

Representing Autism: A Sociological Examination of Autism Advocacy

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Abstract

This paper explores how the cultural phenomenon of autism is being structured by autism advocacy work in the contemporary West. Drawing on recent work in the field of disability studies, I analyze critically the social significance and productive effects of advocacy campaigns that represent autism as a life-threatening pathology.

Résumé

Cet essai explore comment le phénomène culturel de l'autisme est structuré par le travail militant effectué dans les sphères occidentales contemporaines. En se basant sur les travaux récents effectués dans le domaine des études sur l'invalidité, j'analyse de manière critique la signification sociale et les effets productifs des campagnes de plaidoyer, qui représentent l'autisme comme une pathologie mortelle.

Introduction

Autism is widely understood in contemporary times as a biomedical disorder in need of order (Kanner 1943). In contrast to this conventional understanding of autism, this paper looks at autism as a socially constructed phenomenon that might teach us something about how contemporary social relations are ordered. I examine how the phenomenon of autism is being organized in contemporary times by dominant discourses within autism advocacy. According to the Autism Society of Canada, our country has witnessed a 150% increase in the number of reported cases of autism in the past decade (Autism Society of Canada 2004). With these growing statistical facts, autism advocacy groups have taken on a more prominent and powerful role in North American society and thus have been influential in shaping public understandings of autism through awareness campaigns, fundraising appeals, and so on. I look to these everyday textual representations of autism, produced and circulated by autism advocacy groups, as a way to reveal the making of the meaning of autism today.

I analyze the social significance and material effects of two high-profile autism awareness campaigns originating from the United States (US)—Autism Speaks' "Learn the Signs" campaign and the New York University (NYU) Child Study Center's "Ransom Note" campaign—that rely on and produce dominant biomedical understandings of autism as a pathological disorder in need of a return to (normative) order. To perform my analysis of these campaigns, I draw on a sociological tradition of interpretive textual analysis, an approach that begins with the assumption that we cannot separate the production and circulation of representations from the production and circulation of cultural knowledges and understandings about that which is being represented (Hall 1980). Following disability studies scholar Tanya Titchkosky (2007), I treat texts as social

actions that make up the meaning of people. She writes: "Texts appear to people, and with real consequences, texts enter our lives. In the context of our lives, texts come to life. This life reflects, if only in a flash, the meaning of the being of that which the text speaks..." (Titchkosky 2007, 26). Autism is made intelligible to us via multiple discursive con-texts (e.g., the ways in which autism gets written about in the newspaper; what images we are presented with in awareness campaign materials; what aspects of autism get tracked by statistics; how these statistics are presented to the public). These contexts work to give autism a particular and contingent shape and structure; they allow autism to appear as it does. In turning toward some of the taken-for-granted representations of autism that are being produced and circulated by advocacy groups, this paper seeks to provoke greater and more nuanced understandings of the risks and possibilities inherent in relating to and across difference. It is necessary to begin this analysis with a brief discussion regarding the interdisciplinary perspective of disability studies. This allows me to situate my research and myself: both as a researcher and—insofar as this paper, too, is an act of representing autism—as an advocate.

The Spaces Between Us

My work begins and ends with an understanding that autism is, among many other things, a social identity category and, as such, a viable and valuable way of being in the world. This work is theoretically located in the field of disability studies, which considers disability through a social model (Oliver 1990). Instead of understanding disability as a medical condition located in individual bodies, the social model locates disability in the physical and social environments and in inter-subjective relations that work to disable impaired bodies. Disability becomes politicized as a category of social oppression and material disadvantage. In the social model, disability shifts from being what someone has to who someone is.

Acknowledging the strategic utility of such distinctions as social model/medical model and impairment/disability and the poli-

tical importance of understanding disability as a social identity category, recent work in critical disability studies theorizes disability as neither a singular, fixed, nor trans-historical construct, but as a nexus of embodied relations (Corker and Shakespeare 2002; Titchkosky 2007; Michalko 2002). Adopting this orientation to disability and thus to autism, I contend that, while particular bodies are made more vulnerable to material inequities, autism is not simply in some bodies and not others; it is always being made in the social spaces between bodies (Titchkosky 2007). This analytic orientation works to trouble any quick or easy understandings of what autism is, for "what autism is" is always changing in relation to changing times, changing spaces, changing diagnostic criteria, changing attitudes, and so on. As I make use of such designations as disability and non-disability, autism and non-autism, I am not intending to use them oppositionally. Rather, I acknowledge that these designations are complex and messy. Understandings of autism and non-autism are historically, geographically, and—particularly in relation to contemporary understandings of an "autism spectrum"—relationally constituted. With this in mind, autism can and must be theorized as an interactional social process that unfolds in the spaces between us.

One way I enter into this space of autism and participate in its production is as a non-autistic person theorizing autism and autism advocacy. Insofar as autism advocacy in North America is largely dominated by non-autistic individuals charged with advocating for and supporting autistic people and, insofar as autistic people are often excluded from or are limited in their participation in mainstream advocacy work, my work is risky (Dawson 2005). Indeed, my work represents the risk with which all relationally non-autistic advocates are faced as we find ourselves in autism's midst: the risk of speaking, writing, representing, defending, condemning, protesting, championing, fighting, and supporting difference from within relational systems of power. To say that advocacy is risky, of course, is not to say that we should stop engaging in acts of advocacy; it is rather to bring into focus the necessity for critical engagement with the historical, geographical, and political dimensions and power

relations that invariably structure what it means to advocate and what it is that we are advocating for. If to speak up, speak out, speak-on-behalf-of is one crucial (if not inescapable) function of living with others—and I believe it is—it becomes necessary to trace acts of advocacy along the lines of our (power) relations, to attend to the ways in which advocacy work is producing and governing ourselves and others.

In *Looking White People in the Eye*, Sherene Razack explores the complicity of the relationally non-disabled advocate in sustaining ableist systems of oppression by way of a paternalistic “politics of rescue” (1998, 132). The non-disabled advocate, she argues, is often recognized only as doing the work of advocacy when s/he is actively working to save a vulnerable disabled individual (1998). As we shall see in the examples that follow, this is a familiar trope within discourses of autism advocacy. Razack’s observations provide an entry point for critically engaging the risky terrain of autism advocacy. And so, I move now to examine, in greater depth, some of the ways in which power relations are structuring contemporary autism advocacy work. I approach my analyses of the examples below with the belief that, following Razack, “if we can name the organizing frames, the conceptual formulas, the rhetorical devices that disguise and sustain elites, we can begin to develop responses that bring us closer to social justice” (Razack 1998, 16). To glean the “organizational frames,” “conceptual formulas” and “rhetorical devices” at work in the field of advocacy today, I turn now to an examination of Autism Speaks’ “Learn the Signs” campaign.

“It’s Time to Listen”

In April 2006, Autism Speaks, a US-based organization that describes itself as the “world’s largest autism research and advocacy organization” launched its “Learn the Signs” campaign (autismspeaks.org). The posters, banners, billboards, and television spots that came out of this campaign each follow a similar template: each presents statistical information about the probabilities of something occurring. While some provide statistics about the probabilities of a child fulfilling a dream—the chances of becoming a top

fashion designer or an NFL quarterback—others offer statistics about the probability of physical harm occurring to a child—the chances of getting hypothermia, the baby-sitter needing to call 9-1-1, and so on. The campaign materials contrast these statistics, whether they describe the odds of fulfilling a dream or realizing a nightmare, with one statistic that reflects the number of children diagnosed with autism in the US: 1 in 150.¹ Below, I will analyze two print posters from this campaign.

Figure 1 depicts what appears to be a mother and her son in an entranceway to a home. The mother is helping her son get dressed for what the viewer can only imagine is a frigid afternoon of playing in the snow. The boy, perhaps five or six years old, is a round and puffy, bright red bulb of winter clothes, complete with layers of woollen scarves, a wool hat (with a pompom), fuzzy mittens, a jacket, snow pants, and tall green



FIGURE 1 Autism Speaks Poster, Ad Council, 2006. Used with permission.

boots with thick yellow laces zigzagging up their front. The boy's head is tilted upwards, eyes partially closed, as his mittened hand adjusts the bulky folds of his scarves. The mother is crouching before the boy, her hand carefully reaching out with the boy's other mitten, about to slip it on his hand. The poster's text reads: "Odds of a child getting hypothermia: 1 in 66,000. Odds of a child being diagnosed with autism: 1 in 150."

The second poster, **Figure 2**, depicts what appears to be a mother and her daughter in a sun-splashed pink bedroom. The mother is sitting on the floor looking up at her daughter, who is perhaps seven years old, with braided blond pigtails and is playing dress-up. The daughter is decked out in an explosion of different patterns and colours: hot pink beaded necklace, matching polka-dot tights and t-shirt, blue and white striped skirt, pink jacket and belt, a striped tie, and brown high-tops with undone fluorescent orange laces. Discarded clothes and toys are



FIGURE 2 Autism Speaks Poster, Ad Council, 2006. Used with permission.

scattered about the girl's bedroom—a jacket has fallen atop a white rocking horse, a white teddy bear lies against a white rocking chair. The poster's text reads: "Odds of a child becoming a top fashion designer: 1 in 7,000. Odds of a child being diagnosed with autism: 1 in 110."²

At the bottom of both posters, information appears: "Some signs to look for: no big smiles or other joyful expressions by 6 months; no babbling by 12 months; no words by 16 months. To learn more of the signs of autism, visit autismspeaks.org." Lastly, the Autism Speaks blue puzzle piece logo appears with the organization tagline: "It's time to listen." If now is the time to listen, what might we hear in this poster? If autism speaks via these representations, what might it be communicating, or how is it being communicated? Surely these posters raise our awareness, but what do these posters urge us to become aware of?

Representing Pathology

Autism is made to appear in the "Learn the Signs" posters in a variety of overt and covert ways. Perhaps the most explicit way is as a list of non-normative red flag behaviours, actions or ways of interacting. Autism, the poster tells us, is a checklist of its disorderly characteristics: it is no words, no smiles, no babbles. This interpretive leap leaves us with several things to consider.

First, by depicting autism as a list of pathological signs to be looked for on the bodies of children, the posters reaffirm autism as, simply, something one has (a disorder, a series of symptoms). Such a depiction removes any possibility for conceiving of autism as someone who is (an identity, a perspective, a viable way of being in the world) (Sinclair 1993). This understanding of autism works to discursively split the autistic body in two, conceptually separating what autism is from who autism is.

The second thing to consider is how the pathologization of autism works to organize understandings of autistic ways of being not only in medical terms but also in moral ones. The posters not only instruct the advocate where to look (a medical imperative), but how to look (a moral

imperative), not only how to see autism's signs, but how to read them. The posters direct the viewer to read autism not only as a series of medical pathologies, but also as a collection of moral deviancies and deficiencies. For example, a 16-month-old child's use of non-verbal communication is deflated of any agentive possibility and is re-inscribed as, simply, a pathological absence of words. The understanding that non-normative (autistic) ways of being are nothing more than signs pointing to disorder works to morally encode these ways of being as non-valuable and, even, as non-viable. Understood in medical/moral terms, autistic difference becomes, to borrow from Michalko, "useless difference"; difference that "makes no difference" at all (Michalko 2002, 99).

Autism's medical/moral deviancy is further highlighted as it appears within the confines of the posters as a risk ratio. Although it is nowhere mentioned explicitly, there can be little doubt about the moral meaning of the 1 in 150 ratio. The poster appeals to the viewer's implicit understanding that the relative high "odds of being diagnosed with autism" are not good odds. If, by contrast, a school were to advertise that 1 out of every 150 of their graduates went on to become top fashion designers, aspiring fashion designers everywhere would be lining up for admission. In this way, the "Learn the Signs" posters work to forcefully reframe autism as not only something to be aware of, but something to be wary of, something to beware. As moral and medical understandings of embodied difference mingle, autism is (re)presented in the posters as a threat.

Representing Threat

Recall Figure 1 where we see a mother crouching before her son in the threshold of a doorway, helping him prepare to take leave of the safe and orderly sphere of the home and venture outside into the always-possible perils of the snowy cold. The boy appears with layers of clothes—protective armour against the unpredictable, hazardous winter weather that, presumably, lies on the other side of the closed door. Like this mother, we might know of the dangers that creep outside in the dead of winter,

threatening chubby fingers and tiny noses: "Bundle up—you'll catch your death"; "Make sure your ears are covered"; "Put on your mittens, or your fingers will fall off." "Hypothermia," the poster text warns.

The mother in this image slips the mitten overtop of her son's hand. This act puts her in touch with her son: a gentle touch, a cautious touch, the touch of a mother's fierce protection against the cold and the physical harm it could cause in the absence of vigilant protection. Mothers—good mothers—are wary when little boys venture into the frigid outdoors. Mothers zip up jackets, lace up boots, tie scarves tightly. Hypothermia is something to beware of; 1 in 66,000 is still 1 in 66,000. Your child could be the 1. But worry more about autism. Be aware of the statistics. 1 in 150. The 1 of hypothermia is close, but autism's 1 is closer. Mothers worry about the freezing outdoors, but, odds are, the poster whispers, that the chill will take hold from within: no big smiles, no signs of joy, no babbling, no words.

In Figure 2, recall a different scene. This scene, too, unfolds in the home. However, no doors appear in this scene, no immediate threshold awaits. The only portal to the outside world in this scene is a window ablaze in light. Brightness and openness—possibility—lie outside the home, but not today. There will be no venturing into the unpredictable outside for this young girl. Her layers of clothes are for inside play; her shoes on, but not tied up.

The young girl takes centre stage in this poster, and, indeed, the scene looks as if it may be the end of a performance. The girl—head down, knee bent, toe touching the floor—assumes a position somewhere between striking a pose and a curtsy. The mother leans back and gives audience to the performance. Unlike the scene in Figure 1, no protective mother's touch is needed, for no immediate threat looms. It is a time for trying on dreams in the safety of playrooms; a time for easily slipping into and out of clothes and roles—a skirt, a tie. While the gaze of the mother in Figure 1 looks down, attentive and focused directly on the immediate task at hand—a mother's task of protecting—the gaze of the mother in Figure 2 looks upward

almost in astonishment. Perhaps she sees, as we see, a girl before her who (despite the pigtails and the child-like face) seems precocious, a girl who is changing from rocking horses to fashion statements, a girl full of possibility. The good mother watches as her daughter dreams; she supports her as she grows up, grows new ideas, aspires to success. Being a fashion designer is a competitive business—1 in 7, 000 make it to the top. But the odds of her achieving her dreams are far slimmer than the odds of her dreams being threatened: the odds of a child being diagnosed with autism are 1 in 110.

Both “Learn the Signs” posters—in very different ways—tell the story of autism as a threat to life. In Figure 1, autism is implicitly likened to the life-threatening chill of hypothermia and, as such, is discursively framed as a pathological state that threatens physical harm. In Figure 2, autism ominously looms over a child’s future, threatening her life dreams. Lennard Davis (1995) argues that, in dominant western culture, disability often appears as a *memento mori*—a memory of death. The disabled life often is held in an imagined association with death. As autism is presented in the posters as a threat to life, the autistic life is representationally encoded as a life to be avoided, a life to be protected from, a life, in other words, that is “not quite a life” at all (Butler 2006). In the Autism Speaks posters, non-autism is, thus, discursively transformed into an absolute imperative. The only possibility for securing possibility (life) itself—to be recognized and authorized as “fully” living—is to dwell within the confined parameters of the normal (to show joy in normative ways, to babble within a normative timeframe, and so on).

With normative (non-autistic) life cast simultaneously as valuable and as at stake, the posters work to portray it as vulnerable and in need of protection. Enter advocacy. The tying together of metaphor-laden stories of autism’s inherently threatening nature and the sense of immediacy that is evoked by the repetition of bad odds works to produce the role of the advocate—the mother in the two posters—as one that takes up the work of protecting normative (non-autistic) life.

With normalcy as the only possible/permissible way of being and as advocates take up the work of vigilantly policing the boundaries of normative life, what happens when the signs of autism are noticed? What happens when the borders of the normal are not only threatened, but are also breached? As a way to address these questions, I will, for the remainder of this paper, examine, a trend within contemporary autism advocacy that has been dubbed by many in the popular media as the “war on autism” (Fitzpatrick 2009; Broderick and Ne’eman 2008).

The War on Autism and its Casualties

In December of 2007, the NYU Child Study Centre launched an advocacy campaign—known as the Ransom Note Campaign—that was aimed at raising awareness about the predominance and effects of so-called “childhood psychiatric disorders.” Autism was included in this campaign. One umbrella ad for the campaign depicts a rectangular billboard featuring what appears to be a large ransom note. The note’s text—composed of letters cut from different print sources—delivers the message: “12 million kids are held hostage by a psychiatric disorder.” Another poster from this campaign features a typed note that reads: “We have your son. We will make sure he will not be able to care for himself or interact socially as long as he lives. This is only the beginning.” The note is signed: “Autism.” At the bottom of the poster, we find the following statement: “Don’t let a psychiatric disorder take your child. The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to giving children back their childhood by preventing, identifying, and treating psychiatric and learning disorders.”³

Autism, once again, is represented as a threat to life—a state of disorder that afflicts the body of the individual, causing (or at least threatening to cause) untold physical harm. In the “Learn the Signs” campaign, awareness of autism is an awareness of its potential threat to the life of normalcy—an awareness of an abstract and intangible “what if” or “could be” danger that could strike anybody at any time. The “Ransom Note” campaign, in contrast, tells us what autism is—what happens when the threat of autism

becomes real. In the NYU campaign, we are confronted with an autism that is actively preventing the integrity and security of the body. We see a morally maligned 'autism', personified as an abductor, taking an innocent body and holding it hostage. One way of reading this hostage-taking scenario is as an act of war.

Significantly, and not coincidentally, this poster of an unseen aggressor appears in a contemporary, western/ized context that consistently uses war as a descriptive and prescriptive metaphor for how to orient to any and, it seems, every perceived threat. Following George W. Bush's now infamous declaration, after the events of 9/11, that the US was to wage a war on terror, hundreds of similar war metaphors have emerged in popular discourse. While war metaphors are nothing new, the post-9/11 era has witnessed a notable explosion of these metaphors in everyday talk: we might hear of a "war on guns," a "war on obesity," a "war on the middle class," a "war on science," and so on (Steuter and Wills 2008). And, insofar as it is commonly represented as a threat to (normal) life, autism is embroiled at the centre of this discursive quagmire. In 2006, for example, following considerable pressure from autism advocacy organizations and parent advocates, the US Congress passed Law 109-416, officially named the *Combating Autism Act*. The Law was referred to by advocacy groups and the media as the US "war on autism." Indeed, we find ourselves in the midst of a contemporary social context where we can walk, run, row, fish, or take a cruise to "fight autism," a social context that includes the Autism Research Institutes' 15th annual "Defeat Autism Now!" conference. As well, celebrity advocate Jenny McCarthy—author of the *New York Times* bestselling book on parenting autistic children called *Mother Warriors*—is teaming up with World Wrestling Entertainment on prime time television for an "autism smackdown" (defeatautismnow.com; Dunn 2008).

In their book, *At War with Metaphor*, Steuter and Wills (2008) highlight the crucial role language and metaphor play in shaping our orientations to others and to ourselves. They write,

The language of war, which includes the metaphors it draws on, does not simply hold a mirror up to the enemy. It does not reveal a clear, objective, or pre-existing image of what we fight. What is reflected in language is not reality but construct, something conditioned and assembled, put together from fragments of information and observation...In this sense, we really do, through the metaphors we choose and reiterate, "make" enemies. The mirror of language thus ultimately reflects back to us both the constructed image of the other and, also, something of ourselves (Steuter and Wills 2008, xv).

As we have seen, the mirror held up by dominant versions of autism advocacy commonly reflects the image of autism as a (pathological) thing, separate from an otherwise normal person; a thing, moreover, that threatens (normative) life and, thus, a thing that can and should be battled and eliminated (Broderick and Ne'eman 2008).

It is this version of autism that is reflected in the NYU campaign. Everyday representations that depict autism as nothing more than a series of pathological symptoms and thus as a thing some people have, work to discursively split the autistic body into two parts: autism gets uncoupled from the person, simultaneously coupling the person to the potentiality of non-autism. The NYU campaign poster takes this split quite literally: it presents us with a malicious abductor (autism) and its vulnerable victim (your son). In no uncertain terms, the ransom note organizes the moral character of these figures. "We have what is yours," writes Autism. And, the note tells us, this is more than a simple theft; what has been taken is not a wallet or a watch, but a part of you: "We have your son," a faceless and indeterminate autism says. The poster tells the story of an enemy that is withholding a piece of you from you. It is keeping strange that which ought to be the same, that which ought to be familiar and familial: your child.

The ransom note narrates this lack of sameness—a lack of normalcy characterized as an inability to care for the self and socially interact—as an absence. Desirable parts of your son, the note implies, have been taken and are now held hostage by a violent

aggressor. And, this is only the beginning. Over time, the ransom note promises, other aspects of your son's (normative) life will be taken. Conversely, his autistic life, complete with autistic ways of being in the world—autistic ways of socially interacting, for example—is conceived of as non-valuable and non-viable, if conceived of at all. Again, the life of normalcy is installed as the only possible existence, the only livable life, and autism as an inherent threat to life.

While the typical purpose of a ransom note is to make demands, autism appears in the context of the poster as only making threats. Ironically, it is the Child Study Center that issues the demand: "Don't let a psychiatric disorder take your child." As Steuter and Wills suggest, the mirror of language and metaphor reflects the image of (advocacy's) enemy and, in doing so, reflects back a particular image of the (advocate) self. In advocacy's threatening and violent image of autism, the good advocate is reflected as s/he who is engaged in the work of rescue—the work of policing, preserving or recovering a lost normalcy, "giving children back their childhood" by lessening or eliminating autism, "preventing, identifying, and treating psychiatric and learning disorders." In keeping with (and, indeed, shaped by) the war metaphor, the role of the good advocate is that of someone who must, as Razack suggests, engage in saving a vulnerable body. However, with respect to contemporary autism advocacy work, the vulnerable body that is seen to be in need of saving is not the disabled body. The body deemed worthy of saving is the valuable and viable body of normalcy.

This dominant story of autism and advocacy is premised on the understanding that autism is separate (and thus separable) from an otherwise normal person. This discursive split is not merely troublesome, but dangerous since, as many autistic advocates have fiercely argued, autism is a way of being (Baggs 2007; Dawson 2005; Sinclair 1993). In the midst of these metaphors of violence and war, autistic self-advocate Jim Sinclair reminds us:

Autism isn't something a person has, or a "shell" that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal

child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person—and, if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with. (Sinclair 1993)

Sinclair teaches us that orienting to autism strictly as a problem in need of a solution implies that autistic difference (that is to say, autism as autism and not as, say, autism on the way to non-autism) is neither valued nor valuable in our collective life. Moreover, it even works to produce and sustain harmful conceptions of the autistic life as a life that—in and of itself—is not quite a life. In this way, if autism resists treatment or if its disorder cannot be returned to order, if the autistic life does not, cannot or chooses not to conform to what normalcy looks like, acts like, thinks like, it is made ever more vulnerable to violence.

I end with an extreme example of this violence. In 2006, Dr. Karen McCarron killed her three-year-old autistic daughter, Katie. In a videotaped confession, Dr. McCarron spoke of wanting to "help" her daughter by attempting to "crack" autism's shell. McCarron's account of life with Katie is punctuated by failures—Katie's failure to become more normal and McCarron's own failure to secure this normalcy. McCarron confesses, "Everything I tried to do didn't help her... [Katie] was a tough nut to crack" (McDonald 2007). McCarron stated: "I loved Katie very much, but I hated the autism so, so much...I hated what it was doing to her....I just wanted autism out of my life" (Sampier 2008). Hating her daughter's autism, McCarron testified that she had intended to kill it and not her daughter:

(Defence lawyer) Wolfe: When you were suffocating your daughter, did you think you were killing her?"

McCarron: No.

Wolfe: Who did you think you were killing?

McCarron: Autism. (Sampier 2008)

McCarron's words, at first blush, seem simply non-sensical; then, the chilling logic that makes it all too sensible—autism is separate and thus separable from the child. This version of autism, perhaps more than autism itself, renders autistic people vulnerable to acts of violence and, indeed, threatens their very lives.

It is we—the autistic and non-autistic—who must remain vigilant to how common, everyday conceptions of autistic difference as pathological and inherently threatening produce a kind of logic that makes it possible to move to violence. We must begin to engage critically with advocacy work as a political project laden with complex and risky power relations. It is only with this beginning that we can imagine advocacy otherwise. Alternative versions of advocacy allow us the opportunity to re-enter the story that advocacy is telling of autism and to tell this story differently. It is this reorientation to both autism and advocacy that will permit us to notice the tie that binds the two together. This paper is my attempt to re-orient to the space between autism and advocacy as a space to theorize the politics of alliances and the risks of living with and relating across difference, a space of teaching, learning and questioning and, as such, a space that always invites us to think again.

Endnotes

1. New statistical data released in December of 2009 by the US Center for Disease Control claimed that the prevalence of autism has increased from 1 in 150 to 1 in 110.
2. Following the publication of the US Centers for Disease Control's updated statistics on the prevalence of autism (see endnote 1), Autism Speaks updated its "Learn the Signs" campaigns, changing the "1 in 150" statistic to "1 in 110," as evidenced in the later version of the poster in Figure 2.
3. Several weeks after the campaign was first launched, following considerable pressure from autistic activists and their allies, the campaign was retracted. A statement issued by the Child Study Center stated: "We would like to move forward and harness the energy

that this campaign has generated to work together so that *we do not lose one more day in the lives of these children*" (Koplewicz 2008, emphasis added). Even as the campaign posters were taken down, the underlying conception of autism as that which takes away life remains. It is also worth noting that the "Ransom Note" campaign is one example of a whole genre of advocacy campaigns that frame autism as an aggressor, violently threatening the lives of children with autism and their families; e.g., the Autism Society of America's 2005 "Getting the Word Out" campaign. (ASA 2005) or Autism Speaks' 2009 film "I Am Autism" (Cuaron 2009).

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