Our Good Friends

The recent interest in friendship in queer studies was preceded by lesbian-feminist attention to the history of female romantic friendship in the 1970s and early 1980s. This model of “primary intensity” between women, closely allied to Adrienne Rich’s concept of the lesbian continuum, de-emphasized the erotic aspect of relations between women and privileged instead affective intensity, mutual support, and the freedom of self-definition. At the moment of its ascendance, this model helped make sense of women’s relationships both in the past and in the present. In her 1981 study, Surpassing the Love of Men, Lillian Faderman drew a direct line from the affective bonds of famous “couples” like the Ladies of Llangollen and Michael Field to the lesbian-feminist couples of the 1970s; at the same time, she lamented the “dark days,” stretching from the advent of sexology to the rise of second-wave feminism. Faderman speculated that the “romantic friends of other eras would probably have felt entirely comfortable in many lesbian-feminist relationships.” Whether or not this was true, it was certainly the case that many lesbian-feminists took comfort by imagining themselves in the romantic friendships of the past.

The idealized image of passionate, gender-separatist, and possibly—maybe sexual relations between women did not survive the sex wars of
the 1980s or the general darkening in tone of lesbian representation in the 1990s. Terry Castle's dismissal of the Ladies of Llangollen in her 1993 book, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, gives some idea of how deeply the discourse of romantic friendship was discredited during that time. Although these retiring Scottish ladies were once seen as icons of romantic lesbian bliss, Castle considers "this insufferable old pair" only to wonder if "it may not indeed be time to revise the often cloying "romantic friendship" model." In the past couple of decades, critics and historians have launched an attack on the idealized discourse of female friendship on several fronts: not only was it very likely that these ladies were "doing it" all along, but this limited, upper- and middle-class discourse could hardly account, they argued, for the full range of erotic and affective bonds between women before 1900.

It seems clear that this particular version of romantic friendship holds little appeal in the contemporary moment, when critical interest has turned away from the "profoundly female experience" of lesbianism to "gender trouble" and "sexual dissidence." Yet while female romantic friendship has become increasingly marginal, attention to both the history and the philosophy of friendship has been reactivated in queer studies. Even in the midst of the turn to stigma, shame, and bad sex, friendship remains a kind of sacred space, a consistently idealized model of same-sex relations. In his late interview, "Friendship as a Way of Life," Michel Foucault laid down a foundation for this recent work as he invoked friendship as an alternative form of intimacy, a utopian space beyond the constraints of marriage and the family. In tracing the fluctuating fortunes of the friendship concept in gay, lesbian, and queer criticism, it is interesting to note that in this interview Foucault approvingly cites Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men*. In the intervening years, Faderman's work has been called utopian, desexualizing, and essentialist, while Foucault's work on friendship has been central to queer re-thinkings of intimacy and the social.

Friendship plays an important role in queer history. Clearly idealized within a Greek homoerotic context, friendship in the West from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century constitutes a site for the exploration of same-sex intimacies relatively free from stigma. Jonathan Ned Katz's 2001 book, *Love Stories*, for instance, focuses on the alternative forms of intimacy explored by men in the nineteenth century, before the distinction between gay and straight was consolidated. Histories of same-sex relations "before homosexuality" hold out possibilities for a renewal of social and sexual relations in the present. Across the twentieth century, friendship provided an alternative to family and marriage for many gay people; the widespread notion of a friendship network as a gay or queer "family" arises from the historical exclusion of gay people from their birth families and from the institution of marriage. In contemporary gay and lesbian life, the valorization of friendship as a less obligatory and highly structured form of intimacy in queer culture spans great ideological divides: people who agree about little else tend to agree that an ethics of friendship as well as related forms of nonbiological kinship are among the greatest achievements of queer culture.

Friendship also holds a particular appeal for queer theory. The field of queer studies emerges in part in the early 1990s out of a frustration with the limitations and exclusions of identity politics. Queer studies turns against the notion of fixed categories of sexual orientation and the essentialist gender categories that anchor them. In the collective effort to undermine a strict division between heterosexuality and homosexuality, queer scholars have looked to models of sexual and gender behavior that exceed the normative bounds of "modern gay identity." The history of friendship is a particularly attractive archive for the exploration of same-sex relations, partly because of the relative absence of stigma, and partly because of the relatively unstructured nature of friendship as a mode of intimacy.

In addition to these explanations for the queer interest in friendship, I think there is another one that has received less attention. Over the long course of Western history, friendship has been at the very top of the hierarchy of intimate relations; during that same period, same-sex desire and love have been among the most denigrated forms of intimacy. In the queer attention to friendship, there is a natural desire of the stigmatized to draw on the energies of what remains a powerfully idealized social form. The long philosophical tradition of friendship that sees this relation as a model of equality, reciprocity, and longevity proves almost irresistible to the bearers of a form of love understood to be nasty, brutish, and short.

According to a tradition reaching back to Aristotle, friendship is seen as an autonomous space, as free from the machinations of power as it is from the shocks of desire. Friendship is understood to be noninstrumental; its lack of a determinate end is one of the main factors distinguishing it from
eros. Comparing “affection for women” and friendship between men in his essay on friendship, Montaigne writes that love is
more active, more scorching, and more intense. But it is an impetuous
and fickle flame, undulating and variable, a fever flame, subject to fits
and lulls, that holds us only by one corner. In friendship it is a general
and universal warmth . . . with nothing bitter and stinging about it.
What is more, in love there is nothing but a frantic desire for what flees
from us . . . As soon as it enters the boundaries of friendship, that is to
say harmony of wills, it grows faint and languid. Enjoyment destroys it,
as having a fleshly end, subject to society satiety. Friendship, on the
contrary, is enjoyed according as it is desired.9
For Montaigne, love burns us, while friendship spreads a “general and
universal warmth”: friendship, or philia, moves away from eros and
toward the universal love of the neighbor, caritas. It holds out the promise
of an autonomous space away from the tremors of eroticism, and also from
eros’s relentless narrative logic of pursuit, consumption, and exhaus-
tion. Being with the friend is an end in itself. There is no orgasm of
friendship; wedding bells do not ring for friends.
The ideal of friendship has had a significant afterlife in queer thought.
In “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Foucault suggests cultivating a mode
of existence in which friendship would be central. Questioning the ten-
dency to always ask, “What is the secret of my desire?” Foucault writes,
Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, ‘What relations, through ho-
monosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied and modulated?’ “
Friendship for Foucault is an alternative form of relation enabled by the
advent of homosexuality. It is for this reason, he writes, that “homosex-
uality is not a form of desire but something desirable.” Friendship holds
out the promise of a “naked” relation, a fragile space outside of the
institutional logics of marriage, “professional camaraderie,” and routin-
ized sexual encounters. The space Foucault describes, however, is
hardly the transcendent space of eternal, harmonic, coupled friendship
that Montaigne points to in his ambitiously homoerotic essay. Friendship
appears here as a relatively uncharted and labile space of relations traver-
sed in multiple and unpredictable ways by desire. Foucault writes,
“It’s a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness that exists among a
lot of people.” Foucault’s notion of friendship draws on the philosop-
ical canon of friendship, and it opens this discourse to disturbing and
unexpected currents of desire and social refusal.10

The shift Foucault sketches away from homosexuality as a fixed
identity to homosexuality as an undiscovered horizon of relational and
ontological possibilities has had an enormous appeal for queer readers.
His brief, suggestive remarks in this interview have been profoundly in-
fluential in the field. Still, queer writing on friendship tends to emphasize
fairly familiar and reassuring qualities of friendship over uneasiness, de-
sire, or the “improbable.”11 In a chapter titled “The Friendship Ethic” in
Same Sex Intimacies, Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Hearphy, and Catherine Donovan
approvingly cite Foucault and suggest that nonheterosexual friendship
“continues to disrupt radically the conventional boundaries and separa-
tions in everyday life” and that such friendships “make life experiments
possible.”12 The authors interview a diverse range of queer women and
men, and present firsthand accounts of such life experiments. Yet the ele-
ments of what the authors ultimately describe as the friendship ethic—
“care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge”—do not necessarily capture
the uneasiness and the trouble that might be expected to accompany on-
going experimentalism. Rather, these characteristics represent a familiar
catalogue of attitudes and behaviors associated with ethical treatment of
the other.13
I do not want to suggest that nonheterosexual friendship networks
are not characterized by experimentalism and by mutual care and re-
spect. In many ways, such a description offers a good account of the
kinds of alternative arrangements in which many queer people do actu-
ally find themselves. What I want to point to instead is the stabilizing
role that this version of friendship plays in imagining queer existence
and queer community. Friendship has played this role in an official ca-
pacity recently. In the activist call for alternatives to the same-sex mar-
rriage platform, friendship has been forwarded as a form of relation that
is tied neither to the conjugal couple nor to blood kinship, but nonethe-
less presents a legible and generally appealing image of caring and inti-
macy.
In a section of the general statement of the organization Beyond Mar-
rriage entitled “The Longing for Community and Connectedness,” the
authors reflect on the inadequacy of the marriage form in meeting the
needs of LGBT people.

So many people in our society and throughout the world long for a
sense of caring community and connectedness, and for the ability to
have a decent standard of living and pursue meaningful lives free from the threat of violence and intimidation. We seek to create a movement that addresses this longing.

So many of us long for communities in which there is systemic affirmation, valuing, and nurturing of difference, and in which conformity to a narrow and restricting vision is never demanded as the price of admission to caring civil society. Our vision is the creation of communities in which we are encouraged to explore the widest range of non-exploitative, non-abusive possibilities in love, gender, desire and sex—and in the creation of new forms of constructed families without fear that this searching will potentially forfeit for us our right to be honored and valued within our communities and in the wider world. Many of us, too, across all identities, yearn for an end to repressive attempts to control our personal lives. For LGBT and queer communities, this longing has special significance.14

With a nod to the historic exclusion of LGBT people from dominant forms of intimacy—marriage and the family—the Beyond Marriage statement acknowledges the specificity of queer longing for community. While such an acknowledgment might preface a call for the legalization of same-sex marriage, the statement actually risks this acknowledgment in the context of a call for a departure from limited and limiting forms of state-sponsored intimacy; it gestures toward an expanded and as yet unmapped field of relations. The risky utopianism of the Beyond Marriage movement is undeniable: they aim to address social exclusion and the special longing that it produces; at the same time, they resist the most obvious “solutions” to that longing. Such a move draws on the historical importance of friendship and alternative, nonbiological kinship for LGBT people. But such alternatives and the consolations that they provide have hardly been perfect. That fact—and not simply conservative conformism—accounts for the powerful appeal of gay marriage, and for the “special” quality of longing that queer people feel. The attempt to address that longing directly is blunted, in this statement, by the presentation of community as an unambiguous guarantor of intimacy and care.15

Such accounts do not admit the trouble and unease that are at the heart of friendship. In a well-known moment in “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Foucault claims that it is not homosexual sex that poses a challenge to general social norms but rather new forms of homosexual intimacy. There is little to disturb in the expected image of “two young men

meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other’s asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour.” Foucault writes that “there you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease, and for two reasons: it responds to a reassuring canon of beauty, and it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship” (136). Foucault’s reflections on queer friendship gesture not only toward the possibility of new forms of intimacy and pleasure, but also toward an enhanced recognition of what can be troubling in affection and companionship. Because friendship has historically been a salve for queer forms of intimacy trouble, queer thought has generally presented friendship as trouble free. Yet that same history might allow us to think about queer ways of life and forms of intimacy that include trouble, and even make it central.