

CULTURAL COMMENT

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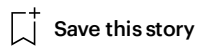
Transference and the contemporary classroom.

By Merve Emre

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Illustration by Andrew B. Myers



At the center of “The Life of the Mind” (2021), Christine Smallwood’s comic novel about the vagaries of contemporary academia, are two scenes designed to mirror each other. In the first, the protagonist, Dorothy, an adjunct professor of English literature, is attending a conference in Las Vegas, where she has a video session with her therapist: she talks “blandly,” about architecture and signage, air-conditioning and species death, before they move onto a conversation of notably unspecified length and tone about Dorothy’s mother. In the second, Dorothy is losing money in a casino when her former dissertation adviser, Judith, “a teacher and a foster mother and an employer,” drags her to a pool, past crowds of parents and children and a sign that “spelled LOVE in glittery red letters.” On the way, Judith snaps a photograph of Dorothy—“a good photo,” Dorothy thinks, by comparison to the unflattering photographs that her boyfriend takes, and which lead her to wonder if he loves her. “But that same logic would dictate that Judith loved Dorothy,” Smallwood writes, “and that couldn’t be true.”

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The therapist, the teacher, the mother. The client, the student, the child. In the two scenes, these figures shadow one another, swapping places and roles, in a diptych that shows us what it might be like to experience, as Dorothy does, “adulthood as a simulacra of childhood.” There is an anxious Hitchcockian instability to the descriptions of both encounters. One moment, the therapist’s eyes are “looking vacantly”; the next, they are “moving around all the time,” before they look “blankly” again. One moment, Judith’s eyes seem to have “fully spherical, panopticon-like mobility”; the next, they are “the greedy straws” of a face that is “like a living organism that sucked the life out of your face in order to sustain itself.” Smallwood’s narrator understands how changeable our perceptions can be of a person who derives her power from a mingling of institutional authority and charismatic appeal. This power imparts a vivid significance to that person’s every word, glance, and gesture—a significance that, as “The Life of the Mind” portrays, reproduces phrases and ideas present in other intimate relationships, but remains wary of classifying this power as love.

This dynamic can be present in any relationship, but, as the psychoanalyst Leo Stone observed, in 1967, it operates at the highest pitch in relationships with “individuals whose vocations provide similarities or parallels, however rarefied, to the caretaking functions of the original parents: teachers, physicians,

clergymen, political rulers, occasionally others.” Parents awaken the hope of help and love; children want to please them. “Judith always had the ability to make Dorothy feel like a puppy who had crapped on the carpet,” Smallwood writes. “She wagged a finger like Dorothy was being mischievous or trying to get attention, but Dorothy was only ever trying to give the right answer.” The right answer may be met with an appreciative exclamation (“You’re special, Dodo,” Judith says at one point. “I’ve always told you that!”), a dismissive pat on the head, or a vehement invitation to serve as an errand girl, a bitchy confidante, or an uncredited collaborator. In Vegas, Judith weeps to Dorothy about the death of a friend, and urges Dorothy to cry in turn, trying to transform her former pupil into a mirror that Judith can hold up to her tear-streaked face so that her sorrow might be over there—in an already vulnerable, childlike Dorothy—rather than part of her.

It would be easy to describe Judith’s actions as exploitative, harmful, toxic, triggering, or traumatic, a failure of generosity and care. These are terms that, in the past decade or so, have become a kind of lingua franca for students and teachers attempting to adjudicate contested exchanges: test questions, classroom exercises, grading and accommodation policies, student feedback, course content, off-the-cuff jokes, extracurricular plays and productions, and social-media posts. What is salutary about “The Life of the Mind,” however, is that Smallwood details her protagonist’s discomforts while explicitly resisting any idiom that would fix them as violent, a violation, or even a rupture of everyday life. “Hers was a situation, not a trauma,” Smallwood writes. “A trauma implied an event, a shock, before and after. The situation persisted.”

Older terms for explaining the ongoing situation between Dorothy and Judith are the ones that Leo Stone was writing about: transference and countertransference. The concepts date from the early days of psychoanalysis, but rarely crop up in discussion of current classroom controversies. But they are worth reviving if universities are to move away from cycles of easy outrage and conspiratorial accounts of who really holds power, and toward a hard-won truce.

Transference began as a theory of love, or, rather, of love’s inadequacy. “If someone’s need for love is not entirely satisfied by reality, he is bound to approach every new person whom he meets with libidinal anticipatory ideas,” Sigmund Freud wrote, in his 1912 paper “The Dynamics of Transference.” It struck Freud as normal and obvious that the drive he had named the libido would be directed at the doctor, who seemed, to the patient, to fit an emotional groove well worn. The doctor appeared with the image of a father, a mother, or a brother projected onto him and evoked a range of similar feelings. There might be love, adulation, desire, idolatry (the affects of positive transference)—or anxiety, frailty, jealousy, and anger (the affects of negative transference). These passions threatened to impede analysis, but acknowledging them, Freud believed, could help surface the patient’s past relationships and absent loves—the phantoms who invisibly jostled one another on the doctor’s couch. “When all is said and done, it is impossible to destroy anyone *in absentia* or *in effigie*,” he concluded.

In the U.S, where Freud delivered his lectures on sexuality in 1909, the idea that transference was both an unconscious source of resistance to analysis and a means for the analyst to master the unconscious appealed to Progressive Era theorists of pedagogy. For many, the relationship between analyst and analysand was, in broad strokes, analogous to the relationship between teacher and student. (Whether transference is unique to analysis or applies more generally was, and still is, a contested point among psychoanalysts.) In 1919, the educator and philosopher Wilfrid Lay published "The Child's Unconscious Mind: The Relations of Psychoanalysis to Education," which was followed in 1922 by a cascade of books that made psychoanalytic concepts easy for teachers to apply to the classroom: George Henry Green's "Psychoanalysis in the Classroom," H. Crichton Miller's "The New Psychology and the Teacher," and Evelyn Saywell's "The Growing Girl: Her Development and Training." An understanding of transference and countertransference was crucial for cultivating the whole child, who, Lay argues, harbored a profound antipathy to the very principle of education, rooted in an early resentment of parental figures. "Nobody wants to learn *from another person*, even from a professional teacher," he writes. The teacher's attempt to impose his authority over the student only increased the student's resistance, which, in turn, intensified the teacher's demonstrations of his authority—a vicious cycle. In the worst-case scenario, the resistance escalated, paranoid readings of each party's intentions dominated on both sides, and the classroom spiralled into suspicion, insolence, complaint, or outright rebellion.

Lay's book is more than a century old, but anyone who has ever experienced a "bad class," either as a student or as a teacher, will recognize the dynamic he describes and the mutual misery that it generates. Last year, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the cartoonist Phoebe Gloeckner published a piece, "My Cartoonish Cancellation," describing how students in her introductory comics course, at the University of Michigan, started a private group chat after she had presented a cartoon from the nineteen-seventies that they judged to be "hurtful" or "harming." They detailed her every slip—the time she confused two students' names, or used the wrong pronoun, or asked the class why work was late, or forgot that she was sharing her screen, which showed a comic-book cover that they found offensive. The allegations they made were not untrue, but they were "ungenerously construed," Gloeckner writes, and "put me into something of a panic." The more she tried to offset the panic, by suggesting a film to watch or inviting experts to guest-lecture, the colder and more antagonistic the students' responses became. The virtual classroom turned into a nightmare space.

The teacher who tries to set things right by desperately doing more—more assignments, more readings, more demonstrations of expertise—may, oddly enough, make a bad situation worse. Students do not in fact want the teacher's knowledge; they want the teacher to want theirs. "The art of teaching," Lay explains, consists in "developing or 'delivering' the thoughts, and by means of them the actions, of the pupil, who all along is to be assured that he is imparting information which the teacher is sincerely desirous of knowing." The teacher in control of the classroom's transference and countertransference dynamics had to create the illusion of student mastery—a convincing simulacrum of the idea that professors learn more from their students than their students learn from them. Yet the artful teacher

retained a quiet understanding of who it was that was really seeding the ideas that his students expressed, who was really setting the agenda.

Conversely, anyone who has experienced a “good class,” as either a student or a teacher, will recognize that dynamic of mutual satisfaction in Lay’s description. Good classes are not recalled in the same obsessive detail as bad ones because good classes are not eventful in the same way. Their drama is intellectual, not interpersonal; their stakes are shared thought and argument; the feelings they give rise to are pleasantly hazy. Neither their content nor their tone needs to be litigated in retrospect. There is a wonderful synchronicity between the knowledge of the teacher and what Lay and his contemporaries called the wish-energy of the student, such that the external world of the classroom appears to be changed into a dream world, a respite from the school that, paradoxically, exists within it.

During the postwar years, the period that the historian Nathan G. Hale, Jr., deemed the golden age of psychoanalysis, the classroom receded as more pressing political and social needs came into view. By 1960, it was possible for the psychoanalyst Samuel Baron, in his essay “Transference and Counter-Transference in the Classroom,” to express his surprise that “practically nothing has been written on the subject.” The claim had its utility for Baron, who focussed especially on countertransference to create a typology of teachers. “The young teacher who still views himself as a child,” Baron wrote, might have the tendency to “show affection indiscriminately,” overvaluing and overreacting to the student’s responses. The sadistic teacher was a teacher in denial, performing his “outright contempt” and “deliberate disregard” for the student’s feelings to avoid accepting his dependence on them. The idealistic teacher doubled as the masochistic teacher, always signalling his “readiness for self-sacrifice,” his infinite tolerance for his student’s moods and foibles. What made it difficult to counteract the patterns of any one of these types, Baron observed, was the low social status of the teacher in particular and the anti-intellectualism of society at large. In his day, as in ours, both conspired to keep the teacher immature and to make equanimity impossible.

Once we accept that excited interest will always make itself felt in classroom relationships, the question becomes how to talk about it. Baron’s typology flirted with the rhetoric of sexual taboo, but it was in 1989 that the National Women’s Studies Association first purposively deployed the term “Erotics of the Classroom,” in a call for papers on pedagogy. It proliferated through the feminist writings of the nineties and, often, as a strategy for reclaiming women’s affective agency in the classroom—in, for instance, the essays collected in bell hooks’s “Teaching to Transgress” (1994). But it reached an uncomfortable climax in Jane Gallop’s 1997 book, “Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment.” In it, Gallop defends her decision to kiss her advisee during a conference—a “brazen and public” kiss intended, she claims, to cause a spectacle and spur debate about the erotics of the classroom. “Transference is undoubtedly an ‘amorous relation,’” she writes. “At its most intense—and, I would argue, its most productive, the pedagogical relation between teacher and student is, in fact, a ‘consensual amorous relation.’” To ban this relation,

which, she suggests, had to be expressed in this specific way—or, at least, could not have its expression fixed or constrained—would be to ban “teaching itself.”

Any serious analysis of transference in an educational context will be suspect when it lays such heavy emphasis on sexualizing the relationship between students and professors. Those doing the analysis do not always recognize this error or, worse, work hard to confirm it. Consider Marta Figlerowicz and Ayesha Ramachandran’s 2018 essay, “The Erotics of Mentorship,” which attempts to redeem eros in the classroom by presenting it as a history of philosophically productive desire. Through figures like Alcibiades and Socrates, Abelard and Heloise, Saint-Preux and Julie, and Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, the authors (who make no mention of transference) set out to draw a parallel between the affects that emerge in a “good class”—the intensely alive feeling of intellectual and emotional communion—and the affects that emerge from a teacher “stoking and refusing” a student’s “sexual longings.” To argue on this rhetorical ground is to disable the argument from the start.

Amia Srinivasan is surely correct when she writes, in a far more measured article, “Sex as a Pedagogical Failure,” that the teacher who eroticizes her students commits the error of responding to transference in kind rather than using it to maintain control over the classroom. To turn transference into a useful pedagogical tool “would involve, presumably, the professor ‘convincing’ the student that her desire for him is a form of projection,” she writes. “In that way, the student’s transference-feelings could be repurposed for the end of education itself: that is, the student’s learning.” It is unclear, however, how this would play out in practice. When has anyone’s desire ever weakened in the face of the claim that he is projecting or fantasizing? How could fantasy, which is nothing more than the imagination working on objects outside the self, be eradicated from human interactions? As Freud warns, in his paper “Observations on Transference-Love,” the attempt to repurpose transference risks consuming the entire analytic relation. In the classroom, one could imagine how openly addressing transference would become its own variety of pedagogical failure—the discomfort and distraction it would cause, the time it would take, the interest the teacher would have to cultivate in the student’s family life.

Transference, then, is the baby that got thrown out with the bathwater of “the erotics of the classroom,” once that water became thoroughly sexualized and thus taboo. To reinstate it as a useful way of understanding what occurs on campuses requires recognizing what the arguments above do not: that, for the vast majority of teachers, the affective feelings of the classroom are not experienced as romantic, let alone sexual, desire. Those who teach know the variety of roles we can be conscripted into—mother, father, sibling, best friend, therapist, priest, idol, nemesis—just as we know, or at least sense, which of these roles we are willing to play at different moments in our lives, which fantasies of love we will honor and which we will deflate, ignore, or reject. I remember when my former dissertation adviser predicted that, once I had children of my own, I would no longer feel energized by acting as a foster mother to my students. She was correct; now I feel a shudder of unease when a teacher reveals, almost

always on social media, that she has baked something for her class, or that she has accommodated an abnormal number of absences or late assignments, in a magnanimous gesture of “care.”

In casual conversation, especially during the pandemic, the emergent discourse of “care,” as a friend suggested to me, has emerged as the positive transference counterpart of the negative language of “harm” and “trauma.” The teacher’s declarations of care are, at once, a way of soliciting transference-love from her students and a way of permitting herself to respond in kind. Unawareness of transference as a concept means that the teacher can remain not just ignorant of what she is doing but proud of it—of wanting to love her students and to be loved by them in return. Here, countertransference works to mask and to compensate for the disproportionate care work performed by so-called Professor Moms, whose performance of support and service disadvantaged them in assessments of their productivity.

Set against this mystified pride and preciousness, the appeal of the Vegas diptych in Smallwood’s “The Life of the Mind” is its bathos. Where one would expect to find “the entanglement of stimulating ideas and charismatic people,” to echo Figlerowicz and Ramachandran’s sober depiction of the academy, there is a drunk, weeping adviser and her former graduate student, marvelling at the possibility of drinking a piña colada from a twisty straw. This is probably closer in spirit to “The Symposium” than Figlerowicz and Ramachandran would like to believe. Toward the end of Plato’s dialogue, the general and statesman Alcibiades stumbles into a drinking party, drunker than any of the guests, and sees his teacher, Socrates. He weaves a wreath into Socrates’ hair and gives a speech in which he praises Socrates’ ugly face, his sexual restraint, and the simplicity of his teachings. The comic performance deflates what philosophy cannot, and in doing so it shows us how redirecting transference is as much an aesthetic task as a psychological one.

Whether to play transference for romance, tragedy, or comedy, whether to present it as sentimental, farcical, or sexual in monologue or dialogue, are choices that one makes in life, as in literature. Smallwood plays it as a bleak comedy, whereas Ben Lerner’s “The Topeka School,” which presents us with anxious high-school debaters and their paternal coaches, plays it a little sweeter and a little dryer. Lucy Ives’s “Life Is Everywhere” plays it for satire, turning a graduate literature seminar into an occasion for two women professors, one hard, the other soft, to bicker, while their students look on, titillated and embarrassed. K. Patrick’s novel “Mrs. S,” a sly rewriting of Charlotte Brontë’s boarding-school romances, plays it as lesbian erotica with comic touches, whereas Susan Choi’s “My Education” plays it as lesbian erotica with tragic interludes.

To play it straight, as twenty-first-century American realism, requires a shift away from the novel and toward journalism. “It breaks my heart that a professor who is supposed to be my role model [would] show a picture of the prophet,” Aram Wedatalla, the then president of the Muslim Student Association at Hamline University, said, after an adjunct professor of art history showed an image of the prophet (with a trigger warning) and did not have her contract renewed. Plenty of people have debated the

function of trigger warnings, especially given a case in which issuing one is insufficient for protecting either the student's feelings or the teacher's job. Almost no one, to my knowledge, has questioned Wedatalla's genuinely moving claim that her professor "is supposed to be my role model," or that the job of a role model, like the job of a mother, is to protect and to comfort her charges. Mary Gaitskill, in her sensitive essay "The Trials of the Young: A Semester," details how, during a decade or so of teaching, she comes to see her students' growing desire for control in the classroom as a product of the chaos that reigns outside it. These are frightening times, Gaitskill observes. "Only a fool would not crave safety in the face of what is happening now"—mass shootings, resurgent white nationalism, climate emergencies, not to mention the rising cost and declining value of a college degree. The desire for safety exceeds the love that any parent can provide her children. No wonder they seek it from their teachers.

Some recent examples of teaching controversies are so obviously cases of mismanaged transference that the absence of any reference to it is stunning. In February, the theologian Vincent Lloyd published an essay titled "A Black Professor Trapped in Anti-Racist Hell," in the online magazine *Compact*, about how his students expelled him from a class he was teaching, *Race and the Limits of Law in America*, at a high-school program run by the Telluride Association. It is a compelling essay—intelligent, sympathetic, by turns poignant and enraged, and genuinely committed to understanding what is gained and what is lost when ideals such as justice become subject to the bureaucratic structures and procedures of higher education. But, like many first-person accounts of campus controversies, it seems not to grasp the psychological dynamics at play between teachers and students.

These dynamics are easy to detect in the essay's language. Lloyd's students are seventeen years old, high-school students on the cusp of adulthood. Of those he singles out for description, each is introduced as a "girl." (I say this without judgment; it is the term I also would have used.) The girls remind him, he writes, of "the heroes of the *Mysterious Benedict Society* books I was reading to my daughter." Tellingly, the characters in these books are brilliant children taken in by a powerful intellectual. Lloyd's daughter, too, comes up regularly in the essay: first, in an allusion to a domestic scene of reading; next, in his reference to her Afrocentric school, evidence of how his professional and personal bona fides intersect; and, finally, in his memory of a previous time he taught for Telluride, in 2014, when she turned one. ("Not knowing anyone in town, we had the students over to the house we were staying at for her birthday party," he writes.) The daughter and the students converge in the figure of the girl. The classroom is well on its way to becoming an extension of the family, as imagined by its patriarch.

In his recent class, Lloyd had his authority challenged by a "factotum" whom he calls Keisha, "a recent graduate of an Ivy League university, mentored by a television-celebrity black intellectual." A factotum is a term for a general servant, but it is clear, from Keisha's pedigree, that she will not serve him. "She largely remained silent during class for the first three weeks, counter-programming the seminar in the afternoons," Lloyd recalls—that is, she lectured on authors she considered more radical than the ones he had chosen, and reported when a student felt harmed by a racial epithet in a legal text. Keisha, in Lloyd's

telling of the story, is brash, dogmatic, lazy, and opportunistic, whereas he is mature, rational, hardworking, and learned. To his surprise, the students not only gravitate toward her but accuse him of perpetuating anti-Black harm. Lloyd can explain it only by analogizing anti-racist pedagogy to brainwashing. “Last summer, I found anti-racism to be a perversion of religion,” he concludes. “I found a cult.”

Running under Lloyd’s well-calibrated tone, one hears disbelief and hurt mingled with envy and resentment, feelings that are never entirely repressible. Perceiving anti-racism as a cult allows him to avoid a difficult truth: the classroom has not transformed into a church or a temple but remains a classroom, and Keisha, in her twenties, is a better teacher than he is. By “better,” I do not mean that she is more knowledgeable or that what she teaches will benefit the students more, intellectually or morally. (One could even argue that she is abusing her hold over the classroom.) I mean only that, as one of Samuel Baron’s “young teacher” figures, she has learned how to manage the transference of the class and her countertransference response more successfully than Lloyd has. She has persuaded the “girls” to adopt her language, to accept her story as their truth, and to believe that this truth originated with them and that she was merely its mouthpiece. She is able to teach—to get the students to read and to listen, to speak and to socialize with her. She has played her role as their factotum, their servant-teacher, perfectly.

Of course, what Lloyd identifies as the “spirit of the times” is a factor. There is much to object to in the imprecise use of “harm.” There is even more to object to in what Elise Archias and Blake Stimson have described as “the hysteria of university administrators” who adopt “the student’s upset feelings and youthful perspective as their own” to discipline faculty members, and who elevate diversity officers (some of whom, like Keisha, have little experience as teachers) as moral and pedagogical authorities on campus. And there is still more in how differences of race, gender, sexuality, nationality, age, and job security make certain teachers more vulnerable than others to complaint. It is, however, often easier to lay all the blame on an idiom or an ideology than it is to understand the all too human drives by which idioms or ideologies lend coherence to feelings of pleasure or displeasure. This failure to understand will always limit one’s response to a situation. For all his contempt of the way that words like “triggering” and “harm” have become the “idiom *du jour*,” Lloyd narrates the essay on their terms. By the end of it, everyone remains in the dark. No one can see their fantasies for what they are. There appear to be no grownups in the room.

Lloyd’s class may be over, but the situation is, for all of us, ongoing. To adjust our language to account for transference could be the first step toward a collective act of growing up. Adjustment does not involve rejection or scorn. It is easy to mock the language of harm and violence, or to dismiss it as “woke.” What is more difficult is to craft an alternative language—a language that refuses to negate the real feelings of dismay that arise when authority figures fail to live up to the fantasies or expectations projected onto them, but that also refuses to describe this failure as an act of violence, or to treat it as a punishable offense.

To use this language would be to choose to help ourselves. Instead of descending into bitterness and recrimination, we could defuse conflicts that have become overheated—and all the more so when frenzied media coverage and social-media commentary layer the projections and fantasies of innumerable strangers onto the original situation. Instead of fighting our phantoms, we could take responsibility for the flesh-and-blood people—mothers, fathers, sons, daughters—in the room with us. And instead of fumbling around in our ignorance, or dwelling in our nightmares, we could choose to learn what is really going on in our classrooms. ♦

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