DONNA WILLIAMS' AUTISMS. SECOND PART:TOWARDS AN INCONCEIVABLY PRIVATE REAL AUTISM[1]

LIEVEN JONCKHEERE

As previously detailed, I distinguished between three consecutive forms of autism in the case of Donna Williams – or rather three periods in her treatment of her own autism, which are based upon three radically different conceptions of autism. I discussed the first two forms in my previous contribution.[2]

Donna Williams' First Autism And Its Treatment, As Based Upon A Postfreudian Psychoanalytical Conception Of Autism: The Myth Of The Oedipus Complex Implies The Accusation Of The So-Called Refrigerator Mother

Donna's first form of autism, or the first treatment of her autism, was based upon the classical postfreudian conception of autism, which refers to the myth of the oedipus complex and implies the accusation of the *refrigerator mother*. This automatically lead Donna's psychoanalytically inspired psychiatrist Mary to act as a *good enough mother*, especially after it emerged that Donna could not stand interpretations

[1] This article was established from the second of a two part clinical seminar entitled *Autism - The Case of Donna Williams, Part II* which was presented to APPI members in Dublin on April 12, 2014. The first part of the seminar was published in *Lacunae 3 (2)* special issue entitled *Donna Williams' Autisms. Part One: Psychoeducation As Enslavement To Autism As A Master Signfier.*

[2] See footnote 1 above.

that aimed at her relation with "father-figures". This therapy led Donna to identify with her female psychiatrist, not "as herself", but as her two main characters: by means of the Willie-*character* she identified with *Mary-as-someone-who-knows*, and by means of the Carol-*character*, she identified with *Mary-as-a-woman*.

Donna Williams' Second Autism And Its Treatment, As Based Upon An Academic Psychological Conception Of Autism: The Ideology Of The Bio-Psycho-Social Unity Of Man Promotes The Call For Psychoeducation And Group Formation

Donna's second autism or treatment of it was based upon the current academic conception of autism which preaches the bio-psycho-social unity of man, but fundamentally believes in the biological underpinnings of autism.

The preliminary step toward Donna's own treatment of her autism at this level was a kind of injection of the word "autism" as a master signifier in her own history. Having finished her farewell-letter[3] she read in a psychology-textbook that "autism is not to be confused with schizophrenia".[4] At that moment, Donna who also had feared to be identified as schizophrenic, immediately identified with its opposite, autism. And in one fell swoop her farewell-letter transformed itself into her first book entitled *"The Remarkable Autobiography of … An Autistic Girl"* – a book which would inaugurate the new literary genre of the "autibiography". This fundamental preliminary operation allowed Donna to reconnect with the Other and to open herself to a bio-psycho-social treatment of her autism, to maintain a semblance of bio-psycho-social unity. This came about in two steps, two scansions.

First of all with her autibiography in her pocket Donna appealed to the Big Other, in the shape of "The Expert" in the field of autism

[3] Editor note: Refers to a suicide letter.

[4] All direct quotations are derived from Donna Williams' books, blog and website as detailed in bibliography.

who assisted her in creating her identity as an *autist* by reinforcing her identification with the signifier *autism*. This is called Psychoeducation: Donna swiftly learned how to format the speech of the Other and how to act out emotional behavior. But, as a result of all that psychoeducation, it seems, Donna started to act and to speak completely/entirely as if she were Willie or Carol. Also it emerged that her mirror image was animated more than ever: she started living her whole life in front of the miror, in the company of "the girl in the mirror": she ate, washed, read and even slept in front of her mirror. Nevertheless, there is also a positive side to this psychoeducation by the Big Other.

Once Donna had become solidly identified with the master signifier autism, once she had assumed her auti-identity and had become an autist she was able to engage in the social part of the treatment of her autism, she was ready to meet the small other. With her autibiography she appealed to "the other autistic people like myself", inviting them to identify with her. And in no time this quest would reach its climax but also its impasse in a love relation with an "equally autistic" man: Donna fell in love with a man after having checked, with a kind of checklist based on her autibiography, that they both are "equally autistic" (he also has these *characters*, for instance). I call this relationship *autism-à-deux,* with an expression coined by Lacan.[5] At first sight this *autism-à-deux* had therapeutic or survival-value for the both of them. But finally inherent complications would make it fall apart.

The fact that Donna continued her secret life in front of her mirror is an imaginary complication – which she swiftly disposed of by taking over her friend's imaginary obsession with symmetry.

The realisation that everything they did or said was performed by some *character* lead to a protracted symbolic complication. At first, in a kind of collective hysteria, they continually caught each other out when they were not speaking or acting out of *wants* of their own – with the markedly dramatic effect that both their speech and physical

[5] Lacan, J. (1979 [1976-1977]). Le Séminaire Livre XXIV: *l'insu que sait de l'une bévue s'aile à mourre.* In: Ornicar, 17/18, p. 13 (lesson of 19th April 1977).

movements fell apart – nevertheless, in this void Donna succeeded in creating, as it were *ex nihilo*, a new voice and new physical movements. Then followed a deeply disturbing period of a seemingly "collective obsessional neurosis", which was due to a kind of *checking procedure*. All they said and did was subjected to this procedure, and only when it delivered "a genuine emotion" (some peculiar physical form of enjoyment) did they accept that it was said or done out of a want of their own. In this way they succeeded not only in getting rid of a pile of autistic "objects", including friends, but also in acquiring new ones. Unfortunately it turned out that this checking procedure, as a defence against the *characters*, had surreptitiously become infiltrated by these very *characters*. Indeed, these *characters* had succeeded in manipulating the *checking procedure* in such a way that they gave Donna and her partner the feeling, the counterfeit or illusory feeling, that what they did and said corresponded to wants of their owns. So at this point of a "return of the repressed", they had to start checking the *checking procedure* itself – and as a consequence in no time the equivalent of a fullblown collective obsessional neurosis developped. The final result was that they could not say any longer whether a particular *want* was a *want* of their own or simply a trick of one of their *characters*. So they despaired of ever being able to get to their own wants, their own desires: every desire is liable to be counterfeited. Finally this impasse had to be veiled by a kind of honourable truce with the *characters,* which meant that direct confrontations with the *characters* were shunned …

Last but not least, there was also a real complication of the *autism-à-deux:* sexuality, which this time would prove to be fatal for their *autism-à-deux.* Complications due to the real of sexuality would make the couple divorce as abruptly as they had married. One fine day, having been able to perceive each other for the first time as a *significant unity*, they got married. This image of the other had come about in two scansions. The cornerstone of their *autism-à-deux* was their belief to be equally "asexual", they were able to get in touch gradually and to explore each others body, without finding themselves making

love. It made them "feel" the unity of each other's body, just as blind people would – albeit that Donna and her partner remained fixed on the "joints", where the parts of the body have been "welded" together. After that they discovered that a particular combination of coloured lenses enabled them to see each other for the first time as a *significant unity* – and this time without "welded joints". At this moment of revelation of a perfect unity with each other they rushed into marriage. And they lived happily ever after … Not really. As already said, the couple divorced as abruptly as they got married. The divorce was the result of the double *coming out* of Donna's husband. First of all he turned out to be … a homosexual: he was not an "asexual heterosexual" but an active homosexual. In a kind of ultimate mirror reflex Donna also went through a short but torrid lesbian episode. In any case, their pretended "asexuality" fell apart. But more importantly, or worse, he turned out to be … an Asperger. And this is what finally made their *autism-à-deux* fall apart: indeed – in Donna's view an Asperger has nothing to do whatsoever with autism, with "real autism".

And this is what will be explored here, *the real autist* according to Donna Williams, in her third form autism and its treatment.

Donna Williams' Third Autism And Its Treatment, As Based Upon A Lacanian Psychoanalytical Conception Of Autism: The Finding That Nobody Can Do Without A Symptom Compels The Subject To Invent Inconceivably Private Arrangements That Make It Possible To Do With Autism

This third period is characterised by a radical change in the status of the word *autism* as a signifier. It no longer functions as a master signifier. This means that it no longer guarantees any form of unity: it no longer guarantees the unity of Donna's own identity, of her being equal to herself; and it no longer guarantees the unity of the social bond with the other, of Donna's being equal to other autists. In this third period autism, or more specifically, the expression "true autism", has

become a letter – which means that it functions as a means for cobbling together Donna Williams' *inconceivably private* form of autism: an autism that is constantly in progress, that is not equal to itself, an autism that cannot be compared to the equally *inconceivably private* forms of autism of all other autists who are unlike her.

Now, how does Donna cobble together her own *inconceivably private* form of autism? She basically does so by claiming a unique place in four different realms – as a kind of prima donna of autism in each of these. By claiming this status in four different realms she kind of knots them together. Let me first give a brief outline of these claims, these realms, which I will then discuss in detail:

- "I am the first author ever who, as a real autist, published about his or her own autism". By creating the new literary genre of the so-called *autibiography*, Donna Williams offers the autist a new subjective position.
- "I am the first consultant ever who, as a real autist, implemented new therapeutic techniques for the treatment of autism". By treating objects with a paradoxical indifference, as so-called *specialies*, Donna Williams makes objects acceptable to autists.
- "I am the first teacher ever who, as a real autist, constructed a theory on autism, that is taught at universities". By putting forward a new paradigm for autism, the so-called *fruit salad model*, which combines all kinds of disorders, Donna Williams allows for approaching autists one by one
- And last but not least, at least for Donna herself, "I am the first artist ever who, as a real autist, achieved such and such a thing in plastic arts and in music". For Donna herself this seems to be the most important claim, the realm where she absolutely wants to be "the first real autist ever etc", the realm that comes closest to what she calls herself as an autist.

It really is the combination of these four claims that make up Donna's sinthomatic solution for her autism. More precisely: her *sinthome* is the conviction, or the desire,to be the prima donna of autism, as

exemplified in the sentence "I am the first real autist who …". That this sentence is a *sinthome,* means at least two things, at least in Donna's case. First of all it is flexible: the rest of this sentence can always be adapted, in order to be true – "I am the first real autist who … whatever". And secondly it knots together realms of life that otherwise would not be connected at all. So it could have been other realms than the four that Donna knots together

> "I am the first author ever who, as a real autist,…
> ...published about his or her own autism"

First of all the context of Donna's becoming an author. As detailed previously at the age of 25 she had been patched up bio-psycho-socially. And as a result, for the first time in her life, she had fallen head over heels in love with a man, with whom she had immediately felt as one, but who unfortunately turned out to be schizophrenic. In her despair about this impossibility to connect, Donna had decided to commit suicide. But preliminary to that planned suicide, in order to understand herself, she had started writing a long farewell letter. In addition, in order to understand her lover, she had been looking for a definition of "his schizophrenia". At that moment, out of the blue, in of one of her psychology textbooks, the word "autism" had jumped out – it really had jumped out at her, in its fundamental difference with schizophrenia: "'Autism: not to be confused with schizophrenia!' it read". It was this epiphany of autism as a master signifier that had kept Donna alive. Or to be more precise: what had kept her alive was the injection of the master signifier autism in her farewell letter, because in this way it was transformed into a publishable book. In its first version the farewell letter still corresponded to an attempt at some kind of autobiography, entitled: *Dolly. Autobiography of a Disturbed Child.* This farewell letter would transform itself into a life-saving autibiography – which as a matter of fact is a neologism for a new literary genre – once Donna had injected it with the master signifier autism, as can be read in the title of what would become her first book: *Nobody Nowhere. The*

Remarkable Autobiography of an Autistic girl.

I already indicated how Donna, with this autibiography, immediately appealed to the other; first to the Big Other and then to the small other.

The Big Other takes on two shapes. First the shape of auti-experts: in a London hospital Donna knocks at the first door marked with the master signifier "autism", offering to read her autibiography. And in this way – thanks to the psychoanalyst Frances Tustin – her first book is published. Once this book is published Donna heads back to her native Australia, where she immediately calls on the local auti-expert Bartak – with whom she will go through the whole process of psychoeducation as previously explained. But oddly enough, in Donna's case, the Big Other also takes the shape of … her own father. She also heads back to Australia in order to visit her family, because she has to obtain from each of them a so-called "quit claim" (which means that they do not object to being depicted in a identifiable form in Donna's book). This quit claim return to her family turns out to be a return to her father as the one who is able to give some imaginary consistency to the master signifier autism. As a matter of fact Donna already knew the word autism before it had popped up in her psychology textbook: previous to that she had heard it from her father. Indeed, prior to the love tragedy with the schizophrenic man Donna already had lived a similar experience with an equally schizophrenic man – and at that moment she had run back to her father, asking him whether as a child she also had been diagnosed as "schizophrenic". At that time her father had answered: "At the age of two they said you were autistic. You had a problem with touch: you wouldn't let anyone come near you". "And you also had a problem with speech: you would go round saying what everybody else said all the time". So we could say that, after Donna's second imaginary relation with and separation from a schizophrenic man, the master signifier autism, which her father had given her, suddenly pops up in the real, the real of a psychology textbook. And at that moment Donna once again rushes back to her father – in order to make him once more give imaginary consistency to this master signifier of his.

In answering her he indeed reveals some new elements of her medical diagnosis of autism, at the age of two, and moreover Donna also learns that, at the age of ten, she had been labeled 'autistic' by one of her caring teachers.

A little parenthesis. In fact it is rather odd that Donna should expect her father of all people to give imaginary consistency to her life-saving master signifier autism. As detailed previously[6] at the age of 3 she had decided that her father did not exist any longer for her – so from that moment on, for Donna, her father was "imaginarily dead". I will return to the importance of this crucial "decision", of the imaginary death of the father, for the development of Donna Williams' autism. But for the moment I can state that the master signifier autism might correspond to a substitute, in the real, for the forclosed *Name-of-the-Father*, as though the father gave the signifier autism, the consistency that he no longer has himself.

Once the Big Other – in the shape of the auti-experts and, not forgetting, her father, with his memories of her childhood autism – had given the master signifier autism enough imaginary consistency, Donna can appeal to the small other. In addressing this small other, with her autibiography, Donna immediately divides it, which means that she divides her reading public. On the one hand she has this burning desire "to meet the other autistic people, to meet the people who are autistic like me". I already commented on the most pregnant realisation of this desire, under the shape of her *autism-à-deux* with an equally autistic love partner whom she had "diagnosed" and seduced with her autibiography. At the same time the master signifier autism, rather her autibiography, also allowed Donna to develop social bonds with other *autists-like-me*, and even to develop a web-society of autists. At that point Donna Williams still acts as a champion of the ideology of *neurodiversity*: "We, autists, are a new form of normality: the alternative *wiring of our brains* makes us better adapted

[6] Refer to first part of this articule entited *Donna Williams' Autisms. Part One: Psychoeducation As Enslavement To 'Autism' As A Master Signfier* in *Lacunae* 3(2), special issue.

to our contemporary ICT- and evaluation-ridden society". But on the other hand Donna cannot help challenging the not-like-me, the non-autistic people, the *neurotypicals* with their standard *wiring of the brain* – we would name them the *common neurotics*. The agression in this imaginary challenge would become especially clear in relation to her publishers. Donna really terrorised them with the formatting of speech that is necessary for her in order to extract meaning out of their discourse. We will see that later on this split in the little other will shift: there will no longer be a split between neurodiverse autists and neurotypical neurotics, but a split will appear betweeen "real autists", like herself, and the Aspergers, like her ex-husband, who claim to be "special", to be neurodiverse.

> "I am the first consultant ever who, as a real autist, …
> … implemented new therapeutic techniques for the treatment of autism"

First a word about the context of Donna's becoming a "consultant" or a therapist in the field of autism. Donna had, as a result of her first therapy, in an identification of the Willie *character* with her psycho-analytically inspired psychiatrist Mary, studied psychology. But it's only much later, that Donna would start treating autistic children. She would do so after the death of her father, in a conscious imitation of him. As stated, Donna at the age of three had decided that her father was dead – this is the first, imaginary death of the father. It's only after his second, his real death – in 1996, when she's thirty three years old – that Donna became an autism-consultant in her own right. The odd thing is that she explicitly states that she does so in a double imitation of her imaginary dead father: the attitude she adopts toward autistic children is the attitude her imaginary dead father adopted towards her; and the way she handles objects between her and autistic children is the way her imaginary dead father handled objects between him and her.

As a matter of fact Donna's invention of a new therapeutic attitude towards autism is a direct imitation of the attitude of the imaginary

dead father.

This attitude of the imaginary dead father towards herself as an autistic child is qualified by Donna as that of a *gadoodleborger.* This is her neologism for an in-between category of people who are not autistic themselves, but who behave themselves as if they were autistic themselves, and who consequently can be called "auti-friendly".

After the real death of her father Donna, in her therapies with autistic children, adopts this *autifriendly gadoodleborger* attitude of her imaginary dead father towards her – which, by the way, means that she in some way dissociates herself from her own autism, simply by "behaving as if she were autistic", just like her father did towards her. Donna calls this an *Indirect Confrontational Approach* of autism, opposing to each form of direct confrontation (for instance the behaviorist punishment and reward). The basic principle of Donna's own therapeutic position is *detachment*, on two levels: detachment of the auti-therapist towards the autist but also towards himself. The auti-therapist should not want anything – neither for the autist nor for himself. The auti-therapist should not try to forge an authentic relationship from *Self* to *Self*.

Second Donna's invention of new therapeutic techniques for the treatment of autism is an imitation of the way her imaginary dead father handled objects between the two of them.

Donna remembers how her father would bring home some tiny, fancy, shining thing of a nothing, and play a kind of game with it, a game between himself and little Donna. In this game three scansions can be distinguished. First *the Thing an sich*. He would turn the thing around and around, not looking at Donna, but only at the thing itself, as if hypnotized by it. Second *the Thing* and the signifier. Then he would name the thing – as a category: "this thing really is a *specialy*!" (which again is a form of neologism) – but he also gave it his name with "words in which the meaning was still yet to be found" (for instance: "this is an Angus Buldarum Blackarse Brookenstein Specialy"). And finally *the Thing* and the body. Finally little Donna never would be able to resist grabbing at the thing, and after some squabbling she always

would slip off with "her *specialy*".

This fatherly play with the *specialies* shows through in Donna Williams' technical guidelines for the handling of objects with autistic children. Guideline 1: do not make eye contact. Do not force an autist to look you in the face: do not display facial expressions; do not post yourself in front of an autist, but always on the edge of his field of vision. And do not look at an autist directly: look through the window, possibly at your own reflection; and if you happen to look at an autist, look at him as if you were looking at your own mirror image. In short: you should act as a double of the autist, not in a confrontational, face to face way, but on the edge of an autist's field of vision, in an oblique way. Guideline 2: do not search for meaning . Do not show signs of interest for the meaning of what an autist says. And do not try to arouse interest in an autist for the meaning of what you say. Guideline 3: do not give an autist something directly in the hand/do not talk directly to an autist, but reduce yourself to a *passing machine* – not only of things but also of words. So present objects to autists the way Donna's father did with his *specialies*: hold things in between you, looking intensely at them and naming them, and finally abandoning them somewhere in the indeterminate space between the both of you. Basically the same applies for words: do not attach any importance to words, but just let them drop from you; do not talk directly to an autist, but talk about him, in objective terms (so do not say "you are…" but "autists are …"). In conclusion: between therapist and autist words and things should be treated alike, as *specialies*.

In her books Donna Williams gives many very interesting clinical examples of her *autifriendly gadoodleborger* attitude towards autistic children and of the *specialy* way she handles things and words in the interaction with autistic children.

> "I am the first teacher ever who, as a real autist, …
> … constructed a theory about autism, that is taught at universities"

For the third and final treatment of her autism Donna Williams had to

develop her own conception of autism. This is the so-called *fruit salad model* of autism. Whereas for her second treatment of her autism she simply had adopted the bio-psycho-social conception of autism – as it is still current in academic psychology, implying that autism is a biological handicap on the level of information processing in the brain and suggesting that, as a consequence, the only remedies are psychoeducation or learning how to cope with this handicap and the ideology of neurodiversity or the invention of a new form of normality.

Now, before sketching Donna Williams' own conception of autism, with the *fruit salad model,* I first want to stress once again that it presupposes a radical change in the status of the word *autism*. At the base of this change in status of the word autism is its falling apart as a master signifier. This happened in two scansions.

First the master signifier autism is split up into "Asperger" and "real autism". The origin of this split is the split between Donna and her ex-husband at the time of his coming out as a homosexual – which brutally ended the myth of their shared asexuality. But also and more importantly it marks how, at that very moment, Donna also discovered that he was not really autistic-like-her, that he was autistic-in-a-different way, as an Asperger – which meant the fatal blow to their *autism-à-deux*. From that moment on Donna stubbornly attempts to deepen the split between her own real autism and his Asperger. See comparative table below:

	'real autism' = Donna	Asperger = Donna's former partner
onset	before 3 years	later on in life
sensory *	*simultagnosia* inability to perceive unity (things, faces, body, spaces)	hypersensitive for light *alexithymia*
jouissance	*sensing* enjoying the gaze (flashes of light in the head)	inability to recognize/accept emotions in oneself and in the other

language communication	*meaning deaf* • voice problems • aphasia, oral dyspraxia, verbal agnosia → communication impossible	stick to one meaning *Social Emotional Agnosia* → avoidance of communication
co-morbidity	• anything goes (OCD, DID) … except for personality disorders • everything possibly has a therapeutic effect	• personality disorders: Narcissistic, Borderline, Obsessive-Compulsive, Multiple Personality • all these are very problematic
gifts	no particular *gifts* artistic potential, as a consequence of the sensing	*high functioning* *= Self STIMulatory Behavior* *= obsessive interests* e.g. ICT, reading, games • master a jargon (sign-language) • identify themselves proudly with their gifts and become very good at it (socially relevant)

At that point for Donna it was extremely important to find official support for her distinction between her real autism and his Asperger. So she was comfortable with the DSM-IV (1994), where the Asperger lobby had succeeded in distinguishing itself from Kanner's autism, by stressing the need, of Aspergers, for routines and *sameness* and their absence of problems with language. Unfortunately, for Donna, the DSM-V (2013) has dissolved this distinction into the continuum of *Autism Spectrum Disorders*.

After the splitting off of the sexual Asperger-part Donna dissolved the remaining signifier *real autism* into all kinds of *fruit salads.* Indeed, in her conception, this remaining signifier real autism is nothing but a cluster – I refer to Lacan's idea of the signifier as *un essaim*, a swarm or cluster.[7] This idea, of the remaining signifier real autism being a cluster, is the very essence of Donna Williams' *fruit salad model* of

[7] Lacan, J. (1975 [1972-1973]). Le Séminaire Livre XX: Encore. Paris: Seuil, p. 130

autism. Each case of real autism presents itself as an *inconceivably private fruit salad* of all kinds of disorders. We will see what kind of disorders make up that fruit salad of real autism, but also – and maybe even more importantly – what kind of disorders do not. All of these disorders, by their particular combination, not only hide the real autism, but also function as a spontaneous form of autotherapy for it. As a consequence one cannot any longer identify an essence of autism, one cannot any longer identify real autists as a group – which also means that there is no standard way to approach autism, no standard way to treat autism. It all becomes of question of one by one.

So for Donna the word autism no longer functions as a master signifier that guarantees the unity of her own identity, of her being equal to herself, and the unity of the social bond with the other, of her being equal to other autists. But rather now, in this *fruit salad model*, the idea of "true autism", as distinguished from Asperger, has become a means for cobbling together her own, *inconceivably private* form of autism. This is a form of autism that is constantly in progress, that is not equal to itself. And also a form of autism that cannot be compared to the equally *inconceivably private* forms of autism of other autists. This is why, in Donna's third period of treatment of her autism, I call the word autism a *sinthome*. I reiterate that the idea of being "the first true autist ever who …" performs its function as a *sinthome* by knotting together four different realms, four competences: Donna as an author or writer, Donna as a consultant or therapist, Donna as a teacher or theorist and Donna as an artist.

Let's turn now, to an example of "the making of the *fruit salad*" in the *inconceivably private* case of Donna Williams' 'real autism'" and how it functions as a *sinthome*.

According to Donna herself the foundation of her autism is to be found in all kinds of metabolic disorders, consisting of a combination of all kinds of insufficiencies and her own individual "eating history". This condition would already have been apparent at the age of two, the year of her first "medical" diagnosis of autism. That these metabolic disorders would constitute the foundation of her autism seems to be

a kind of delusional certainty for Donna.

On this probably delusional "biological" basis two mythical elements interfere, that can be dated between the age of two and three years: on the one hand there's the *jouissance* in the own body, that Donna herself considers as the fundamental autistic phenomenon of *sensing*; on the other hand there's an oedipal history with a traumatic mother and an imaginary dead father. In Donna's discourse it remains unclear what the temporal and logical relations between these two are. Is the sensing an automatic consequence of the metabolic disorders or is it a reaction against the oedipal history?

In any event, at the age of three Donna is able to loose herself completely, wallowing in a fanciful game of flashes of light and colours in her own head – an inner lightshow she compulsively stirs up by pushing on her eye balls or by making fast swinging movements. From a Lacanian point of view we could say that she's hypnotized by the inner object of the gaze.

It is interesting to note that this inner gaze seems to have come about as the partial "intraction" of an outer gaze. Aged two Donna is lying in bed, and sees herself encapsulated by all kinds of light phenomena – and feels herself protected in this *mystical glass coffin* as she calls it.[8] Above her bed *wisps* of light resemble *creatures*, all around her bed *tiny points of light* blink, and from under her bed a pair of *glaring green eyes* stares *piercingly*. Now, the inner gaze in her head, which Donna enjoys so much, in her autistic *sensing*, really seems to correpsond to the intraction of this light capsule – but with the exception of the pair of eyes: these remain in the outside world, where they become the support for Willie, the first *character*, as we will see. The autistic problem is that this intracted part of the formerly external gaze cannot be extracted any more, it remains inside her head.

The second mythical element, interfering with her metabolic disorders, is a form of Oedipal history. Are the traumatic events of this history an intrusion on the autistic sensing or do they trigger it? This

[8] To Frances Tustin this phenomenon of encapsulation is a fundamental phenomenon in autism.

also remains unclear.

In any case Donna relates how her mother already abused her sexually when she was two years old. But the bigger trauma was an outright attack by the mother when Donna was three years old: she must have been messing around with her food, because all of a sudden the yelling mother furiously crams a dishcloth in her mouth, which nearly makes her choke to death.

At that moment Donna did not die. But, as we already know, her father did – not in reality, but in her mind: "at the age of three my father stopped existing". We cannot be sure whether this imaginary death of the father, at the age of three, is related to the real trauma in relation to the mother, at the same age – but I do think it is: it seems that at that moment Donna has been confronted with the inexistence of her father, his foreclosure. Evidence for this assumption can be located it seems in Donna's reaction at the age of twelve, when the mother once again attacks her and beats her within an inch of her life. The moment Donna regains consciousness she realises someone is trying to feed her – she does not immediately see who this is, but following the thread colours-fork-hand-arm-shoulder faceeyesthatdesperatelys-tareatme (in one word) she realises: "It's my father!" – only to see his face fading away immediately: "But it's my grandfather, who always fed me as a child!".

More important, according to Donna, than the mythical sensing and oedipal history are the reactions to it – the so-called *characters* she started to develop between the ages of three and four. In the course of her life she would develop upto thirteen *characters* (my count!). Here we limit ourselves to the main *characters* – whom we already encountered.

First in line is *Willie*. The *Willie-character* seems to have a double origin. I just gave away that he somehow originated in the *glaring green eyes* under the bed – the two spots of the light capsule around the bed, that had resisted 'intraction' in Donna's head. In the outside world these eyes would become the support for a phallic figure: indeed Willie is characterised by "his rigid corpse like stand, his pinched-up

mouth, his clenched fists, his spitting". And we cannot overlook either that *Willie* (spelt with 'ie') is a child's word for penis. On the other hand *Willi-* is also the first part of Donna's family name. Indeed, *Willie* seems to be a trace of a problem that Donna has with her family name – a problem that originated with her father. Originally his name was not *Williams* but *Keene*, after the name of his mother's ex-husband (to whom he was otherwise unrelated and had never known). When Donna was aged two, in order to marry her mother, her father had assumed the name *Williams* – after his mother's second husband (who himself had gotten rid of his original name by renaming himself *Williams*, after a random streetsign!). It remains unclear what family name Donna was born with. Anyway at some point she had to change name and to assume the name *Williams*.

In any event, at age three she identifies with this phallicised reminder of the outer gaze, with this scrap of her adopted family name – and she becomes *Willie, Willie* becomes one of her *characters*. As discussed previously this *Willie-character* constitutes the basis of her educability. It also proves to be the most resistent en consistent *character* throughout her life.

Then *Carol* emerges. At four years old Donna is swinging and *sensing* autistically in the park, when she is looked at by a girl whom she names *Carol* – and whom she tries to follow as if she were hypnotised by her. Not being able to find her back Donna starts running the streets, and entering houses … only to find Carol back at Donna's own home, in the mirror. Indeed, aged five she identifies with this *Carol* in the mirror – and she becomes *Carol. Carol* becomes one of her *characters* (a *character* that will always remain subordinate to the *Willie-character*).

At four years of age, at a moment when her first *character, Willie*, is already constituted, Donna has her first experience of *Big Black Nothingness*. This is how she names the panick attack that she experiences when she's flooded by what she calls "emotions". It seems plausible that this panic has to do with the dishcloth-trauma in relation to her mother, at the age of three, resulting in a near-death experience.

In any event, until today Donna considers this *Big Black Nothingness* to be the main cause of her suffering, the one problem she probably will never be relieved of. She vividly recalls the first time she had this extremely terrifying experience. How all of a sudden the room had come to life, and transformed itself into a huge "shell of living flesh". How she had desperately dashed in all directions, looking for something to hold on to – only to discover that she could not find herself in the mirror (afterwards *Carol* would take her place in the mirror). And how finally the object of the voice had appeared – on the one hand she heard her own desperate call "dontwannadie!" die out in the echo "die!", while on the other hand she suddenly heard called out "stop!" – and everything had become frozen "in a state of suspended animation". In the course of Donna's life this experience of *Big Black Nothingness* has grown worse. Not only has it grown more frequent, but it also has assumed a more massive form, as it has taken on the form of a wall of water that, with a thundering roar, sweeps over her.

For her own interpretation of this *Big Black Nothingness* Donna refers to the bio-psycho-social paradigm of autism. So in this paradigm it is the consequence of *an emotional overload*, of the inability to manage all of those emotions by means of cognitions. Not surprisingly she compares it to the sudden shutdown of a computer the moment it is used to full capacity. My interpretation of this *Big Black Nothingness* is based on Eric Laurent's pioneering conception of the problem of *jouissance* in autism – which means that, for me, it corresponds to a *return of the jouissance on the border.* In psychosis (to Lacanians autism is a form of psychosis) there are three possible localisations of *jouissance*: in the case of paranoia the delusion identifies the *jouissance* in the Other, the subject is sure that the Other enjoys … him or her; in schizoprhenia the *jouissance* rages throughout the body of the subject and makes it crumble; and finally in autism the *jouisssance* returns on the border, the border the subject has constructed between the Other and their own body. In Donna's case, this border has taken the form of the room that she used to hide in – and it is the return of the *jouissance on the border*, on the walls of this room that transform

it into "a shell of living flesh" (or later on: living water). It should be noted that this phenomenon is accompanied by a radical shift in the object: from the reassuring "good" object of the gaze in the head to the terrifying "bad" object of the non localizable voice – which seems to be the fundamental autistic object.

In relation to this *Big Black Nothingness* Donna Williams also invents a new form of anxiety that she calls *Exposure Anxiety* – which has now become her contribution to general psychology (check wikipedia!). Indeed in principle *Exposure Anxiety* is not typical for autism, everybody has it, to some extent everybody can experience this anxiety of exposure to stimuli that can lead to overstimulation, everybody is liable to this anxiety that makes one keep avoid stimuli that can lead to emotional overload. Nevertheless in autism *Exposure Anxiety* is overpowering, to the extent that, in autism, even the slightest emotion is bound to lead to *emotional overload*, to *Big Black Nothingness*, but also to the extent that it is a well tried method for protecting the *sensing*, or the *jouissance* of the object of the gaze in the head.

On the autistic basis of some obscure metabolic disorders, the mythical *sensing* or *jouissance* of the gaze, the traumas in relation to the mother and the unbridled use of *Exposure Anxiety* in front of emotions that are bound to lead to *Big Black Nothingness* Donna develops all kinds of disorders. This mix of disorders is what makes for the autistic *fruit salad*, an *inconceivably private fruit salad* in the sense that each autist has his or her own mix of disorders. On this point there remains an ambiguity in Donna Williams' conception: does this *fruit salad* of disorders constitute the autism or does it on the contrary cover it up? Anyhow, according to Donna herself each of these disorders to some extent can have a therapeutic value for her autism. But in order to have this value it seems important that a disorder has been properly labelled, that Donna receives the official DSM-IV diagnosis for it (she collects diagnoses). On the other hand in this conception of autism as a *fruit salad* it seems equally important that some disorders are incompatible with her real autism (which incidentally makes them typical for Asperger).

Now which disorders are an ingredient of Donna's inconceivbaly private autistic *fruit salad* and which cannot be part of it?

Two disorders seem to make up its core: a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and a Dissociative Identity Disorder (DII). Indeed, for Donna her *Big Black Nothingness* is a manifestation of a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, notwithstanding our lacanian problems with the ideology of disorder-diagnoses in general, we can agree with that as the *Big Black Nothingness* seems to be a repetition of the dishcloth-trauma, in relation to the mother. Otherwise it should be noted how Donna struggles to defend herself against auti-experts who publicly accuse her that she does not really suffer from autism but from PTSD: to her it is vital to defend her invisible autism as more fundamental than the salient PTSD she only accidentally acquired in relation to her mother. The second core-element of Donna's fruit salad is a Dissociative Identity Disorder – which is the official DSM-IV diagnosis for her *characters*. Donna herself puts great store on her DID, because according to her it has been the basis of her major autotherapy: it's only thanks to her *characters* that she was finally educated, or "normalised" and has found her way in the world – and most important of all: in the meantime, behind this mask of "normality", she has been able to cherish the autistic *jouisssance* of her *sensing*. So in her internet discussions with other autists Donna always breaks a lance for DID.

Apart from these two core-disorders her autistic fruit salad contains all kinds of peripheral disorders: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, tics, bodyagnosia, dyspraxie, simultagnosia, alexithymia, language processing disorder, dyslexie, bipolar, reactive attachment disorder – to name just a few.

From an diagnostic point of view, at least as important as these ingredients of her own fruit salad are, there are two types of disorder which according to Donna can never be part of any "real autistic" *fruit salad* at all. When one of these is present, there's no longer a question of real autism. I suppose that it is no coincidence that these two types of disorder are intimately associated, I believe, with the two lovers that Donna had to separate from. First of all, all Psychotic

Disorders are incompatible with real autism. But this is especially the case for schizophrenia – and as previously detailed Donna's first lover was a schizophrenic. Personality Disorders are not compatible with real autism either: Multiple Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder. According to Donna Williams, Personality Disorders are typical for Asperger – and as stated already her second lover was an Asperger.

> "I am the first artist ever who, as a real autist, …
> … achieved such and such a thing in plastic arts and in music"

Last but not least, at least for Donna Williams herself, art is the realm where she feels most at home, where she comes closest to her autism, which means the autistic enjoyment of *sensing*. I will not go into that now. However I want to indicate that, in this realm, two registers can be distinguished, as based on two objects. On the one hand there's the object of the gaze, Donna's dabbling in plastic arts: at heart she considers herself to be a painter and a sculptor. On the other hand there's the object of the voice: she plays and even composes music. However, this is material for another discussion.

In conclusion I reiterate my thesis from the outset and that is that Donna Williams' claim, or her conviction to be the prima donna of autism in four different realms (the autobiographical testimony on autism, the therapy of autism, the theory of autism and last but not least in different domains of the arts), as "the first real autist who …", makes up Donna William's inconceivably private sinthomatic solution for her autism.

Author Information

Lieven Jonckheere is a doctor in clinical psychology (dissertation on Lacan's theory of anxiety) and lecturer in psychology at the Dutch speaking University of Ghent (Belgium). He is a psychoanalyst in private practice and is a member of Kring voor Psy-

choanalyse van de New Lacanian School, the New Lacanian School and World Association for Psychoanalysis. He is responsible for the "Theoretical Seminar of the Kring of the NLS" on Lacan's teaching, and collaborator on the "Continuous Formation in Psychoanalytical Therapy", Department of Psychology, at Ghent University. He is a regular contributor to iNWiT (Dutch speaking Journal of the New Lacanian School).

Address for Correspondance

E-mail: Jonckheere.lieven@gmail.com

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