

Refrigerator Mothers

Over the past century, images of “bad” mothers have multiplied, and increasing numbers of mothers and children have come under the paternalistic regulation of scientific, racist and classist Western regimes of power. Since the late 1940s, “autism mothers” emerged as one such “bad” mother. These mothers have been scientifically blamed for their children’s autism, first through mid-twentieth century psychoanalytic theories of emotional disorder and now through scientifically shaped regimes of intensive mothering. Drawing on feminist poststructuralist and interpretive disability studies approaches, I trace the emergence of the mid-century autism mother in Toronto, the so-called cold, “refrigerator mother” thought to cause autism in her child. I do so by examining “everyday texts” of the mass media and popular science during the years 1945–1969. Adding a new element to an age-old adage, I argue that the refrigerator mother emerged as a key cultural contradiction through which scientific understandings of autism and a contradictory femininity began to regulate the good/bad mother in new ways. I also suggest that far from being an element of the past, these modes of regulation are in large part continuous and intensifying under today’s neoliberal, patriarchal, global capitalist regimes.

There have always been “bad” mothers. Over the past century, however, images of bad mothers have multiplied, and increasing numbers of mothers and children have come under the paternalistic regulation of scientific, racist and classist Western regimes of power. These images are all too familiar, whether it is welfare mothers, lesbian mothers, teen mothers or career women and their “disordered” children as the topic of moral and scientific scrutiny and blame (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky). Since the late 1940s, “autism mothers” emerged as one such “bad” mother. These mothers

have been scientifically blamed for their children's autism, first through mid-twentieth century psychoanalytic theories of emotional disorder and now through scientifically shaped regimes of intensive mothering (Hays). Indeed, as Amy Sousa suggests,

Whereas seemingly cold mothers ... were once considered responsible for curing as well as causing their children's intellectual disabilities ... mothers are now responsible for curing the disability, or at least accessing the intervention that will mitigate the disability's impact on their children. (221)

Mothers are not only blamed, then, but are increasingly held accountable for producing normal citizens—the self-interested, rational, autonomous self-governing citizen—alongside the health and well-being of individuals, families and nations (McGuire 2013, 2011, 82; Rose 203).

Drawing on feminist poststructuralist and interpretive disability studies approaches, I trace the emergence of the autism mother mid-century in Toronto within these regulatory regimes, the so-called cold, “refrigerator mother” thought to cause autism in her child. I do so by turning to “everyday texts” during the post-World War II years (1945-1969). For this paper, an “everyday text” means texts of the mass media (newspapers, magazines) and popular science (books, magazine articles) in which refrigerator mothers make an appearance (Titchkosky 26). Adding a new element to an age-old adage, I argue that the refrigerator mother emerged as a key *cultural contradiction* through which scientific understandings of autism and a contradictory femininity began to regulate the good/bad mother in new ways (Bordo 2003; Hays). And while my scope is limited here, I also suggest that far from being an element of the past, these modes of regulation are in large part continuous and intensifying under today's neoliberal, patriarchal, global capitalist regimes (Sousa).¹ As Stuart Hall recommends, I consider questions of cultural production to be “deadly political” ones, entangled with questions of power and constitutive of identity and human possibility (290; also see Wynter). At the same time, I consider everyday text a key cultural scene wherein readers create and resist identities and human possibilities anew (Titchkosky 2007; also see Smith 1999). It is to the unarticulated background of the scene of everyday text in terms of both resistance and power I turn my analytic attention (on sceneography see Butler 1993: 28; Michalko 71). Through this approach, I not only trace the emergence of autism mothers in Toronto but work to reveal the radical potential of disqualified knowledges about human difference, relationality and love that dwell at the edges of “official” scientific discourse, but at the centre of these mothers' lives (Foucault 1972).

At the Intersection of Feminist and Disability Studies

Until very recently, and despite their proliferating images in the mass media, mothers have been a marginalized presence within both disability studies and feminist discourse.² When mothers have appeared at all, it is most often tragic or oppressive aspects of the experience that have been emphasized—whether for mothers or disabled people—as if a “natural” corollary. As Ryan and Runswick-Cole reveal, the conversation between feminist and disability studies has only just begun. Recent work at the intersection of feminist and disability studies in the scenography of mothering is generating new questions about mothering and disability as a potentially transformative form of advocacy, activism, pedagogy, relational ethics and even disability experience (see, for example, Charles and Berman; Filax and Taylor; Fisher and Goodley; Goodley and Tregaskis; Hughes et al; Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio). My work here is both indebted to and contributes to these emerging conversations. Titchkosky says, disabled people “embody alternative ways of being-in-the-world and act as living depictions of the possibility that things could be otherwise” (2003: 237). This suggests that theorizing at the intersection of feminist and disability studies offers an occasion to think anew about some of our most intimately experienced ways of being together—mother and child—as ones that are not simply natural, nor a straightforward matter of disability or maternal oppression, but interpretive and political sites replete with lessons about power, difference and forms of agency within late modern life.

Feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith offers a starting point for my analysis. Smith begins from women’s lived “actualities”—the felt, embodied and particular of a local here and now. She works from the particular of previously excluded “standpoints” to understand the abstract, “extralocal” and “organized practices” that constitute relations of rule both within and beyond sites of knowledge production (Smith 1999). Smith’s notion of standpoint is not that of an essentialized, privileged knower or common view that somehow belongs to women. Rather, standpoint “...does something rather different. It shifts the ground of knowing, the place where inquiry begins” (Smith 1992: 91). By shifting my focus onto everyday texts of popular science and the mass media, ones written both about and by autism mothers, as well as onto this study as its own site of knowledge production, I investigate relations of rule as an everyday accomplishment through *textual practices*—whether cultural production, practices of mothering, or feminist inquiry—in which we, all of us, are integrally caught as readers, viewers, producers and social actors. Textual practices are not only scenes of power then, but also interactive sites of meaningful social action. That is, readers and producers draw on shared schemes of cultural knowledge in the making, and remaking of selves and world through

text, thereby “taking account” of social others (Weber 88; Smith 1990, 1999; Titchkosky 2007). Interpretive approaches help reveal the taken for granted background of this creative space between subject and world even as systems of domination impose constraints on our social life together (on between-ness see Titchkosky 2007: 21).

I depart from Smith, however, in my analysis of everyday text, by including a turn to Michel Foucault’s “genealogical” approach to investigate the operation of power, or “ruling relations,” in the context of autism mother history. By turning to “what we feel is without history” (e.g., sexuality, love, instinct, conscience, sentiment, the body), Foucault’s genealogies are helpful in tracing how truth claims and identities are produced and naturalized through modern forms of power that take the body as their target (Foucault 1984: 76; also see Bordo 2003: 165-6; Tamboukou). Genealogy directs our analytic attention to the link between more enduring systems of domination and everyday embodied practices, the emergence of new identities, forms of knowledge and, in my case, to ways of making this all visible through everyday text (Dean; Foucault 1984).³ Rather than “writing a history of the past in terms of the present,” a genealogy performs a “history of the present” (Foucault 1977: 31; also see Bordo 1987: 5; Tamboukou 205). In this case, the refrigerator mother is imagined today as an unimaginable chapter in the history of science and mother blame. Contemporary biogenetic approaches are thought to have revealed the “truth” about autism and done away with mother blame (see, for example, *Refrigerator Mothers*). My genealogical work here suggests, however, that enduring Western cultural understandings of autism and autism mother (ones that are now globalizing) emerged with the refrigerator mother, and continue to shape new forms of mother blame, ones that have shifted the burden for mothers from cause to cure (Sousa; also see Blum; Robertson). I “look back” then, to historicize the very possibility of autism, and autism mother, within Western culture, as well as to rethink forms of resistance. The aim of this history of the present, one that can only remain partial here, is transformative:

Let us give the term genealogy to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today. (Foucault 1972: 83)

Like Stiker, a disability historian who utilizes genealogy in his work, “At most my goal is to enlarge the understanding that we already have” (18). Everyday text already narrates stories of autism and mothering in Toronto. Through my analysis of everyday text as both an interactive scene and site of power, the text that I weave here seeks to offer a new understanding.

Creating an Autism Mother Archive

Everyday texts of the mass media and popular science dealing with autism, and autism mothers during the post-war years (1945-1969) are in some instances readily available and in others quite difficult to locate. I have performed extensive searches for these original documents.⁴ Given the inconsistency with which these materials are archived, my archive is not exhaustive of every appearance of refrigerator mothers in text. I use some secondary sources to round out the story I weave (see, for example, Pollak; *Refrigerator Mothers*). Though I highlight Canadian periodicals and newspapers, I also include major American periodicals and popular psychology circulating in Toronto through the years 1945-69 (see, for example Bettelheim 1967; Park).⁵ This means my story features some of the typical actors that make a regular appearance within autism mother history—Bruno Bettelheim and Leo Kanner for example—in addition to mothers’ voices and Canadian storylines together, something that does not appear to have been done within autism history in quite this way before (for examples of autism mother history see Grinker, McDonnell; McGuire 2011, 85-101; Nadesan; Robertson). Despite some of the challenges locating everyday text for the post-World War II years, I draw from a robust archive that begins to sketch a new story about the legacy of the refrigerator mother in Canada. I begin by considering how new forms of modern power, specifically new forms of knowledge, visibility, technologies and identities post-World War II drew new lines between the normal and abnormal by directing mothers’ gaze ever more deeply inward, toward a mother’s inner emotional and bodily life (Dean; Rose). I then consider how this inwardly directed gaze also, and ironically, became the grounds for mothers’ resistance.

The Birth of Autism Mothers: A History of the Present

1. Turning the gaze ever-inward: Emerging forms of power and knowledge

In 1943 Dr. Leo Kanner, an Austrian psychiatrist who emigrated to the United States in 1924 where he directed the child psychiatry unit at John Hopkins Hospital, published eleven case studies of children whom he had observed over some years in his hospital clinic (Kanner; also see Pollak 249-50). Here, he described children whose characteristics he thought presented a new disorder distinct from other diagnoses such as childhood schizophrenia. He called this new disorder “early infantile autism.”⁶ Unlike childhood schizophrenia, Kanner wrote, which involved an initial relationship of self to world, these children never forged a social relationship with their parents, families or social world around them. They were impaired in their ability to communicate, unable to engage in reciprocal social interaction and engaged in stereotyped behaviours

such as rocking or “twiddling.” These children were, according to Kanner and the parents he interviewed, in a world of their own from the start (Kanner).

Writing under the influence of biological psychiatry and the mental hygiene movements of the early twentieth century (psychoanalysis, though dominant in these years, did not completely eclipse alternate views), Kanner felt there must be some biological basis for the disorder. Interestingly, however, he also noted the potential influence of parents, who seemed to form their own unique group, and would go on to study them in more depth as well as offer his views in the mass media (Kanner and Eisenberg; Park 125; Pollak 249-51). In a *Time Magazine* medical feature (“Medicine: Frosted Children”), for example, Kanner, as a leading figure in the emerging field of child psychiatry, is quoted as observing that these parents display a “mechanization of human relationships.” In another medical feature twelve years later summarizing his pivotal contribution to the new field of child psychiatry, his view seems to have solidified: these were the type of parents “just happening to defrost enough to produce a child” (Thomas). Highly intellectual as well as successful in their careers, predominantly Anglo-Saxon or Jewish, oriented to abstraction rather than people and even cold, Kanner noted, “In the whole group, there are very few really warmhearted fathers and mothers” (250). Most mothers, it was noted, were college graduates and many worked outside the home. It would be a short distance to travel, one facilitated by the work of psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim (see below) and new forms of visibility already apparent in Kanner’s work, for this emerging understanding of autism and a contradictory feminine (loving/destructive; masculine/feminine) to begin to regulate the good/bad mother in new ways. I address these new forms of visibility below.

The emerging terrain of child psychiatry and psychology as distinct disciplines during the first half of the twentieth century in North America brought certain—and new—aspects of middle-class motherhood and childhood into view. In a climate of heightening concern for social stability, these new disciplines recast the lines between normal and abnormal development, with “early infantile autism” often forming the extreme pole of an emerging category of “emotionally disturbed children” in Ontario (for example, delinquency, psychosis and shyness), now considered distinct from both adult “disturbance” as well as childhood “feeble-mindedness” or “mental retardation” (Nadesan 53-79; Kirkwood W1; Landsberg 22 Apr. 1965, W1; Landsberg 24 Apr. 1965, 18; Schill 16 Jan. 1957). Alongside these new knowledges and categories of childhood disorder, new treatment facilities for emotionally disturbed children emerged, like the program for autistic children at Thistletown in Toronto for example, which re-occupied older custodial institutional space (“A Fine Start”; “Thistletown Plans Expansion”). Rather than a custodial emphasis, however, their focus was on rehabilitation through early, short-term and often residen-

tial treatment. As Stiker describes, “rehabilitation marks the appearance of a culture that attempts to complete the act of identification, of making identical” (128). In other words, the newly emerged autistic population was thought to be “improvable,” capable of at least some degree of normalization.

Bruno Bettelheim, director of Chicago’s Orthogenic School, was of considerable influence in the emergence of these new forms of visibility for autistic families in Toronto.⁷ Bettelheim, who secured a Ford Foundation grant (1956–62) to study and treat autistic children at the school in Chicago, believed it was in giving autistic children the “love” and proper nurturance for each stage of development disordered by their damaging parents that recovery could be found (Bettelheim 1967, 7). Bettelheim’s influence found its way to Toronto. Warrandale, a residential treatment school committed to providing the “love and essential nourishment for growth” for “emotionally disturbed” children, was influenced by Bettelheim’s psychoanalytic approach (“Centre’s Controversial Director has 90% Success With Patients”). The school was directed by social worker John Brown who studied at the University of Chicago and worked with others influenced by Bettelheim’s approach. Amidst much controversy, Brown implemented “regression” and “holding” techniques designed to correct development gone wrong because of disordered mothers. Brown included “disturbed” mothers and families in treatment through recreation and support groups (Stapleton). Other treatment centres with a rehabilitative goal emerged in Toronto during this time also. The Creche, a day treatment program for autistic children in Toronto, operated with a pedagogic and therapeutic emphasis for mothers and children. Mothers were invited to observe social workers as they worked with their so-called disturbed child (“Creche Hears Praise of Welfare Work”; “Creche Will Continue Treatment at Centre”; “Taught to Be Children at This Day Nursery”). In addition, Thistleton, a traditional residential therapeutic hospital program for autistic children also involved mothers in counselling (“A Fine Start”; Landsberg 24 Apr. 1965). The inclusion of mothers and families in treatment represents a key shift emerging alongside these new facilities, regardless of their approach. Indeed, it was very often the mother, instead of or in addition to the autistic child, who was prescribed treatment in order to properly interact with her child (see Park 153–73; *Refrigerator Mothers*). With the rise of psychiatry and psychology as the “expert” disciplines on “normal” childhood development, then, new categories of childhood disorder like autism, along with their new forms of treatment, opened mothers’ and children’s domestic, bodily and emotional lives to regulation and surveillance in new and intensifying ways, a surveillance that continues apace (albeit in different language) (McGuire 2011; Nadesan; Rose 123, 134–5).

A second form of visibility already operating in Kanner’s article above—the case history—brought this newly “captive” autistic population, as well as

their mothers and families into view in new ways. Developed out of medical, social science, social work and even journalism practices, case histories gather in-depth information about a patient's so-called exceptional life in all of its peculiar and exotic history (Becker). In the case of autism, the case history turned psychiatry's gaze toward the realm of the domestic. Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic theory of the cold, refrigerator mother, for example, is based on case histories described in his popular book, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (1967), as well as in popular science features like "Joey: The 'Mechanical Boy'" (Bettelheim 1959). In addition to laying out his theory of the rejecting mother, Bettelheim provides detailed and lengthy symptomatic and family histories for three autistic children in the pages of his book. He took particular aim at the mother:

...the mother felt trapped in her marriage, resented husband and child ... both to earn enough to keep the family going and to forget it all, she went back to nursing ... she chose to work in a setting that matched her own feelings of hopelessness: a hospital dealing mainly with terminal cases. The infant's total care was left to miscellaneous baby sitters, some of whom seemed to inspire Marcia with great fear. What little the mother did do for Marcia "I did in a hurry. I'm a bossy person." (Bettelheim 1967: 158)

Here, Bettelheim takes us far afield from the autistic child, implying that the mother's disordered feelings, desires and wishes—indicated by her resentment and choice to return to "work in a setting that matched her own feelings of hopelessness"—and her subsequent careless inattention to Marcia, were a damaging and initiating factor in her daughter's autism. In other words, through the case history, a mother's bodily and psychic movements became a newly-visible space subject to scientific discipline and moral regulation (Foucault 1977; also see Bordo 2003: 165; Titchkosky 171). Bettelheim's signature inclusion of strange photographs and paintings by autistic children in his case studies were another diagram of power popularized during this time (also see Bettelheim 1959). They provided further evidence of so-called harm by mothers and illustrated an emerging understanding of autism as the withdrawal of the self from the world (Bettelheim 1967, 89-339; also see Dean). Together, new forms of visibility like treatment regimes that involved mothers and the case history turned psychiatry's gaze toward a mothers' bodily practices and inner life in new and contradictory ways—mothers became essential to normal development yet destructive, scientifically (removed, abstract, unemotional) guided yet proximate and loving. In this way, important new links were made between a contradictory feminine, the emerging category

of autism, and the moral and scientific regulation of the good/bad mother.

Indeed, it would in some measure be through the scientific blame for autism—what might be considered a technology of affect—that mothers would be invited to turn their own gaze ever-inward, toward the scientific guidance of their own inner life and embodied practices (Hook; McGuire 2011). During the 1950s and '60s, psychoanalytic approaches eclipsed (though not entirely) the influence of alternate understandings of autism such as Kanner's biological theory.⁸ It was now the scene of the mother-child relationship, particularly that of nursing and a mother's intimate responses to her infant, through which "normal" development proceeded or was "arrested" as the case may be (Nadesan 97-9; also see McDonnell). Normal development now depended upon mother's proximity: "The studies of Bowlby, Ainsworth and others fueled the claim that children's mental health depended on mother love—and that mother-love meant being at home with your child" (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 14). As Bettelheim put it for the case of autism:

Because while the infant can make it clear, through the way he holds his body, whether or not he feels comfortably held, he cannot ensure that this active expression of his feelings will meet with a positive response. That will depend on how the mother reacts. (Bettelheim 1967: 17)

These maternal reactions, according to Bettelheim, could range from the most subtle— a grip that is slightly too firm—to the most extreme: "I believe that the initial cause of withdrawal is rather the child's correct interpretation of the negative emotions with which the most significant figures in his environment approach him" (1967, 66). Bettelheim, among others, even went so far as to assert, "the precipitating factor in infantile autism is the parent's wish that his child should not exist" (1967, 125-6; also see Mahler qtd. in Bettelheim 1967, 43; *Refrigerator Mothers*). Bettelheim's theory was echoed in the mass media and popular science circulating in Toronto at the time, "Thwarted or ignored in early childhood by hostile or indifferent parents, victims of autism sense during infancy that their own action cannot shape their lives" ("Psychiatry: Chicago's Dr. Yes").

Accomplished through the scientific scrutiny of a mother's emotional and bodily life, these subtle and extreme forms of scientific blame that simultaneously required a mother's proximity were invitational, urging mothers to follow psychoanalysis's gaze inward:

I could not say that Elly, in the give and take of a family ... was getting far more of what she needed than she could in a residential school ...

I could not speak these heretical thoughts; I could do no more than allow them to hover at the edges of my mind . . . I feared that as soon as a real psychiatrist learned about our games he would recognize them for what they were—a mother fooling around, lucky if in her inexperience and deep involvement she merely escaped doing harm.

For how likely was it that she could escape it? Alone, without professional guidance, what possible qualifications could a mother have with her psychotic child herself? (Park 120-1)

Here, Park describes her fear of harming her child through “fooling around” and “deep involvement” in her own mothering practices outside of the gaze of science. As another mother asks in the documentary *Refrigerator Mothers*, “What have we done that is so awful that would drive a child into such a regression? I was told that I had not connected or bonded with the child because of inability to properly relate to the child.” Mother blame now had a scientific basis. And while the governance of mother’s and children’s lives was nothing new, what seems new with the refrigerator mother is how the affective technology of blame invited mothers to turn their gaze inward, toward the governance of their own so-called disordered, suspect and potentially damaging feminine practices and desires, unbounded by science (Nadesan 69-70, 97-99; Rose 160-181; Walkerdine and Lucy 29). In hyperbolic terms, this technology of affect compelled mothers—perhaps all mothers—into their own scientific and moral self-governance within the new linkages between a contradictory feminine (loving and abstract, damaging but essential), autism and the regulation of the good/bad mother. A mother’s proximity to her child alongside the requisite to scientifically order her bodily practices and desires had become both the cause of autism and the necessary condition for her child’s normal development (McGuire 2011, 82; Rose 203).

So far, I have traced how new forms of knowledge, visibility and technology (i.e., affect) in everyday text in Toronto linked emerging understandings of autism and a contradictory femininity to new configurations of the good/bad mother. In order to consider what this all means for agency and forms of resistance to scientific and gendered regimes of power, I first reflect on these new identities themselves. The new identity of refrigerator mother emerged as part of a larger re-imagining of the “good” mother during the post-World War II years in North America. This mother was thought capable of ordering her desires, feelings and bodily movements through her own scientific self-governance, and of necessarily being proximate to both her child as well as normal development. The refrigerator mother was an extreme example—a kind of cautionary tale—of what would happen to the children of mothers who did not or could not comply with these new modes of regulation. Yet

despite this extreme and paternalistic treatment, the refrigerator mother was also an ironically privileged identity (and continues to be today), available only to mothers with temporal, financial and educational resources, in other words, to white, bourgeois, North American or Western European mothers. She emerged as part of—and perhaps as handmaiden to—the post-World War II reassertion of traditional gender roles and push of white middle-class mothers back into the home (Ladd-Taylor 12-3; McGuire 2011). Other “bad” mothers and their children (i.e., working class, Black) transgressed the bourgeois and white norm and were subjected to different—racist and classed—forms of regulation (i.e., identification as “mentally retarded” and therefore not “improvable”) (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky; McGuire 2011; O’Malley Halley 5-15; Walkerdine and Lucy). In the documentary *Refrigerator Mothers*, for example, a Black mother recalled, “According to my doctor, my son could not be autistic. I was not white, it was assumed that I was not educated and therefore he was labeled emotionally disturbed.... You can’t even be a refrigerator mother. The irony of it all.” To put the matter differently, through racist and classist logics, the identity of “autism mother” emerged as a key cultural contradiction—privileged yet subject to extreme regulation, scientifically (self) ordered yet nurturing, proximate and necessary to normal development and social order yet also linked to disturbance and pathology. Though in different vocabularies (biogenetics and neoliberal global, consumer capitalism), the identity of autism mother continues to operate in this contradictory way, now within biogenetic and gendered regimes that demand a mother scientifically and intensively order her interventions, everything from pre-natal genetic testing, to diet, to advocacy and more (Sousa). Understanding mothers’ resistance to and complicity in living this cultural contradiction is key to thinking through challenging such regimes.

The deeper cultural meaning of autism that emerged alongside the contradictory autism mother during the post-World War II years, although under challenge by today’s neurodiversity movement (see footnote 1), has also remained for the most part unchanged. Understood as the “regression” or “withdrawal” “of an otherwise ‘normal’ or non-autistic self” (McGuire 2011: 80) into a state of aloneness or empty fortress, the identity category of autism emerged as an “undesired difference” (Goffman 5), a non-viable form of life (Butler 2004). This understanding of autism as a “horrifying” form of emotional disturbance and of autistic children as “withdrawn ... entirely cut off from reality” infused the mass media and popular science during this time (Landsberg 22 Apr. 1965). Among others, Bettelheim’s work was formative (see, for example Kanner; Rimland). As a survivor of the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps, Bettelheim introduced troubling parallels between the trauma responses of prisoners he witnessed in the camps and the autistic children he observed at his

school: “infantile autism is a state of mind that develops in reaction to feeling oneself in an extreme situation, entirely without hope” (Bettelheim 1967: 68). He saw similarities between autistic children’s and prisoners’ manner—their “averted gaze,” “withdrawal into fantasy,” “self-stimulation,” “helpless rages” at change and “empty rote learning” (Bettelheim 1967: 67-8). All of this Bettelheim understood as evidence of having to cope with utterly hopeless and extreme circumstances. Indeed, on a late night talk show Bettelheim claimed:

This autistic child felt that everybody wants him to be dead as the Nazis indeed wanted all Jews to be dead. And when that cannot in one’s own inner feeling be counteracted—Yes, somebody cares terribly much about me!—then one is so hopeless that one has not the energy to fight back.” (Bettelheim qtd. in *Refrigerator Mothers*)

Like the prison guards, mothers’ destructive intent perpetrated near murderous harm, initiating a “massive withdrawal” from normal development—autism (Bettelheim 1967: 126). Whether due to rejecting mothers or mothers’ warrior role today within biogenetic regimes, part of understanding how mothers live with, and therefore both comply with and resist the cultural contradiction of autism mother must also involve a rethinking and revaluing of autism as a viable and even possibly pedagogical difference. I conclude below with a tentative beginning towards rethinking forms of agency and resistance to scientific and gendered regimes of modern power.

Returning the Gaze? Rethinking Resistance

Ironically, it would be these newly emerged identities—autism and autism mother—together with the less dominant understandings of autism during this time (see, for example Rimland) that would compose the terms of mothers’ growing resistance to the overt forms of mother blame associated with psychoanalytic understandings. As early as 1957, after the first 150 cases of autism were identified in a survey undertaken by the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, autism mothers and families were organizing (Schill 16 Jan. 1957; Schill 23 Jan. 1957). They helped found the Ontario Association for Emotionally Disturbed Children, an early advocacy organization that “formed to discuss ways and means of treatment facilities as well as to discuss mutual problems” (Schill 23 Jan. 1957). At a time when the governance of “abnormal” populations was shifting to demarcate “emotionally disturbed” (including autism) and “mentally retarded” children in Ontario, mothers composed a “productive force” (McGuire 2011: 23). They were from the beginning a central part of the movement that challenged custodial forms of care with short-term or

community models, decried overt mother blame, established new treatment facilities that included pedagogical possibilities for their child (albeit in the problematic language of rehabilitation and treatment), and recast autism outside of psychoanalytic vocabularies, thus recuperating mothers from more overt forms of blame (Panitch). These accomplishments are significant. They are an indication that as powerful as tactics of governance are they can never be completely successful. Indeed as Foucault tells us, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (1984: 94). In a sense, mothers’ activism is an example of a different kind of technology of affect formed within the matrices of normalizing scientific and patriarchal regimes—a politicized response to blame and force of resistance to transform their child’s and their own treatment. For these mothers, the “personal” had become “political” long before this 1970s feminist slogan (Boler 114).

At the same time, it is important to notice how mothers’ resistance took place on the same terms as the regimes of scientific and gendered governance discussed in detail above. In living the cultural contradiction of autism mother, mothers are complicit. Rehabilitative, short-term treatment models, as radical as they were, nevertheless seek to achieve identity and as such, are complicit with understandings of autism as an undesired difference (Stiker 128). What’s more, this kind of advocacy and activism forges a new way to be proximate for autism mothers continuous with the role of autism mothers today: this mother is loving (she must love her child to do all of this!) yet scientifically regulated (now through biogenetics), necessarily proximate (to advocate for and intensively treat her child) yet still potentially destructive (today, if she can not or will not advocate fiercely or intensively treat her child). Working at the intersection of feminist and interpretive disability studies suggests there is a way to understand mothers’ resistance and complicity in a more radical sense and revalue autism in the process. In her work on everyday text and talk as a site of social action, Titchkosky is helpful here. She describes a “liminal space between subject and ground” (2007: 21). I understand this space as the creative, embodied pedagogic space opened up by the incompleteness of power, in this case, through mothers’ everyday encounter with text as readers. Indeed, mothers’ activism itself suggests that mothers did not completely come to experience themselves on the ever-inwardly gazing terms of scientific regimes (Dean). As Park puts it about the overt mother blame in the mass media, popular science and autism research at the time, “These were threatening ideas to confront. Yet somehow they did not take hold” (127). What’s more, says Park, in the daily life with her autistic daughter Elly there are “heretical thoughts” that “hover at the edges of my mind” (121). It is to this radical potential of the liminal space where dominant ideas do not “take hold” and heretical ones “hover” that I finally turn.

Using an adaptation of the case history, autism mothers began to “write back” to power in the form of first-person narratives about life together with their autistic child (these narratives are now multiplying numbers). An early example is Clara Park Claiborne’s *The Siege* (1967), published in the same year as Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Empty Fortress*. Park’s is the story of the author’s “siege” upon the solitary world of her autistic daughter Ella, told in the form of a middle-class, educated white mother’s narrative of their life at home, with family and within the maze of professional psychiatry. Trying to understand her daughter’s autism and her role as mother, she reads not only all of the autism “experts” (i.e., Bettelheim, Kanner, Rimland, etc.) but also other autism mother narratives and mass media accounts as key pedagogical terrains for mothers,

We hear on every hand that what we do in the first months of life ... may mark our child forever.... Even the parents of normal children move with a certain knowledgeable edginess. What goes through the minds of parents who know they have a child whose development has gone wrong?⁹

In some ways, Park’s narrative proceeds on the same terms as those of Bettelheim, Kanner and mass media accounts, in other words, on the terms of a privileged identity, normal development and emerging views of autism as bizarre, otherworldly, solitary and tragic: “Elly’s eerie imperviousness, her serene self-sufficiency, belonged to those who, like the fairies, can live somehow untouched by the human experience” (11).

Yet even on these now-familiar and problematic terms, Park’s narrative introduces an alternative way to care about autism and autistic children through her descriptions of her life together with Elly:

We have always made up little songs to fit recurring situations; like many parents we had a good-night song, and others of which we were scarcely conscious. One of these was a car song; to the simplest of tunes, we sang, “Riding in the car Riding in the car Elly and her mama Go riding in the car.” ... Surprisingly, she sang it first not when riding in the car, but one day after I had merely spoken the words. This was the beginning of a curious and encouraging development; what we came to call Elly’s leitmotifs. We became aware that this strange child who could not take in the simplest word could absorb a tune and make it do duty for an idea. (83)

Here, Park articulates (albeit in somewhat normalizing language) the possibility of what might be considered a different kind of care, one that is grounded in

pedagogy—learning from the difference of our autistic child. Elly’s autistic difference is humanized—she uses music, not spoken language, to relate with her mom and communicate her ideas. In this “view” autism mothers become something more than cold or disordered. They are engaged, curious and creative. This kind of pedagogic care is echoed in other autism mothers’ stories of their life together with their different child: “They are whole people,” one mother in the documentary *Refrigerator Mothers* tells the viewers, “They just have a different culture. A different way of communicating. A different language.” Perhaps it is in the (re)turning of our gaze toward the shared yet illegitimate knowledges and practices that “hover” at the edges of scientific discourse (whether mid-century psychoanalysis or today’s biogenetics) yet dwell at the centre of mothers’ lives together with our different children that the next wave of feminist and disability resistance to our own and our autistic children’s governance might emerge. It is my hope that this paper has been a beginning in this task by accomplishing two things: first, upsetting our contemporary imagination of the refrigerator mother as an unfortunate chapter of the past through tracing the contemporary break from as well as continuities with refrigerator mother history in Toronto, and secondly, gesturing to the wealth of mothers’ knowledge about difference and human relationality as one that might humanize how we—all of us—live with difference within now dominant biogenetic regimes of self-governance and heightening forms of gender and class oppression (on Foucault 1972: 81-4; Ringrose and Walkerdine).

¹Though its causes and treatments continue to be scientifically contested, autism today is generally understood as a neurodevelopmental disorder with a genetic and/or environmental basis, one in need of a biomedical solution. In contrast, autistic people and their allies advocate autism as a different way of being-in-the-world, a being in neurodiversity. See Broderick and Ne’eman (2008) and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network [Accessed May 1st, 2014] for further reading. Also see Nadeson and Murray for reading on autism as a new category of problem people constituted within scientific discourse.

²For further reading in disability studies as an interdisciplinary approach that works to challenge medicalized understandings of embodiment, objectivist modes of knowledge production and representation, and ablest modes of social organization, see, among others, Davis, Oliver, Garland-Thompson, Titchkosky (2003, 2007).

³I am particularly influenced by one form of modern power Foucault (1991) articulated in his genealogical work during the 1970s—*governmentality*. Governmental power involves the naturalization of prevailing forms of thought such as liberalism through specific targets like mothers (Dean 16).

It operates programmatically through innumerable and divergent points in the larger social body, entering everyday lives in technical and intimate ways (Foucault 1980, 94; Rose). Everyday text is one such point of convergence. Governmentality, according to Foucault, is a strategic form of modern power concerned with ordering the “conduct of conduct” (1982: 221). Not only does governmental power shape the conduct of others, it also, and crucially, targets our own self-conduct through “techniques of the self” or the work of self-governance, suggested or prescribed (Foucault 1994, 87), and operates together with forms of disciplinary and sovereign power. In other words, this form of modern power operates practically, inviting our participation by holding our bodies, hearts and minds in its grip: “...it incites, it induces, it seduces ... it is ... always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action” (Foucault 1982: 200). In this way, governmental power is *productive*, constitutive of opportunities for acting and imagining ourselves within our everyday, seducing us into new identities like the refrigerator mother. This approach understands the broader historical contours of the subjectivity/ies “autism mothers” as shifting regulatory sites linked to distantiated, even global systems of power, yet practically and intimately constitutive of experience and subjectivities.

⁴My research has included extensive searches (keywords ‘autism’ ‘schizophrenia’ ‘mothers’) through online databases (Reader’s Guide Retrospective, Proquest, Factiva, Google Books). I have also searched archived issues (microfilm) of magazines. To determine which magazines and newspapers were circulating in large numbers in Toronto between 1945 and 1969 (> 100 000), I consulted individual volumes of *N.W. Ayer & Son’s Directory, Newspapers and Periodicals*. To ensure no periodical was missed, I also searched the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*, the *Canadian Index to Periodicals and Documentary Films* and *Canadian Periodical Index: an Author and Subject Index* for subject headings ‘autism’ ‘mothers’ ‘problem children’ ‘child psychiatry’ ‘child psychology’ ‘mentally handicapped’ and ‘schizophrenia’.

⁵Scholars of the mass media in Canada suggest that major American newspapers and magazines were widely available to a Toronto audience since the early days of the industry (1800s) either through circulation or subscription. See Vipond.

⁶A second Austrian psychiatrist working separately in Vienna, but whose work did not become known in North America until the 1980s, Hans Aspergers, made similar observations and drew similar conclusions about a group of children in his care, with the distinction that the children he observed acquired language more readily than those observed by Kanner and typically became “successful” if “egocentric” adults. Aspergers, too, felt that this was a disorder with a biological basis (Pollak 249-50; also see Nadesan; McGuire 2011).

⁷Bettelheim’s influence and popularity as a leading child expert during this

time was considerable. He wrote several popular books about autism and emotional disturbance in children. He had an accessible style, and appeared regularly in American newspapers and magazines, some of which were circulating in Toronto. He also appeared regularly in women's magazines like *The Ladies Home Journal* on all matters of child rearing as well as on talk shows. His work at the Chicago school was even made into a made for television movie (see Bettelheim 1950, 1967; Nadesan 97-8; Pollak 249-285; *Refrigerator Mothers*).

⁸On alternative approaches to psychoanalysis during this time, see Rimland. Also see Drs. Ilg and Ames who appeared regularly in the *Toronto Daily Star* with advice like "We believe that autism ... is to a large extent inborn." Also note that today's biogenetic approaches, while dominant, have not dispelled psychoanalysis from the world stage—it is still common in both France and South Korea for autism treatment and research (Grinker).

⁹Other examples of early autism mother narratives included *Dibs: In Search of Self* (Axline) and *The Child in the Glass Ball* (Junker).

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