

INTIMACY AS TRANSGRESSION AND THE PROBLEM OF FREEDOM

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“Could one conceive of a love that would not be an encroachment [*empiètement*] on the freedom of the other? . . . There is a paradox in accepting being loved by a person without wanting to have any influence on her freedom. . . . To consent to love or be loved is to consent also to influence someone else, to decide to a certain extent on behalf of the other.”
Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception**

“The revolution begins at home.”
Cherríe Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa,
This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color

Strange it might seem to write about intimacy in the context of critical phenomenology—especially when, as is the case here, no particular analysis will be given of the economic, political, or legal institutions that shape our intimacy, or of the ways in which sexist, heterosexist, racist or colonialist norms might operate within intimate relationships. After all, as a contribution to critical theory, broadly construed, should a critical phenomenology not be aiming at the emancipation of humans from systems of oppression and domination through critical reflection upon the real effects of society’s institutions and practices?¹ And is intimacy not something that is affected by these greater systemic forces of oppression, without being in itself an institution or practice that strips us of freedom? Feminists have long called upon us to recognize that “the personal is political,” but the implication seems generally to be that, if we can just free our intimate relations and home life from the oppressive norms and unjust institutions that currently structure them, we will secure a realm of mutual freedom that can serve as a refuge from, or even a site of resistance to, society and its oppressive forces.² It ought not to be intimacy that we interrogate, on this view, but the systemic forces that fetter it.

* I have altered the translation of this passage slightly, substituting “accepting being loved by someone” for “accepting love from someone” to translate “*accepter d’être aimé de quelqu’un.*”

¹ Max Horkheimer characterizes the goal of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory as “[hu]man’s emancipation” from situations of domination and oppression (1972, 246). This goal, he argues, substantially differentiates critical theory from theory as understood by Descartes and the scientific-philosophical tradition that is inspired by him.

² This phrase is sometimes attributed to Carol Hanisch, on the basis of her essay entitled “The Personal is Political.” But Hanisch claims on her website (<http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>) that she did not give the essay this title, and that it may have been the editors of the book it was in: Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt’s *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation* (1970). In any case, the idea behind this phrase has circulated far and wide in the field of feminist thought and activism, since before this publication as well as after it.

My intention, however, is to challenge this vision of intimacy, and to argue that, especially in our intimate relations, we are always inevitably involved in imposing what I will call a form of “unfreedom” upon our intimate others. I am not concerned, then, with systems of oppression that can be transformed and eradicated; I am interested, rather, in a form of “unfreedom” that enables all oppression, and which would remain even if we were able to free ourselves from systemic forms of oppression. My project is nonetheless one aimed at producing greater freedom, agency and becoming for individuals. But this greater freedom will come not through emancipation, or the releasing of an individual freedom (or an intimate relationship of mutual freedom) from its fetters. It will come rather through owning up to the unfreedom that we inevitably impose upon our intimate others, and learning, precisely through an acknowledgment of that inevitable imposition of unfreedom, how to care for others, ourselves and our relationships in ways that ultimately promote, rather than hinder, others’ freedom. It is this acknowledgment and learning that will enable the cultivation, within intimate relationships, of forms of agency that can stand up to and transform systems of oppression.

At the root of this challenge to our understanding of intimacy is a challenge to the idea that critical theory is concerned with emancipation—at least insofar as emancipation implies a neoliberal, Cartesian model of agency. Judith Butler describes “an emancipatory model of agency”:

... according to [this] view of agency, a subject is endowed with a will, a freedom, an intentionality . . . [where] ‘freedom’ and ‘the will’ are treated as universal resources to which all humans qua humans have access. The self who is composed of such faculties or capacities is thus thwarted by relations of power which are considered external to the subject herself. (Benhabib et al. 1995, 136)

On this account, the subject is free, emancipated, when her actions and thoughts are “the consequence of her ‘own will’ rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion” (Mahmood 2011, 11).³ Against this view of the subject, and the corresponding understanding of emancipation, critical phenomenology offers an alternative. Phenomenology takes note of the way in which institutions, practices, and other workings of power do not merely constrain us from the outside, but more profoundly, transgress into our experience and constitute the very manner in which we perceive the world and ourselves, the possibilities that we find available or not within our situation, and the positions that we feel ourselves legitimately able to assume.⁴ If, however, one’s ex-

³ This is Saba Mahmood’s characterization of the neoliberal vision of the free subject. Mahmood’s book, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2011), argues that, for all the good that feminist critiques have done—and they have done great good—some nonetheless fail to adequately understand the agency and experience of women committed to Islam because they are operating with neoliberal assumptions about the nature of freedom and agency (see, for instance, 13-14), or (as in Butler’s case) because they operate with a binary logic of subordination versus subversion, which supposes that freedom is realized only in the subversion of social norms. In contrast, Mahmood argues that we need to conceptualize agency “not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable” (18; italics in original). This conception of agency is aligned with the notion of freedom achieved through unfreedom that I am proposing in this essay.

⁴ Frantz Fanon (1967) and Iris Marion Young (1990) offer paradigmatic examples of this, showing, respectively, how racism and sexism come to configure racialized and feminized subjects’ experiences of themselves and what is possible.

perience is already infiltrated and configured by the human attitudes, practices, institutions, and artifacts that surround us, then freedom cannot lie in an agency set apart from social workings of power, and resistant to them; freedom must always be developed in and through an agency that is already transgressed by and established within these relations of power; freedom must always develop from within what we might call “unfreedom,” and by virtue of it.⁵ What distinguishes empowering or emancipating situations from oppressive ones, then, is not the presence or absence of transgressive normative social forces; it is rather the particular character of these transgressive forces. Some transgressions and configurations of experience—some forms of “unfreedom”—will tend to promote freedom; others will tend to hinder it.

In this essay, I propose to focus on one particular, but fundamental, site of transgression and unfreedom: interpersonal relations. Though formal institutions, informal practices, discourses, and even architecture can encroach upon and configure our experiences, the power they have to do this has its origins, I suggest, in our intersubjectivity. The first aim of this paper is thus to make the case that intersubjectivity is inherently transgressive, that one’s experience is inevitably infiltrated and informed by other people’s behaviors and attitudes. This inevitable encroachment of one person’s perspective upon another’s—whether those people be strangers to one another, or intimates—I call “ontological intimacy.” Others reach into our experience, so that we are influenced by them whether we like it or not. Most others do not have as deep or thoroughgoing an effect on our experience, however, as intimate others do. The second task of this essay is thus to consider what distinguishes concrete, lived forms of intimacy from the “ontological intimacy” that I claim is always present between people, and to explore the responsibilities that intimates have to each other, precisely because we are always, inevitably transgressing upon each other’s experience and, as Merleau-Ponty asserts in the epigraph above, deciding to a certain extent on behalf of each other. How might we assume responsibility for the unfreedom we inflict upon others: the ways we shape their agency? How might we engage in these transgressions in ways that promote, rather than hinder, the development of freedom and greater agency? Answering these questions will remind us that the problem of promoting agency and freedom is addressed not only by critically analyzing the public institutions, practices and discourses that shape us, but also by critical insight into and transformation of our most private and intimate relationships. The revolution, as Moraga and Anzaldúa have said, begins at home.

I.

OUR ONTOLOGICAL INTIMACY WITH OTHER PERSONS: TRANSGRESSION AS COEXISTENCE AND DIVERGENCE

Our Cartesian heritage inclines us to think of intimacy in terms of certain beliefs and feelings that one harbors about another person: one feels oneself intimate with another when one believes one knows and is known by the other, or feels together with the other

⁵The transgression of others’ attitudes into our own is essentially what Martin Heidegger is claiming when he speaks, in chapter 4 of *Being and Time*, of the “they” (and claims that authentic being-one’s-self is “an existentiell modification of the they”—i.e., that one never leaves behind others’ transgression into and configuration of one’s perspective) (1962, 168). In his essays “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” (1993a) and “The Question Concerning Technology” (1993b), he also makes cases for how the built environment and modern technology configure our experience.

person and believes that the other feels the same way.⁶ Ontologically, these two persons are conceived, in the Cartesian tradition, as essentially separate. There is no direct encounter between them; each is given as an object of consciousness for the other, and thus each consciousness encounters not the other directly, but merely her own representation of that other. The experience of intimacy, we must conclude, lies not in actually *being with* an other, but rather in our representations of her (and of her representations of us). The other is, in other words, kept fundamentally at a distance from us by the interposition—between us—of representations, interpretations, or judgments about the nature of our relations. On the Cartesian account, real, ontological intimacy with another person is impossible; it is only our own judgments and feelings that are intimately present to us.

Against such a Cartesian account, Merleau-Ponty offers a vision of intersubjectivity wherein there is genuine contact between persons. Here, the other is not first and foremost represented by us, but touches us, moves us, inhabits, and is inhabited by us.⁷ It is true that, insofar as we have the other as an object, we do interpret the other in our own terms, and, like representations, these interpretations will typically involve some degree of distortion. But, others are not given to us first and foremost as objects: they are rather present more fundamentally as perspectives that sweep us up and orient us towards the world—as what Merleau-Ponty calls “coexistences.”⁸ Moreover, even our objectifying interpretations are grounded in lived interpretations that are not effected primarily within our own private consciousnesses, as re-presentations therein of someone whose reality lies outside of our consciousness, but are rather enacted in our interactions with others.⁹ And those enacted interpretations are not formed unilaterally but are worked out in embodied dialogue with the other, motivated by the ways in which those others are always already at work in pre-reflectively shaping our most basic unreflective experience of the world, and consolidated only insofar as the other assumes

⁶ See, for instance, Robert Sternberg’s characterization of intimacy as “feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness ... It thus includes those feelings that give rise, essentially, to the experience of warmth in a loving relationship” (2006, 185). Such intimacy, he claims, originates in self-disclosure, for intimacy requires “break[ing] down the walls that separate one person from another” (1998, 8). The intimate connection between people is therein viewed as being formed through verbal communication, which conveys private experiences linguistically from one separate individual to another, and produces certain intimate feelings and beliefs therein. For the Cartesian account of the subject that arguably underlies this view, see Descartes 1993, *Meditations I-III* in *Meditations on First Philosophy*; however, my interest is less in a scholarly assessment of Descartes’ own thought, which is nuanced, than with the less nuanced Cartesian assumptions that have come to characterize much of our contemporary philosophical, psychological, and common sense accounts of the self, and what it is to know.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty compares his own account to the Cartesian account in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “these two [consciousnesses] are not *cogitationes* enclosed into their immanence, but beings who are transcended by their world and who, consequently can surely be transcended by each other... [in such a way that their perspectives] slip into each other and are gathered together... in a single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception” (2012, 369/410–411). Henceforth, the 2012 English translation pagination will be followed by (unless otherwise noted) the French pagination.

⁸ Though Merleau-Ponty refers often to this coexistence, he elaborates it most thematically in the chapter “Others and the Human World” in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and in the essay “the Child’s Relations with Others.” The latter starts with a reflection on how children’s perceptions are shaped by their affective relations with their parents, and it proceeds to investigate how the capacity for children to experience both themselves as objects and their parents as objects develops only slowly.

⁹ The language of “representation” is largely alien to phenomenology, because the aim is to challenge the notion of a separate inner subjectivity, and to call attention to the primacy of our being in the world, our actual, interpretive and understanding interaction with others. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which representations are still at play: when we step out of an interaction with another person, and think about them, talk about them with another, or gossip about them, we are arguably dealing with our own re-presentations of them (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 378/419).

and confirms the lived interpretation we offer them; they are co-created.¹⁰ Thus, we do not, according to Merleau-Ponty, simply find others at the end of our gazes, as objects of our consciousness. We also, more fundamentally, co-inhabit others' perspectives: we see them, ourselves, and the world through their ways of being towards the world. Or, to say what amounts to the same thing: they are already at work within our ways of being in the world. As Heidegger puts it: we are *Mitsein*, or *being-with* others.¹¹

In part, this being-with and mutual inhabitation shows up in the phenomenon of culture or “the social.” As Merleau-Ponty says, culture is not an object for us; it is rather “the permanent field” of our existence—or what “we inseparably bear along with us prior to every objectification” (2012, 379/420). To be born in the contemporary age, for instance, is already to live our relation to others and our political state, to knowledge and science, to virtue and honor, to self-actualization, very differently than the ancients did. It is not that the child of the contemporary age thinks or represents these things differently. Even before she can think or objectify them, even before she forms her own interpretations of them, she is informed by the contemporary framework, inhabited by contemporary assumptions, attuned by contemporary social practices in ways that give a certain direction or *sens* to her experience and configure her world in contemporary rather than ancient terms.¹²

But it is not only, or even most basically, in the public realm that we are swept up into this being-with and a mutual inhabitation of perspectives. It is true that assumptions and attunements about who we are and how we ought to live are communicated in part by social institutions, practices, and discourses in the contexts in which we live. The rules, policies and norms into which I am disciplined carry with them, in other words, visions of what it is to be a subject, and my proper relation to self, others, work, knowledge, and so on. But these rules that we live by are themselves communicated to me, for the most part and most powerfully, not by explicit assertions but by the bodily behaviors and embodied attitudes of others.¹³

¹⁰ As Merleau-Ponty argues, we are able to objectify each other, and withdraw into solipsism and our own personal interpretations or representations of each other, only on the ground of a pre-existing communication with the other. We are fundamentally in contact with, in communication with, others (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 378/419). See also “The Philosopher and his Shadow”: “We would not overwhelm them with our importunate comments, we would not stingily reduce them to what is objectively certified of them, if they were not there for us to begin with. Not to be sure with the frontal evidence of a thing, but installed athwart our thought” (1964c, 159). This being with others, this communication, this installation of the other within us, is conceived by Merleau-Ponty not as the result of a linguistic conveying of information about our private mental lives, but rather as “coexistence” or as being drawn in embodied ways into shared perspectives.

¹¹ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, especially §§ 25–27.

¹² Merleau-Ponty uses the French term *sens* to communicate a kind of sense or meaning [*sens*] that is not conceptual but unreflectively experienced, and which evokes a direction [*sens*] of interpretation, rather than a fully determinate, unambiguous, or finished meaning. For the idea that our culture is “lived concretely” rather than being an object of our attention (2012, 420/379–80). This is not to say, however, that the ancient worlds are inaccessible to us. As Merleau-Ponty notes, in this same passage, these ancient worlds are “marked on the borders of my own history . . . [and I] find the fundamental structures of history within my own life” which is why historical knowledge is possible.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty also suggests that assumptions and attunements are communicated by cultural artifacts and our built environments (2012, 370/411–412). These artifacts and environments solicit us to take them up in certain ways and foreclose other ways of acting—and they thereby draw us into certain prejudices about what matters and how to behave, while also attuning us to certain issues and occluding others. Architect-philosopher Erik Rietveld and Ludger Van Dijk also explore these ideas (Van Dijk and Rietveld, 2017).

My gaze falls upon a living body performing an action and the objects that surround it immediately receive a new layer of signification. . . . A vortex forms around the perceived body into which my world is drawn and, so to speak, sucked in. . . . The other body is . . . the place of a certain elaboration and somehow a certain “view” of the world. (2012, 369/411)

This other as a view of the world into which I am “sucked” is not, then, an object of my perception so much as a self-effacing intentionality that turns me towards the world and objects in it. An example given by psychiatrist R.D. Laing illustrates this vividly: a parent responds with revulsion and disgust at the worm that her young child shows her (Laing 1971, 102–104). The child’s initial orientation in first showing the worm was one of pride and excitement at his discovery. But by virtue of his mother’s response he is re-oriented towards the dirtiness of the worm and his own shameful dirtiness. Indeed, through her response, a whole new dimension of reality—a new sense of what to aspire to, a new matrix for making sense of things—is opened up. Where the child had assumed that exploration and discovery were valuable, his mother announces—not so much through what she says as through the focus enacted in those words, and through her gestural recoil—that it is hygiene that really matters. “Clean = good; dirty = bad” (Laing 1990, 104). Here, the stance that “to be good, acceptable, loved, one must be clean” is not noted as an object; it operates rather as an intentionality or directionality that sweeps the child’s experience up and carries it along with it towards relevant realities within the world. The parent’s stance transgresses into the child’s and attunes him in a certain way towards the world of dirtiness and cleanliness. In Merleau-Ponty’s words:

Everything happens as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body. The gesture I witness sketches out the first signs of an intentional object. This object becomes present and is fully understood when the powers of my body adjust to it and fit over it. The gesture is in front of me like a question, it indicates to me specific . . . points in the world and invites me to join it there. Communication is accomplished when my behavior finds in this pathway its own pathway. I confirm the other person, and the other person confirms me. (191/225)

Through this primordial communication (this mutual inhabitation and confirmation at the behavioral level) what is an object to us is not the other nor the matrix of meaning into which she draws us, but only the things that are put into relief by her orientation.

Before the other herself is an object, then, the other is a co-intentionality: a coexistence towards the world. She is, we might say, a medium for the world: it is through co-inhabiting her directedness towards the world that we establish, with her, the world as a shared reality.

Now, in the particular example that we have given, we can see what could be called a “colonization” of the child’s experience by his mother’s way of perceiving: her concerns with cleanliness eclipse and in some sense usurp his initial experience of the pride and excitement of discovery. Or, we might say, the child’s experience is assimilated into the mother’s, and transfigured in its meaning for him. This transgression of one perspective into the other stands in stark contrast with the mental isolation and freedom

assumed by our Cartesian heritage. What we have just described is one person (the child) coming to see with (or according to) the other (the parent). On the Cartesian view, there can be no such seeing with. For the Cartesian, we are locked within our own ways of making sense of the world; we are, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, two “*cogitationes* enclosed into their [respective] immanence” (2012, 410–411/369). We encounter the other’s linguistic and bodily behavior only ever as an object in our world, and, as a result, the meaning that behavior has for us can only ever be a result of our own attribution of meaning. What the other intends in her behavior or communication is, for the Cartesian, something to which we do not have access; stuck within our own system of meanings and interpretations, we are also stuck merely making our own sense of the other, irrespective of the sense they intend. Correlatively, then, we always leave the other “free” to think what she will think; and we impede upon her freedom only externally, by virtue of the obstacles we present to her own free decisions. In contrast with this Cartesian understanding of our ontological relations with others, our example of the parent’s colonization of her child’s way of seeing asserts that we do transgress into and transfigure others’ experiences, never leaving them entirely “free” to make their own sense of the world. There is an inevitable violation by us of others’ perspectives: a determining and transforming of the meaning of their experience. As we will see, however, this “unfreedom” is not simply opposed to freedom.

Such transgression might seem, at first sight, a negative and constraining phenomenon. Indeed, in the case of the little boy’s re-attunement to matters of hygiene, one could argue that it is constraining, for it disconfirms and threatens to shut down his interest in exploration and discovery—interests which are essential to growth and becoming. But, one person’s “usurpation” of another’s sense-making can also bring benefits and liberations. This is made evident in the phenomenon of learning, as Merleau-Ponty understands it: transgression of one person’s experience by another’s is a condition of learning. Were it the case that we only ever made sense of the other’s gestures and expressions in terms of our own resources, we would never learn anything truly transformative; we would remain imprisoned within our own basic, subjective terms of reference. But in fact we do learn from others. To read a great book, to hear an insightful speech, even to witness a wise teacher or parent in action is to be taken beyond our current sense-making capacities, and drawn into new relations to the world and to ourselves (see, for example, 2012, 184–185/218–219 and 188/222–223). We are carried, through these others’ bodily and linguistic expressions, into new realizations—which is to say, into new ways of finding the world configured and correspondingly into a recognition of new dimensions of reality heretofore unknown to us. Others’ transgressions of our experience can, then, open up for us new possibilities while also revealing the limitations of our characteristic modes of sense-making. Insight into new, richer dimensions of reality is only possible because we co-inhabit others’ perspectives, because we are drawn into their way of perceiving or they transgress into ours.

It is this transgression into another’s perspective that I propose to call “ontological intimacy.” It is an intimacy because by virtue of it, the other touches and shapes me not just from the outside, but within my most “private,” personal experience. It is ontological because it occurs simply by virtue of the kinds of beings we are—intersubjective beings. Let us note, however, that the transgression involved is never a complete usurpation of an individual’s perspective. One can coexist with others, co-inhabiting a shared world; but one is never thereby fully reduced to, or taken over by, the other’s

perspective. In varying degrees, and due always to the singularity and historicity of our own situation, each individual inevitably maintains some degree of *écart* or divergence from others' perspectives. Transgression thus involves both difference and coexistence—or, as Merleau-Ponty notes, “solitude and communication [are]... two moments of a single phenomenon” (2012, 376/535).

It is perhaps worth precluding a possible misunderstanding here. This divergence or difference, this solitude as the other side of communication, is not, on Merleau-Ponty's account, the result of a true personal will or an untouched individual freedom that maintains itself in the face of—and as resistant to—social forces that threaten it. We are not returning here to a neoliberal, Cartesian notion of the subject. Rather, such divergence and difference arises from the ways in which any individual is, by virtue of her social relations and her personal stage of development, inevitably implicated in and transgressed by competing visions of the world.

Thus, one reason for a person's *écart* from another's perspective lies in her lack of development or preparedness for inhabiting the other's view. A child, for instance, may feel largely unmoved or even bewildered by a poem, song lyric, or discourse about sexual desire: for her life experience and her pre-pubescent body have not yet prepared her for genuine insight, for being drawn into this form of experiencing. Though she may catch onto, and even be vaguely attuned by, the basic gesture of this communication, that which it outlines in the world remains largely mysterious for her. There is significant divergence here even as there is also overlap and coexistence.

Another reason for a person's divergence from others' transgressions into her perspective lies in that person's involvement in relations whose visions of reality conflict with that transgressive configuration of experience. Thus, though an employer's dismissiveness and contempt might reach deeply into an employee's sense of self and place in the world, that employee may also be able to gain a distance from it, insofar as she is also implicated in relationships that validate her as intelligent, competent, worthwhile.¹⁴ It is not her autonomous will and intellect that thus resists total usurpation; it is rather the fact that she finds herself in the context of other relationships reflected and realized in very different ways.¹⁵

Finally, a person may be able to diverge from, and retrieve herself from, another's usurpation of her perspective if differing reflections of herself have been incorporated

¹⁴ For an extended and insightful reflection on the multiple ways in which we can be implicated in and re-defined by other's ways of being, see Gail Weiss's book *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. Weiss sums up her own argument in the book effectively: “human beings tend to have multiple body images and . . . these body images overlap with one another and are themselves constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed through a series of ongoing, intercorporeal exchanges” (1999, 165).

¹⁵ In “Between Two Intimacies” (2014), John Russon argues that one's development as an autonomous adult actually requires experiencing the tensions between two different ways of being situated, reflected, and defined in intimate relationships, or, more precisely, between two forms of intimacy: familial, and non-familial. He proposes that the developing individual needs to experience (a) a familial intimacy that fosters a sense of agency and belonging in the world, but also (b) non-familial intimacies that are in tension with the familiar, and that motivate self-definition in and through a transformation of the institutions established in familial intimacy. Here, we can see the importance of multiple interpersonal involvements for personal development, and, more specifically, the importance of having intimate relationships beyond the familial realm.

Advocates for survivors of domestic violence note that one of the primary ways in which abusers maintain power and control over the abused is by isolating the abused from other relationships that might challenge the vision of self and partner maintained within the abusive relationship. See, for instance, Shannon Perez-Darby's “The Secret Joy of Accountability: Self-Accountability as a Building Block for Change” (2016, 109). Perez-Darby is Deputy Director at The Northwest Network of Bi, Trans, Lesbian & Gay Survivors of Abuse.

into her habitual sense of self and world. If, for instance, a young woman has grown up in a household with progressive values, such that these have come to be a part of her own habitual embodiment, then even if she is momentarily swept away by conservative values in dialogue with another so that—as the dialogue unfolds—she comes to see the world as the other does, she can nonetheless retrieve herself after the fact by a withdrawal into her own familiar forms of sense-making. Therein, she may find a perspective that sheds a new light on, or puts her in tension with, the perspective that had transgressed into her and momentarily taken her over. Merleau-Ponty calls attention to this capacity for withdrawal and self-retrieval, after having been carried away, through dialogue, into another way of seeing:

In the experience of dialogue . . . there is a being-shared-by-two [*un être à deux*] . . . We are, for each other, collaborators in perfect reciprocity: our perspectives slip into each other, we coexist through a single world. I am freed from myself in the present dialogue, even though the other's thoughts are certainly his own, since I do not form them, I nonetheless grasp them as soon as they are born or I even anticipate them. And even the objection raised by my interlocutor draws from me thoughts I did not know I possessed such that if I lend him thoughts, he makes me think in return. Only *après coup*—when I have withdrawn from the dialogue and am remembering it—can I reintegrate it into my life, turn it into an episode of my own private history. (2012, 370–371/412)

To speak of transgression or of ontological intimacy is not to deny, then, that there is divergence and difference within that intimacy. Indeed, the simultaneity of this ontological divergence with ontological coexistence is in part what drives us, within the concrete, empirical forms of interaction with others, to pursue further, more intimate relations with others. I encounter someone who (in the ways in which she deals with the world and with others) reveals to me that she perceives what I perceive, that we share an outlook, and thus that she can perceive me in ways that others cannot. I experience already a kind of being with her. And yet, at the same time, the overlap is not perfect; while her perspective coexists with mine, it also thereby orients me towards something more to be perceived, something that I have not yet fully seen—in both myself and the world. While I am with her, in other words, she is also taking me beyond myself. She thereby offers to me—and if I am lucky, I can offer to her—the promise of a deepening relation to self and reality. This promise of greater intimacy, born out of our simultaneous coexistence and difference and thus felt in her transgression of my perspective, draws me towards her.

At the basis of all interpersonal communication and learning, then, is this ontological intimacy or intertwining wherein, on the one hand, one's very sense of the world and oneself is profoundly configured by others, and on the other hand, we feel our difference and divergence from them. Others are both beyond us and within us, inhabiting to a greater or lesser degree our intentionalities while we inhabit, to a greater or lesser degree, theirs.

Note though, that despite making my point primarily through examples of intimate relationships, I am proposing that it is not just in love but in all interpersonal relations that others are intimately present within us, always already 'influencing' us, 'deciding

on our behalf? We must ask, then, what distinguishes love, or our particular concrete experiences of intimacy from this fundamental, ever-present ontological intimacy?

II. CONCRETE INTIMACY, MOMENTARY MUTUAL RECOGNITION AND SHARED INTERPERSONAL INSTITUTIONS

I have said that our being is characterized by a fundamental ontological intimacy with others. But precisely because it is fundamental or ontological, this “ontological intimacy” is operative to some extent whether we are encountering a distant stranger or an intimate partner. Audre Lorde describes a childhood experience on the subway: a stranger expresses horror and disgust when Lorde—a black child—sits down beside her. Eventually leaving her seat to avoid contact with the child, the stranger infiltrates Lorde’s own experience of herself, leaving her with a sense that she is somehow bad (1984, 147–148).¹⁶ A mature person, with a more established sense of self, or who is wiser to the ways of a racist world, might respond to the stranger with outrage or disdain; but even then, the act of resistance is premised upon transgression. On the one hand, the mature person can resist only because, through others’ transgressions into her sense of self, she has incorporated and consolidated a vision of self at odds with the stranger’s reaction to her. On the other hand, she is moved to resist because the stranger’s response is experienced as a transgression: the stranger’s response is only disturbing to the mature person because it is not merely a failing within the stranger, limited to the stranger’s mind; it is simultaneously a transgression into and shaping of others’ experiences. She is having an effect on how others see and respond to race. If strangers can intimately transgress into our experience like this, however—if it is not just in our intimate relationships that others “get inside” us—then what is there to distinguish intimate relationships from encounters—even alienating, oppressive encounters—with distant others? How ought we to distinguish our concrete experiences of intimacy from ontological intimacy?

What I propose in this section is that there are two interrelated “layers” to concrete intimacy. The two layers are mutual-self-definition in this moment, and shared habits or institutions that endure through time. This notion of layers is indebted to Merleau-Ponty’s distinction of the *body at this moment* and the *habitual body* (2002, 95).¹⁷ In the context of accounting for the phenomena of phantom limbs, Merleau-Ponty argues that one’s experience is configured both at the level of one’s current embodiment and at the level of one’s habitual embodiment. This explains how, for the person with the phantom limb, the world can show up as soliciting him as a two-limbed person (this is the habit body at work) and as marking out his deficiency (this is the current body at work). The result in this case is the experience of a limb that is only ambiguously present—neither

¹⁶ Fanon similarly describes the ways in which prejudiced attitudes shape our sense of self and possibility by speaking of a “historico-racial schema” (1967, 111–112): the idea is that others’ perspectives have come to be embodied in our very sense of what is open or not for us to do, what possibilities lie available to us. For more recent work and a reflection on Anzaldúa’s writings about racialization, see Florentien Verhage, *Living With(out) Borders* (2014).

¹⁷ I have used Colin Smith’s translation of “*corps actuel*” as “body at this moment” rather than Donald Landes’ “actual body” because I think Smith’s translation better captures the temporal connotation of the French which is its dominant connotation. “Current body” would equally work.

a real arm nor an absent arm, but a phantom arm. The more the habit body prevails, the more the individual experiences himself as two-armed; the more the layer of the current body predominates, the more the individual experiences himself as one-armed. And ultimately, the overcoming of the phantom limb will require the transformation of the old habit body in order to integrate it with the new, current, one-armed body (2012, 82–88/109–116).

Drawing on this conception of layers of embodiment, I am proposing that our intimate relationships involve two layers as well: on the one hand, a taking up and informing of one another in the moment (ideally co-enacted as mutual recognition) and, on the other hand, shared interpersonal institutions, or habitual, enduring, and co-enacted visions of who we are, how to live, and what matters (ideally co-established in a manner that supports mutual recognition and becoming). In each case, there is an intertwining of worlds and identities so that who I am, what I see in the world, and the possibilities I experience are inseparable from who you are, what you see, and the possibilities that you experience. It is, in each layer, as if we shared a common but two-headed body, an “intercorporeity” (e.g., 1964c, 168, where the French word is translated as “intercorporeality,” 1968, 141). We will see that, like in the individual body, one or the other of these two layers of intercorporeity can predominate, but concrete intimacy is realized in its fullest form when the two work with each other so that the layer of shared institutions supports mutual recognition and growth, and the layer of current mutual recognition can nourish and transform the shared institutions.

Consider the first layer mentioned—that of current, in the moment, mutual self-definition. In the example of Lorde on the subway, or the child with the worm, the adult—through ontological intimacy—defines the child, and the child is drawn into this definition of itself. This co-inhabitation of a way of seeing the child is, however, also experienced as alienating by the child. The adult’s transgression into the child’s way of experiencing induces an inner conflict, wherein one way of experiencing (e.g., this child is/I am bad and dirty) suppresses another (this child is/I am a successful explorer or basically good). This alienating realization of ontological intimacy is *not* an experience of concrete intimacy.

Concrete intimacy in the moment, in contrast, is marked by a lived sense of connection. We *experience* ourselves as intimately with another, and this happens when we co-exist with the other in the moment, experiencing her as seeing, in the world, what we, too, see, but many others do not. We thereby experience her insight as reaching more deeply into us and our world than others’ insights do (and our insight as reaching more deeply into her and her world). Such intimacy in the “at this moment” layer can happen, interestingly, even between strangers, and it can be profound in its moment. Strangers on a subway may, in a moment of shared laughter or in a situation of crisis, find themselves drawn temporarily into coexistence and a common world. To focus on the situation of crisis, living through and responding to an emergency together, facing with each other our human vulnerability and mortality, we may experience the powerful intimacy of being together in touch with a much deeper reality than is sustained by most of our mundane relations.¹⁸ Even if we never see each other again, this experience may remain with us as one in which we felt an unusual and deep connection—in that

¹⁸ This experience is vividly thematized in J.G. Ballard’s novel *Crash*.

moment. Similarly, short-lived erotic encounters (like those we often call “one-night stands”) can sometimes involve a deeper intimacy than our more familiar relationships. Without the baggage of a shared past and the expectations that unfold from this, each participant may be open to, and able to go along with, realities and potentials in each other that are typically occluded in her other relationships. Each participant may, indeed, help the other to discover aspects of herself that were heretofore unrealized by her. This experience of being seen not only for who we take ourselves to be, but also for who we had not until now realized we were or could be, is a profound experience of mutual recognition. It tends to stand out from the rest of our mundane life, often highlighting hollowness, disconnection, misrecognition, or loneliness therein.

But there is also another sense of intimacy—another layer—that characterizes enduringly intimate relationships. This is an abiding, shared sense of how to go about living life and being in relationship. It takes the form of shared, interpersonal “institutions” that, often without noticing, we co-enact and co-establish in our behaviors. We might also call these “sedimented patterns” or “dynamics of behavior” or “structures of relating,” but “institution”—if we understand this term as Merleau-Ponty does—allows us to see how these patterns of behavior are equally shared ways of orienting ourselves to what really matters and perceiving ourselves in relation to each other and the world beyond us. For Merleau-Ponty, institution does not denote our usual sense of institution—a public establishment or association, like a school or a prison, which is purposefully and formally set up and organized to promote some end. For Merleau-Ponty, institution can be found, for example, in a person’s individual development, in an artist’s style, in the love that is established between two people, or in a historical event.¹⁹ Institution, in these contexts, means “establishment in an experience . . . of dimensions . . . system of references . . . in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and will make a sequel, a history” (2010, 8–9/38); it is the founding of a field or frame of reference in terms of which all that appears makes a new sense.

In intimate relationships, shared customs around dinner-making, money-spending, television-watching, and conflict are small or local instances of such interpersonal institutions; and their specific character is manifest in the ways in which these dynamics establish and support a certain identity and position for each member of the relationship. Providing the frame of reference for our interactions, these co-enacted institutions also install shared values and assumptions that, when they are truly shared, allow us to function smoothly together, and to feel at home with each other, like we belong. They allow us to feel *with* each other. Such interpersonal institutions thus found an “intersubjective or symbolic field . . . which is our milieu, our hinge, our jointure” (2010, 6/35).

This instituted layer of intimacy is largely lacking in intimate encounters between strangers. Though a stranger in an erotic one-night encounter may see me deeply and insightfully in that moment, we may experience great difficulties if we attempt to continue that relationship beyond the moment. We may find ourselves unable to live with each other if the routine paths and practices that give meaning to our lives and inform our senses of self diverge too much, and if we are unable to let go of them without losing our sense of self. An enduring intimacy, in other words, involves not only the capacity

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France* (1954-1955) (2010, 5–113; 33–154 in the French edition). Henceforth, the English translation pagination will be followed by the 2010 French pagination. See also my essay, “The ‘*entre-deux*’ of Emotions” (2017) for an exposition of Merleau-Ponty’s use of “institution” and a defense of the claim that the emotion of love is an institution established between two people, through their mutual transgression into each other’s experience.

to be with another person within a circumscribed moment, but also the capacity to forge an enduring shared world, or habitual ways of being that are inhabitable by both intimates.

In institution as Merleau-Ponty conceives of it, the dimension or frame of references established is not consciously chosen for some particular purpose: it is the “establishment of a system of distribution of values or of significations . . . which is *practiced* . . . not acquired notionally” (2010, 25/60; italics in original); it is “a non-decisionary project, not chosen” by a constituting subject, but rather established through “productivity of what I am doing in the other and of what he is doing in me” (6/34–35). But the new symbolic field is nonetheless instituted because it offers a lived, unreflective answer to a problem that was merely latent within the previous field of experience:

[h]uman institution always resumes a prior institution, which has posed a *question*, . . . and which has failed. It reactivates this problem and human institution reunites its givens in [a] totality that is centered otherwise It is not a state of consciousness . . . and it is not an object of consciousness. The modes of existence of the question and answer are *dimensions* of a field, dimensions in which all of what is lived is distributed, but which are not lived for themselves.” (2010, 22–23/58; italics in original)

In other words, an interpersonal institution is the establishment, between two or more people, of an agreed upon way of doing things and of defining each other’s positions. *But* the agreement is established not through purposeful reflection and explicit verbal endorsement, but practically and unreflectively through the un-self-conscious development of shared practices and discourses.

These shared practices and discourses, and the interpersonal institutions that they realize, are settled upon precisely because they allow each member a certain position in the world which responds to latent tensions and problems which that member has been experiencing within her life. The institution is co-established as a solution to such tensions. But the solution is typically arrived at largely passively and unreflectively by happening together upon a way of being that works in response to problems experienced by each member rather than by each member self-consciously and purposefully intending this solution. Indeed, neither the solution, nor the tensions and problems which motivate it are typically acknowledged or made explicit. Rather, two or more people simply settle into a way of being together that, in some vague way, seems fitting, satisfying, settling.²⁰

The function and nature of shared interpersonal institutions can be further clarified through a couple of examples. John Russon, in his book *Bearing Witness to Epiphany: Persons, Things, and the Nature of Erotic Life* (2009), describes two intimate relationships that

²⁰ Napier and Whitaker, in *The Family Crucible* (1978), describe entrenched family systems of interaction that are instances of such “shared interpersonal institutions”; Minuchin likewise describes, in *Psychosomatic Families* (1978), family patterns of mutual self-definition, and the ways in which these can work to make one family member sick. Laing calls such family patterns “social phantasy systems” in *Self and Others* (1971, ch. 2 and ch. 8). And Berne, in *Games People Play* (1964), elaborates particular forms that these institutions can take and the ulterior motives that they serve. Berne calls these institutions “games.”

enact in different ways such institutions (Russon calls them “bonds”).²¹ Considering these will also, in preparation for this essay’s final section on freedom, help us to see how the mutual transgressions and coexistence involved can either inhibit each person’s own becoming and development, or enrich and support it.

In one intimate relationship, a man and a woman have developed a shared sense of themselves as “rebels, whose nonconformity to the standards of others marks their own greater insight into the way things should be” (Russon 2009, 80). This shared vision constitutes a bond between them, with each affirming and supporting the other in their positioning of self and other. At the same time, this vision of themselves shapes how they see and respond to the rest of the world: any critical reflections from other friends, for instance, can be dismissed, as lacking in insight. This bond between them—this interpersonal institution—thus involves mutual transgression and the transformation of each other’s basic orientation. Each lives from the assumption that they are such rebels, and endorses and feels endorsed by the other’s perspective on this; they thereby habitually inhabit that perspective together. Each has become part of the other’s orienting form of embodiment, then, by virtue of having incorporated the other’s perspective into his or her own way of perceiving. What shows up as valuable and as possible within the world is conditioned by this coexistence. This relationship is satisfying, moreover, because this shared institution responds to inchoate, not fully recognized problems that they had each previously felt in their dealings with others—distrust of others, and fears and anxieties about being criticized; it is a kind of solution to those problems. And yet, as much as this solution responds to latent problems from the past, it also inaugurates a form of life that undermines each member’s own becoming. Essentially, these two have developed a self-enclosed relationship which shields them from any criticisms or perspectives that friends might bring to bear—criticisms or perspectives that might reveal limits or problems, foreclosures, or occlusions in the couple’s ways of making sense of things. They have thus instituted a self-confirming, self-perpetuating way of being that results in stagnancy, rather than in learning, growth, or becoming. As Russon says, “this couple enacts a fundamental denial of the self-transformative possibilities—and imperatives—of their interhuman situation” (81).

Compare this with a second relationship described by Russon (2009, 81-2): this is a couple, two women, who find in each other affirmation of aspects of themselves that were denied in their former long-term relationships—aspects like their intelligence and competence, the value of their emotional depth, and the validity of their sexual desires. Their relationship thus involves the institution of a bond that affirms the agency and worth of each member, and thereby draws them each out of old and unsatisfying patterns of subordination to, or manipulative seduction of, others. Together they thereby establish a form of coexistence that serves as a kind of protection or shield. But in this case, what they are shielding against is not learning from others and the growth that can bring, but rather the kinds of misrecognitions—and indeed, shared institutions—that can draw and have drawn them into self-undermining ways of perceiving themselves and the world. They have transgressed into and shaped each other’s habitual sense of self and possibility; they have established in their bond a shared institution, a

²¹ I am drawing from a section of the book where Russon is establishing what ethical imperatives and responsibilities must characterize interpersonal relations, given the nature of intersubjectivity or what he calls “the epiphany of the other” (2009, ch. 4). Russon’s ideas in this section helped to crystallize for me something of the import of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of intersubjectivity. The last two sections of this paper are thus much indebted to Russon’s thought here.

certain way of coexisting towards the world, themselves, and each other; but they have done this in a manner that ultimately promotes each person's self-actualization and development. For, on the basis of this bond or institution, each member of this relationship now experiences herself as capable of taking initiative, able to be more honest with herself and others, inclined to cultivate more substantial relations with others outside of this intimate relationship, and engaged with larger social and political concerns—all of which are conducive to learning, becoming, and developing.

In these two examples, we see how an enduring bond or shared institution is set up between two people in a manner that involves mutual transgression and an abiding sense of who they each are in relation to each other and the world.

This intimacy as shared institution should not, I am arguing, be confused with intimacy in the moment: these are two different layers which can in fact be at odds with each other—though ideally we want them to support each other. A further example from Eric Berne's *Games People Play* (1964) helps to illustrate the dissonance that can occur between these layers of intimacy. Berne describes a very common dynamic between intimates—a dynamic that he names “If It Weren't for You.” In this situation, a couple is constantly in conflict, experiencing a repeated lack of momentary intimacy, but only by virtue of being entangled in the same structure or shared institution. In other words, it turns out that they are in fact collaborating and supporting each other in who they are, engaging in an implicitly agreed upon ritual of mutual self-definition, even though it seems to them that they are disagreeing, and they feel alienated from, and not really recognized by, each other. The disagreement takes the form of one person (we will say she is a woman) demanding of her partner (a man, let us say) that he stay home with her, and not go out on his own adventures with others. The man, for his side, feels like he is being kept from realizing his full potential because of the woman's needs. “If it weren't for her” he would be realizing his true potential. When, however, the woman relents and allows the man to go out, he realizes that he has great fears of going out. The dynamic between them, then, was not one of her keeping him home, simply; it was an institution that they co-established, and both needed. It worked for her because it relieved her of fears of abandonment. It worked for him because he was able to avoid his fears and anxieties of taking on new things and developing himself. What looked like struggle, disagreement, and misrecognition, was rooted in a shared pact; and though the frequent arguments and tensions left them feeling alone and misrecognized in the moment, they were at the same time an expression of their entanglement, co-dependency and shared institution—an expression, that is, of an enduring form of intimacy, albeit one that works against intimacy at the momentary level.²²

Concrete intimacy, then, occurs at two levels or layers each made possible by the transgressions of ontological intimacy. In each layer, we establish a kind of shared body, an intercorporeity, such that your way of taking me up is incorporated into my sense of world and self, and my way of taking you up is incorporated into yours. In one layer, we find intimacy at this moment, experienced as connection: here, if there is intimacy, it is because when each incorporates or is transgressed by the other's orientation, there is an experience of mutual recognition. Each finds themselves, the world, and the other per-

²² Eric Berne adds the important insight that, even though these two feel alone and misrecognized, their arguments and fights actually are ways of connecting or “stroking” each other—albeit in painful, rather than pleasurable, ways (1964, 15).

ceived in ways that are deeply aligned with their own orientation, and that may even further their own insights. But intimacy also occurs at another level, in another layer—that of shared institutions. Here, even when an *experience* of momentary connection is missing, two people can be deeply intertwined: in an enduring, habitual manner, they transgress into, and actively inform and uphold each other’s way of being in the world. Through their habitual practices and the ritually patterned dynamics therein, each intimate is dependent upon the other for her sense of who she is in the world and how to be at home there.

We have seen, moreover, that these layers of intimacy can inhibit our development as individuals, or enable and encourage it. Momentary intimacy can help us realize aspects of ourselves (and possibilities within the world) that were until then merely latent within our experience. Our shared institutions, on the other hand, can either trap us in dynamics that close us off from learning, or establish a form of mutual self-definition that opens us up to and promotes self-development. The challenge, then, is to live our enduring relationships, with their inevitable transgressions and their resulting institutions, in ways that allow for genuine becoming: for a creative taking up and expressive transformation of the past, for the establishment of new institutions—personal and interpersonal—that better support each person’s growth. Such transformation or genuine becoming is what Merleau-Ponty understands as freedom.

III.

THE PROBLEM OF FREEDOM AND THE CHALLENGES OF INTIMACY

I contend that freedom in Merleau-Ponty’s thought is ultimately understood as becoming: freedom is enacted not in a moment’s decision but in a temporally extended process of self-overcoming. Latent tensions within our situation gradually emerge and motivate our assumption of a new existential orientation that both resolves those tensions and brings to expression a truth secretly harbored within them. Thereby, a new existential equilibrium is instituted within our lives, a new way of living and being is realized, and a new sense of the past and future established. Freedom is, in other words, realized in a process of creative self-transformation.

The individual who has lost her voice recovers it. The exploited and oppressed worker becomes a revolutionary. The analysand with the inferiority complex realizes a more honest habitual orientation towards herself. The gambler overcomes his addiction. Each transformation is a move from lesser to greater degrees of freedom, and each involves moments of initiative—saying no to one direction, and yes to another. But, says Merleau-Ponty, initiative is not yet freedom (2012, 463/502). The gambler can say no to gambling in one moment, only to be drawn back into it in the next. For (greater) freedom to be realized, a new way of life must take hold, motivated by tensions in the past, and supported by an enduring transformation of their meaning. If we can speak of a decision or choice, Merleau-Ponty says, it is “a conversion of our existence . . . [which] assumes a preexisting acquisition [and] establishes a new tradition” (463/502). As such, the conversion cannot be an unconditioned choice executed in an isolated moment: it is rather the culmination of a transformation that is prepared only through time, as if in secret, through a gradual articulation of tensions and indeterminate directionalities within one’s situation. To use Merleau-Ponty’s example (468–471/507–509), the day-laborer becomes a revolutionary not in an instantaneous

conscious decision, but rather through being drawn, over time and through contingent events, into coexistence with small farmers and city workers; through thereby becoming attuned to the contradictions of their shared situation; and through finally finding in the revolutionary words and actions of others a meaningful crystallization of that situation. If there is at all a moment that might be deemed the transformational instant of realization, the moment of conversion and coming to revolutionary consciousness, it is only the pinnacle or the final coming to expression of something that took form in a long and secret gestation through what Merleau-Ponty calls a “molecular process” (471/510) or a series of shifts and slippages (476/514, 482/519–20).²³

Merleau-Ponty, following Cézanne, also speaks of this process as a kind of “germination.” An artist, he says, paints not by knowing in advance what she is going to put on the canvas, but rather by “germinating” with the landscape:

[There is] motivation that comes simultaneously from colors, light, substance, movement, a call from all of that to a movement of the hand which resolves the problem while being unaware of it . . . The choices are the trace of this labor of “germination.” (2010, 47/86)

Similarly, a day-laborer attains to revolutionary consciousness and greater freedom not by knowing in advance what he seeks, but rather by “germinating” over time with his social conditions, and being motivated by them to assume a new social position which retrospectively transforms and resolves a problem that had been largely latent and merely inchoately felt. Freedom, then, is realized in coming back to one’s situation, accepting and germinating with it to the point of being able to take it up, transform it, and thereby move beyond it: “it is by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, by willing what I will, by doing what I do, that I can go farther” (2012, 482–3/520). And if we do not germinate with and take up our own situation then we fail to attain real freedom: “the only way I can fail to be free is if I attempt to transcend my natural and social situation by refusing to take it up first.” The addict who presumes to simply deny who he was, and to will himself free of his habit, inevitably finds himself still driven by and entangled in his habit.²⁴ Germinating with one’s situation and thereby discovering a way of being that responds to and transforms the past which shapes one’s future is essential to the development of freedom.

Germinating does not in itself ensure that the move one feels called to make is indeed a realization of freedom. There is no guarantee that one’s realization is in fact a liberating realization. Like the artist who cannot be sure as he paints whether he is bringing to expression for the first time a reality and truth or only engaging in a clichéd repetition, we too cannot be certain in the process of pursuing freedom whether our decisions are truly realizing a new way of being ourselves or are only blindly repeating ourselves and even regressing. Is, for instance, a decision to quit this job the insightful recognition of a truth that has been making itself felt for years and the inauguration of a new and

²³ Freedom as self-overcoming is thus really a matter of establishing new personal institutions. See Maclaren, “The *‘entre-deux’* of Emotions: Emotional Institutions and their Dialectic” (2017).

²⁴ Gregory Bateson highlights this dynamic in his article “The Cybernetics of Self” (1987). The alcoholic remains imprisoned within his addiction so long as he supposes that he has it all under control, that he can handle it all himself. It is only when he gives up this notion of the self-sufficient individual that the healing transformation takes place.

better life? Or is it merely a reactive response based in an inferiority complex, repeating an old structure, and leading to an even more constrained and unfulfilling future? Such ambiguities and uncertainties are endemic to our realization of our own freedom.

It is here that the importance—and danger—of intimate others for the development of an individual's freedom emerges. This will be the focus of the remainder of this essay.

Always somewhat opaque to ourselves, never fully self-transparent, it is easy for us to miss ourselves. We can be carried away by the stories, tropes, and values that circulate in our social environment but are inadequate to our reality. We can equally be carried away by the ways in which others' practices transgress into our experience, position us, and misleadingly define our sense of self and world. And we can be carried away by becoming stuck within our own complexes or bad habits, which reduce us to less than we can be.

Intimate others, however, can help bring us back to ourselves. They can help us recall who we have been and can be, and what really matters to us. They can do this in two ways. By virtue of knowing us well, intimate others can explicitly call to our attention a way in which we have diverged from our characteristic selves; if this divergence seems to work against our becoming, they can make a case for this, and call on us to acknowledge this and to come back to ourselves. Sometimes, however, our intimate others need say nothing: they call us back to ourselves simply by being themselves and doing the things they do. In these ways, they draw us back into those shared interpersonal institutions that have previously configured our world and made us who we are—institutions from which we have strayed.

Returning a person to herself can, however, inhibit her becoming rather than promote it if it does not also allow her to (as we have seen Merleau-Ponty say) “go farther.” Imagine that the institution that one has strayed from and to which one is returned is that which we found in the rebel pair, or in the “if it weren't for you” couple. In the rebel pair, drawing one partner back into a shared way of being is drawing that individual back into a shared interpersonal institution that prevents her from being open to and moved by friends' criticisms or perspectives.²⁵ In the case of the “if it weren't for you” couple, the quarreling couple draw each other back into the same old dynamic (“your duty is to be at home with me”; “if it weren't for you, I'd be realizing myself”) which keeps them from facing their own anxieties and thereby developing themselves. To promote and support an intimate other's becoming, then, each partner must not merely help the other return to her familiar ways of being. Each must also help her to “germinate” with those ways of being—to open herself up to feeling the tensions within these institutions and to find therein an impetus and means for going farther, for self-overcoming, and for realizing new, freer ways of being herself.

Here is where the great challenge and responsibility that intimacy is becomes more evident. On a Cartesian vision of the self, we might think that supporting an intimate other is simply leaving her free to become whomever she wants to be. But this vision of support is based upon a notion of the subject as ontologically separate from others, as

²⁵Again, we can see an extreme version of this in the isolating effects of an abusive partner's behavior. This partner may insist that “no one understands you like I do” and “it's me and you against them” or “I need you to stay with me to help me,” thereby keeping the survivor of abuse from developing relationships that might criticize and challenge the abusive relationship (Perez-Darby 2016, 109).

self-possessed and self-transparent. And such a vision of the subject is precisely what is under challenge in this essay. Transgressed by others, a person is never simply ontologically separate, and she does not have herself wholly in her own hands; she is to a significant extent dispossessed and informed by others. As a result—that is, precisely because she can be carried away by others into momentary misrecognitions or into shared institutions of sense-making that do not do justice to who she has been and can be—that individual can be profoundly wrong about who she is and wants to be. An intimate other may, for instance, take herself to be quitting her job because she has “discovered” that she is not capable of doing this well and that to stay in her job is to be caught up in a futile and self-undermining struggle. But in fact this “discovery” may be a wrongful self-interpretation motivated by an employer who unjustly casts her as a bad employee, or by a long standing inferiority complex, or both.

What is notable is that in this situation, an intimate partner does not have the option to “leave the other free,” and trying to do so would be the least supportive and most irresponsible course of action. Our worlds and identities are already intertwined; each person’s perspective already transgresses upon and informs the other’s, and these facts require that one take a stand one way or another on who one’s intimate other is. Leaving my intimate other “free” to make her own choices and letting her simply quit her job is not in fact a neutral leaving free; it is rather an endorsement of her sense of herself as incapable. My silence in the face of her decision asserts “you know yourself, and whomever you take yourself to be must be who you are; if you think you are incapable of this line of work, that must be the truth.” My silence is not, therefore, a non-involvement in her decision as it pretends to be; my silence is, as Merleau-Ponty says, “deciding on her behalf” insofar as it endorses and promotes a certain vision of who she is and what she ought to do (1964a, 154). It is, of course, still she who carries out the decision to quit, handing in her resignation to her employer, but that action grows out of a more fundamental decision about who she is and how her situation ought to be understood.²⁶ And in relation to this more fundamental decision I have played a part, helping bring it to crystallization, while simultaneously doing so under the guise of letting her decide who she is. My silent “leaving her free” is thus a deception. If I am to live our intimacy truthfully, instead, I will have to take responsibility for the decisions that I unavoidably make on her behalf. What would it mean truly to take responsibility for my transgressions into my intimate other’s decisions? It may mean, interestingly, entering into con-

²⁶ It is important to note that, when I speak of “deciding on the others’ behalf,” I am not focusing upon a coercive relationship in which an abusive partner might pressure the survivor partner into making a certain decision. I am instead challenging the notion that, in those relationships which seem to leave each member free to make up her own mind, there is indeed total, uninhibited freedom. Even in those non-coercive relationships, I am arguing, there is unfreedom and deciding on the other’s behalf: that deciding on the other’s behalf occurs at the level of endorsing or denying the other’s vision of self, world, and possibility, or transgressing into and usurping that vision with another one. To genuinely promote each other’s freedom, we need to become aware of this more subtle “deciding on another’s behalf” and take responsibility for it. This does not deny that there is an important line between the abusive, coercive intimate partner and the non-abusive, non-coercive intimate partner. But it does demand more subtlety in understanding the difference between the two.

flict with my intimate other.²⁷ In some situations, it may be that being true to my intimate other, really standing by her and supporting her freedom or becoming, will require *resisting her decision* and calling on her to see this situation otherwise, to find in her situation a different *sens* or meaning than the one upon which she has settled. “It is not that you are incapable” we might say; “this seems rather an instance in which your inferiority complex is running the show.” Such resistance might well be felt by my intimate other, in its immediacy, as violence, as a betrayal, for it is indeed a denial of, and taking distance from, her own position; it dismisses her position as out of touch with reality (even if it acknowledges how real and weighty an inferiority complex can be).²⁸ And yet, as Russon notes in his investigation of loyalty, betrayal, and ethics in interpersonal relationships, what is felt as a betrayal could be the greatest act of solidarity (2009, 93). For, the resistance and denial of the other is a taking distance from the other *in order to call her back to herself*, to help her better discover herself and find a truer enaction of herself.

For some of us, this prospect of resisting the other can inspire anxiety. For there is a presumption being enacted here. It is the presumption that I can see the situation better than my intimate other can, and that I am in fact helping her. Since, however, I (like my intimate other) am finite, not all-knowing, and addled by my own blindnesses, I could be wrong about this. It may be that I am calling her away from herself instead of back to herself. This could be not an act of solidarity—indeed, even worse, it could be a failed attempt at solidarity that is presenting itself as an act of solidarity. But the point of this essay, the insight articulated in Merleau-Ponty’s claim that we are, in intimacy, always deciding to some extent on the other’s behalf is this: we cannot help but presume; we are always already taking a stand. If, in fear of being presumptuous, I leave the other “free” to make her own decision, to quit her job, I am thereby endorsing her decision. I am presuming that she sees better than I, and that I have nothing to offer her. If this is true, then this presumption is a good one. But if it is false, then it is a presumption that has let my intimate partner down, betrayed her, and left her to damage her own life substantially when I could have helped her.

What, then, am I to do, if I cannot help but to presume and to decide on the other’s behalf? I must take a stand—the best stand I know how to take—since I cannot do otherwise. But I must take it with an openness to finding out that I am wrong and to learning more about myself and my intimate other.²⁹ I must make it from a stance that seeks understanding, communication, and mutual confirmation rather than a legislation of who the other is. I can resist her in the moment, in other words, and produce a breakdown in our momentary sense of intimacy; but if I am to be responsible to our intimacy and committed to our mutual becoming and flourishing, and if I am to remain intimate and *with* her in a more enduring, overarching manner, I must do it from

²⁷One might imagine that, on this model, one ought never to remain silent if one thinks one’s intimate other is going astray. Intimate life would then be a matter of constantly challenging each other. But this challenging mode of behavior also decides on the other’s behalf in the very mode that it assumes; in challenging rather than awaiting, it makes a claim about who the other is. It claims that she is incapable of coming to insight on her own, in time. We need, then, to acknowledge two forms of silence. There is the silence that merely goes along with, and thus endorses and is complicit. But there is also the silence that trustingly holds open the space for the other to encounter the tensions in her own stance and to find her own way back to herself. Parker Palmer describes this silence well in “Deep Speaks to Deep,” in *A Hidden Wholeness* (2004).

²⁸In “Pain and Agency” (2016), Shannon Hoff notes how pain is not only negative, and can in fact be an inevitable concomitant of the very interpersonal transgressions of boundaries that enable self-transformation and the development of greater agency.

²⁹Taken up in this way, intimacy can in fact be one of the best of forums for becoming existentially educated, and developing one’s interpretive resources and insights.

within a co-established, co-perpetuated, interpersonal institution of communication, openness, and learning.

IV. CONCLUSION

Intimacy, I have proposed, is not made up of inner feelings and beliefs about others; it is rather the fact that others transgress into our own perspectives and shape our sense of world and self. Such intimacy is present in all our interpersonal relations in the form of what I have called “ontological intimacy.” It also underlies our concrete experiences of intimacy—whether with strangers or intimate others. Here, the transgression enables momentary experiences of connection; but it can also be deepened and come to carry more weight by virtue of becoming embodied in habitual and enduring dynamics of mutual self-and-world-definition. We establish between us shared interpersonal institutions; the other comes to be embodied in me and my outlook, and I come to be embodied in her and hers.

Transgression into the other’s experience, informing how she finds herself positioned and defined in the world is, then, inevitable. The question is not how to avoid it, but whether we are owning up to it and its effects—are we being honest about and taking responsibility for what we are already doing? These transgressions are, in fact, impositions of a kind of unfreedom on the other. Within this unfreedom lies great dangers of interpersonal violence, alienation and oppression. But this unfreedom can also be the greatest enabler of freedom. One person’s perspective working within another’s also takes that other beyond her current form of sense-making. If, in doing this, the transgression enables that other to come back to who she has been: to germinate with that, and to “go farther,” discovering new ways of being herself that resolve tensions that had been making themselves felt, then that transgression and imposition of unfreedom works in the service of freedom. And the freer others are, or the more they are in touch with the reality and imperatives found within themselves, their situations, and their social and natural environments, the better their transgressions will work to resist our own errancy and enable freedom within us. The great challenge of intimate relations, then, is to forge a way of being with others—in the moment and through shared interpersonal institutions—that takes responsibility for the transgressions and encroachments we inevitably effect, and that enacts them in ways that promote openness, communication, recognition, and becoming.

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