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On Queer Theory and Erotophobia

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6 / Two Girls²: Sedgwick + Berlant, Relational and Queer

Queer Relationality?

To readers familiar with the *anti*-relational topoi of queer studies, it may seem necessary to justify this final chapter's inquiry into the topic of relationality. After all, wouldn't the field's proud antipathy toward relationality's familiar tropes testify to a widely held *disinterest* in what people do together, or what it means and why it matters? And yet, what are the stakes of *queering* subjectivity if sex-without-the-mess-of-otherness is all that's finally achieved? Besides, if we have learned with Laplanche that sexuality originates in *relation* to others, by a process of involuntary relating that we can neither master, coincide with, nor avoid, what kind of queerness imagines it can celebrate sexuality by dismissing its constitutive relationality? In their recent dialogue, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman undertake to theorize relationality as a separable sphere of experience by locating "sex" as one scene among many of "relations that overwhelm and anchor us"¹ and suggesting an approach to "the scene of relationality" as a category of encounters that "disturbs the presumption of sovereignty . . . specifically, an encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation. Sex is exemplary in the way it powerfully induces such encounters, but such encounters exceed those experiences we recognize as sex" (viii). This avowal of "relationality" as a capacious term that includes, but is not reducible to, a certain kind of psycho-sexual encounter, offers a way into this chapter's exposition

of the relationship between queerness and relationality, and specifically, what relationality has to do with self-transformation.

I begin by exploring how efforts in contemporary critical and literary theory to explain the complex relational experiences of psychic subjectivities can be traced back to an unreflective reliance on applied Lacanian psychoanalysis as its only and ultimate interpretive apparatus. The chapter ends by drawing on Laplanche's radical innovations in metapsychology to develop new narrative trajectories for how knowledge is, relationally, transmitted and transformative. At this chapter's center is my encounter with Mary Gaitskill's novel, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, and Lauren Berlant's essay on Gaitskill's novel of the same name, "Two Girls, Fat and Thin." And because I first discovered this text while Berlant was my teacher and I was her student, and because this is an essay on relationality, at the center of my critical encounter with Gaitskill is also my pedagogic encounter with Berlant.

Although the particular "girls" named by the dyad vary depending on whether it is Gaitskill's novel (Dorothy/Justine), Berlant's essay (Lauren/Eve), or my chapter (Student/Teacher), in every iteration the expression "two girls" functions as a formulation of the relationship between two girls in the moment of some kind of learning. Although Gaitskill has a distinctive oeuvre in contemporary American literature as an author of sexually and psychologically subversive fiction, and Berlant is unique in her prominence as a leading influential critic in both queer and affect theory, *Two Girls* is unusual among Gaitskill's works for using each girl's different relationship to a transformative teacher as the context for drawing out whatever intimacy they already or eventually share, and Berlant's essay is not an intervention in Gaitskill's critical reception so much as an occasion to reflect on the relationship between trauma and history via her own intimacy with, and juxtaposition to, fellow queer/affect theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. That is, rather than being exemplary of each thinker's abiding formal or thematic interests, "two girls" has the status of being unusual in each thinker's repertoire. (Gaitskill has two protagonists who take turns narrating the story, instead of one, and Berlant, who avowedly resists the tropes of self-experience, threads her close reading through autobiography.) My choice of these "atypical" texts magnified the curiosity of my own critical agenda: After all, even though I might find a clever way to justify these object choices, there is, perhaps, the crude arithmetic embarrassment that by the time one counts my own trauma/history as well as my own pedagogic relation to Berlant, there are enough traumatized girls in any given sentence to feel uneasy and discouraged about the chances that critique can be anything other than a feat of extraordinary

sublimation. In the name of high theory, I often found myself wondering: How many “two girls” is *too* many girls?

By this I mean that I was suspicious of my motives. After all, isn't it unequivocally the case that nothing quite screams Oedipal rivalry like a younger thinker writing critically about an older one? In fact, for months the ostensible obviousness of this rhetorical/interpersonal act deterred me from approaching these texts. All I could think was that in my endeavor to problematize existing models of pedagogic transformation, I challenged my own teacher's explanatory paradigm, and, in so doing, didn't my radical critique of anxious influence sink before it ever sailed? Harold Bloom has most forcefully linked these terms together when, in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), all relations between younger and older poets could be explicable as some version of the paternal drama and all creative difference as agonistic overthrowing. Maternalizing this dynamic hasn't done much to radically challenge the explanatory hegemony of Freud's metapsychological account. That is, even where attempts have been made to imagine a softer, daughterly push between women—insofar as it presumes the familiar psychoanalytic teleology of transformation—such attempts invariably retain the symbolic coordinates of an Oedipal showdown.

Naturally, I bristled at the reduction of critical thought to such primitive psychological gestures, as if the need to compete, defy, or overcome my teacher offered an appropriate explanation for my argument or object choices. I grew sometimes weary, sometimes hysterical, to notice how defensive my every self-justifications seemed (*there's no such thing as objectivity! critique is hardly the most efficient means of differentiation! difference is a tribute not a method of retaliation!*). It wasn't difficult to concede that I was probably squeamish about my ambition, and aggression, but even when I allowed that this was something I probably needed to work through, a theoretical problem nagged at me: What was the distinctiveness of pedagogic relationality if self-transformation was always and only a reaction to the parental bond? And then I realized: What kind of motivational paradigm situates the relationship *before* the psychic events it enables? Wasn't the incoherence of these tropes, and critical theory's uncritical deployment of them, precisely the object of this critique? By using an idea of paternity as the template for all development, the Freudian/Bloomian topos of transformation generates a confused model of psychic motivation that somehow treats all the contortions of *becoming* as a reaction against relating rather than emblematic of how the pedagogic form is itself *already* the response to a constellation of common, overlapping, questions. Enforcing linear causality belies the distinctiveness of

transformational phenomena. As a result, equating each figure in the dyad with its ostensibly transparent chronological position arrantly and incongruously misplaces how the motivation to relate comes *from* the experience of having one's own knowledge challenged and provoked by its dynamic relation to the knowledge of another.

And so, what if intellectual filiation did not need, necessarily, to culminate in the declared supersession of someone else's thought but could become instead the occasion for elaborating impact and relation? I want my way of reading to be a practice in the *relating* I seek to describe. That said, *reading* and *relating* are not an opposition here. This chapter is an argument that uses style to put pressure on how kinship is conceptualized by staging teacher-student relationality as both a topic and an experience of relating. Berlant refers to the unique potential of performative theory when she writes, "Reimagining forms of relation entails imagining new genres of experience" (ix) and it is to further elaborate this connection between theoretical writing and relational engagement that my encounter with Berlant takes the form it does here. Throughout, I want what I'll be calling "resonance"—the kinetic force that registers relation—to appear legible yet apart from relationality's existing tropological forms. This is, I believe, the dehiscence that Berlant shows us Gaitskill enables, and that Berlant uses Lacan to stitch closed.

Reading Berlant Reading *Two Girls*

Lauren Berlant's essay, "Two Girls, Fat and Thin," about Mary Gaitskill's novel of the same name is a powerful account of the connection between imagining alternative relational modes that are not reducible to conventional plots of desire and belonging, and understanding psychic subjectivities as too functionally incoherent and structurally inconsistent to be assimilated into dominant paradigms of attachment, history and sociality.² The novel tells the story of two girls who, in different but formally similar ways, are each abused by those who are entrusted with loving them, embody their damaged psyches through an array of compulsive fixations, and in varying degrees of rage, lethargy, and disappointment negate psychic itineraries that promise either redemption or cure. Summarizing the book's psychic-affective landscape, Berlant writes:

Justine's response to Dorothy is at first like Dorothy's to her—a desire to tell a hard story to a stranger to whom she feels averse, followed by confusion about that impulse lived as ambivalence toward the person who animates it. Far more impersonal than Dorothy, Justine

has a slower emotional metabolism (yet Dorothy is the fat one, Justine the thin), but eventually she returns to Dorothy, sensing that Dorothy knows something that Justine cannot bear to know on her own. This meeting and return frame the book. . . . We witness them growing up paralyzed by fear and at the same time launching into madneses of thinking, reading, eating, masturbating, attaching, and fucking. . . . If she wants a good life, what's a girl, or two girls, to do? When does the doing matter? (29)

The two girls of the novel meet through a shared interest in Anna Granite, the once famous and hypnotic Ayn Rand–like leader of a social and intellectual movement/cult called Definitism. Dorothy was infatuated with Granite and had left college to work for her, and Justine is now writing an article about her. With the prospective article as the novel's organizing center, the story traces the awkward conversations between these two girls who, except for a common investment in Granite, are strangers to each other. The girls keep meeting to discuss Dorothy's firsthand experience of Granite as a teacher/leader and repeatedly find themselves instead, or in parallel, swapping stories about their lives. But rather than eventually maturing into a more typical or recognizable genre of relating, the intimacy between these girls extends without ever quite graduating into a "normal" form. Much like "fat" and "thin" of the novel's title, each girl seems to retain their essential size and shape throughout the novel as if to literalize that they never merge into a unit/couple, nor that either girl ever loses or gains any weight from having taken in the other. This homeostatic situation threatens to buckle under the pressure of the novel's end when Dorothy feels betrayed and enraged by the scathing article Justine has written on Definitism and goes to Justine's house to confront her, but instead interrupts a dangerous S/M encounter, scares the guy away, and rather than unleashing her meticulous diatribe, takes Justine's naked, wounded body into her arms. But then, instead of climax or a breakthrough, they rest together and fall asleep.

The novel's ending "is not a lesbian ending, exactly," Berlant writes, "since exhaustion is neither sex, love, nor object choice," but it is "not nothing, it's something else" (152). This is just one example of Berlant's indefatigable commitment to protect the possibility of perplexing subtlety in strange and sometimes bewildering personal and interpersonal moments from the critic's interpretive overreach. One way that Berlant navigates this critical project is by continually breathing air into dominant explanatory frameworks, coaxing her peers to try (at least once?) trading their attachment to certainty for thought-experiments with

non-coherence. In one such characteristic moment, Berlant writes: “In this habit of representing the intentional subject, a manifest lack of self-cultivating attention can easily become recast as irresponsibility, shallowness, resistance, refusal, or incapacity; and habit itself can begin to look deeply overmeaningful, such that addiction, reaction formation, conventional gesture clusters, or just being different can be read as heroic placeholders for resistance to something, affirmation of something, or a transformative desire.”³ For Berlant, it could never be critically responsible to merely impugn people for trying, in her words, to “stay afloat” in the world under conditions of precarity and near-chronic oppression, nor could the epistemological comfort of any simple anti-formalism explain with any generosity or ingenuity how a subject can be something *other* than “performatively sovereign,” *not* “deeply overmeaningful” and whose ways of being may be something *else* than “heroic placeholders for resistance to something, affirmation of something, or a transformative desire.” Berlant unrelentingly deshames the value (and necessity) of binding oneself to a life raft by insisting that any analysis involving what people do to survive must seek out language that strives to capture the infinite subtlety of experiential encounters. In this way, Berlant keeps showing that no matter how sophisticatedly posed, assailing attachment for being “ideological” leads too readily and inevitably to judging people’s effort to manage their lives—and bolstering with it the ideological apparatus it seeks to critique. By disrupting the putative “straight” line from ideology to a person’s complex self-experience, Berlant’s writing relentlessly avoids precisely the vulgar Marxist/Foucauldian relationship to ideology that we observed in Butler’s totalizing conflation of “gender” with the Law, making Berlant one of the most deft psychologists in queer studies today.

Perhaps because of the idiosyncratic way that the personal/psychological and social/ideological are inextricably interdependent in Berlant’s analysis, her work exemplifies the field’s most sophisticated attempt to articulate the kind of subject that is at once “historical” and “psychological.” Taking into account the Marxist and Foucauldian assaults on the myth of sovereign “individuality,” Berlant locates her own approach to subjectivity somewhere in between the extremes of naïve psychological realism, on the one hand, and posthumanist abolitions of the subject on the other. This sense of her “between-ness” is not incidental to how she elaborates her critical position; rather than through polemic or critique, Berlant’s particular approach unfolds through staged juxtapositions to the “strong” positions of other critics. In “Two Girls,” Berlant’s “impersonality” emerges in contrast to Sedgwick’s commitment to the “person,” whereas in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Berlant’s belief in relational repair

stands out in contradistinction to the hard edges of Edelman's anti-relationality. Therefore, Berlant's position "between" the extremes of relationality/anti-relationality—*less* personal than Sedgwick, *more* relational than Edelman—makes her work among the closest that contemporary critical theory comes to using the close-reading of a text in order to endeavor a defense of what motivates people to do whatever weird and confusing things they do, in the paradoxical and inexplicable ways they do it.⁴ Berlant's wariness of the "overmeaningful" and "performatively sovereign" subject challenges the way psychology is typically deployed, where "a manifest lack of self-cultivating attention can easily become recast as irresponsibility, shallowness, resistance, refusal, or incapacity."⁵ In so doing, her work can be seen to complement and powerfully extend the range of queer and affect theory's critical mission to unhinge psychological acts and identities from habituated tropes of a normativizing interpretive determinism. But what I mean to show in reading the two readings of Berlant's essay—her reading of Gaitskill's novel and her own relationship to Sedgwick—is that although Berlant's analytic practice is rigorously *less* deterministic than conventional mobilizations of theory, the version of psychoanalysis it uses renders it ultimately no less *relationally* determined. Put another way, the anti-"personal," "anti-meaningful" approach Berlant mobilizes as a defense of critical nuance leads to an impoverished conceptualization of subjectivity that uniformly fails to explain the psychological transformations that occur as a result of complex, intimate relationality. As an alternative to Berlant's applied Lacanianism, I develop Laplanche's concept of "reactivation" to propose a theory of "textuality" that foregrounds relationality as the foundation of subjectivity.

I will be exploring how Berlant's essay simultaneously elaborates the superabundance of what connects people to one another and refuses to allow the specificity of those connections to matter. Throughout her tour de force dilation of the ways all four girls are brought into relation, Berlant's essay performs being transformed by particular others while at the same time insisting on transformation as the formal effect of non-relational encounters. Given her singular purchase on the way interiority and ideology are inextricably linked, Berlant wants to emphasize that relationships can be powerful without being over-determined by heteronormative tropes of kinship. For example, the way Berlant describes meeting Sedgwick ("She gave a paper, and we talked about it. Years later, I gave one, and she listened to it. She wrote another book, and I read it") versus her account of being impacted by her ("For me, though, the luck of encountering her grandiosity . . . is of unsurpassable consequence")

seems deliberately to choreograph as a tension how little you can “know” the other person versus how transformed by them you can become. De-dramatization as a stylistic device is a powerful antidote to the inflated narratives of true love and true selves, love that occurs at first sight and the kind that completes you. But whereas Gaitskill amplifies the girls’ entanglement to intensify epistemological pressure, Berlant collapses indeterminacy and structuralism to abrogate the question of what brings and holds these girls together.

Applying Lacan and the “poetics of *méconnaissance*,” Berlant turns each girl into a “placeholder” that “they take personally but that has, in a sense, nothing to do with anything substantive about each other, except insofar as each woman functions formally as an enigmatic opportunity for something transformative” (“Two Girls, Fat and Thin,” 127).⁶ Indeed, only a paragraph earlier Berlant points out that the girls’ names, Dorothy Never and Justine Shade, are “shades of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Pale Fire*, and *Justine*” and in the accompanying footnote, that the novel’s literary history “requires a story of its own.” But this reference to Nabokov and repetition of “shade” might signal more than just the novel’s general literariness and indicate instead a more substantial connection between Gaitskill and Nabokov’s fictional projects. It is, after all, with a passage from a different Nabokov text that Gaitskill’s own novel begins: “All one could do was to glimpse, amid the haze and chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with unusual persistence of diurnal cerebration are able to perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour.”⁷ We are reminded here that Nabokov’s technical virtuosity is singularly focused on tracking his obsession with the occult underpinnings of human behavior. Not only is Nabokov’s oeuvre distinguished for its experimental preoccupations with doppelgangers (a pair of Nabokovian “two girls” might really be “one”?) but this prefatory passage expressly establishes the provocative dissonance between what we see and what we follow.

Therefore, although Berlant’s essay captures and recreates the rich panoply of relational dyads and dynamics, it does so in order to repeatedly hollow out the relational mechanisms of any meaningful content, and to systematically insist that what underlies relationality must be either determinable or “hav[e] nothing to do with anything substantive about each other” (127). This repudiation of “anything substantive” is an extreme alternative to exegetic density; the choice between a claustrophobic hermeneutics and a permissive one is an ultimatum that prefigures Berlant’s conflation of biography with psychology in the context of a text that

seems so deliberately and with such virtuosity to crank up the tension between “everygirl” and peculiar ones, oracular forces and the mundane. The Marxist observation that even generic types can have eccentric variations seems insufficiently able to explain the novel’s experimental logic because, instead of recuperating agency, it dramatizes the powerlessness, awkwardness, and erotics with which people are moved toward others for reasons that are strong and yet just out of perceptual reach. Berlant’s reading is exemplary of the limited critical imagination with which contemporary theory, and affect/queer theory specifically, approaches relationality. Although, as it pertains to these questions, I mostly treat affect/queer theory as a homogenous discourse, this chapter traces a fundamental difference between Sedgwick and Berlant that Berlant’s use of “two girls” as a narrative frame both addresses and absorbs. Specifically, what I think this analysis will show is that in the name of resisting a kind of pre-structuralist psychoanalytic determinism, relationality, as a mechanism, has been drained of any material and psychological force and diffused instead into an empty “happening” that can determine everything that transpires around it without ever being accessible or worthy of curiosity and definition.

Theorizing Relationality in Queer/Affect Theory

If any discourse has seemed interested and equipped to offer a corrective to the limitations of a conventional, and conventionally deterministic, psychoanalytic interpretive regime, affect theory has been the most promising—not least because it uses as its founding text the essay by Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” in which Tomkins’s research on “affect” is hailed as the much-needed alternative to critical theory’s overly psychoanalytic, insufficiently nuanced paradigms of human need and action.⁸ Indeed, among queer theorists, Sedgwick has arguably done the most to try unmooring sexuality studies from its “trieb”-centered Freudian base. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick writes, “The post-Romantic ‘power/knowledge’ regime that Foucault analyzes, the one that structures and propagates the repressive hypothesis, follows the Freudian understanding that one physiological drive—sexuality, libido, desire—is the ultimate source, and hence in Foucault’s word is seen to embody the ‘truth,’ of human motivation, identity, and emotion.”⁹ Using Tomkins’s affect theory to dislodge the “one physiological drive,” Sedgwick and Frank show that as a fierce critic of Freudian drive theory, Tomkins long ago insisted on untying the knots made by confusing biological needs with emotional ones.

As Tomkins writes, “In the concepts of orality, the hunger drive mechanism was confused with the dependency-communion complex, which from the beginning is more general than the need for food and the situation of being fed. In the concept of anality, the elimination drive mechanism had been confused with the contempt-shame humiliation complex. . . . While it is true that oral, anal, and sexual aspects of these complexes are deeply disturbing and central to the psychopathology of many individuals, aspects not emphasized by Freud are more disturbing and more central to the psychopathology of others.”¹⁰ Although Tomkins does not directly address “relating” as a distinctive psychological mechanism, one reason his work has the quality of a breakthrough is its reorientation away from the tendency to theorize the subject in isolation and toward its imbrication in affective states, the environment, and others.

Seidwick’s use of Tomkins to insist on a new and different motivational structure avowedly compels a reevaluation of dominant explanatory models. While this call for nuance is not aimed at relationality specifically, the critical exasperation with “over-meaningful” accounts of psychic action, and interpretive limitedness more generally, promises fresh attention to dimensions of experience that have until now been systematically neglected. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth write:

Almost all of the tried-and-true handholds and footholds for so much critical-cultural-philosophical inquiry and for theory—subject/object, representation and meaning, rationality, consciousness, time and space, inside/outside, human/nonhuman, identity, structure, background/foreground, and so forth—become decidedly less sure and more nonsequential. . . . Because affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements of primary units, it makes easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs.¹¹

As the writing and thinking in this passage illustrates, affect theory is characterized by a language of sensation, of “thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs,” that eludes dominant critical “compartmentalisms” and that in doing so insists upon the “muddy, unmediated relatedness” of belonging in the world. This is an incredibly powerful framework, or slipping out from under what with a capital “F” becomes a “framework’s” noose, that testifies to the imaginative and pragmatic opportunities made possible by having “no single, generalizable theory of affect” (3).

Indeed, in keeping with its multidisciplinary resources and commitment to expanding the critical and perceptual range of our interpretive practices, affect theory has a robust theoretical apparatus for reconceptualizing the relational context. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy exerts one of the most crucial influences in this discursive landscape. Not only did Merleau-Ponty seek to undermine Cartesian mind-body dualism by demonstrating that all knowledge was necessarily "embodied," but his work on perception and psychology further demonstrates that all knowledge is *not* representational. Teresa Brennan's "transmission of affect" is extraordinarily helpful in further elucidating the conceptual consequences of reorienting our dominant physiological-psychological divide. Brennan writes, "The taken-for-grantedness of the emotionally contained subject is a residual bastion of Eurocentrism in critical thinking" and what "the transmission of affect means [is] that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment.'"¹² This *insecure* distinction "between the 'individual' and the 'environment'" is so important for Brennan because it opens up a whole new language for tracking embodied experience; "rather than the generational line of inheritance (the vertical line of history), the transmission of affect, conceptually, presupposes a horizontal line of transmission" via "olfaction and the circulation of blood," hormones, facial expressions, touch. One major claim resulting from this project is that perception is not contingent on representation; or put another way, what we *sense* of our/another's affect or experience does not need to be representable in order to be *perceptually* operative.

Although opening the door to materialism can often sound like it slams the door on language, one of my points in this essay is not that affect gets us away from discourse, but that affect theory diversifies our analytic tools by focusing on a world of forces and impacts that are not reducible to, or identical with, those thematized by the structuralist paradigm.¹³ This intellectual development seemed to me like an especially promising innovation for theorizing subjectivity, and metapsychology generally, because it put back at the center of analysis a rigorous respect for the singular dimensions of experiential life that are necessary to elucidating why, for example, people become the people they do, and how that happened. I realize that "materialism" as it is typically mobilized in philosophical discourse refers to "real-world" concerns like capitalism or the ecological crisis rather than phenomena in a subject's psychological life, but one of this essay's organizing contentions is

that a narrow conceptualization of materiality (one that derogates psychology to immateriality) or of subjectivity (one that does not consider the conditions for transformation to be material in nature or effect) limits the radical potential of realist philosophy to change how existence in the lifeworld is thought and lived.

Coextensive with my conviction that metapsychological questions are integral to any materialist philosophical system is my interest in literary criticism as a “practical psychology.” By this I mean that because the exercise of close reading is charged with the task of interpreting human action as it occurs in narrative form, a psychology of the subject is never abstract, or incidental to, the explanatory power of hermeneutic engagement. Therefore, for example, rather than looking for a logical flaw in Lacan’s theorization of subjectivity, I consider how an applied-Lacanian reading reveals what may be missing in Lacan’s theoretical system. Throughout, I draw upon Laplanche’s theoretical interventions to consider how the models of subjectivity currently in use mitigate any sustained critical awareness of psycho-sexuality as intrusive, exogenous and originating in the material “other.” It follows from my avowedly idiosyncratic use of literary criticism that I do not begin with any established theory of the subject but rather read closely trying to find one.¹⁴

“Textuality” and Relationality

Dorothy’s account of how she met Justine opens the novel: “I entered the strange world of Justine Shade via a message on the bulletin board in a Laundromat filled with bitterness and the hot breath of dryers. ‘Writer interested in talking to followers of Anna Granite. Please call —.’ It was written in rigorous, precise, feminine print on a modest card displayed amidst dozens of cards, garish Xeroxed sheets, newsprint, and ragged tongues of paper” (*Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, 11). “Textuality” is a literal feature of their relationship and is linked, from the novel’s first words, with a dual sense of casualness and fate; an eleven-word ad “displayed amidst dozens of cards” hardly seems to augur a life-altering event, but then again, what are the chances that the writer *of* the “index card” and the writer *in* the index card will be read by someone who both reads index cards in laundromats and happens to be among the former “followers of Anna Granite.” Dorothy draws out the connection between fortuity and accident by saying, somewhat crankily, “The owners of this laundry establishment seem to have an especially lax policy when it comes to the bulletin board, and upon it any nut can advertise himself.” For a moment it doesn’t matter that Dorothy happened upon the “modest card”; it only

matters that she almost didn't. Bemoaning the clutter of idiosyncratic longing, Dorothy's indignation reflects her discomfort with offhanded characterizations of Granite and meaningfulness generally. However, whereas Dorothy is indignant and overwhelmed that intimacy is mediated by "index cards" and "bulletin boards," Berlant is buoyed to find that getting to know Sedgwick by reading each other's books is "one place where the impersonality of intimacy can be transacted without harm to anyone" (126).

Elaborating on Berlant's formulation, I consider how "textuality" is not only a pattern of interacting *through* texts but a model for relating to each other *as* texts. I develop the term "textuality" to provide a non-hermeneutic account of psychological engagement. Instead of using "textuality" as a paradigm for all interpretive activity (as some branches of hermeneutics have),¹⁵ I suggest that relationality is amplified when we consider that interpretive reading is not the only way to engage a text. As Laplanche has masterfully shown, within Freud's metapsychology there is no logical explanation of how unconscious sexuality *originates*. For Freud, it seems good enough to say that sexuality becomes a "drive" somewhat supernaturally, by being either an inborn feature of every psychic system or the sudden but inevitable outgrowth of infant development. But as Laplanche has persuasively shown, Freud's conflation of "instinct" and "drive" leads to a deeply problematic misunderstanding of how enlarged sexuality works. Describing this theoretical problem, Laplanche writes, "Instinct is hereditary, fixed, and adaptive; it starts with somatic tension, has a 'specific action' and a satisfying object, and leads to a sustained relaxation of the tension. In contrast, drive in the pure sense would not be hereditary, nor necessarily adaptive. The model of source, aim, and adequate object cannot easily be applied to the drive. I have insisted more than once, notably in relation to the idea of 'source,' that if one can say with any rigor that the anus is the source of anal drive, then one must question with even greater rigor how one could ever maintain that the drive to see, voyeurism, aims at lowering something that one could call 'ocular tension.'"¹⁶ We know that instinctual life is predetermined by biology and we also know that adult sexuality is a fact of psychological experience but, within psychoanalytic metapsychology, we have no way of understanding *how* we get *from* basic, hardwired instinctuality *to* enlarged, unconscious sexuality.

Laplanche shows that in the absence of a logical explanation for how "drive" originates, Freud resorted to Lamarckian ideas about the phylogenetic transmission of universal psychic fantasies. That is, unable to explain how certain powerful emotional experiences developed in the individual,

Freud relied on the idea that ancestral social events could bridge the gap between “ancient interpersonal experiences and the universal underlying features of internal psychic structure,”¹⁷ and that, when it came to “drive” sexuality, every individual acquired erotic interests out of some mysterious *endogenous* process. This move—from external events to internal reactions—was always Freud’s particular talent; as noted earlier, he distinguished psychoanalysis from the therapeutic endeavors of Charcot precisely in this way, making subjective experience more psychologically meaningful than any particular traumatic event. However, while this move was extraordinarily successful in shining a light on a vast range of internal experience, it nearly immediately resulted in a well-worn philosophical problem, which was how then to account for the role of the *outside* world, and of the *other* person? As the psychoanalysts Stephen Mitchell and Jay Greenberg have observed, classical drive/structure theories echo the “highly *individualistic, atomistic tradition* of Locke and Hobbes in British political philosophy”(30) wherein “man cannot live outside society, but society is in a fundamental sense inimical to his very nature and precludes the possibility for his deepest, fullest satisfactions.”¹⁸ While in the Anglo-American tradition, relational theory has ventured to remedy the psyche’s atomism by dispensing with drive altogether and instead reorienting psychology toward the interpersonal context, Laplanche takes a different approach that retains sexuality as the primary object of psychoanalysis but fundamentally transforms our understanding of how it works.

To do this, Laplanche situates the emergence of “drive” in the communicative exchanges *between* the adult and child. Emphatically rejecting Freud’s efforts to make “drive” the spontaneous outgrowth of instinctual life, Laplanche instead suggests that we view sexuality as the inevitable result of the mind’s developmental process, which is fundamentally dependent on the other/adult person. The fact of this dependence is extremely important for Laplanche insofar as it establishes a *channel* for the exchange of material between adult and child. Why is it so important for a channel to exist? Because, as Laplanche will show, once you have a mechanism for transmitting information between an adult and a child, then you also have a way of explaining where “drive” sexuality originates—which is in the unconscious of the adult. According to Laplanche, *seduction* names the fact that in order to survive, the human infant depends upon the adult as a caretaker but that this caretaker, who is an adult, also has an unconscious of his own. While in and of itself this statement hardly seems that radical, what Laplanche goes on to describe is the impact—on the child—of encountering the adult’s unconscious sexuality. Specifically,

that when faced with the adult's sexuality, the infant sets about to "translate" what she is picking up on. Why? Because to the infant, experiencing the adult's unconscious sexuality is an *affective* event. Laplanche writes, "It is only because the adult's messages are compromised by his sexual unconscious that, secondarily, the child's attempts at symbolization are set in motion, where the child actively works on material that is *already* sexual."¹⁹ Although Laplanche does not ever explicate how "translation" or "symbolization" work at a technical or biopsychical level, our contemporary understanding of affect enables us to fill in the blanks. That is, viewed in terms of affect, unconscious sexuality can be understood to be areas of the adult's psychic life that have not been worked on by language or symbolization, meaning they are raw and largely unprocessed. While the adult may be undisturbed by what he doesn't consciously feel, the child has a different experience. For the child, repeatedly confronting large batches of unprocessed affect prompts regulatory action, propelling the child to diminish the intensity of incoming affect by setting to work on the material, "translating" it into images, fantasies, symbols, and so on. It is precisely this process of "translation" that establishes "drive" sexuality in the child. Understood functionally, affect is therefore able to explain what no theoretical program could explain without it—the development of unconscious sexuality. Laplanche calls this sequence of events the "Fundamental Anthropological Situation," by which he means that it is "the truly universal relation *between a child* who has no genetically programmed unconscious ('genetically innocent') and *an adult* (not necessarily the mother) who, psychoanalysis tells us, is inhabited by an unconscious. It is a situation that is absolutely ineluctable, even if the infant has no parents, and even if he is . . . a clone!"²⁰

Laplanche outlines a profound and original hypothesis about how what propels psychological *becoming* is simultaneously forceful and enigmatic, external and nowhere we could know. This depiction of how the subject is constituted by its necessary *response* to an-other's desire is crucial for what I call "questions" because it foregrounds how the forces that shape object-relating have to do with being compelled by "messages" that a subject bears but did not generate on his own. Even more importantly, Laplanche's paradigm of unconscious sexuality challenges the popularity of projection as the dominant mechanism of intersubjective communication by showing how one person's psychological effects on another person are never as straightforward as the drama of misrecognition suggests. That is, if we take seriously Laplanche's insistence on the other person being an "other" to himself, then it becomes practically impossible to

declare, as Berlant does, that what I respond to in the other person is only ever what *I* put into him. The problem with reducing all the complexity of dynamic relationality to the linear plot of transference is that “everything is constructed from the center, all mechanisms are conceived with, as subject, the person in question.”²¹ “Is it possible,” Laplanche asks, “for us to succeed in this intellectual conversion, this unimaginable ‘version’? to abandon the centrifugal arrow, free ourselves from the idea that everything is already in Pierre’s pouch” in which we continue to imagine that “everything would be in the internal ‘convenience store,’ and would be reduced to the simplistic question of ‘moving the inside to the outside’” (226). What if instead of this classical model, we began to understand that each person—having been a “translator” of his parent’s unconscious “messages” since infancy—has a store of “questions” that are susceptible to reactivation by any new person he meets?

If having one’s “questions” reactivated by someone else’s “questions” sounds like science fiction, that isn’t incidental to Nabokov’s effort—through webs of fortuities that stretch realism’s range—to complicate the representation of reality’s operation. We can observe a similar project at work in Gaitskill’s text in the form of Dorothy as someone whose hyper-vigilance about connections and deeper meanings often seems desperately superstitious and vaguely paranoid. For example, after discovering the fateful “index card,” Dorothy says: “When I woke in the afternoon, I called ‘writer’ again. Again, no response. Instead of relief, I felt irritation. Why had this person put his/her number on a bulletin board if he/she didn’t have a machine to take calls? . . . ‘Writer’ had sent a quivering through my quotidian existence, and now everything was significant” (15). Even though Dorothy’s exaggerated responses seem like they would automatically undermine her narrative credibility, Gaitskill’s text instead consistently frustrates and disorients the distinction between Dorothy’s acuity and her self-deception. After finally reaching Justine and arranging their first interview, Dorothy says, “I invented possible scenarios daily, growing more and more excited by the impending intellectual adventure” (17). This sounds like the kind of inflated imaginative reverie we come to expect from Dorothy until suddenly Dorothy’s description aligns exactly with the story the novel will tell: “My wildest invention, however, didn’t prepare me for what actually happened. . . . I had thought of Anna Granite as the summit of my life, the definitive, devastating climax—and yet perhaps she had only been the foreshadowing catalyst for the connection that occurred between me and Justine, the bridge without which our lives would have continued to run their spiritually parallel courses” (17). By positioning Dorothy as the indefatigable apostle of life’s mysterious

underpinnings (and not just the deluded counterpart to Justine's jagged skepticism), the novel appoints Dorothy as the occult's eccentric beholder, whose perspicacity accurately captures the strange-yet-ordained quality of transformation.

Transformation and Relating

Dorothy's vivid depictions of her encounter with Granite are especially striking for their contrast with the scripted, impatient manner she has for talking about anything else. Consider the juxtaposition between the matter-of-fact style in which she reports having "been forced to have an incestuous affair with my father, starting at age fourteen" (26) with her recollection of first discovering Granite: "I read Anna Granite and suddenly a whole different way of looking at life was presented to me. She showed me that human beings can live in strength and honor. . . . And then the rest was just . . . the sheer beauty of her ideas . . . she held up a vision for me, and her vision helped me through terrible times. I mean, by the time I discovered Granite, I had just about given up" (28). Unlike the other moments where Dorothy dutifully and begrudgingly itemizes her traumas, this description of Granite is the first time Dorothy sounds *narrative*. Whereas trying to answer the interview questions felt coarse and unintuitive—at one point Dorothy even says, "I regarded Justine with dislike and awaited her next prepackaged question" (32)—talking about Granite recreates the aura of romance and transformation.

In her descriptions of discovering Sedgwick, Berlant imitates Dorothy's narrative arc when she says, "Eve Sedgwick's work has changed sexuality's history and destiny. She is a referent, and there is a professional field with a jargon and things, and articles and books that summarize it. For me, though, the luck of encountering her grandiosity, her belief that it is good to disseminate the intelligent force of an attachment to a thing, a thought, a sensation, is of unsurpassable consequence" ("Two Girls, Fat and Thin," 122). When later in the essay Berlant offers an account of how it is that another person can effectuate such impactful transformation, the concept of "emancipatory form" is introduced to suggest that, "in the spectacularly alien capacity to absorb a person, to take her out of her old way of being whether or not she finds a place elsewhere," the "emancipatory form does not require a particular content but instead the capacity to be both surprised and confirmed by an attachment of which one knows little" (141). Non-specificity is an essential feature of the "emancipatory form" because what the subject experiences as transformative isn't anything "particular" about the object per se, but "in the spectacularly alien

capacity to absorb a person, to take her out of her old way of being.” Transformation is a version of absorption, and given the immense burden of Dorothy’s traumatic past, it is no wonder that, according to Berlant, “the most thematic but not least dramatic instance of this double movement is in Dorothy’s encounter with Granite.”

Privileging the formalism of a transformative event is crucial to understanding what people do to have and hold onto their optimism, but in the commitment to “deshame fantasmatic attachments” there is a wholesale flattening of relational forms into things that have value *despite* their “particular content.” Working against the critical tendency to devalue and dismiss the subject’s strategies for “staying afloat,” Berlant’s essay seeks to redeem the silly or sentimental cathexis by demonstrating that fantasy-based attachment is on a spectrum of projective need, not a symptom of the proletariat’s errancy. The twofold implication here is that fantasy is the universal mechanism of everyone’s object relations (everyone does it) and it is the common ground for all different kinds of object relations (every relationship is equally fantasmatic). An interpretive model that takes the subject’s self-alienation as presumptive opens up innumerable possibilities for being curious and compassionate about all that compels us toward/away from each other and ourselves. But then what is the specificity of being transformed as a process of becoming-different? Here I think we can begin to perceive a non-difference, in Berlant’s account, between “absorption” as a technique for managing anxiety and pain versus “relating” as the connection to an object that enables psychic change. In fact, extrapolating from this conflation of absorption with relating, it is as though all attachment becomes functionally identical to any other compulsion for managing distress. Can individuals use objects outside overdetermined circuits of meaning? This seems indisputable to me. And where in doubt, Berlant’s oeuvre resolutely shows that pleasure and relief are not derived from necessarily “coherent” or “appropriate” activities. But how can we make the leap from this observation to the notion that there is no difference between being absorbed and being transformed because an identical mechanism underlies both—a need getting met—unless we consider transformation as somehow dissociable from psychic relating?

Indeed, Berlant insists on severing the association between “particular content” and “emancipatory form” even as the novel and essay proliferate evocative glimpses of barely symbolized, non-conscious, non-representational “communication” between each set of girls. Dorothy describes the power of Granite as “the first writer, ever” who “showed me that human beings can live in strength and honor, not oppositional to it”

(27). Berlant replicates the rhythm of this scene when she says of Sedgwick's work, "To admit your surprising attachments, to trace your transformation over the course of a long (life) sentence, is sentience—that's what I've learned" ("Two Girls, Fat and Thin," 122). Here and elsewhere, scenes of learning refer to something *specific* about the object-as-teacher that makes a given interchange transformative. And yet, when Berlant conflates "absorption" and "relating" it is because "a poetics of misrecognition" redescribes all attachment as motivated by the projection upon the object of a fantasmatic need. In his theory of the "mirror stage," Lacan uses the child's experience of registering the disjunction between his "unorganized jumble of sensations and impulses" and the reflection of a "unified surface appearance similar to that of the child's far more capable, coordinated, and powerful parents"²² to demonstrate the subject's foundational self-estrangement, the impossibility of aspiring to a True self and the comedy of encountering, in every other, a self that is always already mediated by fantasy. Using Lacan's formulation, Berlant writes that, "Misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) describes the psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire: its operation is central to the state of cruel optimism. To misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities—which it might or might not have" (122). The subject of this scenario attempts to get what it needs and what it needs is, ultimately, to manage confusion and get some relief. There can be a diversity of objects who provide this and a multiplicity of means, but the need to "imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire" is the subject's most elementary wish.

Berlant treats the "poetics of misrecognition" as an analytic formulation that, despite their slightly different critical investments, she and Sedgwick both share. According to Berlant, "Sedgwick seeks to read every word the subject writes (she believes in the author) to establish the avowed and disavowed patterns of his or her desire, and then understands those repetitions in terms of a story about sexuality that does not exist yet as a convention or an identity. . . . The queer tendency of this method is to put one's attachments back into play and into pleasure, into knowledge, into worlds. It is to admit that they matter" (123). But "my world," Berlant writes a few paragraphs later, "operates according to a proximate, but different, fantasy of disappointment, optimism, aversion, and attachment than the one I attribute to Eve." Berlant avers that "this distinction is not an opposition" because, "like Eve, I desire to angle knowledge toward and from the places where it is (and we are) impossible. But

individuality—that monument of liberal fantasy, that site of commodity fetishism, that project of certain psychoanalytic desires, that sign of cultural and national modernity—is to me a contrary form. . . . There is an orientation toward interiority in much queer theory that brings me up short and makes me wonder: Must the project of queerness start ‘inside’ of the subject and spread out from there?” (125). To illustrate this point biographically, even though “in writing this way I am working against my own inclination,” Berlant writes:

My story, if I wrote it, would locate its optimism in a crowded scene too, but mine was dominated by a general environment not of thriving but of disappointment, contempt, and threat. I salvaged my capacity to attach to persons by reconceiving of both their violence and their love as impersonal. *This isn't about me*. This has had some unpleasant effects, as you might imagine. But it was also a way to protect my optimism. Selves seemed like ruthless personalizers. In contrast, to think of the world as organized around the impersonality of the structures and practices that conventionalize desire, intimacy, and even one's own personhood was to realize how uninevitable the experience of being personal, of having a personality, is. (125)

In what might otherwise be a heartbreaking glimpse of a terrifying childhood, Berlant insists instead that the subject's capacity to survive and the quality of her object-relating are not, necessarily, linked. This breach between attachment and personhood anticipates the disconnection between particular objects and impacted subjectivity that Berlant asserts is fundamental to every transformative relation. Moreover, by applying “this isn't about me” to object relating tout court, and transformative encounters especially, Berlant uses her interpretation of what transpires between two sets of fat and thin girls to prove that transformation is not about getting “personal”—because look at all the ways these women do not know or even care about each other—and subjectivity is not about being transformed—because motivation and the interiority it fabricates is a psychological and hermeneutic luxury for those who aren't simply desperately trying to “stay afloat.”

What “staying afloat” shares with the “poetics of misrecognition” is a conceptualization of what constitutes the subject's basic needs. But this idea of the subject who relates by fantasmatically conforming the outside object to his internal needs depends upon the assertion that biological self-preservation and psychological growth are structurally and economically identical and moreover, that psychic development works the way eating does. Laplanche vigorously warns: “We must *refuse to believe*

in the illusion that Freud proposes. From the hat of hunger, from a self-preservative instinct, Freud the illusionist claims to produce the rabbit of sexuality, as if by magic. This is only possible if sexuality has been hidden somewhere from the start.²³ While the experience of being fed and the mirror stage are different developmental moments, Laplanche identifies how both fables share the modeling of *all* psychic need on the mechanism of *alimentary* satisfaction. Because for Laplanche, the satisfaction of needs (milk) is always part of someone else's sexuality (breast), the notion that adult desire is autocentric, conscious, or necessarily even aligned with self-preservation belies the fact that there never was an object who was only or simply the provider of alimentary needs. Even the "provider" had a psychology that, while dispensing food, was also "enigmatic" and whose enigmas demanded the subject's "translation" and response. Therefore, whereas "self-preservation" (eating) works according to a principle of pleasure (satiety and the reduction of tension), the "drive" denotes a force that is "not goal-directed," "variable from one individual to the next," "determined by the individual's history," and that works according to a principle of excitation (increase in tension).²⁴ Because the drive "is bound to fantasy, which for its part is strictly personal," Berlant's insistence that desiring transformation is governed by the principle of "self-preservation" (survival) is incoherent to the extent that transformation is a product of the subject's fantasmatic life *as* constituted by relating to others. Transformation is not a basic need that can be efficiently met but a function of an idiosyncratic psyche pursuing *becoming*. Asking why an individual would attach to things that militate against flourishing presumes that somehow flourishing is dissociable from attachment. But while this construct makes sense within a Marxist frame, in a psychological one there is no way to separate what's in a subject's "interests" from the objects of attachment; the "interest" of the subject is survival and attachment is the means. "Cruel optimism" risks tautology by using psychological principles to redescribe a problematic those same principles presume.

Fat vs. Thin, Personal/Impersonal

Gaitskill uses this "fat/thin" distinction aesthetically and descriptively to denote the different psychic and environmental textures of each girl's experiential world, and in her essay Berlant elaborates this imagined juxtaposition by grafting onto "fat" and "thin" literal distinctions between her and Sedgwick (Sedgwick writes about being fat, Berlant talks about her asceticism) and conceptual ones, between personal and impersonal,

biography and anti-biography, attachment and detachment. This overarching categorization meditates on fat/thin as a difference of relational intensity that is concretely expressed in each girl's relationship to the pedagogic object at the novel center: Dorothy is *over*-identified with Granite, imitative, infatuated, evangelical, while Justine is skeptical of Granite, journalistic, curious, interested in writing *about* her but not in becoming an actual acolyte. And so, although both "fat" and "thin" represent modes of impersonality, they each also figure for notably different relational tendencies, such as: Dorothy/Sedgwick/Fat = voracious, entitled, outstretched vs. Justine/Berlant/Thin = aloof, apart, contained. (Insisting on relating and what my relating might mean, I think, though I'm skinny, we know whose company I'm in.) What is suggestive about Berlant's metaphoric framing of relational styles in metabolic terms is that it consigns relationality to a spectrum of "greater" or "lesser" degrees of aggression (grandiosity) and demand (projection), the result of which is that Justine behaves fantasmatically and Dorothy tends to make-believe. However, the novel and essay contradict the classification she constructs: Not only are both girls compelled by Granite, even if Justine seems impassive and Dorothy feels cosmically ordained, but both the novel and the essay depend, for their existence, on thin girls trying to be intimate with what fat girls say they love.

The implications of this fat/thin distinction are not limited to analyses of each girl's fantasmatic range, but serve, in Berlant's essay, to characterize the different appetitive profiles of critical interpretation. Although the essay begins by sketching her and Sedgwick's "different, but proximate" fantasies of personhood, and Berlant assures us that this "distinction is not an opposition," the essay progresses by systematically collocating possible avenues to psychological meaning, then dispersing them onto an all-exterior landscape of un-interpretable sensation and non-comprehensible events. If the subject is only ever fumbling and stumbling and trying to survive with a bare minimum of optimism intact, then attributing behavior to interiority and interpreting what motivates sexual or "textual" desire already aspires to explain over-meaningfully; as if trying to understand the subject in psychological terms becomes itself a sign of critical greed. Or critics more wounded and austere would never even *be* that hungry.

Although Berlant's suggestion to be less hungry critics, or at least to train ourselves to evacuate whatever "meaning" we ingest, complemented the discourse's direction as one that focused its interpretive energies on adumbrating the "thresholds, tensions, blends and blurs" and rejecting the big "compartmentalisms" of subject/object, representation, memory, time/space, and so on—it also enabled psychoanalysis to retain its status

as the absolute explanatory paradigm of human behavior by ratifying “transference” as the preeminent mechanism of object-relating. If, beyond insinuating that opposite body types attract because they are symbolically complementary, Berlant’s essay cannot account for what brings these girls together, it is because when everyone is a “ruthless personalizer,” what motivates contact is not much deeper than how well (or badly) the other serves one’s own projective longings. This uncritical reduction of all relating to “transference” and projection preserves psychoanalysis’s ideology of the autocentric subject and, in doing so, simplifies intimacy and transformation precisely where queer theory seemed uniquely poised to complicate it.

Since the concept’s debut in Freud’s early writings to the contemporary proliferation of diverse typologies, “transference” has become the ur-mechanism for how subjects experience each other as familiar objects. Initially, Freud defined “transference” as “new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and fantasies that are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity . . . that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician.”²⁵ No matter what brand of transference it is (sexual, negative, Oedipal, narcissistic, and so on), certain key features are consistent: Temporality moves forward and/or backward, shuffling between present, past, and future tenses; the directionality of affect flows only from inside and toward outside, in varying permutations of projection and identification; fantasy and need are the main impulses for transporting affect between objects even if other mechanisms like the body or landscape function interactively as well. As we will see, it is impossible for transference to be used without invoking a specific ideology of affect whereby fantasy originates in *me* and gets projected onto *you*. The word “transference” itself, with the root verb “transfer” describing the movement of something in someone to someone/thing somewhere else, bears the trace of the concept’s particular genealogy in classical Freudian psychoanalysis where transference represented the patient’s affective “resistance” to the “talking cure.” Although the term’s antagonistic dynamics have been notably softened by the development of a “two-person” framework, I argue that no matter how brazenly contemporary clinicians insist on increasing the ratio between neutrality and the reality of an interpersonal context, the philosophical foundations of transference retain the infrastructure of a psychic subject whose experience originates in a monolithic historical past that gets reimposed on an otherwise innocent relational present.²⁶ Indeed, Sedgwick’s mobilization of Tomkins’s affect theory is directed at dethroning Freudian/Lacanian metapsychology at exactly the point where psychoanalytic

formulations reduce subjectivity to a crude relational determinism and psychobiology. By showing that affects *motivate*, Sedgwick uses Tomkins to show that new possibilities emerge for interpreting the subject's experience. How, then, can we understand the totalizing reductiveness by which what happens between "two girls" becomes no more than a transference event, the formal effect of the general wish each girl projects "for something transformative"?

As a critique of individuality—"that monument of liberal fantasy, that site of commodity fetishism, that project of certain psychoanalytic desires, that sign of cultural and national modernity"—Berlant's impersonality would seem, nearly automatically, to demand the dissolution of the auto-centric subject. However, by conflating all of psychology with (available/interior) consciousness, and flattening all relating into need-based projection, Berlant corroborates transference and its enforcement of psychoanalysis's most persistent and totalizing myths: that transformative relating is exogenous to the constitution of subjectivity. As an argument, Berlant's use of her relationship to Sedgwick, and Dorothy's relationship to Justine, to prove that relating does not need to be personal to be transformative, depends for its cogency on conflating biography with psychology, but they are not, after all, the same thing. In fact, it is precisely the tension *between* them that animates and challenges the critic's interpretive task. As such, while defending the subject's rights to incoherence is a vital hermeneutic precept, limiting the subject's psychological processes to originating "basic" needs and meeting them consolidates the subject's absolute, autarkic role. What about becoming-different as a form of relating irreducible to "getting by" or ontogenesis? After all, a girl whose compulsions we can't read and a girl whose compulsions have no meaning are two different things. Ruth Leys's seminal critique of affect theory's "anti-intentionalism"²⁷ echoes this chapter's observation that "a materialist theory that suspends considerations of meaning or intentionality in order to produce an account of the affects as inherently organic (indeed inherently mechanical) in nature"²⁸ is necessarily committed to an idea of emotions as "inherently objectless" so that, even though "I laugh when I am tickled," "I am not laughing *at you*." Laughing, but "not *at you*" helpfully demonstrates how affect theory's "anti-intentionalism" is practically contingent upon, and responsible for, a *non*-relational metapsychological framework. To extrapolate even further from these observations, I would suggest that the compatibility of Lacanian metapsychology with a Deleuzian ontology of immanence and non-representational theory occludes affect theory's *depsychologization* of relationality because linguistic structuralism effectively *materializes* psychic action into generalized "forms" that

are beyond personal, relational or concrete “content.” I think it is a specific kind of formalism that is organized *against* the content of anything “personal” about the object or relation that enables Berlant to claim that what is transformative is the *self’s* “impersonal,” non-psychological attachment to the object, not something—however imperceptible or non-representational—that happens *between* them.

“Resonance” and Relationality

Perhaps the measure of how far affect theory moves us toward a new vocabulary for describing relational experience while simultaneously circumscribing the theoretical range of what it will capably radicalize is evident in the different ways “resonance” can be understood. Berlant uses “resonance” to characterize the sensation Dorothy and Justine experience when they first meet: “At the time of their meeting, neither Justine nor Dorothy has had a good conversation with anyone in many years. . . . Yet from the moment of their initial phone call they resonate with each other, a resonance that they take personally but that has, in a sense, nothing to do with anything substantive about each other” (127). “Resonance” recurs often in affect theory and in the phenomenological thought influenced by Merleau-Ponty, offering, as it does, a term for signaling a “felt” occurrence that is not necessarily assimilable into linguistic representation or more concrete signification. I want to suggest that in order for each girl to function “formally” rather than “substantive[ly]” for each other, for “formalism” to be juxtaposed to “content” in this way, we also have to imagine that the “resonance that they take personally” can be physiological without being psychological, or, put another way, that in order to be perceptual, meaning has to be perceptible, too. But Merleau-Ponty uses “perceptual meaning” in a functionally similar way to Laplanche’s “psychic reality”—to denote an alternative logic of development that is simultaneously constitutive of subjectivity *and* relationality, irreducible to biological or linguistic reductionism, singular and not-me, singular because *I* am where *I* respond to the *other*. If it is through the self’s movement in relation to others that a self develops, then “resonance” is an exemplary encounter with movement *as* being-moved that is not necessarily accessible to signification.

Therefore, whereas “resonance” within an applied Lacanian model merely complements the affective topography of an ultimately transferential event, in a Laplanchean-inflected formulation of relational encountering, “resonance” is how the impact of a transformative “textual” engagement becomes registered, non-meaningfully. This means that

we can “resonate” with an other even though we cannot know *what* or *why* or even *how*—only *that* we are resonant and, because our knowledge is embodied, because “textuality” lives in our gestures and glances, our resonance *means* even if we will never know *what* it means. This “resonance” that happens between subjectivities is not, then, a narrative moment where form exceeds or supersedes content, but a psycho-physiological instant that attunes me to my “textual” self, and to myself *as* “textual.”

I have used “textuality” to refer to the *questions* (Laplanchian “messages”) that propel transformative “relating” and “textual desire” to the need/wish to experience these questions *as* questions. What I want now to add to this formulation is the mechanism that links these two concepts, something Laplanche calls “reactivation”:

The translation of the enigmatic adult message doesn’t happen all at once but *in two moments* . . . in the first moment, the message is simply inscribed or implanted, without being understood. It is as if maintained or held in position under a thin layer of consciousness, or *under the skin*. In a second moment the message is reactivated from within. It acts like an internal foreign body that must at all costs be mastered and integrated.²⁹

The psychic mechanism Laplanche outlines makes it possible to imagine relationality as an experience of one’s own “messages” being “reactivated” by the “messages” of another. What distinguishes this model from what Laplanche often refers to as the “trans-individual structures” of Lacanian “language,” or the fantasmatic activity of Kleinian “projection,” is that only a specific, concrete other whose “messages” *resonate* with my own can provoke the “reactivation” of my “untranslated” questions. This is the reality of the “message,” i.e. of the “signifier as it is addressed by someone to someone.” According to Laplanche, “to project, to introject, to identify, to disavow, to foreclose etc.—all the verbs used by analytic theory to describe psychical processes share the feature of having as subject the individual in question: *I* project, *I* disavow, *I* foreclose, etc. What has been scotomised . . . quite simply, is the discovery that *the process originally comes from the other*. Processes in which the individual takes an *active* part are all secondary in relation to the originary moment, which is that of a passivity: that of seduction.”³⁰ It is no longer possible to think psychic life archeologically because development is mediated by the concrete “other,” and what the child bears as “knowledge” is only ever *already* a product of how “enigmatic” content has been idiosyncratically “translated.” With this, Laplanche offers a way out of “transference’s” determinism because there is no unified

or legible scene that could be wished-for or repeated—only implanted “messages” shot through with affect and signification that in their exigency compel us toward we know not what, or whom.

Two Girls, Relational and Queer

This chapter suggests that *Two Girls* is an exemplary dramatization of how relationality unfolds in non-hermeneutic, non-teleological, indeterminate ways, for not only is Dorothy’s response to Justine’s “index”-card call for “followers of Anna Granite” *literally* an answer to Justine’s question about Granite, but Dorothy’s relationship to Granite is something that, for whatever reason, Justine wants an occasion to live with (and through) for a while. Why else would Justine want to write about it? And even then, why interview ex-acolytes? This is not an attempt to deduce unconscious motivations but instead to insist we take seriously the conditions that bind any of the girls writing or being written about “two girls.” This means that we cannot treat as narrative coincidence that these two girls are brought together on either side of Granite (a teacher) and Definitism (a movement compelled by the search for Truth), even if it looks as though the intimacy between someone detachedly curious and someone who cathects heroically is reducible merely to the structural drama of a thin girl experiencing proximity to a fat one. Because even when the manifold effects of this “comic *méconnaissance*” seem weird and queer and enigmatic, sadly, the motivational mechanisms that underlie it never are. For although putting each girl’s desperate, justifiable need for a transformative object at the center of their encounter suggests that phenomenological rawness proves attachment has been stripped un sentimentally down to the bone, it only really strips attachment of the complexity that renders it any kind of relationship whatsoever.

While the biographical data we’re given is at once too limited and conventional to explain their respective attraction to Definitism or each other, the novel seems decidedly more provocative as an exercise in rendering, as links, the possible knots of psychic entanglement that it could sketch but barely, if ever, begin to untangle. Therefore, insofar as “resonance” aims to describe the powerful, mostly nonlinguistic and non-representational, relational current connecting psychic subjectivities to each other, I want to read the ending as the beginning the novel has been working its way to elaborating. The ending is therefore not only, “not nothing,” but radical because it isn’t any kind of ending at all but rather a singular moment of elaboration, where the “sonorous” sense of “resonance” “can only emerge little by little, and no doubt with difficulty.”

halting and halted in a holding embrace, where the force undergirding their “resonance” emerges and can glimpse something of what “resonance” would look like if it never had to assume a relational form. Whereas for Berlant, this ending resists categorization by being ambiguous, I want to read this ending as the concrete expression of a “resonance” these girls have experienced in relationship to each other *from the beginning*.

In her essay’s countermanding conversion of all meaningfulness into abstraction, Berlant valorizes their inscrutable “falling asleep” by ignoring that Dorothy interrupts Justine during an S/M scene, which, in a novel this bracingly deliberate, we have to consider as being about more than just salvation from violence (they’ve each had so much of that already) and instead about the ways their complimentary, enigmatic “questions” dramatically intersect. For Justine, this final S/M scene marks an escalation of the danger/pleasure ratio she has been testing throughout the novel. While Dorothy spends the novel attempting to regulate her desire by idealizing then denigrating her objects, Justine tries outsmarting her detachment by finding a viable spot between terror and indifference. Although each girl is preoccupied privately and outside any dialogue they’re explicitly having, the novel’s trajectory plots them on parallel paths that converge when they experience their struggles in *relation* to each other. Of course, to every thin girl sureness looks big, and to every fat girl deprivation needs saving. But calling this a relational dynamic is not identical to a conventional love plot. We need terms for distinguishing relationality from structures of compulsory kinship—otherwise all attachment is effectively heterosexual and all relationality automatically non-queer.

What Do Teachers Have to Do with “Two Girls”?

I doubt it is incidental that pedagogy brings all these unlikely pairs of girls into each other’s orbit. While at first, Dorothy and Justine each perform rituals of projective appetitiveness that can make their cathexis to Anna Granite seem like the desperate attachment of students onto the teacher-hero as empty form, as the novel progresses we observe the way they circle and evade each other as if they are each compelled to keep sharing *something*. This isn’t what happens *to* two girls *in spite* of their history but what happens *between* them *because* of it. Indeed, not only is Gaitskill’s novel a story of “two girls” who meet through a teacher, and not only is Berlant’s essay an account of what she learned and “Professor Sedgwick” taught, but Berlant’s essay itself begins, and ends, with a sentence—“history is what hurts”—from her *own* teacher’s text. Although

Fredric Jameson is nowhere situated as her teacherly interlocutor, Berlant implicitly avows the essay's pedagogic context when, in addition to her opening riff, "history hurts, but not only" (121), she later adds: "Here is a stupidity of mine: 'History is what hurts,' that motto of *The Political Unconscious*, is a phrase that I love. It resonates as truth; it performs a truth-effect in me. But because it is in the genre of the maxim, I have never tried to understand it. That is one project of this essay" (126). Again there is "resonance"—this time between Berlant and something she loves of what her teacher has said. And *what* is that "phrase I love" without ever "try[ing] to understand it" but her own teacher's idea of history's relation to subjectivity, genre, and trauma, a theory of transformation and impact that she distills her own meditation on traumatized subjectivity *in relation to*?

For that matter, what is that sentence from Jameson she calls "a stupidity of mine" but precisely a knowledge that she just does not yet "understand" because before she has a chance to intervene, it "performs a truth-effect in me?" Berlant blames the sentence's formalism for obstructing her access to critical self-reflection: "Because it is in the genre of the maxim," she says, "I have never tried to understand it." But isn't it actually the "genre" of *pedagogy* that makes this motto feel so unavailable to critique? For if teacher-student relationality has no phenomenological integrity that can't eventually be reduced to the hysterical relay of impersonal projections, then endeavoring to elaborate one's own textual objects has no recourse to engage a material, specifiable other. Indeed, her account of "a phrase that I love" is surrounded at every turn by references to its mystical genealogy, as if attachment can be either sensible or magical, legible or stupid, desperate or depressive. But if pedagogy is the condition of Berlant's attempt to push against what she calls her "stupidity" while writing about someone else from whom she's learned, and pedagogy is the context of Dorothy's initial struggle to become a girl who is not her father's daughter, a project she begins with Granite and resumes in relation to another girl's learning, it may be because resonating with the question another person asks *is* the only way to reactivate "messages" that I *have*, but have no access to?

What I think this means is that teachers are not those we learn from by "overthrowing"—besides, rage against temporal difference seems far more like the aging father's problem than the younger son's. But rather, we learn from those who help us survive our *questions* by inviting us into their own. Since resonances are partial and non-meaningfully known, difference is constitutive of attachment, not its retributive form. As such, if the pedagogic relation is so essential to every iteration of "two girls" it

is because pedagogy cannot be reduced to merely another non-specific psychic mechanism of survival-by-any-projective-means necessary. Relationality is not *only* what happens in the suspension and disorganization of genre—a formulation that ultimately reifies social categorization by locating potentiality in materiality's elusive “elsewhere.” Relationality is *how* “textuality” becomes transmissible and transformed. While contemporary critical and literary theory proliferates generative and rich possibilities for how subjectivity can be non-symptomologically experienced and expressed, it maintains a distinctly more limited imagination about what happens between subjects who are not only structural placeholders for abstract psychic functions but concrete others carrying “enigmatic messages” that “resonate” and compel. Insofar as relationality requires a methodology that foregrounds between-ness epistemologically, we need a metapsychology that can wonder how strangers reach and turn away from each other, how *Two Girls* is about what happens *between* two girls, and how it is what's elaborated *between* girls that is potentially transformative for *each* girl. To the extent that “history” is not *only* what “hurts,” it is in no small part because of whom we meet and what, because of who they are, we find transformable, and transformed, about ourselves.