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# Dis/connections: Toward an Ontology of Broken Relationality

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**ABSTRACT:** Ideas of relationality have come to influence a wide range of theoretical fields. In this article, we develop an understanding of relationality as not necessarily something continuous and uninterrupted (as is often the case), but rather as something fundamentally shaped through breaks and interruptions. We work through notions of relational brokenness by “thinking with” the telephone as an intriguing relational technology, a material metaphor, and a discursive device. The argument moves between Derrida’s telephone fascination; the metaphorical black telephone in Sylvia Plath’s poem “Daddy”; Proust’s narrator waiting for a call from his grandmother in “The Guermantes Way”; and the communication breakdown in Lady Gaga’s “Telephone.” What the telephone allows for in this discussion is a way of thinking of not only technology as inherently fractured, but also our very ways of relating, connecting, and being in the world.

Ideas of relationality have come to influence a wide range of theoretical fields, anchoring everything from psychoanalysis and continental philosophy to actor-network theory and posthumanist theory. In relational understandings, human subjects come into being through intimate and intricate connections with humans and (other) animals, technologies, and the environment. But what does it entail to speak of relationality, beyond an understanding of relations before entities, a focus on movements between—rather than within—sub-

jects and objects? And how is the “relation” in relationality understood?

This article uses as an important point of reference the tension within Western queer theory between relational and antirelational responses to the present moment of queer thinking. We aim to move the discussion out of the thesis-antithesis binary, but without resorting to a synthesis, somehow solving the conflict between a proposition and its negation. Rather, we complicate the thesis/antithesis logic with the help of a *prosthesis*—the telephone. Our starting point for this endeavor is an understanding of relationality as not necessarily something continuous, uninterrupted, or unbroken (as is often the case), but rather as something fundamentally shaped through brokenness. We suspect that going “against,” or questioning particular understandings of relationality does not necessarily need to end up in antirelationality, or a turning away from the social, as it were. Such a questioning could, rather, be a way of reworking what relationality might mean if we were to think brokenness, disruption, and disconnection as formative of how we understand the relational in the first place. We also imagine that rethinking relationality through brokenness is not only ontologically, but politically important.

We work through the question of understanding relationality through brokenness by “thinking with” the telephone as an intriguing relational technology. The telephone in our text is both a material metaphor, a discursive device, and a concrete technology. We move between philosophy, literature, and popular culture, letting the argument take shape through Derrida’s telephone fascination, the metaphorical black telephone in Sylvia Plath’s poem “Daddy,” Proust’s narrator waiting for a call from his grandmother in “The Guermites Way,” and the communication breakdown in Lady Gaga’s “Telephone.” As such, the discussion moves between and links together an experience of one’s very first phone call (Proust), an era of physically wired machines and landlines (Plath and Derrida), and a telephonic landscape of cell phones and wireless connectivity (Gaga).

What the telephone allows for in this line of argument is a way of thinking of not only technology as something fundamentally broken, but also our very ways of relating, connecting, and being in the world.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we are interested in how telephonic brokenness makes and shapes relations and ways of relating, how techno-

1. For a discussion of technology as something inherently broken, see Jenny Sundén, “On Trans-, Glitch, and Gender as Machinery of Failure,” *First Monday* 20:4 (2015): <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/5895/4416>.

logical breaks and ruptures become part of our relational fabric.<sup>2</sup> As Ariana Kelly puts it in a backward glance at the heyday of the phone booth, “Telephones became conspirators in our lives, participants in our loves and losses, necessarily implicated in the communications they conveyed. Public phones played into this, allowing people to be immensely more reachable than before, able to wield power from a distance, or at the very last minute notify someone about a later arrival.”<sup>3</sup> In a world of abundant cell phone use, often close at hand, and close to the heart, the question of power is tightly linked to technological delays and deferrals, in which we are kept or keep others hanging.

In her groundbreaking *The Telephone Book*, which functions less like a book than a switchboard between philosophy, literature, and psychoanalysis, Avital Ronell considers the importance of the telephone and its logics for modern thought by investigating the relations between self and other, presence and absence, signal and noise. “Why the telephone?” she asks, and argues, “[I]n some ways it was the cleanest way to reach the regime of any number of metaphysical certitudes.”<sup>4</sup> She starts from the idea that the telephone “destabilizes the identity of self and other, subject and thing, it abolishes the originariness of site.”<sup>5</sup> To be hooked on the phone implies an intense attachment or entanglement with the telephone itself, making the subject/object distinction shift. A telephone is more than a medium or a facilitator of (human) conversations. It is also a lively part in such conversations, its technological peculiarities actively shaping our connections with others, human and nonhuman. This becomes perhaps even clearer in technological landscapes of wireless connectivity. Through accidental dialing, our phones may pick someone randomly in the contact list, making the call seemingly at will. Or

2. For a deeper analysis of the queer potentials of disconnection in digital connectivity, see Jenny Sundén, “Queer Disconnections: Affect, Break, and Delay in Digital Connectivity,” *Transformations* 31 (2018): [http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Trans31\\_04\\_sunden.pdf](http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Trans31_04_sunden.pdf). Here, the break is understood as formative for how we can both sense and make sense of digital connectivity, insofar as the break has the potential to bring forth what constant connectivity means and how it feels. The break is also discussed as something that makes tangible relational (hetero)norms around continuous, coherent, linear ways of relating and connecting, and thus provides alternative, nonnormative models for ways of being with digital devices, networks, and each other.

3. Ariana Kelly, *Phone Booth* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 43.

4. Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 9.

5. *Ibid.*

consider the unpredictability of cell phones to “behave themselves” in quiet public events. Such technological disobedience makes our phones much less object-like, or perhaps more to the point, it demands an approach to objects based on their aliveness. Within more recent new materialist theorizing, the aliveness of objects becomes particularly vibrant, in a sense that makes it difficult to speak of inanimate objects. Objects—or, in Jane Bennett’s vocabulary, *things*—consist of rather vital, vibrant materiality, with a tendency to act up in all kinds of unruly manners.<sup>6</sup> Such willful connections and disconnections insert a sort of formative brokenness in the midst of relational logics. For if our relational technologies are thing-like and broken, what does this do to the relations “themselves,” and how we might understand them?

### Queer Relationality

Relationality concerns the state or condition of relating, of being relational, the ways in which two or more subjects (or objects) are connected. Relationality has been theorized in different ways within queer theory, as modes of resisting the contemporary push for queer subjects toward particular forms of relating and connecting: through assimilation, reproductive sexuality, and family-making. Such theoretical modes of queering relationality have aimed to critique the heteronormative relational structures of marriage, heritage, respectability, reproduction, and longevity.<sup>7</sup> But even if these discussions have in common the interest in the critical potential of queerness (or, in Leo Bersani’s terms, “homo-ness”), they tend to be rather polarized.<sup>8</sup>

Initiated by Leo Bersani, and driven further by Lee Edelman, the antirelational (or antisocial) trajectory within queer theory invests in particular forms of present-tense intensity, negativity, and refusal. To Bersani, oppression is not only that which structures society, but in a more fundamental sense that which constitutes the social itself. To him, there is no liberating potential in queer relations, as these are always already forged by hetero-normal assimilatory forces. This leads him to insist on “homo-ness” as “failure to accept relation with any given social arrangement.”<sup>9</sup> It is against this background that he

6. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

7. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

8. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

9. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

understands gay desire as intrinsically incompatible with the social, as something always already hetero-fied: “Perhaps inherent in gay desire is a revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality. This of course means that sociality as we know it, and the most politically disrupted aspect of the homo-ness I will be exploring in gay desire is a redefinition of sociality so radical that it may appear to require a provisional withdrawal from relationality itself.”<sup>10</sup> Departing from this turning away from the social, Edelman uses a similar argument by focusing on a turning away from the figure of the child—as the heteronormative promise of the future, and as such as the representative of the social.<sup>11</sup> He argues for a firm refusal of such ways of envisioning the future, and in its place for an embrace of queer negativity.

In response to this embrace of antirelationality, negativity, and refusal, José Muñoz argues for “anti-antirelationality,” a double negative that shapes a more hopeful, critically utopian queer stance.<sup>12</sup> To Muñoz, relationality is intimately connected to futurity, and he uses a Blochian critical utopia to rethink queer relations in a temporal register. He refuses to give up on futurity and hope, and argues compellingly for the “not yet” of queerness. Queerness to Muñoz does not take shape as a rejection or a negation of the future, but something that strives to rework the present (and its straightening, assimilationist devices) by insisting on the potentiality for other ways of living, other worlds. In his view, “the antirelational in queer studies was the gay white man’s last stand.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the gay white man who withdraws from relationality and connectedness, Muñoz insists on the importance of collectivity and community for understanding queerness. Their differences aside, relationality in both Bersani and Muñoz seems to equal the social, since the terms “antisocial” and “antirelational” are used interchangeably. They both address the ways in which we organize our relations, such as when Muñoz speaks of queer versus straight relationality. Antirelationality, then, is quite literally a negation of social relations, a matter of turning away from, or breaking (up) with, the social.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

11. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

12. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

13. José Esteban Muñoz, “Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique,” in “Forum: Conference Debates—The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” ed. Robert L. Caserio et al., *PMLA* 121:3 (2006): 825–826, at p. 825.

Then again, it seems possible to trace a partly different way to discuss, or relate to relationality in queer theory. As evident in the work of Lauren Berlant, relationality becomes more of an affective rhythm of the social. In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Berlant's dialogical book with Lee Edelman, they explore relationality as a risky business that intermingles our fears of loss and rupture—the presence of negativity—with our hopes for repair, fixing, and a momentary breathing space that reduces the anxiety of the intrinsic break in relation.<sup>14</sup> Following the death of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Berlant and Edelman follow her pairing of paranoid and reparative readings, of reading practices of rupture and repair, and show how these ways of reading and being in the world are simultaneously about making and breaking connections: “One can only conjoin or repair what bears the mark of separation already.”<sup>15</sup> While Edelman insists on the presence of rupture in every act of repair, Berlant is perhaps more cautious to fully align the break-in-relation with the negative. She discusses, for example, how we may find solace in detachment, or even in dissociation, in ways that foster new affective, social rhythms. We read this as a possible opening toward a reframing of ruptures in relationality, not necessarily as forms of negativity and as something that attributes negative value, but rather in ways that may acknowledge the formative qualities of (relational) breaks in a different affective register.

### Hello? Yes?

From the moment of “hello,” there is a break in the *telos* of telephonic relationality, a break in the completion of the circle of calling and answering, of addressing the other as the other that we know, can locate and possess, the other that is “our” other, the one with whom we are speaking. “Hello” means *some* other is (possibly) hooked up, somewhere—absent, seemingly distant, from far away, on the phone. The telephone, as a horizon of relationality, breaks with the logic of the subject/object distinction (who is calling, and who is answering the call?), as an inverse order in which the telephone greeting “hello” is coming from both ends of the line, blurring the distinction between the one calling and the one being called. The call is precisely, as Heidegger claimed, “something which *we ourselves* have neither planned nor prepared for nor voluntarily performed, nor have we ever done so. ‘It’ calls, against our expectations and even against our will.”<sup>16</sup>

14. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

16. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson

In order to call, to start a conversation, which does not guarantee its duration but only perhaps its inevitable finality, the formulaic words “hello” and “goodbye” seem to be used in order to check the openness of the channel. These words, spoken with utmost expectation for answerability, connectivity, and durability, as envisioned in Roman Jakobson’s model of communication, stand for a phatic function of language.<sup>17</sup> The channel is open, but the code does not have to be recognized, and the communication can end up in uncanny uncommonness. As Ronell has it, “The telephone connection houses the improper. Hitting the streets, it welcomes linguistic pollutants and reminds you to ask, ‘Have I been understood?’”<sup>18</sup> The (telephone) line is always already open, and in its openness inevitably open to misunderstandings, misreadings, and misleading; it represents the connectivity as broken, as being open and exposed to its own brokenness. Or, put differently, to be broken is always already a possibility of being open. The open line is inherently offline. With Ronell, we wonder:

What does it mean to answer the telephone, to make oneself answerable to it in a situation whose gestural syntax already means yes, even if the affirmation should find itself followed by a question mark: Yes? No matter how you cut it, on either side of the line, there is no such thing as a free call. Hence the interrogative inflection of a yes that finds itself accepting changes.<sup>19</sup>

Our tentative answer to her question, to her call, is that the call, to answer the call, is fundamentally a question of (answering to) power. It is an answer to a call for power. It is probably more than that. It is a power relation entwined with a set of gendered expectations and implications, and as such, simultaneously, a set of queer possibilities, or potentials. We will come back to this.

With the telephone, we are facing the paradox of the circular nature of every call, or, and this amounts to the same thing, the paradox of the speculative nature of every call. In order to call the other, not to destroy the otherness of the other or to pay attention to the

(New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 275 (emphasis in original).

17. Roman Jakobson, *On Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). In Roman Jakobson’s structural analysis of language, the phatic function is a way to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication, or confirm whether the channel is still open, and the other still there. The phatic function, thus, is the part of communication that keeps open the line of communication itself; it holds no other content than reassuring those involved that they are being listened to.

18. Ronell, *The Telephone Book* (above, n. 4), p. 3.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 5.



other—even in criticizing, challenging, or questioning her/it/him—Derrida proposes that we recall Heidegger's argumentation:

yes, but there is something even more originary than questioning, than this piety of thinking," and it is what he called *zusage* which means to acquiesce, to accept, to say "Yes," to affirm. So this *zusage* is not only prior to questioning, but it is supposed by any questioning. To ask a question, you must first tell the Other that I am speaking to you. Even to oppose or challenge the Other, you must say, "at least I speak to you," "I say yes to our being in common together."<sup>20</sup>

So there is accepting, there is affirmation, saying "yes" prior to every questioning, prior to the piety of thinking, prior to negativity. Moreover, there is affirmation originary to relationality, which is, as such, broken. Whenever there is a "yes" between me and you, between telephones, there is a multiplicity of calling and being called. The telephone, as an object and as a relational technology, is always multiple, hooked up or wired with another telephone, to an absently present other.

This means that "I" can call "you" only insofar as I am already called. Therefore, one might argue that there is no such thing as an original call, a *naïve* call. On the contrary, every call is an answer to another call, which means that every question is an answer to another question. Or to go even further, the question is sent back as "other," as "an endless process of alteration."<sup>21</sup> The call is an impossible response to another impossible response, and the call in its plurality is inhabited by absences, traces, and ghostly alterities.<sup>22</sup> This structure of calling and addressing leads us, therefore, to the very paradox of relationality. If calls are always responses to other calls, they keep calling each other, my call is always multiple. There is no other; there are only others. The figure of the other is the figure

20. Jacques Derrida, "An Interview with Jacques Derrida," interview by Nikhil Padgaonkar, March 17, 1997, <http://mural.uv.es/mibosa/DerridaInterview2.htm>.

21. Claire Nouvet, "An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus," *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 103–134, at p. 110.

22. As within the mythological narratives of feminine disturbances of the politics of voice by, for example, the figure of Echo, Medusa, and the Babylonian goddess Tiamat, "all these mythic female vast bodies of transformation are a result of a fragile auricle, the ear of the other, of an anarchic listening of the order and the law of creation of the world, the listening that always hears every utterance but manages to over-hear it, and send it back as other. In this sense, these figures serve as a destabilization of logics of identity" (Mirjana Stošić, "'On This Haunted Ground I Was Lost and Found': Echo's Lithography," *Культура/Culture* 6:13 (2016): <https://journals.cultcenter.net/index.php/culture/article/view/253>).

of multiplicity. We can call one of these others the Other, but we are always called by many different others. Somehow as a kind of spectacle right in front of our eyes, the uncanny truth of calling the other writes itself: There is the other whom we address by a promise, "I will call you soon." However, just before the kind of promise that promises the call, there is a kind of information informing the other that the one who is promising to call is actually being called, that s/he is already called. So, there is this complication, a complication related to numbers, to a way of counting and enumerating, to a kind of accountancy.

This accountancy, as is the case with every accountancy, gives account of depths and properties. If I am the one to whom a promise was made, and this promise is a promise of being called, then there is a kind of betrayal of this promise. The one who is promising is promised already to the others, or, the one who will call me is the one who, at the same time, is answering the calls of the others. But is it always so? Is it always the case that there are many of us inscribed in every relationship? According to Derrida,

Imagine my having thus to command the other (and this is renunciation) to be free (for I need his freedom in order to address the other *qua* other, in a desire as well as in renunciation). I would therefore command him to be capable of not answering—my call, my invitation, my expectation, my desire. And I must impose a sort of obligation on him thereby to prove his freedom, a freedom I need, precisely in order to call, wait, invite. . . . As if I were calling someone—for example, on the telephone—saying to him or her, in sum: I don't want you to wait for my call and become forever dependent upon it; go out on the town, be free not to answer. And to prove it, the next time I call you, don't answer, or I won't see you again. If you answer my call, it's all over.<sup>23</sup>

The telephone marks the place of an absence of the other, the ways in which the absent other differs and defers in its distance. This absence cannot be said to be a "pure" absence in the traditional understanding of the term. Telephony presumes the present absence of the telephone, in its ambiguous usage—as telephone and as "phone," a voice, a sound, and, at the end, as silence, inaudibility, unresponsiveness. In calling the other, in thinking about the relationality through the telephone, Derrida is interested in the ethical dimension on the side of the one who is answering the call: "Be free not to answer my call," or be capable of not answering also means, your freedom (which I need in order "to call, wait, invite") breaks (up) the logic of

23. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 2006), p. 174.

*tele-* in the telephone call, breaks its circular nature. In other words, I need you to break that logic, I need you to not be in my reach, I need you to be free (in order to be able “to call, wait, invite” you).

### Am I Through? Can You Hear Me?

So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.<sup>24</sup>

In Sylvia Plath's poem “Daddy” (written in 1962, and published posthumously in *Ariel* in 1965), Holocaust metaphors are intermingling with the narrator violently doing away with “her” father. Our interest here is not primarily in daddy issues and the complexities of father-daughter relationships, but rather in the image of the telephone, and in the kind of relationality it both enables and disables. “So daddy, I'm finally through” can certainly mean being done with daddy. The textual “I” is done with the memories of him. She is over him; she is finally free of him. But being through, on the phone, also implies making a connection.<sup>25</sup> To be through, in this sense, partly refers to a telephonic era of early twentieth-century switchboards, in relation to which female switchboard operators would manually put the call through. The figure of the switchboard operator is mythic, her body “hidden at the heart of a national communications network, appearing only in impersonal voice” in ways that made her a vital site of power and discipline in the midst of male corporate telephone traffic.<sup>26</sup> Then again, even long after these women lost their jobs to fully automated machines, “being through” still holds sway over our ways of understanding the moment of “getting through” to someone, to connect, to establish a connection.

To be through, then, holds an intriguing ambivalence. As Matthew Boswell suggests, the above lines from the poem are simultaneously alluding to connection (she is, indeed, through) and disconnection (in the sense that being through indicates that one is done with, or cut off from something else).<sup>27</sup> To Boswell, the metaphor

24. Sylvia Plath, “Daddy,” in *Ariel: The Restored Edition: A Facsimile of Plath's Manuscript, Reinstating Her Original Selection and Arrangement* (HarperCollins Publishers: New York, 2004), pp. 74–76, at p. 76.

25. Cf. Al Strangeways and Sylvia Plath, “‘The Boot in the Face’: The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” *Contemporary Literature* 37:3 (1996): 370–390.

26. John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 196.

27. Matthew Boswell, “‘Black Phones’: Postmodern Poetics in the Holocaust Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” *Critical Survey* 20:2 (2008): 53–64.

of Plath's black telephone stands for the fundamental dividedness of the narrator's relation to her father, and of poetry's relation with the past. He argues that in "Daddy" (but also elsewhere, such as in Plath's "The Munich Mannequins"), the black telephone embodies a mode of communication with the past that can only transmit incommunicability, that which perhaps paradoxically cannot be spoken, or expressed. As a metaphor in these poems, black telephones suggest poetry's inability to put the living in touch with the dead, and come to function as a repository for voices that are not there. To us, the phone metaphor is also significant in its vivid technological materiality, in that it embodies a relation and a technology that are fundamentally formed by being disconnected "at the root." Its termination of connectivity, of being cut off may seem final. But through the juxtaposition of these lines, and through the logic of telephonic relationality itself, to be cut off does not necessarily mean the opposite of being through. The interruption of the connection, the amputation of the wire, is in fact the very prerequisite of being through, and of making a connection.

In "Daddy," the broken telephone line is not only meaningful, but a matter of life and death. The blackness of the black phone has resonance in other black objects and subjects in the poem, connecting with questions of death, but also race, Jewishness, and "A man in black with a Meinkampf look." Apart from forming a cutoff link to daddy and his Nazi allusions, the black telephone is a direct line to the dead, it seems, with roots reaching through the dirt, and being cut off so the transmission of voices from the other side cannot be heard. A telephone "off at the root" is a strikingly organic metaphor, in a sense evoking horticultural practices of pruning and cutting back (as a removal of dead, diseased, or broken growth), which may make for new growth, or else for a dying branch. To take the telephone off at the root may thus indicate that the wire, which goes deeper than the connector in a house, might spring back. But it may also mean that it has been pulled out from the root, so that it can no longer live, no longer grow back. For Camille Paglia, "This stunning metaphor, regressively fusing the modern with the archaic, portrays miscommunication and a dying family tree as technology on the blink. . . . We normally say a phone is 'off the hook,' not 'off at the root'; the wire, slithering into the ground like a snaky vine, has been cut."<sup>28</sup> In other words, what we find in these lines is a breakage, or a breakdown, not only of transmission, but of family relations. The lines of kinship and connectivity are broken, and yet the presence of

28. Camille Paglia, *Break, Blow, Burn* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), p. 174.

the black phone opens up the very possibility of connection, of the voices getting through, as threatening as that might be.

Within the temporal framework of "Daddy," with its wired machines, landlines, and phone booths, securely located in specific places in the home and in the streets, Kelly reminds us that "we were once much more tethered to the earth. The evidence was everywhere in the form of chords roiling in corners like snakes, or splayed across the floor like tripwire—from the receiver to the phone, from the phone to the wall, from the wall to the poles, from the poles to the switchboard."<sup>29</sup> A telephone off at the root signals a cut in that tethering, a dislocation or disruption of such wired safety, but perhaps also a moment of being set free. A broken signal, a cutoff wire, can be devastating and painful, since the cut being made is a cut in our connection with the other, to the other. But to be cut off, or cut loose, also holds a liberating potential. If you cannot answer, you cannot be held accountable. Much like the telephone itself, you are (seemingly) off the hook.

Ronell notes that the logic of the call relies on the question of answerability: "You picking it up means the call has come through."<sup>30</sup> She also points out how to answer not only implies that the call is indeed through, but that it also means that you give something up, that you are willing to answer to the call(er), willing to take an order. What happens, then, if you do not answer? Or if the telephone is disconnected in the first place? The broken line in "Daddy" performs a break in the father-daughter relationship, but perhaps also in an underlying hetero-normal fantasy of a woman "waiting by the phone," not only for her father (but probably that too), but for her lover or her boyfriend to call. As such, it is a break, not only in gendered relationality, but in the binary composition of gender itself. Or so it seems. Who's calling? And who's (not) answering? What happens if "she" is neither the persistent caller, nor the anxious receiver of the call? The cutoff wire, the broken signal, is in this sense a rather queer technology, and one that makes possible a disruption in that very space of endless waiting. It makes possible the opposite of waiting, the not waiting, as well as the opposite of answerability and accountability, a kind of dis-charge or release.

Then again, even with a broken wire, or within a contemporary framework of bad reception, you are still wired to the machine, and through the machine to others, or to the other. What the break does is not to make impossible the connection indefinitely. Quite the con-

29. Kelly, *Phone Booth* (above, n. 3), p. 54.

30. Ronell, *The Telephone Book* (above, n. 4), p. 2.

trary, a broken signal makes the signal both possible (in the first place), but also in a sense tangible. It becomes knowable. For this reason, disconnection needs to be understood as something other than the opposite of, or the lack of connection, engagement, relatedness, as is commonly the case.<sup>31</sup> In “Daddy,” being through is formed by a broken line, in a sense that points at how disconnection lives in every connection, as a ghost in the machine, as the very foundation of connectedness. Without a break, a broken line, a broken technology (like a phone “off at the root”), there would be no way of forming a connection at all. The same could be said about relationality more generally. It is only through the ever-present possibility of disruption, through the brokenness of the line or the link—or the brokenness of the heart—that relatedness can be felt. The break, in this sense, is what makes the connection real.

### Hang on a Sec

Through its ever-present possibility of disruption and brokenness, and through its vocal noncorporeality, telephonic relationality introduces a shift in existing sensory registers in the sense that the other of the call is reduced to a thing, or reified. One great episode in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* deals with the complexities of telephony, with the anxiety of hearing a loved one’s voice, and with the break of the “final separation.” The scene is set in the early days of telephony, in which this mythic technology became an odd counterpart in unfamiliar conversations. It depicts the narrator’s very first experience of a telephone call from his grandmother, which involves the rather inconvenient and time-consuming business of going to the post office at Doncières, where he then needs to wait for the call. But then, it happened, “in the moment our call has sounded, in the night filled with phantoms to which our ears alone are unsealed, a tiny sound, an abstract sound—the sound of distance overcome—and the voice of the dear one speaks to us.”<sup>32</sup>

In order to transcend the vast distance, from Paris to Doncières, the narrator has to prick his ear to the technological noise of his grandmother’s voice, and to distinguish between the phantom telephonic voice and the remembered image of the loved one (embedded in his imaginary archive). During this process of differentiation, the narrator is faced with the inevitable death of his grandmother and with

31. Cf. Tero Karppi, *Disconnect: Facebook’s Affective Bonds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

32. Marcel Proust, “The Guermites Way I,” in *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), vol. 1, p. 965.

the only remainder in a form of “a phantom as impalpable as the one that would perhaps come back to visit me when my grandmother was dead.”<sup>33</sup> The narrator only needs to wait a second, to wait for that fractured moment, when the voice of the other would vanish altogether. Then it would no longer be possible to speak to the other (who could no longer reply), except through displaced repetitions and endless reanimations, enabled by the surviving technological noise of a traveling voice.

A telephone call is a relation. Such a relation, through the wires, demands waiting. When we want to pause a phone conversation, we ask the other to hang on. Hang on a second. At the same time, when we want to talk to the other, we also say hang on. Hang on a second (longer). It seems as if telephonic relationality (in Proust, consisting partly of the technological noise of the grandmother’s voice) requires the perfect moment between two instances of waiting, between having time and running out of time, between time and death itself. Wait for me and I will wait for you. The difference between these modes of waiting seems intricate. However patiently one listens to the waiting at the other end of the line, this waiting never adds up to a wait long enough. So, while waiting (and never long enough), one faces another paradox of relationality: we need the other (in its distance, displacement, absence) to wait a second, not to die, to wait a bit longer, and at the same time we need the other *not* to wait. Just wait a sec, with me, before, and after me, please do not wait. I need your freedom.

Hang on a bit longer, stay a bit longer, wait a bit longer—those are the things we are saying to each other in the absence of the other, distant on the phone. Wherever and whatever we talk about, it is always about waiting, waiting *a bit longer*. It is, on the one hand, about the never-ending process of waiting, but on the other hand, it is also about this very brief, the briefest instance of time that we always lack in order to have a relation with the other. It is this lack, in the event of death, but also in the briefest of seconds of everything and nothing that endlessly separates us from the other, from the others. It is this second, this spatial and temporal rupture, which signals the impossibility of the relation at the very heart of it. Hang on a sec, wait a bit longer, is at the core of relationality, which then can only be understood as something interrupted. It is an approach to relationality as always already cracked (through this however brief a second of waiting for the other, to the other); relationality characterized by being postponed, prolonged, promised, hanging in the air,

33. *Ibid.*, vol.1, p. 967.

through the wires, a “connection” that is simultaneously lost and found. A connective capacity that may well be devastating, as in Derrida’s *The Postcard*, “the idea that you might ‘call’ me and that I might not answer overwhelms me. All this telephone between us.”<sup>34</sup>

It is a kind of relationality based on a double dissymmetry, as a nonreciprocity that interrupts connectivity understood as an economy of exchange. Even not answering the call of the other (although possibly waiting for it), the telephone would still “ring a bell.” It would still be “relational,” but relational of a different kind, something that “amounts to marking, simply, that we are *here*, present, listening, on the end of the line, ready to respond but not for the moment responding with anything other than the preparation to respond (hello, yes: I’m listening, I can hear that you are there, ready to speak just when I am ready to speak to you).”<sup>35</sup> The phone call demands waiting (hang on a sec), to wait awhile, to survive for a while longer, to be prepared for fast or sudden movement on the other end of the “line” (perhaps disconnecting, sometimes even not answering). And yet, to continue (waiting) persistently, to persevere by waiting for the possibility of a relation, which in its every instance is suspended, broken, interrupted, and thus ultimately impossible. We need to wait for each other, and yet we cannot. In relation, in death, on the phone. It is not only a matter of waiting (a sec) for the other to re-engage, but also to wait for that very line “hang on a sec.” For that line is conveyed by the telephone; the other always gets it a bit later, a (fracture of a) second later, always deferred, postponed. We are to wait for the plea to wait. We have to wait to hear whether we are to be asked to wait.

### **I Can’t Come to the Phone Right Now. Could You Please Leave a Message?**

Hello, hello, baby  
 You called, I can’t hear a thing  
 I have got no service  
 In the club, you see, see  
 Wha-wha-what did you say?  
 Oh, you’re breaking up on me  
 Sorry, I cannot hear you  
 I’m kinda busy.<sup>36</sup>

34. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 41.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

36. Lady Gaga, Rodney Jerkins, LaShawn Daniels, Lazonate Franklin, and Beyoncé



In 2010, the video for Lady Gaga's song "Telephone" (featuring Beyoncé)<sup>37</sup> was released with a bang, quickly generating numerous feminist and queer analyses, including no small amount of praise for its subversive potentials.<sup>38</sup> The video opens with Lady Gaga playing a prison inmate. After some steamy scenes between girls behind bars, she gets a phone call (which she does not pick up), and yet another one from Beyoncé, who bails her out of jail. Once released from prison, the two stars clad in larger-than-life costumes drive across the desert in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* Pussy Wagon, taking a break at a diner to sneak deadly poison into the food of Beyoncé's (other) lover. The video ends with our queer heroines speeding through the desert à la *Thelma and Louise*. Plenty can be said (and has been said) about the kind of feminisms, queer desires, and racial politics that the video embodies; the implications of its dense layering of pop culture references (flirting with everything from Captain America and Wonder Woman to Madonna, Warhol, and *Natural Born Killers*, to mention just a few); and the significance of its retro feel swept in Technicolor and American flags. But few seem to have taken on the task to analyze the perhaps most obvious protagonist of both the video and the song lyrics: the telephone.

A brilliant exception to the relative absence of telephone analyses of "Telephone" is Judith/Jack Halberstam, who points out that "[t]he song itself, misleadingly pop in tone, is actually about broken communications, phones that ring but don't get answered, messages that never get picked up, missed connections, texts that are never sent, words that are never spoken."<sup>39</sup> To this apt observation, we would add that the song can be understood as not only about broken communications, but about communication as something always broken, always incomplete, always consisting of deferrals and delays,

Knowles, "Telephone," on *The Fame Monster*, Lady Gaga featuring Beyoncé, Interscope Records, November 18, 2009.

37. Lady Gaga and Beyoncé Knowles, "Lady Gaga—Telephone ft. Beyoncé," YouTube video, 9:30, posted by Lady Gaga, March 15, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVBSypHzF3U>.

38. See, for example, Lisa Colton, "Who's Calling? Telephone Songs, Female Vocal Empowerment and Signification," in *Lady Gaga and Popular Music: Performing Gender, Fashion, and Culture*, ed. Martin Iddon and Melanie L. Marshall (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 65–81; J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012); Katrin Horn, "Follow the Glitter Way: Lady Gaga and Camp," in *The Performance Identities of Lady Gaga: Critical Essays*, ed. Richard J. Gray II (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), pp. 85–106; Tavia Nyong'o, "Lady Gaga's Lesbian Phallus," *Bully Bloggers*, March 16, 2010, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/03/16/lady-gagas-lesbian-phallus-2/>.

39. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism* (above, n. 38), p. 62.

misunderstandings and mix-ups. Within this relational logic, the telephone becomes an amplifier (and quite literally a microphone), turning up the volume on the dynamics of push and pull, the making and breaking of connections. One interesting thing—in a cross reading of “Telephone” with Plath’s “Daddy”—is the significance of the technological specificity involved in these broken circuits of communication. Technological specificity matters in the sense that different technologies tend to generate communicative breaks or breakdowns in different ways. Thus, there may be an important difference between a cutoff wire (Plath) and a break in wireless connectivity (Gaga). Such specific breaks, or break-ups, also have different gendered implications, or queer potentialities for that matter.

“Telephone” brings the relational logic of broken wires in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” into a more obviously posthuman technological landscape of wireless connectivity and prosthetic mobile devices. We may hardly get to see cell phones visually in the video, and yet they are everywhere. They beep and buzz through the music as dial tones and busy signals. They run through the lyrics, tangled up with the theme of (supposedly) bad reception. They are vibrantly present in the vocals, in how the voices are consistently broken up by stutters and distortions, as if amplified by the sonic consequences of bad cell phone coverage (“Eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh; Stop telepho-nin’ me”).<sup>40</sup> There is also a telephonic quality to the dance moves themselves. The deeper into the video, the more the movements of both Lady Gaga and Beyoncé seem to embody technological slips and glitches, to the point at which their bodies are on the verge of becoming telephones: broken-up, disjointed, wired to the bone. As Halberstam has it, “The mobile phone is a player in the battle of lovers, and so Lady Gaga and Beyoncé decide to unleash themselves from the tyranny of the phone—instead of hanging on the telephone, they become the telephone.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, while mobile telephony links together the lyrics, the vocals, and the dance moves, the video remains visually rooted in a number of retro-style landlines: in the prison and in Beyoncé’s bedroom (but also as on Lady Gaga’s head, and in her hair). Seemingly more restricting, they bind the bodies of callers/callees to specific places, as well as provide a tangible linkage to the history of telephone technologies itself. Then again, once out the bedroom, or out of jail, these tethered machines can ring as much as they want. Someone might take a message (or not), left behind as they are, wired to the wall.

40. Gaga et al., “Telephone” (above, n. 36).

41. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism* (above, n. 38), p. 64.

In the context of Plath's black telephone, the illusion of two-way telephonic communication was broken by the presence of switchboard operators, populating these conversations with a plurality of relations. In the Gaga era, such a plurality of broken binaries is perhaps even more pronounced as leaky digital devices, potential phone tapping, and other ways of being "listened" to make the boundaries between subjects and objects in phone relationality shifty. Wireless connectivity in "Telephone" produces a relational geography in which our female protagonists are always—but at the same time never completely—off the hook. It is a state of profound uncertainty, to be always and never reachable. This creates something of a double bind within telephonic femininity. On the one hand, there is a significant break with a hetero-normal relational script when "she" is not the one calling (always too often), not the one waiting by the phone (always for too long), not the one having a breakdown on the phone (also always too often). She simply does not want to pick up and let "him" get through to her. As Katrin Horn puts it, this is a reminder "that even smartphones can be switched off and that Gaga defines the conditions of her availability herself."<sup>42</sup> This disconnect in answerability, this refusal to answer, to be sexually available (to him), to be held accountable, releases her from the phone, and by extension from him. A cutoff connection and a distancing strategy that, in turn, connects her more deeply to the women within intimate proximity to her. The more he calls, the more she connects with other women, it seems, as evident in Beyoncé's rap interlude:

Boy, the way you blowin' up my phone  
 Won't make me leave no faster  
 Put my coat on faster  
 Leave my girls no faster.<sup>43</sup>

For Halberstam, while in the genre of "mindless pop," "Lady Gaga manages to harness her ring tones to much deeper concepts, like the fragmentation of connection in the age of cell phones, the creation of new forms of rebellion in a universe of media manipulation, and the emergence of new forms of gender and sexuality in a digital age."<sup>44</sup> This holds true, insofar as we stay with the gesture of her not answering the phone, of not letting the call through. Because in the very absence of picking up, there is instead the presence of an alternative, a queer futurity perhaps (to speak with Muñoz), an opening

42. Horn, "Follow the Glitter Way" (above, n. 38), p. 98.

43. Gaga et al., "Telephone" (above, n. 36).

44. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism* (above, n. 38), p. 63.

to a world structured through different relational logics. But this possibility is merely there for a moment, only momentarily, and then it is gone. This freedom to move, to breathe, and to desire in a different way remains conditioned by a relational technology always close at hand and clearly not fully switched off. In fact, the whole song is about his annoying calls (“Stop callin’, stop callin’”), which, however annoying they might be, still link her to him, through a phone that you surely can ignore, but only for so long. The cell phone as an ever-present, dominating, and controlling partner is still part of the picture. No matter how deconstructed the positions of caller and receiver might be, along with the acts of making and breaking connections, the telephone in “Telephone” is still binding. In her feminist analysis of telephone songs, Lisa Colton similarly argues that while the telephone technology in “Telephone” blocks the kind of communication that historically has entrapped and controlled women, Gaga’s freedom is still conditioned by her very availability.<sup>45</sup> And perhaps, in this sense, the cutoff wire in Plath’s “Daddy” is a queerer, more liberating device. With a phone “off at the root,” you are free to leave, free to go out; it will not even ring in your absence, for in a way, this line to the dead has itself died.

### Before We Hang Up

In Ronell’s speculative telephony, the telephone is a powerful disconnecting force, while at the same time a binding device: “Maintaining and joining, the telephone line holds together what it separates. It creates a space of asignifying breaks and is tuned by the emergency feminine on the maternal cord reissued.”<sup>46</sup> Here, this disconnecting force is a Freudian cut with the maternal superego (as impossible as such a cut might be); it is about unconscious transmission, the drama of long distance, and left-behind children. For us, the disconnecting force of the telephone is not so much psychoanalytical as it is metaphysical or ontological. And it is way queerer. In her book, Ronell gets an impressive group of male thinkers on the line. This move in turn makes gender figure primarily as something that makes or marks the Other (“the feminine” or “the maternal”) in the sense that gender equals woman. “She” is the soft voice of the operator, “perfectly suited to perform phallic penetration,” her swift fingers working the switchboard.<sup>47</sup> By literally embodying the switch, the line between subject and object is profoundly destabilized. Then

45. Colton, “Who’s Calling?” (above, n. 38).

46. Ronell, *The Telephone Book* (above, n. 4), p. 4.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 201–202.

again, such boundary instability is mandatory in the very constitution of hetero-normal femininity, in that femininity was always partly about being an object.

Our investment in telephonic dis/connections is different. In this article, we have explored the critical implications of what we could think of as static on the line—of interference, broken signals, and lost connections. Static on the line is a queer device insofar as it makes uncertain the identities of self and other, subject and object, but also in that it has the potential to insert interference in binary divisions of gender. It is precisely this interference that creates relational spaces of profound ambiguity, intensely connected to questions of power, time, and timing.

We discussed such spaces of telephonic ambiguity and relational brokenness in a number of ways. We started out with an analysis of how the state of not knowing whether the call is the question or the answer (to another call) renders unstable the distinction between caller and receiver. The “yes?” that signals the open line is prior to questioning, prior to critique or opposition, prior to negativity, and as such functions as a fundamental affirmation on which relationality builds. We then turned to the formative function of the cutoff wire, how a disconnected telephone does not imply that you are “off the hook,” even if this indeed seems to be the case. The break, or the possibility of a break, is that which paradoxically makes the signal. The interrupted signal, in turn, led us to the question of waiting, in relation, and on the phone. The act of having to wait for the other, yet not being able to wait, always running out of time, or not having time in ways that make the relation unbearable. We finished with a discussion of the intense uncertainty in the state of being always, yet never securely reachable, in an endless play with power and control, desire and longing, with highly uncertain outcomes. Who’s (not) calling? Who’s (not) waiting? Who’s (not) answering? We may envision a way out, or a break with these circuits of telephonic ambiguity: to resist the call, to not wait, to not answer, which in the moment may provide an unbinding or a release from answerability and accountability, only to be re-bound in the next moment. As the broken signal is part of what makes the connection, the break can never be final. It can merely be postponed, suspended, delayed (as in the telephonic phrase “let me put you on hold”).

To understand or rethink relationality through telephonic logics, metaphors, and technologies, we need ideas of interference, broken signals, and lost connections. We may also need a relational vocabulary that includes ideas and concepts of brokenness, without constantly somehow displacing such ideas beyond the limits of re-

lationality itself. For what is the word for a broken relation? Or one with interference? Or one that holds multiple connections, lost and found? Are there even such words? It may seem like relationality is a strikingly binary construct: either you relate, you have a connection, a relation, or there is a break(up), which ends it. Interestingly, the notion of “nonrelationality” has been theorized, in queer theory and elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> Edelman addresses, precisely, the “nonrelation” within relation, as something internal to relation, but always and at the same time as something other than relation; a void, a negative, a force threatening to disrupt and destroy, something that forms the social by deforming it.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, our attempt in this article has rather been to think of such breaks and disconnections as having a different productivity to them, not as something within yet alien in relation, but *as productive of relationality itself*.

We wonder, thus, if it would not make more sense to think of breaks and disruptions as part of what it means to connect, or to relate, in the first place? It may certainly be painful to move, together, while in pieces. But what other ways are there? Do we really have a choice? For without a notion of something broken, or something not functioning in the midst of how we conceive of relations with human subjects (and nonhuman objects), relationality would be both unthinkable and impossible. Thinking the break as something deeply relational may thus have the potential to provide us with other modes of being in the world, and other ways of being together. Always less than perfect, and always other than whole.

48. See, for example, Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (above, n. 14); Lee Edelman, “An Ethics of Desubjectivation?,” *Differences* 27:3 (2016): 106–118; Paul Harrison, “‘How Shall I Say It . . . ?’ Relating the Nonrelational,” *Environment and Planning A* 39 (2007): 590–608.

49. Edelman, “An Ethics of Desubjectivation?” (above, n. 48).