

Regarding Sedgwick
Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory

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21. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ* 1, no. 1 (1993), 1-16. Hereafter page numbers cited in text.
22. "Readers who have paid attention to the recent, meteoric rise of shame to its present housewife-megastar status in the firmament of self-help and popular psychology . . . may be feeling a bit uneasy at this point. So, for that matter, may those used to reading about shame in the neo-conservative framework that treasures shame along with guilt as, precisely, an adjunct of repression and an enforcer of proper behavior. In the ways that I want to be thinking about shame, the widespread moral valuation of this powerful affect as good or bad, to be mandated or to be excised, according to how one plots it along a notional axis of prohibition/permission/requirement, seems distinctly beside the point" (Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," 6).
23. Warner, Michael, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 3.
24. *Ibid.*, 35-36.
25. "... the universal humiliation of all characters in this [ridiculous, queer] theatre gives it a repulsive air of viciousness, even cruelty, because it is absolute: the victims are accorded no basic dignity, no saving graces. We are not reassured of worthy or innocent motives of underlying rational seriousness. The characters are not just clownish or foolish but clowns and fools. They are not exactly funny. Isolated clown scenes, jokes and parodies that at first seem pure fun trouble us by their implications of profound ridiculousness. Some important, often protracted, actions are specifically and formally cruel humiliations: Bajazeth's enslavement in [*When Queens [Collide]/Conquest [of the Universe]*], the entire action of *Screen Test*, Lady Godiva's undressing (according to [John] Vacarro), in *Lady Godiva*, Victor's re-education in *Vinyl*. These humiliations bring this close to a theatre of the terrible. It takes a strong stomach to participate in their fun . . ." (Brecht, 36). *Screen Test* and *Vinyl* are both films by Warhol whose scenarios by Tavel became plays performed by the Playhouse of the Ridiculous.
26. Warhol and Hackett, 91.
27. Tavel, 77-78.
28. *Ibid.*, 85.

Two Girls, Fat and Thin

Lauren Berlant

When You Wish upon a Star

History hurts, but not only. It also engenders optimism and disappointment, aggressions that respond to the oppressive presence of what dominates or is taken-for-granted. Both emotions are responses to prospects for change. It is not usual to think of critical theory as an optimistic genre, since it creates so much exhausting anxiety about the value of the pleasure of thinking even the "thinker's" thought.¹ But the compulsion to repeat optimism, which is another definition of desire, is a condition of possibility that also justifies the risk of having to survive, once again, disappointment and depression, the protracted sense that no-one, especially oneself, is teachable after all. All that work for what? Love isn't the half of it.

To be teachable is to be open for change. It is a tendency. It is to turn toward the story of what we have said in terms of phrases we hadn't yet noticed.² 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. In the pleasure/knowledge economy of her work, the force of attachment has more righteousness than anything intelligibly or objectively "true": She enables the refusal of cramped necessity by way of a poetics of misrecognition.

This is the process described by the concept of misrecognition. Misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) describes the psychic process by which fantasy recal-

brates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire. 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.³ A poetics of misrecognition may seem to risk collapsing the critical analysis of fantasy into fantasy. Maybe so, but such a risk is unavoidable. Fantasy is that which manages the ambivalence and itinerancy of attachment. It provides representations to make the subject appear intelligible to herself and to others throughout the career of desire's unruly attentiveness to new objects. That is, fantasy parses ambivalence in such a way that the subject is not defeated by it. To track fantasy across the scene of the subject in history, in this view, is to take seriously the magical thinking, or formalism, involved in seeing selves and worlds as continuous and whole.⁴ This is a theory of being, and it is also a theory of reading.

As any reader of her work on Henry James would attest, Sedgwick's mode of reading is to deshame fantasmatic attachment so as to encounter its operations as knowledge.⁵ For example, we may feel the violence of history as something "it" does to "us": But Sedgwick argues that the stories we tell about how subjectivity takes shape must also represent our involvement with the pain and error, the bad memory and mental lag, that also shape our desire's perverse, twisted, or, if you prefer, indirect routes toward pleasure and survival. 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. The pain of paying attention pays me back in the form of eloquence: A sound pleasure.

Yet for a long time now, Sedgwick argues, skepticism has been deemed the only ethical position for the intellectual to take with respect to the subject's ordinary attachments. Even Adorno, the great belittler of the popular pleasures, can be aghast at the ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold to a dream.⁶ Dreams are seen as easy optimism, while failures seem complex. Sedgwick writes against the hermeneutics of suspicion on the grounds that it always finds the mirages and failures for which it looks: She finds critics overdetermined to a self-confirming scene of disappointment.⁷ In this view the disappointed critic mistakes his act of negation for a performance of his seriousness; perhaps he also elevates his thought by disdaining anything that emanates a scent of therapy, reparation, or utopianism.

How does one go about defetishizing negation, while remaining critical? Begin with Freud's dictum that there is no negative in the unconscious. Sedgwick seeks to read every word the subject writes (she believes in the author) to establish the avowed and disavowed patterns of his/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. That aim is what makes her writing so optimistic.

In it the persistence of sexually anomalous attachment figures the social potential of queerness, in which what counts is not one's "object choice" as such but rather one's sustaining attachments, which are only sometimes also one's social relations. In this way repetition, heavily marked as a process of reading and rereading, has a reparative effect on the subject of an impossible sexuality. The queer tendency of this method is to put one's attachments back into play, into pleasure, into knowledge, into worlds. It is to admit that they matter. In Sedgwick's work, desire's self-elaboration enables an aesthetic that is organized neither by the sublime nor the beautiful, the dramatic nor the banal, but by something vibrantly quiet. This would also be the erotic tonality struck by what she calls "reparative criticism," her antidote to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Set against the practice of deconstructing truth forms that she locates in literary theory of the 1970s, the aim of reparative criticism is to sustain the unfinished and perhaps unthought thoughts about desire that are otherwise defeated by the roar of conventionality or heteroculture.⁸ Any writer's task, in this view, would be to track desire's itinerary, not on behalf of confirming its hidden or suppressed Truths but to elaborate its variety of attachments as sexuality, as lived life, and as an unfinished history that confounds the hurts and the pleasures.

I love the idea of reparative reading insofar as it is a practice of meticulous curiosity. But I also resist idealizing, even implicitly, any program of better thought or reading. Those of us who think for a living are all too well-positioned to characterize acts of thought as dramatically powerful, whether effective or futile; we are set up to overestimate the clarity and destiny of an idea's effects. This can produce strange distortions in the ways we stage agency as a mode of heroic authorship, and vice versa. Thus the distinction I'm making here is about an attitude toward what thinking (as *écriture*) can do. I'm suggesting that the overvaluation of thought is both an occupational hazard and part of a larger overvaluation of a certain mode of self-reflective personhood.

Elaine Hadley tells the long history of the liberal elevation of cultivated self-reflection starting from its congealing image in Mill's *Autobiography*. Mill, she argues, posits an identity between thought and interiority, such that his version of the ethical subject takes on the shape of the intellectual who cultivates his self-awareness — that is, his awareness of himself as a self.⁹ More recently, there was a seemingly antithetical moment — call it '68 — when a program of history from and of the subject opposed the proprietary clarities of institutional and bodily truth claims even, or even especially, in liberal capitalist/democratic contexts that elevate mental abstraction over bodily labor. In this Anti-Oedipal moment the subject's amalgam of knowledges — thoughts and practices — became a generative ground for refiguring the normatively social, especially in the domains of socialist and sexual politics. Bodies were elevated as, in a sense,

smarter and more knowing than minds, although ultimately the distinction heads toward exhaustion.

We are still in that epoch and need still to be, and yet there can be an uncanny confluence between the ideal of liberal abstraction or inner-directedness and the antiliberal orientation toward the subject. I often experience the radical project as having attenuated somewhat, as it is thematized in stories about exemplary individualities and individuals seen swimming or drowning amidst unjust forces. Like Eve, my desire is 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, a form that needs interruption by a contrary. There is an orientation toward interiority in much queer theory that brings me up short, makes me wonder: Must the project of queerness start "inside" of the subject and spread out from there?

This distinction is not an opposition. Here is a biographical way of showing it, though in writing this way I am working against my own inclination. Eve's public stories about becoming possible — in *Fat Art/Thin Art, Tendencies*, and *A Dialogue on Love* — recount a crowded world of loving family and friends in which she thrives partly by living in the fold of her internal counter-narrative.¹⁰ 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 unavoidable the experience of being personal, of having personality, is. Out of this happy thought came an orientation toward passions of all sorts, including those intellectual and political.

Attachments are made not by will, after all, but by an intelligence after which we are always running. (It's not just "Hey, you!" but "Wait up!"¹¹) This lagging and sagging relation to attachment threatens to make us feel vertiginously formless, except that normative conventions and our own creative repetitions are there along the way to quell the panic we might feel at the prospect of becoming exhausted or dead before we can make sense of ourselves.¹² In other words, the anxiety of formlessness makes us awfully teachable, for a minute. To the degree that the conventional forms of the social direct us to recognize only some of our attachments as the core of who we are and what we

belong to, one's relation to attachment is impersonal. To belong to the normal world is to misrecognize only these modes of intelligibility as expressing one's true self. It brings out my queerness to think of living less as self-extension than as a process that interferes with the drama of the self. You will note that I am talking about impersonality not as the opposite of the personal — say, as "structure" or "power" — but as one of its conditions.

In this sense, my world operates according to a proximate, but different, fantasy of disappointment, optimism, and attachment than the one I attribute to Eve. I think of how I met the girl. We are both shy — who isn't? 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. There were meetings in airports and hotel dining rooms. We took walks, talked. Once, by accident, we took a small plane together. Reading is one place where the impersonality of intimacy can be transacted without harm to anyone: so are writing and paper-giving. There is no romance of the impersonal, no love plot for it. But there is optimism, a space across which to move.

Stupid optimism is the most disappointing thing of all. By "stupid" I mean the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking will secure one's happiness: for example, the prospect of class mobility, romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or better sexual identity. Here is a stupidity of mine: "History is what hurts," that motto of *The Political Unconscious*, is a phrase that I love.¹³ 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, I realize, to understand it. That is one project of this essay.

Did Somebody Say Wish?

Bodies and sexualities were in the wings of the previous section. Eve and I both write about fat because we identify as it, rightly or wrongly. She: "I used to have a superstition that / there was this use to being fat: no one I loved could come to harm / enfolded in my touch."¹⁴ Me, writing about someone else, of course: "for him, it is a narrative in which the very compulsion to desire specific things . . . forces him to risk insatiability, a constant inadequacy to one's own desire."¹⁵ My claim is that our relations to these modes of embodiment register our proximate approaches to the incorporative and impersonal strategies of queer/utopian thought.

Mary Gaitskill's novel, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, tells a story that comes close to encapsulating these dialectical impulses. All of her books try to make sense of the relation between painful history and the painful optimism of traumatized subjects trying to survive within that history, since they cannot put it

behind them.¹⁶ Trauma can never be let go of: it holds you. It locates you at the juncture of the personal and the impersonal, specifying you at the moment of least control over your own destiny and meaning. You become like a small pet that, when picked up, never stops moving its legs.

In *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, Dorothy Never and Justine Shade — shades of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Pale Fire*, and *Justine* — come in contact because of their common interest in Anna Granite, an Ayn Rand-like figure. Like Rand, Granite intoxicates her audience with the promise that identification with one's sexual and intellectual power can produce happiness and fulfillment, achieving a victory over the deadening normal world.¹⁷ Justine Shade has decided to write an article on Anna Granite and the people who follow her for *Urban Vision*, a hip paper like *The Village Voice*. She has learned of Granite at her day job in a doctor's office, where the promise they make to cure bodies in pain appears to her a false but necessary form of forestalling despair. When a young patient with heart disease tells her about Granite, the philosophy strikes Justine as both stupid and powerful.

Dorothy Never had once been a Granite acolyte, liberated by the thought of living and promoting the beauty of destructive passion. The two girls meet when Dorothy responds to a three by five card Justine posts on a Laundromat wall that asks for information about Granite. At the time of their meeting, neither Justine nor Dorothy has had a good conversation with anyone in many years: Each has long ago drawn a "cloak" around herself (Gaitskill 1991, 112, 158, 173) that acts as an "invisible shield" or "square of definition" (128, 129). Yet from the moment of their initial phone call they resonate with each other, a resonance that they take personally but which has, in a sense, nothing to do with the other except insofar as the other functions formally as an enigmatic opportunity for something transformative. "I invented possible scenarios daily," Dorothy thinks, "growing more and more excited by the impending intellectual adventure" (17). They convert into disembodied, vocal actors in each other's fantasy world: Dorothy is "lulled by the expressionless, melancholy quality" of Justine's voice (16), while Dorothy's "voice . . . stroked Justine on the inside of her skull in a way that both repelled and attracted her" (23). There is an attachment: yet the interlocutor factors in it not as a human, but as an opportunity for the possible emergence of something human. This paradox of the impersonality of attachment, that it circumvents the personal — the historical — on the way to enumerating their relation, organizes the women's mutual attraction/aversion throughout the novel. They feel taken over by it at the same time as they are taken up in it.

Likewise, during the studied formalism of the interview, they find themselves overwhelmed by a compulsion to historicize, to narrate their lives to each

other. In part, this is a banal effect of the event, in which journalism takes on contemporary modes of therapeutic confessional storytelling. Any number of times in the novel the girls tell their life stories to a stranger who exchanges his/her own for it: such is the strange sociability of contemporary trauma talk. But the girls' mutual attachment goes well beyond the content of the phrase. Each woman becomes a "strange world" into which the other "unwittingly pitched" herself (11, 17). They register ambivalence and embarrassment toward the enormity of this impulse, which is not at all their usual practice.

When Dorothy meets Justine and intensity grows between them this dissonance arises first clothed in Dorothy's fierce desire to tell Justine about her childhood and then as an aversion to Justine for animating this wish to tell. Meeting Justine makes Dorothy want to burst open a long life of self-containment, a life in which she has hoarded her knowledge and made her body into a grotesque shield (39). Obesity and ugliness create a force field around her, seeming to neutralize what, in those "gatherings of the normally proportioned," might come from others — curiosity or attachment (169). In this way she is protected from saying what she knows, just as she is protected from the world's demand to know what she knows. "I preferred the elegance of distance," she notes (226). One might say that she shows, rather than tells. Yet she is also like a sadistic Sleeping Beauty, aggressively waiting for an opportunity to trust someone. On meeting Justine Dorothy begins to detach from her own defenses, but not from her own pleasures. Her mode of enfleshment stays the same, but she follows the trail of the voice, and she's not sure why.

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, and then 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. Meanwhile, the body of the novel narrates the whole life stories of Justine and Dorothy, which they never fully tell to each other. We witness them growing up paralyzed by fear and at the same time launching into madneses of thinking, reading, eating, masturbating, attaching, and fucking. A traumatic frenzy of interiority and impersonality constitutes a scene of being and embodiment that they both control and control not a whit. If she wants a good life, what's a girl, or two girls, to do? When does doing matter?

This question takes shape generically through the novel's proximity to the case study. Each girl knows she's a case, in many senses — it's no accident that Justine works for a doctor and Dorothy for a law firm. This proximity to the case

is repeated aesthetically as well. Until the very end of the novel, each chapter has its own narrative voice, which is to say that it assigns each case its own norm of expertise. Dorothy tells her own story in the first person, while a narrator talks about Justine as "she." Each girl's mode of representation performs her relation to impersonality and self-cultivation, but not in a mimetic way: That is, Dorothy details how protecting her vigilant subjectivity requires strategies of social impersonality, while Justine's narrator tenderly registers the formation of Justine's dissociated intimacies. Yet their distinct lives mesh thematically in a hundred ways too, as though there were a certain generic rhythm to the traumatic tableau: peripatetic nuclear families, miserable fathers and mothers, childhood sexual abuse, never the right tone of voice or body. When the two girls are in their childhood families, they don't notice it that much. Their mothers give them enemas, their fathers overvalue them, whatever: They love what ever they can misrecognize as love. Distortion is the shape love takes.

Here is some of the case study content: A doctor friend of her doctor-father repeatedly and painfully masturbates Justine at the age of five. The awful "clawing" feeling of this event confirms something overwhelming she already knows without knowing it about the too intense emotional enclosure of her family: it involves them-against-the-world with an intensity of hermeticism that holds her close, but impersonally so. Justine participates in the economy of familial love by being "good": pretty and smart and submissive to the scene of parental aggression. At the same time she cultivates school as an alternative public for her badness. At seven years old, she gets a neighbor friend to tie her up and whip her; at eleven, she and her friends torture a fat and ugly girl with the nickname "Emotional"; at twelve she rapes a playmate with a toothbrush, masturbating to the memory later (99, 109–11). Later, the playmate asks for more, and Justine refuses her. During high school she develops a secret trashy wardrobe in which she can fit in with the popular girls who are marked by being *knowing*. They produce hierarchies of social value by trafficking in stereotype and mockery; they compete among themselves sexually to have the most "adult" experience.

In short, school is a world in which intimacies are always betrayed. But to Justine its viciousness offers a kind of confirming relief, for the explicit rule of cruelty feels truer to her than the familial amalgam of aggressive intimacy. She enters into adolescent heterosexuality by enacting the ambivalence of this scene repeatedly, but with herself as top and bottom, men being merely the instruments of violent relief from her "goodness." Perhaps her most telling act is to design a plot to lose her virginity violently at home. The scene to which she lures an indifferent boy is the rough floor of the family's "rec room," and its purpose is both to enact a fantasy of sexual surrender and to remain interesting to her closest female friend, Watley. The unpleasant hardness of the unfeeling

fuck confirms something ruthless in Justine, and yet it marks her vulnerability too. After pretending that the experience was good high drama, she confides in her friend that it wasn't. Watley drops her and uses the story as capital to diminish Justine socially. Vulnerability makes you worthless: Survival depends on producing forms of hardened identity and closeting the soft remainders. On realizing that she has been outed as a sexual failure, Justine "walked with her arms around her middle feeling loneliness and humiliation coupled with the sensation that she was, at this moment, absolutely herself" (156). At the moment of that holding thought she is having, perhaps, the best sex of her life.

Dorothy also grows up with an angry father and a passive-aggressive mother, both of whom comment constantly on their daughter, whose value shifts according to the tempestuous parental mood. As a child she loves being at the center of this shifty scene, and yet like Justine she is hypervigilant—she can tell that something is off. "One of my first clear memories is having to deny the concrete truths of my life, of denying the clear pattern of them" (32). In particular, Dorothy shares with Justine a family that is weirdly self-enclosed, and she is likewise split from herself as a result. But Dorothy produces a different kind of split. Usually a "vision of my embattled father with my mother and me standing behind him" animates her. Like superhero partners she and her father "aimed for higher things; we had relinquished beauty and pleasure and turned our faces towards the harsh reality of the fight against cruelty and falsehood" (123).

At the same time, Dorothy begins to cultivate "beautiful and elaborate fantasies" about many things, including men and women whom she finds "unbearably beautiful" (117). She associates her drive for beauty with her mother's drive toward fictionalizing and femininity. Dorothy and her mother spend her youth drawing fantasy pictures together on construction paper in crayon. They tell each other "airy" stories about their visions, and then eat lavish desserts. At first, Dorothy draws countless Heavens "full of grinning winged children, candy bars, cake, ice cream, and toys" (81); then, on hearing her mother read aloud *Peter Pan*, Dorothy turns toward an addiction to Never-Never Land.

Its very name made me feel a sadness like a big beautiful blanket I could wrap around myself. I tried to believe that Peter Pan might really come one night and fly me away; I was too old to believe this and I knew it, but I forced the bright polka-dotted canopy of this belief over my unhappy knowledge. (81; emphasis added)

At ten, Dorothy—nicknamed "Dottie," then—is already practiced at disavowing disquieting knowledge she barely senses with an optimistic absorption

in beauty. But the anomalous style of her attachment both to her unthought thought and its compensations resonates unpleasantly throughout her life. She lets slip to an already sexualized friend that Never-Never Land is her favorite fantasy world, and the friend immediately betrays the immature fantasy, making Dorothy the “queer” pariah at school. When strangers speak to her she becomes “struck dumb by trying too hard to discover the correct response” (115). This result is, in part, a relief, however: It confirms something inchoate about Dorothy’s hyper-orientation toward her family, and the family’s toward itself. The alien eyes of her peers force Dorothy to disfigure her family romance and family romance in general. This is played out as her physical withdrawal from the machinery of familial narcissism.

During Dorothy’s early adolescence she gets quiet, fat, and disgusting, without knowing why. When I say “disgusting,” I am not interpreting: Dorothy characterizes herself as “gross and unhealthy.” When she is fifteen, her father abjectly enters her room to tell her that his frustration with the unjust world causes him to act out on her, and in the jumble of love and apology he utters he begins to molest and to rape her. This is no surprise to Dorothy, really, for

underneath the fear and shame, underneath the excitement, it seemed that what was happening now between my father and me was only the physical expression of what always happened between us, even when he verbally reviled me. Tears came to my eyes; it seemed that his cruel words had clothed these loving caresses all along. (126)

This relation lasts for many years. At night, he grunts while she fragments in silence. During the day, he denounces her furiously — because she no longer obeys her mother. Dorothy looks down at her plate and eats. Subsequently whenever she experiences anxiety, it is as though her organs explode through her body, in ways recognizable from the literature on incest but also, here, resonant as the bodily ground of what Justine calls Dorothy’s soft and graceful corpulence.

[M]ost of the time I felt as if my body had been turned inside out, that I was a walking deformity hung with visible blood-purple organs, lungs, heart, bladder, kidneys, spleen, the full ugliness of a human stripped of its skin. (161)

She comments that “these bodily memories are so unevenly submerged and revealed, so distorted . . . that they may as well be completely invented” (44); this is not to say that the post-traumatic subject is doomed to false- or pseudo-

memory but that memory is mediated by fantasies and misrecognitions so powerful and gratifying in their intensity that one must read them, and oneself, with distrust even when the affect that binds one to memory feels true. To create forms for managing the post-traumatic drives requires an acute visceral and intellectual sensorium that monitors at all times. Monitoring is more important than knowing. All of the girls’ creativity is sucked up by the optimism of that patrolling activity, which enables self-deferral as well. But monitoring in itself assures no authenticity: It just keeps the subject close to the enigmatic representation.

In the language of case study rationality, both girls can be said to know negation as something productive, at once an expression of attachment and a cutting gesture that enables someone, usually the tormenter, to stop feeling overwhelmed. The older men teach the girls the value of the cut, and they spend their teens and twenties reproducing its cruelty where and whenever they feel the need to rise above the engulfing world of normal intimacy.¹⁸ Yet the cruel cut is not merely dissociative, anti-intimate: It also binds the girls to optimistic projects of embodiment and attachment.¹⁹ This is to say that the relation between impersonal formalism and the project of unique self-cultivation are all tied up in the novel. Self-protection and risk are indistinguishable here.

From a distance, the girls’ nexus of self-abuse and pleasure produces formally antithetical sexualities. Justine loses and finds herself in S/M while Dorothy practices a kind of distance learning, a mode of monitoring characterized by psychological sadism and sexual idealization.²⁰ Yet to the extent that these sexualities control the flow of risk and desire, they are formally identical. The girls share other pleasure styles as well, featuring the consumption of food and the production of intense intellection. Each, like sex, is a process of absorption and a way of being in the world, a way of bringing it in, entering it, and averting it. While optimistic, these habituated modes of being are also techniques of self-annihilation and negation, ways of using the episodic relief of particular exchanges in order not, for a minute, to be that ordinary failed person with that history. Even if one risks self-negation through such tendencies, not to be that person is an amazing thing. Strongly ambivalent, then, these three powerful modes of repetition, negation, and optimism are associated with the cultivation of the senses as well: Food, thought, and sex are comforting as well as risky and raw-making modes of engagement and exchange.

So in one view, these repetitions can be read as establishing a regime of self-continuity that amounts to the constellation called “who I am.” At the same time the girls’ capacity not to inhabit the case study version of their story (“Hey you!”) that marks everything as a continuous symptom of the cultivated self, suggests something else: a project of interference with “personality.” Their neg-

activity can be read as a *departure* from rather than an *assumption* of a way of being “who they are.” For the greater part of this essay I will turn toward this set of pleasures which, I am arguing, interfere with negating rhythms of self-continuity. Responding to trauma’s haunting plenitude not with asceticism but with a formalist abundance, the girls’ tactic of counter-absorption marks their will to live otherwise (“Wait up!”).

Pleasure #1: Food (for Thought)

Separately and together the girls “snack” constantly and “savagely” (15, 37, 81, 93, 241). Their mouths and their eyes consume potatoes, “a brown-bagged carton of milk,” “rum-flavored marzipan candies, each wrapped in bright red tin foil bearing a picture of a mysterious brown-haired lady in décolletage, bottled spring water” (12); sweet and sour pork (30); egg roll (36); cheese curls, diet soda, chocolate cake, cookies, sandwiches, coffee, Gruyère broche, Mysterical Mint cookies (15); dainty fried snacks (25); “tea . . . lumps of sugar and cream,” “boiled dumpling” (28); “white bags of candy” (44); “cream and eggs” (45); chili, potatoes, beer, dry roasted peanuts (47); chili over spaghetti noodles, chocolate ice cream, ungnawable jawbreakers (48); cinnamon toast and hot chocolate (52); tuna sandwich (55); mucousy eggs (56); gum (62); “old tea bags and carrot peels” (66); blazing Popsicles (66); Cream of Wheat (74); “apple cores, old potato chip bags” (75); “ice cream and . . . chicken pot pie . . . Almond Joys, Mallomars, Mellomints, and licorice ropes” (76); “cookies . . . gum” 78; eggs (80); “crackers and peanut butter . . . candy bars, cake, ice cream . . . cake and ice cream” (81); “orange and pink candy . . . Sloppy Joes . . . hot chocolate” (84); “cookies and tea” (86); cocoa (87); gum (91); ice cream (93); candy necklaces (94); eggs (98); “alcohol mixed with Coca-Cola” (105); “ice cream and vanilla wafers” (107); “Choco Chunk bars and French fries” (114); “meat . . . potatoes . . . iced tea” (118); sugar (119); “salad . . . scalloped potatoes . . . orange corn curls” (120); “potato chips and beer . . . bite-sized Heath Bars” (123); “pork chops and green beans . . . boxed lemon chiffon pie” (124); “carrots . . . potatoes” (128); “lime sherbet” (130); muffins (137); “gristle . . . milkshake” (141); “coffee with three spoons of sugar” (146); “a box of chocolates, some of which had ladies’ faces painted on them” (154); “a chocolate . . . another chocolate” (155); ice cream sandwiches (160); “a box of donuts and bag of potato chips” (161); “a bag of burgers, fries, and orange drink . . . French toast” (168); “two chocolate donuts wrapped in cellophane” (174); “mushroom fried rice with green peas and lurid red spare ribs” (175); “lumpy potatoes” (177); “cookies and coffee” (179); “salads . . . water” (185); “coffee . . . pizza . . . diet root beer” (193); “take-out salad” (195; 233); “cheese sandwich, potato chips, and candy . . . milkshake and double fries”

(205); “lemon meringue pie” (206); “malts and potato chips, jelly beans and roast beef sandwiches dripping gravy” (211); French toast (214); “can of soup . . . bread” (215); “wonderfully gooey apple pie” (221); “champagne with our omelettes” (225); “hot coffee and a bag of sugars, stirrers, and petroleum milk substitutes” (229); “muffins . . . bag of cookies” (232); “a bag of cashews, a bag of marzipan, and an apple” (234); cookies (238); grilled cheese sandwich (241); misshapen bran muffin (242); “a bag of potato chips and a bag of candy” (244); “a plate of jewel-like sushi and shiny purple seaweed . . . sake” (248); cookies (258); “pastries and puddings” (260); cakes (261); chocolate cake (264); “bags of potato chips and cookies” (272); martinis (281); “little mints and chewy candies” (290); chamomile tea (309).

Forget the fat and calories: To live for one’s snack is to live by the rhythm of one’s own impulse for pleasure, as in creating “a paradise of trips to the grocery and take-out dinners” (76). “In this time of anorexic cuties” being a foodie is a way of both being and not being in the world, giving the girls leverage to engage in exchange and to withdraw from sharing anything with just anyone (95). Eating is *their* time. It’s their *time*. When either woman travels, she marks time by eating. When she waits, she eats. When she thinks, she eats. She eats before and after sex. In response to the overwhelming feeling of “sickening boundlessness” or endless absorbing inferiority, food shapes a space of time for her, an episode of alterity to herself that is nonetheless self-confirming (160). It provides and defeats structure. It makes consciousness (pleasure memory) and its opposite (inarticulateness) too.²¹ That is to say the girls’ relation to eating is a scene, not a symptom: among other things, the practice of eating provides a way to negotiate one’s incoherence while nonetheless refusing to organize a personality to compensate for it.

Dorothy never feels full when she’s on her own. Then, she can eat any spread infinitely. Only when she is absorbed in unoriginal acts — proofreading the law’s text on Wall Street each night or transcribing the debates that take place in Granite’s inner circle — does she feel something like satiety. To be unoriginal is thereby to gain a reprieve from desire’s self-articulating pressure: Accordingly, the more intense the desire, the emptier the body feels. To empty out one’s emptiness through work is something like negating the negation, at least for a minute, because work is absorbing, like eating. But Dorothy also shows that one cannot help but be original or to desire.

It was in Ohio that I developed what my mother came to call my “unattractive habits.” First, I stopped brushing my teeth, except on rare occasions. All at once, I hated putting the paste-laden brush into my nice warm mouth and scraping the intriguing texture of food from my teeth,

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