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Two Girls^2: Sedgwick + Berlant, Relational and Queer

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Abstract: This essay asks what relationality has to do with self-transformation by analysing Lauren Berlant's reading of Mary Gaitskill's novel, "Two Girls, Fat and Thin," an essay in which Berlant reads her own relationship to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick through the novel's lens. This essay explores the limitations of queer and affect theory to challenge the conventional psychoanalytic interpretive regime. It problematizes the Lacanian foundations of contemporary critical theory by demonstrating the failure of existing explanatory paradigms. Through a sustained engagement with Jean Laplanche, this essay elaborates an alternative metapsychological account of transformation and queer relationality.

This essay asks what does relationality have to do with self-transformation. This essay poses this question by first exploring the ways that efforts in contemporary critical and literary theory to explain complex relational psychic experiences can be traced back to an unreflective reliance on applied Lacanian psychoanalysis. The essay ends by drawing on Jean Laplanche's radical innovations in metapsychology to develop new narrative trajectories for the ways that knowledge is, relationally, transmitted and transformative. At the essay's center is my encounter with Mary Gaitskill's novel, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin,* and with Lauren Berlant's essay on Gaitskill's novel by 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, my critical encounter with Gaitskill is also about my pedagogic encounter with Berlant.

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 paper (Gila/Lauren); in every iteration the "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 place in contemporary American literature as an author of sexually and psychologically subversive fiction, and Berlant is unique in her prominence as an 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, instead of one, who take turns narrating the story, 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 was challenging 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 in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), a text that suggests that all relations between younger and older writers 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, even imagining a softer, daughterly push between women – insofar as it presumes the familiar psychoanalytic teleology of transformation – invariably retains 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 upon noticing how defensive my 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 as emblematic of the way 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 the way 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 in opposition here. This essay is an argument that uses style to put pressure on the way kinship is conceptualized. 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," is a powerful account of the connection between imagining alternative relational modes that are not reducible to conventional plots of desire and belonging, on the one hand, and understanding psychic subjectivities as too

functionally incoherent and structurally inconsistent to be assimilated into dominant paradigms of attachment, history, and sociality, on the other.[1] The novel tells the story of two girls who, in different but formally similar ways, are each abused by those 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 psycho-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 madnesses 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? (*Cruel Optimism* 128-9)

The two girls of the novel meet through a shared interest in Anna Granite, the once famous and hypnotic Ayn Rand-like leader of social and intellectual movement/cult called Definitism. Dorothy was infatuated by her and 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 kind of relating, the intimacy between these girls extends without ever quite graduating into a "normal" form. Much like the "fat" and "thin" of the novel's title, each girl seems to retain her essential size and shape throughout the novel, as if to literalize that they never merge into a unit/couple, and that neither 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, goes over to her house intending confrontation, 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.

Berlant describes the novel's ending as "not a lesbian ending, exactly, since exhaustion is neither sex, love, nor object choice" but at the same time is "not nothing, it's something else" ("Two Girls" 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 she 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 another 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 addition, 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. ("Two Girls" 99)

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" or *not* "deeply overmeaningful," and how a subject's ways of being may be something *other* 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 automatically to judging people's efforts to manage their lives – and thereby bolsters the ideological apparatus that is meant to be critiqued.

Perhaps because of the idiosyncratic way that the personal/psychological and the social/ideological are inextricably interdependent in Berlant's analysis, her work is 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. 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." In so doing, her work can be seen to compliment 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 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.

I explore the way Berlant's essay simultaneously elaborates the superabundance of what connects people to each other, and refuses to allow the specificity of those connections to matter. Throughout its 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. 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 ("Two Girls" 126) 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 misrecognition" ("Two Girls" 122), Berlant turns each girl into a "placeholder" (99) that both "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" (127).[2] 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*" (127), and in the accompanying footnote, that the novel's literary history "requires a story of its own" (286). But this reference to Nabokov and the repetition of "shade" might signal more than just the novel's general literariness and indicate instead a more substantial connection between Gaitskill's and Nabokov's fictional projects. It is, after all, with a passage from a different Nabokov text (*Speak, Memory*) 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 an 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. (qtd. in Gaitskill, *Two Girls* 10)

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 by its experimental preoccupations with doppelgängers (a pair of Nabokovian "two girls" might really be "one"?), but this prefatory passage also 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 insist systematically that what underlies relationality must be

either determinable or "hav[e] nothing to do with anything substantive about each other" ("Two Girls" 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 towards each other 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 I mostly treat affect/queer theory as a homogenous discourse in relation to these questions, this essay traces a fundamental difference between Sedgwick and Berlant that is both addressed and absorbed by Berlant's use of "two girls" as a narrative frame. Specifically, I show 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. Indeed, among queer theorists, Sedgwick has arguably done the most to try to unmoor sexuality studies from its *Trieb*-centered Freudian base. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick interrogates

> 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. (17-18)

Sedgwick and Frank argue that Tomkins's affect theory dislodges the "one physiological drive"; 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. (*Shame* 34)

Although Tomkins does not directly address "relating" as a distinctive psychological mechanism, his work is groundbreaking in part due to its reorientation away from the tendency to theorize the subject in isolation and toward its imbrication in affective states, the environment, and others.

Sedgwick'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 with 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. (4)[3]

As both the writing and thinking in this passage illustrate, 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).

In keeping with its multidisciplinary resources and commitment to expanding the critical and perceptual range of our interpretive practices, affect theory presents a strong 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 that "the taken-for-grantedness of the emotionally contained subject is a residual bastion of Eurocentrism in critical thinking" (2); 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"(6).[4] This *in*secure distinction "between the 'individual' and the 'environment'" is important for Brennan because it opens up a 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 (9).. 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 represent*able* in order to be *perceptually* operative.

Although opening the door to materialism can often sound like slamming the door on language, in this essay I contend 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.[5] This intellectual development seems to me like an especially promising innovation for theorizing subjectivity, and metapsychology generally, since it puts back at the center of analysis a rigorous respect for the singular dimensions of experiential life that are necessary to elucidating why people become the people they do, and how that happens. A narrow conceptualization of materialism (one that derogates psychology to immateriality and focuses only on such topics as capitalism or the ecology) or a narrow conceptualization 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 the ways that 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. Throughout, I draw upon Jean Laplanche's theoretical interventions in psychoanalysis to consider the ways that the models of subjectivity currently in use are not inevitable and are open to revision. It follows from this avowedly idiosyncratic use of literary criticism that I do not begin with an established theory of the subject but rather read closely, trying to find one. This methodology is a feature of my project's commitment to a speculative psychology[6] and informs my interest in the ways that affect/queer theory might reimagine new possibilities for understanding subjective life.

"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. (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, that "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" (11). 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 overwhelmed and indignant 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" ("Two Girls" 126).

Elaborating on Berlant's formulation, I consider how "textuality" is not only a pattern of interacting *through* texts but also a model for relating to each other *as* texts. Here the term "textuality" provides a non-hermeneutic account of psychological engagement. Instead of using "textuality" as a paradigm for all interpretive activity (as, Shaun Gallagher notes, some branches of hermeneutics have),[7] I suggest that relationality is amplified when we consider that interpretive reading is not the only way to engage a text. For this speculative rubric I draw on Laplanche's radical revision of psychoanalytic metapsychology.

Where Laplanche is cited in queer theoretical discourse it is typically as the author, with J. B. Pontalis, of *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* (1973), whose ideas were consonant with Freud and Lacan. But for the remainder of his later work, which was extensive, Laplanche vigorously and systematically renounced the concept of "leaning-on" that was so central to his earlier work, and sought instead to develop what he called *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*. According to Laplanche, "the *connection* between the self-preservative, instinctual relationship" and "the sexual drive" has been the dominant question of psychoanalytic theory (*Temptation* 4), but whereas "leaning-on" posits "a sexuality that emerges by supporting itself or leaning on self-preservation," (*Temptation* 27) Laplanche shows instead that this desperate attempt to "save the Freudian hypothesis" (*Temptation* 5) relies, for its cogency, on the notion that self-preservation can somehow *morph* into sexual desire. Dominique Scarfone writes that "leaning-on gives the impression that sexuality 'arises' from self-preservative situations a bit as the flower blossoms forth from the bud," and it suggests that if "an instinctual adaptive function persists long enough, the sexual sphere will kick in" (21).[8] Laplanche explains:

> I have frequently, and for a long time, criticized such a "creativist" and "illusionist" conception of human sexuality. In Freud these conceptions find their apogee in the theory

> of the "hallucinatory satisfaction of desire," which I reject. Indeed, the first real satisfaction can only be the satisfaction of a *need*; and *its reproduction* … can only be the reproduction of an *alimentary* satisfaction. There is in Freud and his successors … a veritable sleight of hand: if the sexual is not present within the original, *real experience* it will never be rediscovered in the fantasmatic reproduction or the symbolic elaboration of that experience. (*Temptation* 46)

Laplanche locates infantile "creativity" in "the 'drive to translate,' which comes to the child from the adult message 'to be translated.'" Laplanche writes: the child's "creativity … does not in fact go so far as to create sexuality: this is in reality introduced from the earliest intersubjective experience, and introduced by the activity of the adult rather than the infant." (*Temptation* 50)

Laplanche shows why this meticulous differentiation between "instinct" and "drive" is the urgent corrective to Freud's "biologizing going-astray." For our purposes, Laplanche's insistence that a "need" cannot set a "drive" in motion (because they have categorically different economies, sources, and aims) offers a genuinely alternative way of thinking about psychological development because it proposes different motivational lines (self-preservation vs. pleasure) whose relationship to each other is "not one of collaboration or of harmonious blending, but a deeply conflictual relation" (44). Dismissing "the sequence of infantile stages described by Freud [as] a barely credible fiction," and prying apart "two respective modes of functioning – 'the pursuit of excitation' and 'the pursuit of pleasure in the object,'" Laplanche outlines the profound and original hypothesis that what propels psychological *becoming* can be simultaneously forceful and enigmatic, external and nowhere we could know. This depiction of the subject's constitution by its necessary *response* to an-other's desire is crucial for what I call

"questions." By "questions," I refer to the force of the "messages" a subject bears within himself but cannot access, or encounter, on his own.

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 threaten to undermine her narrative credibility, Gaitskill's text instead consistently frustrates and disorients the distinction between Dorothy's acuity and her self-deception. 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 a good to disseminate the intelligent force of an attachment to a thing, a thought, a sensation, is of unsurpassable consequence. (*Cruel Optimism* 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 its 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" (140). Non-specificity is an essential feature of the "emancipatory form," since what the subject experiences as transformative isn't anything "particular" about the object per se, but is "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" ("Two Girls" 140).

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" ("Two Girls" 122) 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 errancy. The twofold implication here is that fantasy is the universal mechanism of everyone's object relations (everyone does it) and that 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" (*Two Girls* 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" (*Cruel Optimism* 122-3). 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" (122) 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" (*Écrits* 13) 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. (*Cruel Optimism* 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 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. (*Cruel Optimism* 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" (126). Berlant avers that "this distinction is not an opposition" (125) since,

> 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? (124-5)

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 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 to 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" (since look at all the ways these women do not know or even care about each other), and subjectivity is not about being transformed (since 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" (*Freud and the Sexual* 69). While the experience of being fed and the mirror stage are different developmental moments, Laplanche identifies the way that both fables share the modeling of *all* psychic need on the mechanism of *alimentary* satisfaction. Since 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) (Laplanche, *Temptation* 121). Since 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 the "fat/thin" distinction 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 Sedgwick and herself (Sedgwick writes about being fat, Berlant talks about her asceticism) as well as conceptual distinctions 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's 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, versus Justine/Berlant/Thin = aloof, apart, contained. (Since I'm 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 Berlant 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.

Berlant's suggestion to be less hungry critics, or at least to train ourselves to evacuate whatever "meaning" we ingest, complemented the discourse's interpretive focus on adumbrating the "thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs" (Gregg and Seigworth 4) and on rejecting the big "compartmentalisms" of subject/object, representation, memory, time/space, etc. But 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 complimentary, 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 the psychoanalytic 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 understanding 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" (116). No matter what brand of transference it is (sexual, negative, oedipal, narcissistic, etc.), 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 its ideology of affect. 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. 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 (and not just alimentary "drives") motivate, 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 transferential event, the formal effect of the general wish each girl projects "for something transformative" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 127)?

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, *Cruel Optimism* 124) - Berlant's impersonality would seem, nearly automatically, to demand the dissolution of the autocentric subject. However, by conflating psychology with (available/interior) consciousness, and flattening relating into need-based projection, Berlant corroborates transference and its enforcement of the most persistent and totalizing myth of psychoanalysis: 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 that is irreducible to "getting by" or ontogenesis? After all, a girl whose compulsions we can't read is different from one whose compulsions have no meaning.

Ruth Leys echoes this observation in her seminal critique of affect theory's anti-intentionalism[9] when she writes, "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" 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*" (463). Laughing, but "not *at you*" helpfully demonstrates the way that 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 *de*psychologization 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 extent to which 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. (*Cruel Optimism* 127)

"Resonance" recurs often in affect theory and 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," namely, 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 compliments the affective topography of an ultimately transferential event, in a Laplanchian-inflected formulation of relational encountering, "resonance" is the way 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, since our knowledge is embodied, since "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. (*Freud* 208)

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 an other. 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" *resonates* 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. (*Essays* 136)

It is no longer possible to think psychic life archeologically, since development is mediated by the concrete "other," and what the child bears as "knowledge" is only ever *already* a product of the way that "enigmatic" content has been idiosyncratically "translated." Laplanche offers a way out of the determinism of "transference," since there is no unified or legible scene that could be wished-for or repeated; there are 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 essay 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 "two girls" writing or being written about. 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 whatever transpires between them purports that phenomenological rawness proves attachment has been stripped unsentimentally 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 to 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," ("Two Girls" 152) but is also 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, 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 the 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 more about the ways their complimentary or 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 to imply 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"?

It is, after all, the *pedagogic* context that first brings all these unlikely pairs of girls into each other's orbit. Of course Dorothy and Justine both 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. But as we observe the way they circle and evade each other, the force that compels them to keep sharing *something* simultaneously

becomes concrete and more vague. This isn't what happens *to* two girls *in spite* of their history, but what happens *between* them *because* of it.

Alas, 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 the sentence – "history hurts" – a reference to an idea from her *own* teacher's text ("Two Girls" 121). 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" (*Cruel Optimism* 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 her teacher said that she loves. 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 if pedagogy is the context of Dorothy's initial struggle to become a girl whose 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 an other *asks* is the only way to reactivate the knowledge I did not know could ever *be* a question.

What I think this means is that teachers are not those whom we learn from by "overthrowing" – besides, rage against temporal difference seems far more like the aging father's problem than the younger son's. 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 *the way that* "textuality" becomes transmissible and transformed. While contemporary critical and literary theory proliferates generative and rich possibilities for the ways that subjectivity can be non-symptomalogically 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 also 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 about 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 also in no small part a result of whom we meet and what, because of who they are, we find transformable, and transformed, about ourselves.

This essay is dedicated to my teacher, Lauren Berlant. In addition to benefiting from the generative and stimulating comments of its anonymous readers, this essay has been incalculably shaped by the indefatigable guidance, insight, and provocations of Eyal Amiran.

[1] The essay was originally written for Barber and Clark's Festschrift honoring Sedgwick and later reprinted in Berlant's *Cruel Optimism.*

[2] Berlant's formulation relies upon Leo Bersani's radical transformation of sexuality from a mechanism of self-knowledge into a site of ego-"shattering" (Bersani and Phillips 57) that he later calls "impersonal narcissism" (85). Bersani writes, "might there be forms of self-divestiture not grounded in a teleology (or a theology) of the suppression of the ego and, ultimately, the sacrifice of the self?" (57). Adam Phillips elaborates the transformative power of "impersonal narcissism," when he explains that "the psychoanalyst becomes intimate with someone by not taking what they say personally" (Bersani and Phillips 92).

[3] See also Clough and Halley's introduction to *The Affective Turn.*

[4] The development of affect theory belongs to a broader moment in philosophy that, often exuberantly, avows its disinterest in representation's familiar limits and instead calls for stretching perception beyond the linguistic/symbolic frame. As Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman write in "Towards a Speculative Philosophy,"

> Even while disdaining the traditional idealist position that all that exists is some variation of mind or spirit, continental philosophy has fallen into an equally anti-realist stance in the form of what Meillassoux calls 'correlationism' – the 'idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.' This position tacitly holds that we can aim our thoughts at being, exist as beings-in-the-world, or have phenomenal experiences of the world, yet we can never consistently speak about a realm independent of thought or language. (3-4)

Variously called Speculative Realism, Object-Oriented-Ontology, New Materialism, Transcendental Materialism, and Non-Philosophy, these related developments share the wish to distance themselves from the linguistic paradigm.

[5] As my use of Laplanche and "textuality" shows, affect does not invalidate the grip of language on the formation of subjectivity and sociality, but instead alerts us to the need to put what we know about signification in relation to other things we know about affective transmission, nonhuman lifeworlds, brain synapses, etc.

[6] I use "speculative" in Tom Sparrow's sense, which builds upon work in Speculative Realism and related philosophy. Sparrow writes:

> the proliferation of speculative philosophy in recent years may be unnerving to some. Is this the return of dogmatic, ungrounded, free-floating knowledge claims? Has the Kantian lesson withered away, leaving us just where we were before the 1780s? . . . In a less alarmist tone, the speculative turn is not a rejection of the critical philosophy, but "a recognition of [its] inherent limitations. Speculation in this sense aims 'beyond' the critical and linguistic turns. As such, it recuperates the pre-critical sense of 'speculation' as a concern with the Absolute, while also taking into account the undeniable progress that is due to the labour of critique" [Brassier]. (19)

[7] Shaun Gallagher, p81. I am thinking of Paul Ricoeur's *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays on Hermeneutics*, where the focus on a "hermeneutics of selfhood" outlines the way the subject emerges through interpretation; we could think of Roland Barthes's *S/Z* and *The Pleasure of the Text* as expanding our ideas of what a text can refer to and the varieties of ways we can engage a text.

[8] Laplanche further delineates a difference between "sexual instinct" and "sexual drive" in order to show that instinctive sexuality is not identical with drive sexuality. See *Freud and the Sexual* (2011).

[9] Cf. the work by Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, Michel de Certeau, Brian Massumi, and Nigel Thrift that studies performativity and bodily practices in the everyday rather than focusing on representation and meaning. In his seminal *Non-Representational Theory*, Thrift writes, "non-representational theory is resolutely anti-biographical and pre-individual. It trades in modes of perception which are not subject-based" (7).

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