

Hot and Cool Mothers

*A*t midcentury, pediatricians, psychiatrists, and psychoanalysts aimed to identify what constituted a Bad Mother and how she produced Bad Children as a result.¹ This research was conducted in the United States and England by those from disparate schools of thought, some working in labs, others in clinics, some with theoretical children, others with actual children, and still others with live monkeys and other animals.² Several of these studies were conducted under the sign of behaviorism: ignoring the internal world of both mother and child to name the mother as a stimulus condition that leads to observable, diagnosable phenomena in children. This followed in part from John Watson's *Psychological Care of Infants and Children*, which flattened both mother and child, and the relationship between them, to an environment of inputs and their outcomes.³ Other approaches were keenly focused on the fantasies, psychic life, or emotional home environments of children that produced pathological states, either under the sign of Freudian psychoanalysis or, later, attachment theory.⁴ What emerged across the era's consideration of mother-infant relationships and child outcomes was a taxonomy that centered on the dosage and quality of

attachment, presence, absence, and affect—one that has been scientifically disproven but that nonetheless lingers culturally. Within this taxonomy, I argue, mothers provided either too much or too little stimulus for their babies, which in turn produced “undesirable” outcomes, or under- and overaffective states in children. These inquiries were frequently under the auspices of safeguarding children (especially sons), which meant that the primacy of the mother and her determining effects on children was a problem to be solved. According to this understanding, a mother was always either too hot or too cool: the degree to which she and her affect were available was flagged as responsible for producing a divergent child. The baby was seen to be merely a passive receiver, a receptacle, and result—a symptom of a natural state of womanhood gone awry.

The most famous, if not persistent, of these bad mother theories-turned-diagnoses is that of the so-called refrigerator mother, whose appliance-like affect is palpable in how she relates to her children and how her children then relate to the world. The refrigerator mother, its coiners claimed, produced autistic states in her children with her ineffective and underaffective parenting. She was characterized as cool and therefore generated a cool child, like begetting like. The refrigerator mother was not the only bad model midcentury psychiatry discovered: a whole host of other problem mothers, whom I call “hot mothers,” were also identified, as was a mother who ran both hot and cool by turns, like a tap. The lukewarm mother wasn’t any good either. In fact, almost any lived experience of the maternal was said to yield a flawed outcome, a falling off from an ideal, and any flaw could be traced back to dependency on a nonideal mother rather than to systemic forces. There was no right temperature, no right mother; there was only an ideal of natural, instinctive, healthy mothering implied by the theory but missing from its actual scene.

From the mid-1940s until the 1960s and beyond (because these theories, while discredited, have had powerful and violent discursive staying power in ableist, racist, and misogynist rhetoric), domestic technology and maternal function were linked by metaphors of temperature. Whereas autism and autistic states have been extensively elaborated in their relationship to digital media, this article attends to understandings of maternal etiology as the *cause* of “emotionally disturbed,” queer, and neurodivergent children (as they shift from mother-child to media-child and back again). I argue that these newly codified diagnoses were inseparable from conceptions of race, class, and affect at midcentury, and were influenced by behaviorist accounts of stimulation, mediation, and domesticity. They reflect a set

of theories of maternal absence and (over)presence whose echoes persist in our present in terms like “helicopter parent.”

Taking Temperature

Coalescing scientifically at midcentury, and entering mainstream knowledge in the United States by 1960, this hot and cool mother typology parallels both the rise of the suburban home, with its accompanying image of the discontent, bored, and underutilized white housewife at the center, surrounded by new appliances and entertainment media, and Marshall McLuhan’s influential 1964 binary of hot and cool media (26).⁵ McLuhan argued that some media, like photographs, are hot, providing intense quantities and qualities of information that engage multiple senses. By contrast, the telephone, he claims, is a cool medium because it provides less information. Embodied, in-person speech is a cool medium as well, though arguably hotter than a phone call. Film, hot. Television, cool. Engraved stone, cool; paper, hot. As Nicole Starosielski writes, “For a medium, to be cold is to be *off*; to lack the ability to transfer information” (2505). Hot media, by contrast, overstimulate their users. The upshot of this binary, which yokes media and information technology, is an implicit assessment of what each given medium *requires* of its audience experientially and affectively via engagement, but also what it *permits* the audience to do, think, and feel due to levels of stimulation. A cool medium, because it is comparatively under-featured, requires *more* engagement and imagination to fill in the gap. A hot medium renders participation passive, absorptive. To quote McLuhan, “The effect of hot media treatment cannot include much empathy or participation at any time” (28). For McLuhan, hot media produce cool subjects, and cool media produce imaginative, responsive (hot) subjects. This is, at its base, a determinist media theory of stimulation.

The coincidence of the binary isn’t worth exploring merely because they share a language and an era, or because the affordances and effects of media are, I argue, also about under- and overstimulation in a receiver. Both McLuhan’s binary of hot and cool media and the psychiatric binary of hot and cool mothering converge at temperature. Where McLuhan argues that cool media are better because they stimulate less, neither hot nor cool parenting is any good. Beyond the related metaphorization of hot and cool, one’s relationship to midcentury domestic media and technology culture was a way of thinking the etiology and pathology of nonneurotic diagnoses in children, namely, autism and schizophrenia. At its crux, then,

the diagnosis of maternal (un)fitness and the sorting of good from bad media both rest on a theory of stimulation: the right kind, at the right level, accessed and deployed by the right people in the right homes. Yet where McLuhan seems to prefer cool media for the states they engender, no mother provides the healthy amount of herself: she is either too much or too little stimulus. Recourse to the metaphor of electronics, appliances, mechanics, and media in describing the problems of *mothering* and the resultant child resonates with McLuhan's theory of hot and cool media in ways that cannot go unremarked.⁶ McLuhan makes clear, via the endless gestures he makes beyond his remit, that not just media but anything can be classified as hot and cool based on what it imparts. People and cultures are also hot and cool,⁷ and one can attribute this to the affordances of the object or person in question: how the receiver or audience or related term responds. As McLuhan extends his binary from media to everything else, he produces a raced and classed binary of hot and cool—"backward countries" (cool) vs. the "we" of the Global North, which he terms "hot." While this may sound like the reverse of Orientalist and colonialist narratives of the "untamed" or "uncivilized," it is not; the term *cool* in McLuhan's hands implies an older and "less advanced" society, or to use McLuhan's own word, *backward*. The racializing and classing of the two problematic forms of mothering, hot and cool, often fall within this same binary, reversed: hot affects belong most typically to Black mothers, cool affects to white mothers. Hot affects belong to the poor and working class, cool affects to the middle and upper class. Both class and race became part of the criteria for diagnosis of a cool or hot mother, with massive ramifications: children who may have benefited from therapeutics only accessible via diagnosis were often excluded if their parents—and therefore their race and class markers—did not fit the diagnostic criteria for a particular temperature. Put another way, parents determined the range of possible diagnoses for their children much like, for McLuhan, a medium determines the response of its user. The diagnosis of hot and cool mothering implies a media theory of parenting.

Lost Mothers

It is no accident that the theorization of hyper and hypo states in mothers, and over- and undermothering, emerged when World War II produced large groups of children separated from their mothers by bombing, mass death, and emigration. Especially in Europe and the United States, in research conducted by refugees fleeing the Nazi regime, the states and

institutions aiming to take care of displaced and motherless children were used as laboratories for understanding the effects of maternal separation on children, distilling the role of the mother. Despite the absence of the father in nearly all of these scenarios, these psychological studies were concerned only to determine the role of the mother, and her *presence and absence*, on a child's development. While compromises and divergences in a mother's behavior were blamed for the emotional states of all children, most studies focused on pathological outcomes in boys; if femininity and its affects were highly policed in mothers, it was their impact on their sons that caught the interest of experts at midcentury (and this legacy lives on in diagnostic patterns: autistic states are still almost entirely defined by their presentation in boys).

Lisa Cartwright writes of this moment that child psychoanalysis “was distinct from previous psychoanalytic work with children in its sustained focus on circumstances where the infant or child's relationship to a stable mother figure was precluded or disrupted, with pathological outcomes for the child's ego” (36). While John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth were developing attachment theory in England and the U.S. and Anna Freud was working on children separated from parents and orphaned during World War II in England, the Viennese psychoanalyst René Spitz was investigating separation outcomes in the United States, setting as his task the identification of lifelong impacts of such ruptures. His own career, as it turns out, was notably marked by the same forces of separation he studied. Having begun his work with infants in Paris, in 1939 he went into exile in New York. There, Spitz worked at Mount Sinai, researching anaclitic depression (the state resulting from the partial loss of a loved one) and “hospitalism” (resulting from the total loss of a loved one). Spitz codified this latter term to mean the nonfatal “wasting away” of the infant when he or she has been deprived of contact with the lost person for more than five months. Spitz went on to continue this work in orphanages in Mexico and South America and in prison, where mother-infant pairs would be together for a time and then separated. In keeping with Bowlby's famous axiom, “no therapy without research and no research without therapy,” Spitz set out to document his findings on film, using the close-up to capture emergent mental states as they crossed an infant's face. Rachel Weitzenkorn argues that Spitz's cinematic documentation (hot, according to McLuhan) of these effects bridged the gap between psychoanalytic theories and more empirical behavioristic accounts of infancy and the mother-child bond.⁸

Whereas Spitz turned the hospital, the prison, and the orphanage into laboratories, and psychoanalytic study into scientific visual evidence,

Harry Harlow attended to the *necessity* of the mother in his experiments with nonhuman subjects at his Primate Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Almost accidentally arriving at the question of maternal separation and surrogacy in the breeding of Rhesus monkeys, Harlow’s experiments were deeply in conversation with the work being conducted by Spitz and other psychoanalytic and attachment thinkers (like Anna Freud and Bowlby), on the one hand, and behaviorists like B. F. Skinner who were more focused on questions of stimulus and behavioral outcomes, on the other. The experiments were controversial in terms of the extreme stresses they put on live animal subjects: some were placed in solitary confinement, others were given an inanimate “mother” that only dispensed nutrition, and some were left with their real mothers. Of the doll mothers, some were wire and some soft, and the monkeys paired with the soft dolls did nearly as well as those paired with monkey mothers. Not surprisingly, those left in solitary confinement did much worse than those with even a fake doll as a mother figure, whether wire or cloth. Humanistic psychologists applied Harlow’s findings to their infant and child subjects (Harlow et al.),⁹ where they found the binary of hard and soft to prove less important than the binary of here and there, absent and present. Sounding a great deal like D. W. Winnicott’s formulation of the “good enough mother,” this psychological research, like Spitz’s, essentially found that any kind of mother was better than no mother at all. Put another way, we are dependent on the figure of the mother, but not only on those made of flesh and blood. Even a lifeless, wired, *cold* substitute was shown to be better than nothing at all.¹⁰ The centrality of the mother, then, is affirmed in Harlow’s work, but the importance of the mother proved to be her textures, her ability to nourish, her shape, her contours. “Her” particulars as an individual were secondary.

Hot Mothers

If the work of Spitz and Harlow (among others) proves we’re dependent on mothers in some form, and absent mothers are deeply damaging to the formation of a child, the question remains: what do specific kinds of mothers do and what is the impact of various forms of *presence*? Moving away from the warmth of a cloth mother and the cold of a wire mother, both better than no mother at all, midcentury psychologists and psychiatrists traced the effects of particular qualities of mothering through the closed circuit of their children. While the refrigerator mother may be the catchiest mother stereotype, with the most staying power despite being out of vogue

scientifically in our contemporary moment, figuring out the amount of maternal involvement that would neither overwhelm nor underwhelm a child with affect was seen during World War II and after as the key to avoiding pathological children. By and large, while these investigators may have hoped to find this ideal in practice, their search was biased enough that it was bound to elude them. What resulted was a group of diagnoses and maternal stereotypes that offer “too much” (not explicitly sexually, although sometimes that, too). Psychiatrists claimed that mothers overwhelmed their children with demeaning tones, were too permissive, too attentive, too seductive, too masculine, too feminine, in short, that they impacted their children by being unable to modulate their own affects.¹¹ As with McLuhan’s hot media, these researchers intimated that the excess of stimulation (whether in the form of infantilization, protection, or permissibility) begat different pathological states. Each specific subtype of hot mother produced her own subtype of pathological child.

Leo Kanner helped perpetuate this taxonomy in his elaboration of a new field: child psychiatry. Kanner had emigrated from Austria at the end of World War I and trained as a pediatrician and psychiatrist in South Dakota, where he wrote on idiosyncratic interests like the history of dental work and folklore, the antiquity of syphilis, and psychosis (Baxter). In 1930, with grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Macy Foundation (in its very first year, before it was associated with its famous conferences that turned attention to the psychology and cybernetic theories of the child), Kanner established the first clinic for child psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University. He rose to prominence by being vocally protective of mothers, railing against the societal pressures put on them—especially those dicta about how to parent that were relentlessly issued by fellow pediatricians and psychiatrists. Whereas Spitz brought the empirical to traditional Freudian psychoanalysis, Kanner wanted Freud killed off as the midcentury “Great God of the Unconscious,” going so far as to write a book with the doubly pointed title *In Defense of Mothers: How to Bring Up Children in Spite of the More Zealous Psychologists*, in which he took a deeply anti-Freudian stance that was ostensibly friendly to mothers, appealing to their innate common sense. He also derided mothers’ “gullibility” and “obsessional” *labor* in striving to be good mothers via education, which Jordynn Jack contrasts with “libidinal” or instinctive mothering: “Rather than rigorously quantifying their child’s activities, the libidinal mother was to carefully observe her child’s needs and to calibrate her responses accordingly” (45).¹² Kanner takes on the quantified mother and demands she return to this qualified version.

Yet, his defense of mothers has less to do with valuing them—a feminist corrective to his era’s male bias—and more to do with a rhetorical strategy for discrediting alternative theories of etiology.

Written in 1941, Kanner’s *In Defense of Mothers* is not exactly, as one might hope or expect from the title, proto feminist, nor is it uncomplicatedly on the side of mothers. Kanner and his more famous counterpart Dr. Spock uphold notions of commonsense mothering (as does the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott), but whereas Dr. Spock would famously write just a few years later, in the opening to one of the best-selling books of all time, “Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do” (1), Kanner fails in his own writing to convey Spock’s confidence in mothers. Although Kanner begins his manifesto with an “Open Letter to Mothers,” he quickly moves from directly addressing the mothers he seeks to defend, as Spock does, to a more distant third-person address. At once consoling and shaming, flippant and urgent, he treats parenting and its influences as a case study in psychopathology much like the experts he derides were treating children: “There is no raid shelter from the verbal bombs that rain on contemporary parents. At every turn they run up against weird words and phrases which are apt to confuse and scare them to no end: Oedipus complex, inferiority complex, maternal rejection, sibling rivalry, conditioned reflex, schizoid personality, repression, regression, aggression, blah-blah blah-blah and more blah-blah” (*In Defense* 6). Nearly all of what Kanner mocks here is the popularization of Freudianism, the pediatric literature in an age of prescribed rigid feeding and toilet training schedules (as in the popular work of John B. Watson and the pervasive, middle-class “scientific motherhood” of the early twentieth century), and an increasing popular market of advice books, into which *In Defense of Mothers* would enter. One of the greatest ironies of Kanner’s life and work is that he ended up adding several terms to his long pejorative list of complexes and psychological jargon: “smother mother,” autism, and “refrigerator mother.”

Kanner’s description of mothering was also one of mediation, primarily the interference of print media but probably psychological radio education as well, which was broadcasting heavily at the time. Mediated mothering was the problem. The solution: pure (good, white) mothering that comes from within instead of without. Of course, the very thing impeding mothers (books, both their medium and their message) was supposed to correct the problem (specifically, Kanner’s book). In thinking through the hot mother, the smother mother, he attributes, via class and therefore education level, the category error to *books*—which McLuhan would go on

to call a hot medium. The hot medium of the book is a block to thinking for oneself; it misattunes the mother and passes on its heat to her, converting her into a walking textbook that—in keeping with Kanner’s notion that each type of mother begets a type of child—impedes a child’s ability to develop into a subject who can think and do for themselves. So goes the theory: media destroy maternal instinct and infect the ideally closed circuit of mother and child with overstimulation, which in turn causes the child to retreat from heat to coolness.

Kanner identifies hot mothers, mothers who mother too much and oversubscribe to advice, as overwrought and hyperanxious. Without a trace of sympathy for why mothers might look beyond what he sees as their own instincts to what is culturally prescribed as “good,” he devotes an entire chapter of *In Defense of Mothers* to this type of parent, with its damning sing-song name, the smother mother, a mnemonic whose rhyme contains twice the mother it should. Writing on this overbearing mother, Kanner doesn’t mince words:

Smother love is the most egoistically selfish thing on earth. It is a caricature of mother love. Its possessiveness is greed. Its aim is domination. Its logic is warped. It locks its treasure in a vault, away from circulation, and frantically expects it to yield dividends. The vault takes the shape of an imaginary uterus, which keeps encircling the child for year and years. It resists, prevent, prohibits emancipation. It is sugar-coated cruelty. It treats the school child like a baby, a college student like a kindergarten pupil. While mother love establishes ties, smother love forges chains. It commandeers a child’s appetite, bowels, play, dictation, homework, everything. It strangely combines hugging with nagging, kissing with hissing, doting with don’ting. (41)

Kanner’s smother mother is the definition of mothering to excess. As described above, her type is one who uniquely infantilizes her child, controlling them via mixed messages. Although Kanner doesn’t elaborate on these paradoxical combinations and doesn’t describe the impact of this mixed messaging, what he describes is hate concealed in love (which one of his case children apparently understood, remarking, according to Kenner, that his mother couldn’t have ruined him more if she had hated him instead of loving him). In 1956, the anthropologist Gregory Bateson described exactly this problem as the “double bind,” which arises when someone, usually within a family setting, is told to do two conflicting things that are thus

co-negated and impossible to negotiate. Drawing from theories of communication of the early 1950s, Bateson developed a typology of the double bind, noting that while it often appears innocuously in play, in fiction, and in the structure of jokes, the double-bind message is a fundamental structure in communication from parents to children (mostly but not exclusively from mothers, Bateson notes). While Kanner held his smother mother's excesses responsible for a whole range of fragile mental states in children, Bateson pinpointed the *duality* of her communication structures as pathological, writing, "We have suggested that this is the sort of situation which occurs between the pre-schizophrenic and his mother. [. . .] When a person is caught in a double bind situation, he will respond defensively in a manner similar to the schizophrenic. An individual will take a metaphorical statement literally when he is in a situation where he must respond, where he is faced with contradictory messages, and when he is unable to comment on the contradictions" (257). Bateson holds familial *communication*, via a double bind, responsible for emergent schizophrenic states and even as the cause of schizophrenic reactions in those without a diagnosis of schizophrenia.¹³ Bad mothering is at its base not just a theory of media, but a theory of communication as well.

Kanner and Bateson were hardly alone in diagnosing problems of media and communication between mother and child. In 1943, the psychiatrist David M. Levy wrote of rejecting and overprotective mothers across this same binary in his landmark book, *Maternal Overprotection*, where he argued that the hot, dominating mother produced an "infant-monster, or egocentric psychopath" (161). Just two years later, and five after Kanner's thesis debuted, Edward Strecker advanced this over/under maternal stimulus theory further. Published in 1946, *Their Mother's Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem* is an extension of a lecture Strecker had given just the year before to hundreds of medical students and doctors at Bellevue Hospital. The notorious lecture, titled "Psychiatry Speaks to Democracy," would go on to be called simply "The Mom Lecture," eliding its ostensible political concerns (5). Nonetheless, in both the lecture and the book, which appeared after his article "Are American Moms a Menace?" was widely circulated in *Ladies Home Journal*, Strecker advanced the argument that the apron-strings form of mothering (overly coddled, overly attached) was ruining democracy. The maternal sin against the child was a sin against America. Substituting the primacy of the mother with the motherland, Strecker backed up his claim with newly available hard data gathered through the mass surveillance conducted on American men in the

form of the draft board, which registered 49 million men.¹⁴ Adolph Meyer, the Chairman of the National Committee on Mental Hygiene and a founder of the mental hygiene movement in the United States, writes in his preface to the volume, “To him the cold hard facts that 1,825,000 men were rejected for military service because of psychiatric disorders, that almost another 600,000 had been discharged from the Army alone for neuropsychiatric reasons or their equivalent, and that fully 500,000 more attempted to evade the draft were alarming statistics” (6). From there, Strecker hypothesized that this huge number of men unfit for duty, from all walks of life, shared one problem: bad momming. Strecker, following Philip Wylie’s 1942 screed *A Generation of Vipers*, then differentiates the (good) mother from the (bad) mom and ends up generating an entire classificatory system for the pathology of moms and momism (13).¹⁵ As in Kanner’s book, the deployment of war metaphors and scenes is extensive. Strecker demonstrates the high stakes of this bad “momming” with endless anecdotes from war rehabilitation centers, most unfolding in the pattern of: if I hadn’t been such a coward, my “brother” would be alive. As many scholars have argued, bad mother theories were deployed in the service of safeguarding democracy and shoring up future democratic subjects via the psychological health of their mothers. Thus, problems at the micro level of the family were scaled up to the macro level of the nation, both in the United States and in England. As Deborah Weinstein writes, “Because the family was seen as a key site for the production of healthy personalities and productive citizens, child-rearing patterns held the potential to bolster or undermine American politics and society by affecting the psychological well-being of children. [. . .] bad parenting became the cause of fascism, prejudice, autism, and homosexuality” (25).¹⁶ Strecker’s title and the opening of his lecture nod at this contemporary work on the macro problem parenting produces (a failed, emasculated generation of men, and the consequent projected failure of the generation still growing up), before taking a turn to unvarnished diagnostic misogyny focused on the failure of women. The book that follows is a tour de force of mom typing (there are seven kinds) and their terrible outcomes. Each wields a form of “silver cord” that replaces the umbilical cord as soon as it’s cut and extends mom’s control (30).¹⁷ This cord is another loud metaphor—presaging Norbert Weiner’s *Cybernetics*—that replaces the organic with the inorganic, intimate flesh with a metallic, machinic, and cold form, much as Harlow had done with his monkeys and their wire mothers. Strecker turns the umbilical cord—a site of supposedly perfect, attuned nourishment—into a power source and a chain. He takes the site of the cut cord—one that allows for a

first differentiation between mother and child—and reinstates a bad connection, pathologizing attachment that, under this logic, becomes inescapable.

This image of the metallic, unbreakable bond is a metonymy for bad moms who are so controlling that they are to blame for literal fascism and so doting that they are the cause of inept and submissive children. Strecker's text is a critique of maternal femininity—vain femininity, masculine femininity—and its effects on cultural masculinity writ large.¹⁸ An entire chapter is devoted to what for Strecker may be the worst outcome in a son: homosexuality. As Jennifer Terry writes, Strecker “cautioned mothers to loosen the stifling grip of maternal love and allow sons to overcome the Oedipal crisis in order to become healthy, masculine heterosexuals” (180). Strecker's homophobic theory, which frequently confused gender presentation for sexual orientation, admits that there may be a neurological or biological “deviation” responsible for *some* gay men but that others are only gay because their mothers wanted daughters and feminized them, or otherwise smothered them (128). The silver cord and its maternal power supply are always to blame, a theoretical assertion in which Strecker is far from alone: many psychoanalysts and psychiatrists blamed mothers for gay children on the grounds of a monstrous intimacy and overidentification, a logic that reappears in the 1960s, as Jules Gill-Peterson shows, with the trans child and their “excessive” mother.¹⁹

The theory that hot mothers, whether bored and thus over-focused on their child or working outside the home and thus masculine, cause delinquency, ineptitude, and even queerness persisted and became particularly attached to Black mothers in the 1950s and '60s, as cool mothering affects became increasingly white. This was by no means the first raced and racist bad mother theory to be attached to Blackness. As Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers shows in *They Were Her Property*, the “bad” Black mother has its socio-medical antecedents in the paradoxical dependence on (and pathologization of) enslaved women laboring in the Antebellum South as wet nurses and surrogate mothers who were suspected of being possible sites of cross-racial contamination of white children.²⁰ In the context of the twentieth century, as Ruth Feldstein and Daryl Michael Scott have shown in their works, although the interwar period was marked by progressive and liberal studies on prejudice and its effects on Black families, the postwar era saw psychiatrists and social scientists pathologize the Black family as disorganized and generative of pathological children. These racist explanations were intimately tied up with the theories of “momism” advanced after the War but only concretely emerged when “medicalized notions of

personality” were readily taken up across the social sciences (Feldstein 45–46; Scott 72).²¹ With this medicalization came the study of “damaged personalities arising from black family life [. . .]. [V]irtually everyone agreed that ‘matriarchy’ had adverse consequences for the personalities of black people” (Scott 74). The Black mother was most frequently understood to be a bad mother, in part explained by her status as head of household and sole parent. She was intrinsically dominant, a hot mother emasculating her children even though she was rarely present (always described as away at work) (Scott 78–79, 106–8).²²

This is perhaps nowhere more boldly or schematically articulated than in the 1965 Moynihan Report, which, with its recourse to psychoanalytic theory, goes so far as to say that Black parenting is reducible to Black mothering, that there is no such thing, in reality, as a Black father. Paternal absence, according to Moynihan, has many ramifications, including that Black mothers were forced to work outside the home and thus deprive their children of attention (understimulating them in terms of education), on the one hand, while being overall too domineering and disciplinary, on the other, resulting in delinquent children—again, mostly sons.

Under the guise of a liberal justification for new racial equality policies, the Report furthered racist bad mother theory and left enduring effects that have been analyzed by many scholars. For example, Kathleen Stockton writes, “So strongly does the [Moynihan Report] believe its claims [. . .] that they become the frozen, mythological rendering of black families for all time” (191). Hortense J. Spillers’s critique of the Report is multifaceted and includes its erasure of Black fatherhood, which ensures that, yet again, the mother is held responsible for the misfortunes, misattunements, and problems of her sons (66). Unlike white families, whose mothers are to blame *as mothers* in spite of their sons’ belonging just as much to their fathers, Spillers argues that “the ‘Negro Family’ has no Father to speak of—his Name, his Law, his Symbolic function mark the impressive missing agencies in the essential life of the black community, the ‘Report’ maintains, and it is, surprisingly, the fault of the Daughter, or the female line” (66). The absent white father, away at war, of course goes unremarked because, as Spillers argues, white sons belong to their white fathers even in absentia, although their mothers are responsible for their ruin (66–68). According to the kinship structure mythologized in the Moynihan Report, Black mothers are doubly to blame: for the lack of Black fathers and for all possible child outcomes that family psychologists deemed as following from “overheated” parenting.

Cold Mothers

Whereas Spitz, Harlow, Freud, Bowlby, and others at midcentury focused on theories explaining the mental states of children who have been physically deprived of their parents, and Strecker criminalized the “American mother” as the site where pathology was reproduced, Kanner moved from railing against psychological advice and its influence on parents and its associated maternal overpresence to the impacts of another kind of maternal flaw: emotional withdrawal. In 1943, on the heels of *In Defense of Mothers*, Kanner famously elaborated a diagnosis of “early infantile autism,” also called, as these things tend to go, Kanner’s Syndrome. Kanner’s new diagnosis of infantile autism served as a revision both of widely held understandings in pediatric psychiatry and of his own publicly elaborated thought on childhood mental states. Prior to Kanner’s elaboration of infantile autism, the state he observed and described had been correlated with schizophrenia; the social withdrawal he classified as part of autism had previously been thought of as a symptom of psychosis.²³ It would take more than twenty more years for this shift to be reinforced completely in psychiatry.

In his 1946 study, Kanner relayed a group case study of three girls and eight boys, all of whom were parented by those in the local community and had been observed in Kanner’s clinic since 1938 for a variety of reasons (from withdrawnness to presumed deafness). It bears repeating that, rather than being a diverse if miniature sample size of children in Baltimore, his selected subjects were white and all belonged to the middle and upper classes. He described them as the children of “highly intelligent” parents, and they included several children from the professoriate at Johns Hopkins, at least two of whom were offspring of Kanner’s medical colleagues.²⁴ Kanner observed in the children a turning inward and sometimes a replication of sociality, but not sociality itself. As Amit Pinchevski and John Durham Peters note, one of the diagnostic criteria that Kanner began to develop was a rejection of the social and a gravitational pull toward *things*, namely, objects of play: “Objects supplied what people could not: predictability and monotony. Kanner portrayed his patients as having a uniform *modus vivendi*, relating to everything and everyone equivalently—as objects” (5). When the children preferred objects, Kanner began to describe their mothers as objects too.

Kanner theorized that there were, in addition to likely natural causes, environmental causes for this behavior, which he called autism. Two observations followed. First, Kanner observed that the *mothers* in these families were never deeply emotional; instead, they were reserved, removed,

and of low affect. In describing how the mothers tended to the children, Kanner writes that it was “the mechanized service of the kind which is rendered by an over-conscientious gasoline station attendant,” once again employing a cord metaphor for providing just enough fuel to go—but nothing more (“Frosted” 77). The fathers were deemed too busy to take notice of the children—which indicated that they were home and not abroad fighting in World War II. This also means they were free from the draft, either another marker of education and class level or, following Strecker, the sign of a defective character or a deficit of masculinity. Second, in his observation of the narrative history of the children, Kanner linked all eleven children’s class background, and their origin in white families, directly to the children’s autistic states. The result: children who appeared as if they were “kept neatly in a refrigerator which didn’t defrost” (“Frosted” 77).

The cold, white, middle- or upper-class mother—one with an actual refrigerator to put a baby in—was yet again to blame. It thus followed in Kanner’s understanding that there was no proof that autism was possible in children from “unsophisticated” parents, by which Kanner meant lower-class parents, parents of color, parents without a secondary education, or an admixture of all three. As Jordynnn Jack observes in *Autism and Gender*, the race-based medicine Kanner practiced was not only proper to his particular research on autism but became the prototype for causation theories (49). Medical racism, which limited access to intervention and study in 1940s Baltimore, established a fundamental inequality of attention to autistic children of color, the legacy of which continues today. Additionally, Kanner’s revision of the longstanding belief that autistic states were a symptom of schizophrenia was part of a larger trend in the United States and Europe toward differentiating adult schizophrenia, with an adolescent onset, from autistic states, which appeared in early childhood. This had the further consequence of moving schizophrenia away from its historic diagnostic association with white femininity to its ongoing association with Blackness and Black patients starting in 1960 (Metzl xiii). Of schizophrenia, Jonathan Metzl writes that in the first half of the twentieth century, the typical patient was seen as an “unhappily married, middle-class white woman whose schizophrenic mood swings were suggestive of ‘Dr. Jekyll and Mrs. Hyde’” (Metzl xiii). These conceptions reversed, and schizophrenia became attached not to “docility but to rage” and especially to Black rage in the form of Black emancipatory activism (xiii). To put it bluntly, cool parenting affects were the domain of whiteness (autism/distance/understimulation); hot parenting affects became increasingly associated with Blackness

(schizo/split/hyper). Autism became a white illness, while schizophrenia became a Black one, and I contend that these shifts are linked as the diagnoses become distinguished from one another. This medical redlining was so complete that Black mothers, such as Dorothy Groomer, were *unable* to get their children diagnosed as autistic specifically because they were Black (and therefore excluded from treatments for autism). When Groomer sought a diagnosis for her son Steven (via Bruno Bettelheim; see below), she was told it was *impossible* that her son was autistic; instead, he was said to be “emotionally disturbed” (Groomer qtd. in Simpson). Groomer understands this as being because as a family they didn’t fit the diagnostic criteria, even if Steven as an individual did. As Groomer put it, “This was not a negotiable issue [. . .]. They said, ‘You can’t even be a refrigerator mother.’ The irony of it all” (Groomer qtd. in Simpson).

Kanner’s notion of a frosted (white) child—the icebox baby—migrated etiologically to the “refrigerator mother.” In his treatment of mothers and their children, Kanner metaphorically linked the child’s pathological removal to an appliance-like mother—a *new* suburban appliance—and to fueling a car, turning the child into a machine and the mother into oil. Taking Kanner’s work together, both before his elaboration of autism and after, mother-infant interaction is too hot or too cold, either over- or under-present affectively. Mothers are seen as a function, not a person, and thus are easily metonymizable as domestic architecture and other helping and containing functions and structures. Because the maternal function is read as stimulus and not care, it is also continuous with media and their inputs and outputs. The use of hot and cool is not a coincidence or a neutral media theory of parenting, but a misogynistic and racist media theory of parenting that depends on reducing the mother to a mechanized stimulus transmission. Moreover, the withdrawal, coldness, unnaturalness of the mother, in this understanding, her absence while present, may be tied to women increasingly working outside the home during the war (when Kanner was conducting his study) and after it, when the refrigerator mother theory was codified. Women who were wives and mothers had their work outside the home criminalized by the same psychiatrists that were pathologizing their mothering styles within it. In the postwar era, a mother who worked outside the home was blamed for the rise in delinquent children and other negative types, yet her work inside the home was recast as unnecessary due to the new appliances that “helped” her with it. She had no reason to be exhausted, withdrawn, or emotionally absent (Cowan 203). What remained for her was to focus exclusively on her children, which turned out to be its own problem.

Shifting conceptions of class and women's labor haunt the new diagnosis of refrigerator mother. Ruth Cowan writes in *More Work for Mother* that industrial modes of domesticity evolved over a full hundred-year period: from 1860 to 1960. For some this process was gradual and for others it was a rupture. Cowan marks the postwar period of 1945–60 as its own distinct moment in which an endless proliferation of appliances inflected notions of class, affluence, consumption, and labor for those performing domestic housework (195). By 1960, nearly every American (there were exceptions) lived in an industrialized domestic space. As Cowan puts it, “[T]he diffusion of affluence meant the diffusion of toilets, refrigerators, and washing machines, not Cadillacs, stereos, and vacation homes” (195). By contrast, in 1940, she notes, a third of Americans drew water outside and carried it in buckets, while two thirds were without central heating. Even by 1945 this had changed. Cowan famously argues that managing the increasingly electrified domicile was not, as is popularly held, easier for women charged with maintaining the home. It was, as she claims in her title, “more work for mother.” The management of children and childcare at midcentury changed in response to all the duties pinned on the worker called the *housewife*. It was this development—the sudden ability to own domestic technologies and to augment mothering via technology and paramothering—that the refrigerator mother theory targeted while attaching race and class to specific disturbances in the mother-child relationship at midcentury. One more particularly relevant example: in 1941, only half of Americans had access to a mechanical refrigerator; by 1951, that number was 80 percent (Cowan 196). The refrigerator mother theory, however unconsciously, however metaphorically, records a shift in the role of the mother at home, in her new environment, with her latest devices. Domestic media entered into this equation as well. Starting in the 1940s, a new antimedia panic shifted blame to another central appliance, the television, which both brought the family unit together and displaced the mother; the TV was described as ruining the child via its “glow” and “heat” (even though McLuhan thought of early television as cold). Children were allegedly left “bugeyed” and weak, robbed of the ability to think for themselves and rendered unable to distinguish reality from fantasy (Spigel 195–94). Eventually McLuhan, too, would go on to argue that television watching for children was overstimulating and “addictive” (Gordon 212).

More than Kanner himself, Bruno Bettelheim popularized the refrigerator mother theory, yoking it even more firmly to domesticity at midcentury, until it became the dominant derogatory term for the mother of

an autistic child. (It was also open, at least some of the time, to reappropriation, as evidenced by parent attendees at the first meeting of the National Society for Autistic Children, who wore name tags shaped like refrigerators, turning it to a literal self-appellation.)²⁵ Bettelheim used his media appearances, which were various—from his cameo in a Woody Allen film (where he speaks briefly on the nature of conformity in *Zelig*) to stints on mainstream television, including multiple visits to the Dick Cavett show—to broadcast this midcentury pairing of autism and the refrigerator mother and was so vocal about it that he is sometimes incorrectly referred to as its originator. Bettelheim made sure that the refrigerator mother was the most famous of psychological concepts on that laundry list Kanner wrote up in *In Defense of Mothers*, on par with the likes of Freud's Oedipus complex and Jung's Electra complex.

Bettelheim, also an émigré from Vienna, arrived in Chicago in 1939 after having been interred in Dachau and Buchenwald. He is a multiply scandalous figure in the history of psychiatry, perhaps, according to his biographer Richard Pollak, never having earned a clinical degree in psychology or psychiatry (although he did hold a humanities degree at a time when the United States by and large only allowed medical doctors to immigrate and refused entry to lay analysts fleeing Eastern Europe) (Lehmann-Haupt). His first published work described individual and group psychology *in extremis*, much like what he had encountered in the camps. That article, which appeared in 1943, turned out to be evidentially faked. Nonetheless, in part on the basis of that publication, Bettelheim became the head of the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School in Chicago, where he worked with many kinds of “emotionally disturbed” children,²⁶ including children with the newly emerging diagnosis of autism. As Chloe Silverman writes, the Orthogenic School was unique for its time—both beautiful and less restrictive: “The children could leave the grounds at any time, but visitors needed permission to enter. The institution protected those living there from real and imagined threats outside the gates, even as the staff encouraged independence” (83).

In his work at the school, Bettelheim built on Kanner's conception of the cool mother to elaborate more fully the refrigerator mother's suburban existence as cold and bored (that is, understimulated), reflective of her marriage and the domestic setting in which she found herself.²⁷ Notably, this typology and the connection it forged between the effects of industrialization and domestic technologies on mothers and their states of mind (including boredom) has its roots in the interwar period, where it was first attached to *hot*, domineering mothers at loose ends, and would

continue to be engaged extensively in the culture via Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* for a very different purpose (Ehrenreich and English 205).²⁸

In addition to popularizing the appliance metaphor, Bettelheim's scientific work reached a wide audience, allowing him to publicize the work he did at the Orthogenic School defining autistic/schizophrenic states (again, the diagnoses were coterminous for some and not for others until the mid-1970s, when they were fully distinguished; for Bettelheim, this happened in the mid-60s). Of that research, perhaps the most well known is his case study of "Joey," published in *Scientific American* in 1959. Joey is himself the refrigerator, so to speak, a "mechanical boy," an appliance (Bettelheim). The case study has been much written about precisely because of Joey's self-identification as electric, which puts him, in some ways, more firmly in the lineage of schizophrenic patients who have a special connection to feelings of electricity and being electrified, from Schreiber onward.²⁹ Joey, nine years old and diagnosed with autism, had a specific relationship to the electric: like an appliance, he had to be "plugged in" to "work" and to survive. His "fantasy" or "delusion" was so complete, Bettelheim reports, and so persuasive that one could almost believe that he was part if not wholly robotic. Bettelheim relates that even the fellow children and the maids of the Orthogenic School took special care and attention with not only Joey but the playthings involved in his fantasy of being a machine, understanding that he needed his "wires" to live and his "carburetor" to breathe.

This case study suggests the violent imposition of Bettelheim's views onto his subject. By all indications, the descriptors and scenes have been narrowed and contorted to fit a working theory of its author rather than reflecting the lived experience of its subject.³⁰ In one sentence, Bettelheim acknowledges this, writing, "His story has general relevance to understanding emotional development in the machine age" (117). This sentence is stranger than it appears precisely because Bettelheim goes on to pin Joey's withdrawal on his mother in the familiar ways. According to Bettelheim's account, Joey's mother was in deep denial about her pregnancy, and her relationship to Joey did not change upon his birth. Whereas Kanner observed children whose fathers were somehow untouched by *going* to war, Joey's father was a veteran described as "rootless" and unprepared to parent (118). Instead of distributing causality across both parents and the structure of the family, however, Bettelheim derides the lack of attachment on the part of Joey's mother while also making her exemplary of a type and a pathology.

Bettelheim's focus on Joey's mother is layered. First, Joey was reportedly maintained on a rigorous schedule for feeding and toilet training so that he would be as unobtrusive as possible. While Bettelheim clearly states that this is common—children are trained and monitored—he also notes that Joey's parents were extreme about his scheduling. In essence, Bettelheim insinuates, Joey's parents turned him into a machine, a machine that ate, drank, urinated, and slept on a fixed, automated timetable. Of this Bettelheim writes, "His obedience gave them no satisfaction and won him no affection or approval. As a toilet-trained child he saved his mother labor, just as household machines saved her labor. As a machine he was not loved for his performance, nor could he love himself" (124). Throughout the text, Bettelheim attributes the lack of emotionality not just to Joey's mother but to the "comfort so readily available" in the new domestic setting of the 1950s (126). Bettelheim here folds domestic architecture into a critique of the mother, when the child is the one acting like an appliance (even if his mother presents as a classic example of the appliance-based mother type). Given the ease of the life he assumes for Joey's mother, Bettelheim diagnoses her as totally pathological for not finding her way out of her malignant ambivalence toward Joey: she has nothing else that might occupy her time or mind.

When Joey first presents to Bettelheim, he only says "bam" when addressed, imitating a mechanical explosion. Bettelheim writes, "Joey plainly wished to close off every form of contact not mediated by machinery" (119). His vocalizations were not just limited to functioning machinery (though he made those sounds and gestures too, churning like an engine) but included *broken* or exploding machinery. Bettelheim interprets the fantasy of being mechanical as a wish to be stronger, better than human, precisely because being human and needing was "too painful." He argues that Joey turned to machines because humans—namely, his mother—didn't nourish him in any way. So, Bettelheim argues, "Joey's delusional system was the artificial, mechanical womb he had created and into which he had locked himself" (127). Bettelheim doesn't say so, but it wouldn't be far off to infer that all of Joey's wires are umbilical cords, retethering him to a mechanical mother or to a more reliable substitute, much like Strecker's punitive silver cord. For Joey, becoming electric allows him to become self-sufficient yet still perform a reassuring dependence on a more reliable power, even if from a cold, nonhuman source. Electrification requires both attachment/connection and output/reception/output. Joey makes a closed circuit within his own fantasy, even if the fantasy relies on an outside electrical source.

The Joey case, despite its various forms of extremity, from the biographical detail to the way Bettelheim unfolds and interprets it, contains many of the motives and assumptions of psychiatric diagnosis at midcentury. Bettelheim reduces mothering to function—that of providing stimulus—and, taken together with the more extensive literature on bad mothers, describes maternity as crucially causative but always going wrong. At the same time, Bettelheim both overtly and covertly argues that a mother—especially one aided by access to the abundance of mechanical or para-parenting assistance in the home—should be not just a function but a primary person. This is a structural double bind. The mother is neither present enough nor specific enough in her stimulus, in her attention, to the child. In effect, the scientific description is self-fulfilling, accusing mothers of its own metaphors. Put another way, the mother is the metaphor.

Kanner, Strecker, and Bettelheim are by no means an exhaustive inventory of theorizers of the *cold* mother, nor was the phenomenon limited to the mid-twentieth century or contained as a set of pathologizing prescriptions. Hot and cool mothers show up across the remainder of the last century and into our present. Feminist psychoanalysts, by way of Melanie Klein, Karen Horney, and Maria Torok (among many others), have investigated both individual mother-child dyads as well as the social reproduction of mothering since Freud. Nancy Chodorow's psycho-sociological works on this topic in the 1970s and 1980s expressly deal with the relationships formed in reaction to dominant (hot) maternity and its effects on children, especially daughters. André Green, the celebrated French psychoanalyst, elaborated in the nineties the "dead mother complex," again as a tool to explain a state in children resulting from particular maternal depressive affects. The dead mother complex describes what happens to a young child when a mother, initially lively and loving, becomes unreachable through extreme depression. Green describes this mother with now familiar metaphors of temperature and mechanics. She is suddenly "switched off" and has a "cold core" much like a lake of ice. Similar to the refrigerator mother theory, in which a cold mother produces a cold child, Green's is also a theory of replication, but via a psychical process—identification—wherein the child mirrors the mother. Nevertheless, the mapping of maternal *parenting* to cool devices, environments, and states (the icebox, the refrigerator, the lake of ice) continued to be propagated.

From Cool Mother to Hot Media and Back

In our contemporary moment, both social and medical diagnoses have begun to mix the mother figure with media as the site of etiological origin for autistic states, pathological antipathy, and other diagnoses of divergence and disturbance. Even when discourses about media are foregrounded, the hot and cold mother and her hot and cold children are necessarily present, if not front and center. Despite the gains of disability activists and mental health professionals working to undo the stigma and ableism that run rampant culturally as well as scientifically, neurodivergent children are still to be “corrected” via these working theories. (For instance, screen time is blamed for an increase in autism diagnoses, as opposed to, say, early intervention screening and shifting diagnostic categories.)⁵¹ Scholars have attended to this blending of media theory and usage and autistic states from a wide variety of perspectives (including Alex Galloway’s work on François Laruelle, the work of Pinchevski and Peters discussed here, and, more recently that of James Hodge, who pairs the research of a contemporary psychoanalyst focusing on autistic states, Thomas Ogden, with habitual daily media).⁵² It is not as if we’ve ceased altogether to figure the mother as a site of relation that produces these mental states and substituted for her the “screen” because the mother is still tethered to the uses of the screen as endless debates about screen time and permissive parenting permeate American culture in the twenty-first century.⁵³ This latest joining of mediation and maternity can be read through the lens of midcentury work diagnosing stimulation and states too hot to handle or too cold to love.

The Helicopter Mother. The many snide variants: snowplow, bulldozer, lawnmower, submarine. The child counterpart, too, a landing pad. Once again, the coinages draw on the nonhuman for their classificatory metaphor, most frequently machines, to describe and pathologize qualities of parenting and to account for generational “problems.” As opposed to midcentury metaphors, which centered on temperature and domestic, interior appliances, all of these contemporary mother types are figured as outdoor machines, but from the point of view of maternal typology, it’s more important to note that they are nondomestic machines. Like “wearing the pants,” the difference in appliance registers the shift from the white suburban housewife at home with her refrigerator to the defeminizing role of full-time work outside the house that, for the white middle and upper classes, first widely occurs in the 1940s and then again in earnest from the

1970s onward. These stereotypes, much like the smother mother and the refrigerator mother, are deeply attached to ideals and fantasies that are classed and raced.

The helicopter mother first makes her typographical appearance in an offhand remark by a teenager (a son) who describes his mother with this metaphor in the 1969 parenting book *Between Parent and Child* (Ginott and Ginott). Despite this early usage, helicopter parents are understood to be distinctly opposed to the hands-off working mother of the 1970s and 1980s, or even her complement in the same period, the attachment parenting advocate.⁵⁴ The helicopter parent didn't emerge as a distinctive type—and the site of intense social and psychological scrutiny—until the mid-1980s and early 1990s, when helicopter mothers were differentiated from attachment-oriented parents and formally coined and tied to generationality as an image of boomer parents hovering over their millennial children (see Shoup, Gonyea, and Kuh). The casual, shaming diagnosis continues to be debated in our present, as millennials themselves become parents.

Though the term *helicopter* was at first restricted to the mother, starting in 2000, helicopter *parents* entered general usage. In the present, conceptions of parenting have moved away from mothering toward a more gender-neutral representation, not only because of social progress but also because parenting (mothering) is more and more commonly described as function; it can become gender-neutral or plural because it's one more nonhuman stimulus source. This quality of parent is defined by *presence*, but presence of what kind? A presence that is ubiquitous but at a distance, overstimulating but *underattached*.

Ironically, helicopter parents are often spoken of as if they are *too* attached and unable to let their children differentiate. Using *attachment* here in the psychological sense is a misnomer, both in its recollection of attachment parenting as its own distinctive philosophy and in its association with attachment theory (in the works of Bowlby and Ainsworth, who have separately and together elaborated experiments and understandings of what makes a child secure enough to attach without avoidance or anxiety and thus develop and present normatively). While attachment parenting and helicopter parenting may share the hallmarks of high emotional support, *helicopter* parents are often spoken about as purposefully controlling their children's behaviors and arresting the development of autonomy. They are not a base from which to explore the world; instead, they are figured as chasing after their children, clearing the path in front of them, behind the scenes and omnipresent.

The helicopter parent belongs to the domain of whiteness and is almost always upper class and highly educated, much like the refrigerator mother. Nearly identical in desired outcomes for her children is another “hot mother” type—the Tiger Mother—an Orientalized as well as self-claimed and machine-free appellation for a usually Asian or Asian American mother.⁵⁵ Both these types are the twenty-first-century reprise of the smother mother, similarly demarcated into category by race and class. As Malcom Harris points out in *Kids These Days*, this classification erases the maternal labor that working-class and middle-class mothers perform as advocates for their children (6), or parents of disabled children.⁵⁶ Many critics who chide helicopter mothers focus exclusively on the parenting behaviors and outcomes of college-educated middle-class and upper-class mothers while altogether ignoring other kinds and qualities of intensive parenting performed by mothers in other race and class positions.⁵⁷

The backlash surrounding these mother types reprises nearly exactly the “momism” discourse surrounding hot and cool mothers at mid-century. The psychologist Madeline Levine, who writes about these parenting types in wealthy parents and their traumatic impacts on their children and teenagers, argues that for all the hovering, monitoring, surveilling, and pushing, the parents are not *emotionally* present to their children. Much like the overeducated smother mother who relied on parenting texts rather than Kanner’s notion of maternal instinct, helicopter parents are derided because they are overpresent and use external benchmarks as a parenting guide. These are the middle- and upper-class parents of late-stage capitalism, who are stereotyped as believing that a child’s acceptance into an Ivy League school is the end-all be-all, the crowning parenting achievement. As Hara Estroff Marano argues in her 1994 book *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting*, “hothouse” parenting, used interchangeably with helicopter parenting, is to blame for widespread social ills. Despite the fact that the jacket copy trumpets that this is the “first book to connect the dots between overparenting and the social crisis of the young,” Marano’s stance and rhetoric are nearly interchangeable with that of Strecker and Wylie some fifty years earlier.

If the *helicopter* is one technological metaphor for this form of parenting, it has also been attached to notions of stimulation and communication, “always on” like a cellphone. Instead of practicing attachment parenting, in which parents consistently *physically* hold young children, helicopter parents hover, making use of adjunctive tethers like texting, which

Richard Mullendore has described as “the world’s longest umbilical cord” (qtd. in Childs). Reminiscent of the folksonomic apron strings and Strecker’s silver cord, the cellphone and surveillance apps are the latest problematic yoke of contemporary parents to their children.⁵⁸ The criticism argues that persistent contact is not the same as attention. If they are examples of hot parenting, their heat is cold.

Helicopter parents are understood to surveil and interfere, and that surveillance can be read as either hot (too much control) or cold (too distant) or both.⁵⁹ Surveillance implies distance and, in the twenty-first century, implies technological mediation. Concealed in this logic of stimulus, either mediatic or maternal, either too much or too little, either hot or cool, is the reduction of women (and other parents) to their role as mothers. In turn, a mother is reduced to a maternal function, and that function to the production of stimulus. This produces an inescapable problem wherein all that can ever be offered is too much or too little stimulus—precisely because stimulus is not the right conceptual frame for relationality: it is misogynistic, racist, and classist in its description and in the outcomes and ramifications that it predicts and observes. The persistence of mechanical and temperature metaphors for maternal care indicates—far beyond their midcentury inception—that though the devices, diagnoses, and metaphors shift, this underlying and punitive media theory of parenting remains the same. This is the other double bind of parenting.

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Notes

- 1 For a vital and rigorous compendium of twentieth-century maternal blame and bad mother types, see Ladd-Taylor and Umansky.
- 2 For the intersection of animal research and attachment research, see Vicedo, esp. ch. 2, 6, and 8.
- 3 For more on the influence of Watson's thinking in bad mother theories, see Ladd-Taylor and Umansky. See also Hulbert.
- 4 For two classic examples of this work, see Bowlby; and Freud and Burlingham.
- 5 McLuhan problematically extends this binary of hot and cool to "backward countries," (cool) in contrast to the "we" of the Global North, which he terms "hot."
- 6 As Nicole Starosielski points out, metaphors of hot and cool are not exclusive to McLuhan; the discipline of film and media studies is rife with these metaphors.
- 7 For more on McLuhan and race, see Towns.
- 8 For an elaboration of the import of Spitz's empirical turn within a psychoanalytic framework, see Weitzenkorn.
- 9 For more on Harry Harlow and these experiments, see D. Blum.
- 10 Later, in 1971, Harlow and Leo Kanner would go on to correspond on the question of inducing a *simulated* autistic and schizophrenic state in monkeys in order to deduce, perhaps once and for all, whether autism lay with the child or the mother. See Harlow's letter to Kanner dated June 10, 1971.
- 11 See the work of Kanner and Strecker, for example, discussed in the next section.
- 12 For more on this contrast as it relates to the mothers of autistic children, see Jack.
- 13 For more on Bateson's work and its relationship to cybernetics, see Geoghegan; and Weinstein 47–48.
- 14 For more on the unprecedented surveillance project of the draft board, see Serlin.
- 15 For more on "momism," see Wylie. See also Blatz. For more on the history, see Buhle 125–64; Caplan; Ehrenreich and English 258–68; and Plant 19–54.
- 16 For maternal dominance and its relationship to racist children, see Feldstein 40–85. On Cold War containment strategies on the domestic front, see May. On psychoanalysis, attachment theory, and World War II Britain, see Shapira.
- 17 See also Fred Grigsby's letter to Kanner. Grigsby, the parent of one of Kanner's patients, wrote of recovering the "missing links" as key to his child's "recovery" and "overcoming."
- 18 Alluding to the title of his first book, Strecker released a sequel called *Her Mother's Daughter* ten years later. For more on this sequel and how Strecker pathologizes gay girls, see Terry.
- 19 See Gill-Peterson, esp. ch. 3 and 4; and Terry.
- 20 For the long history of white women's subjugation of Black women who care for their children, see Jones-Rogers 110–20. See also Morgan, esp. ch. 4.
- 21 Instead, Scott argues that Chicago School sociologists, most notably E. Franklin Frazier, thought of the Black family as disorganized due to social upheaval, and on its way to reorganization. Scott carefully

- shows how Frazier's earlier work has been incorrectly connected to the Moynihan Report via the collapsing of political meanings as they differ in the context of Franklin's 1932 *The Negro Family in Chicago* and the 1965 Moynihan Report. Scott points to Frazier's understandings of the problems of patriarchy and the resultant issues with children as a problem of urban ecology, not race; white immigrants faced similar problems in the same urban spaces. Frazier located hope for the return of patriarchy in union membership and in World War II's economic impacts. In the postwar era, Frazier began to locate personality disorder in lower-class Black homes—which he partially located in the matriarchal structures found therein. See Scott 41–55, 75–76.
- 22 See Harrington. Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey were psychoanalysts who argued with particular stridency that Black single mothers were pathologically hot, dominating, and the source of emasculated Black masculinity.
- 23 Kanner's work unfolds in the same period as Hans Asperger's research in 1944, but Asperger's work would go unrecognized in the United States until the 1970s, when Asperger syndrome was first included in the DSM. For more on the longer history of autistic diagnoses, see Pinchevski and Peters.
- 24 For more on this question of the importance of intelligence, see Sterwald and Baker.
- 25 Ironically, advocacy by these parent organizations that organized in part around rejecting refrigerator mother rhetoric had a large part in moving toward Applied Behavior Analysis as the dominant autism treatment paradigm in the United States. See Schreibman 84.
- 26 For the longer history of “emotionally disturbed children” and their treatment in institutions, see Doroshov.
- 27 For a longer discussion of Bettelheim's influences, see Silverman 66–70.
- 28 For more on Friedan and her readers, see Plant 146–76.
- 29 For more on Joey, see Sconce 224–35. See also Hong; and Pinchevski and Peters.
- 30 For more on power and the case study, see Berlant 665–72.
- 31 As just one example, see Her-mawati et al.
- 32 See Galloway; Hodge; and Pinchevski and Peters. See also Alper; and Nagy.
- 33 For more on this, see Zeavin, *Mother's* (forthcoming).
- 34 Attachment parenting, which is not the same thing as a praxis of attachment theory though they share some features (notably, attachment parenting is a much more extreme revision; if Bowlby and Ainsworth think of the good mother as a safe base from which a child explores their world, coming and going, attachment parenting advocates a continuous joining of the dyad), began to pervade parenting discourse in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Attachment parenting, an intensification of Dr. Spock's philosophy, came into its own in 1975 through Jean Liedloff's term “continuum concept” via her ethnographic work with the indigenous Ye'kuana in Venezuela. The ethnography is used to demonstrate that, compared with tech-free Ye'kuana parenting, modern American *technologized* parenting makes for fewer happy, secure babies. The continuum concept does away with augmented

motherhood, eschewing strollers, cribs, and bottles (especially with formula in them). The family bed and cosleeping, then, are argued for as a specifically “natural” way of sleeping that was said to further bonding, need no special equipment, and allow for mutual regulation of parents and child. See Liedloff.

This parenting style and philosophy becomes known as attachment parenting in the 1980s when the pediatrician William Sears and nurse Martha Sears began publishing mainstream parenting literature and advice on “immersion mothering.” They switched the coinage to “attachment parenting” to change the valence (from drowning to something positive and scientific, relying on the association with Bowlby and Ainsworth’s attachment theories), thus giving the movement its name. See Sears.

Relatedly, a return to breast feeding and “natural” and home birth practices in the same moment reinscribed a norm of

“noninterference” and purity in the maternal bond, the legacy of which continues today in the adage “breast is best.” For more on this history, see Martucci.

- 35 The most notorious example of the tiger mother in mainstream discourse centers around Amy Chua and her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*.
- 36 For more on the diagnosis of children in the contemporary context, see L. Blum; Francis; and Rapp and Ginsburg.
- 37 For one example of statistical studies that perform this critique, see Doepke and Zilibotti. For college-educated mothers staying home (in the UK context), see Orgad, esp. part 2, ch. 3.
- 38 For more on surveillance and the datafication of children, see Barassi. See also Zeavin, “Family.”
- 39 For an example of this literature, see Munich and Munich; and Padilla-Walker and Nelson.

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