

## THE PROVOCATIONS OF ENDURING FRIENDSHIP

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If you do a Google search for “Judith Butler” and “friendship,” not much comes up. Mostly there are links to acknowledgments in her many books where she thanks those who have given support, advice, criticism . . . friendship. In fact, the title of this paper comes from one of those acknowledgments—in *Antigone’s Claim*—and it is offered to me. For those of us who have experienced it, Butler is a phenomenal friend; her keen insight, her intense concern, and her generosity are unprecedented and treasured. To be a friend of Judith Butler is to know the joys of a special kind of connection. This is not about the superficial relationship connoted by “friends with benefits,” or Facebook friends, or “Friends of Bill,” or some other celebrity figure—it’s about recognition and emotional sustenance, a shared practice that changes each of us and that is increasingly rare these days.

Yet friendship is largely absent from the theoretical explorations Butler has pursued these many years. She’s taught us to think differently about sexuality and identity, *the* body in its psychic materiality, *the* family and its connections to symbolic and imaginary processes, and politics as an operation of power. But friendship—that ineffable relationship that lies somewhere between families and sexuality and that often serves as an alternative model for politics, is strikingly absent—or certainly not central—in the thinking she has pursued. In this short set of provocations, I want to suggest that the ingredients for the theorizing of friendship are already present in the Butler corpus. Indeed that friendship lies at the crossroads of her many different engagements—with psychoanalysis, with the social history of families, with politics, and with philosophy itself.

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Derrida's comment in his *Politics of Friendship*, in a reference to Heidegger, might well serve as the epigraph for this paper:

The question "what is friendship?" but also "who is the friend (both or either sex)?" is nothing but the question "what is philosophy?"<sup>1</sup>

Of course, friendship is there by implication in Butler's discussions of the self and its constitutive others. One can almost imagine that it's a friend she's talking about in this passage from *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

What is striking about such extremes of self-beratement is the grandiose notion of the transparent "I" that is presupposed as the ethical ideal. This is hardly a belief in which self-acceptance (a humility about one's constitutive limitations) or generosity (a disposition toward the limits of others) might find room to flourish. Surely there are moments of repetition and opacity and anguish, which usually compel a journey to the analyst, or if not to the analyst, to someone—an addressee—who might receive the story and, in receiving it, alter it some. The other represents the prospect that the story might be given back in new form, that fragments might be linked in some way, that some part of opacity might be brought to light. The other witnesses and registers what cannot be narrated, functioning as one who might discern a narrative thread, though mainly as one whose practice of listening enacts a receptive relation to the self that the self, in its dire straits of self-beratement, cannot offer itself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> JACQUES DERRIDA, *POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP* 240 (George Collins trans., 2d ed. 2005) (1994) [hereinafter *POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP*].

<sup>2</sup> JUDITH BUTLER, *GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF* 80 (2005) [hereinafter *GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF*].

She refers to this person, the alternative to an analyst, abstractly as an “addressee,” making no distinction among the various receptive “someone’s” upon whom any accounting of one’s self depends.

Is there a way to distinguish friends among the “others” who grant us recognition? Is there a relationship that might be designated friendship between sexual congress and collegial intercourse, between familial loyalty and societal ascription? What kind of identification is at work? Are friends those who most resemble us or does difference build the bond? Is it distance or proximity or something in between that enables the relationship? Do we possess friends the way we do lovers or is it precisely the lack of possession that makes friendship possible? What kind of attraction draws us to those who become our friends?

Freud is suggestive, but not fully clear about this, in his definition of the capacious libido. “Libido is an expression taken from the theory of the emotions” he tells us, that has to do with the instinctual energy called love. It extends beyond “sexual love with sexual union as its aim” to include love for others: “parents and children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and to abstract ideas.”<sup>3</sup> All of these loves involve “the sublimation of the sexual instincts” and for that reason, Freud continues, “have a great functional advantage over those which are uninhibited. Since they are not capable of really complete satisfaction, they are especially adapted to create permanent ties . . .”<sup>4</sup> Friendship is classed as an “aim-inhibited sexual impulse,” grouped with “affectionate relations between parents and children (which were originally fully sexual)” and with “the emotional ties in marriage which had their origin in sexual attraction.”<sup>5</sup> But it is never set apart as

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<sup>3</sup> 18 SIGMUND FREUD, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in THE STANDARD EDITION OF THE COMPLETE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKS OF SIGMUND FREUD 90–91 [hereinafter COMPLETE FREUD] (James Strachey trans., 1995) (1955).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 139.

<sup>5</sup> 18 SIGMUND FREUD, *The Libido Theory*, in COMPLETE FREUD, *supra* note 3, at 258.

a distinctive tie: are friends simply deferred sexual partners or something else? Put another way, what are the limits of the so-called sexual?

These are not idle questions nor are they driven, at least consciously, by a request for a special place in the affections of today's honoree. They are at the heart of recent debates in which Judith has participated: about gay and lesbian identity, families, and the politics of war.

On the question of identity, there is that moment in her 1994 *Differences* interview with Gayle Rubin when Rubin expresses alarm at "the way the logic of the woman-identified-woman picture of lesbianism had been working itself out." By defining lesbianism entirely as something about supportive relations between women rather than as something with sexual content, the woman-identified-woman approach essentially evacuated it . . . of any sexual content . . . I found this both intellectually and politically problematic."<sup>6</sup> Butler then asks "is it that you objected to calling 'lesbian' the whole domain of female friendship?" Rubin replies "in part" and then goes on to criticize what she refers to as a developing master narrative in lesbian historiography, citing the work of Lillian Faderman, among others. Not only are the "complexities of these friendships" oversimplified in this work, she says, but they produce a romanticized, politicized, and very limited notion of lesbianism. Moreover, they "displace sexual preference with a form of gender solidarity . . . . While female intimacy and solidarity are important and overlap in certain ways with lesbian erotic passions, they are not identical and they require a finer set of distinctions."<sup>7</sup>

Rubin's call for a distinction between erotic passion and friendship is, interestingly, contradicted by Michel Foucault, who in a 1981 interview with the French magazine *Gai Pied*, called upon homosexuals to reclaim, as the article is titled,

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<sup>6</sup> GAYLE RUBIN, *Sexual Traffic: An Interview with Judith Butler*, 6 DIFFERENCES 74 (1994).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 75–76.

*Friendship as a Way of Life*.<sup>8</sup> Citing Faderman's book, he argues that at least since the nineteenth century, there have been different possibilities for intimate contact between men than between women. Still, he thought the aim of the magazine he was being interviewed by ought to be the creation for gay men of something, but not exactly, like what Faderman described for women—it would be “a homosexual culture” in which there were “polymorphic, varied, and individually modulated relationships”<sup>9</sup> Foucault adds: “To be ‘gay,’ I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life.”<sup>10</sup> It was a mistake, he said, to associate gay identity purely with sex —“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”<sup>11</sup>—because this did nothing to generate the critique of social convention that was needed. “To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another—there's the problem.”<sup>12</sup> The kind of love Foucault had in mind would go beyond that which was now narrowly associated either with female worlds of love and ritual or with heterosexual marriage; homosexuals needed both to capture friendship and, in so doing, to redefine it. What he proposed would be an escape from “the two readymade formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lovers' fusion of identities.”<sup>13</sup> But it was not a Freudian sublimation he sought: “How can a relational system be reached through sexual practices? Is it possible to create a homosexual mode of life?”<sup>14</sup> Friendship

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<sup>8</sup> MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, in ETHICS, SUBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH: ESSENTIAL WORKS OF FOUCAULT 1954–1984 139 (Robert Hurley trans., Paul Rabinow ed., 1997).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 138.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 136.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 136–37.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 137.

<sup>14</sup> FOUCAULT, *supra* note 8, at 137.

would enable the process of *ascesis* Foucault described in the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*: “the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains.”<sup>15</sup> The point was “not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure.”<sup>16</sup>

From one perspective, there’s not really a debate between Rubin and Foucault, but rather a critical engagement from each with the differing historical formations of lesbian and gay male identity. Still, friendship has a depoliticizing connotation for Rubin because it draws attention away from the necessarily sexual dimension of lesbianism. For Foucault, it is a way of radicalizing the social impact of homosexual practice and expanding pleasure beyond its purely sexual component. These differences surely matter in the articulation of queer theory and they join some of Butler’s preoccupations with questions of identity, self and other, queer politics and, more generally, the politics of social movements. It would be useful and important to have Butler help us think them through.

Just as one can use Butler’s writing about the constitutive role of an other in the articulation of a self to puzzle out an idea of friendship, so there are hints in her work on kinship that are suggestive. In the Rubin interview, after an extended discussion of Lévi-Strauss and various meanings of kinship, Butler suggests the need for a new vocabulary “to articulate contemporary configurations of kinship.”<sup>17</sup> In *Antigone’s Claim* she lists the new configurations in that dazzling way she has of upending what are assumed to be settled rules, with an accompanying list of exceptions. Here she writes:

[I]n which children, because of divorce and remarriage, because of migration, exile, and refugee status, because of global displacements of various kinds, move from one family to another, move from a family to

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<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> RUBIN, *supra* note 6, at 92.

no family, move from no family to a family, or in which they live, psychically, at the crossroads of the family, or in multiply layered family situations, in which they may well have more than one woman who operates as the mother, more than one man who operates as the father, or no mother or no father, with half-brothers who are also friends—this is a time in which kinship has become fragile, porous, and expansive.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than the end of kinship, Butler calls for its re-conceptualization. What Rubin dismissed as *merely* friendship, Butler *reclaims* as kinship. “I guess another question for me,” she says, “is whether various supportive networks within the lesbian and gay community can’t also be understood as contemporary forms of kinship.”<sup>19</sup>

What are the stakes here in exchanging friendship for kinship? Is it only half-brothers who can also be friends? And how is their relationship to their half-siblings different from those who are fully allied? Is it a question of desire? And what is the place of desire in friendship compared to its place in kinship? Does it all boil down to the desire for an other’s—any other’s—recognition? And what does sex, or Eros, have to do with it?

Butler disputes Hegel’s reading of *Antigone* because it refuses desire in the relationship of recognition between Antigone and her brother Polyneices. “For Antigone, according to Hegel, there can be no recognition with desire. Indeed, there is for her recognition only within the sphere of kinship, and with her brother, on the condition that there is no desire.”<sup>20</sup> Butler links the refusal of desire in this case—though she points out that elsewhere Hegel writes of “recognition . . . itself [as] a

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<sup>18</sup> JUDITH BUTLER, *ANTIGONE’S CLAIM* 22 (2000) [hereinafter *ANTIGONE’S CLAIM*].

<sup>19</sup> RUBIN, *supra* note 6, at 92–93.

<sup>20</sup> *ANTIGONE’S CLAIM*, *supra* note 18, at 14.

cultivated form of desire”<sup>21</sup>—to the incest taboo and to the need to preserve symbolic structures of kinship whether or not they correspond to social arrangements or personal situations. “So Antigone, who from Hegel through Lacan is said to defend kinship, a kinship that is markedly *not* social, a kinship that follows rules that are the condition of intelligibility for the social, nevertheless represents, as it were, kinship’s fatal aberration.”<sup>22</sup>

The project of *Antigone’s Claim*, as of much of her recent writing, is, of course, to call into question the relationship between the Symbolic and the social, to rethink what have been deemed the elementary structures of kinship in the light of recent reconfigurations of families. But I remain confused about the place of Eros in the story. I don’t think it’s a naive confusion which misunderstands the necessarily sexualized connotations, however sublimated, of any desire; rather it’s a sense that there’s more complexity to the issue of love and recognition than is conveyed by evocations of kinship or, for that matter, passing references to friendship. Specifically, in the phrase about “half-brothers who are also friends” Butler leaves unexplored a tantalizing set of distinctions that might illuminate the boundaries and the interconnections between friendship and kinship and so strengthen our theoretical grasp on both.

This is important, not only for the project of rethinking kinship, but also for her current preoccupation with war.<sup>23</sup> By asking what constitutes a grievable life, Butler takes on a huge set of political questions about the articulation of collective or communal selves, about inclusion and exclusion, about enemies and friends. Interestingly, she does not directly address Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* which has provoked so much controversy among political theorists and philosophers, among them Jacques Derrida, whose *Politics of Friendship* is an attempt to refute Schmitt’s conclusions.

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<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> See generally JUDITH BUTLER, FRAMES OF WAR (2009) [hereinafter FRAMES OF WAR]; JUDITH BUTLER, PRECARIOUS LIFE: THE POWER OF MEANING AND VIOLENCE (2004).



Schmitt's famous, or infamous, argument rests on the friend/enemy distinction. As Tracy Strong points out in a foreword to Schmitt's book:

[W]hat is important about this distinction is not so much the 'who is on my side' quality, but the claim that only by means of this distinction does the question of our willingness to take responsibility for *our own* lives arise.<sup>24</sup>

Butler turns this notion of responsibility away from ourselves—"those who are recognizably like me in some way"—to those excluded by communities of belonging such as nations, territories, languages, or cultures. She asks "what is our responsibility toward those we do not know, toward those who seem to test our sense of belonging or to defy available norms of likeness?"<sup>25</sup> And her answer is that we must take responsibility for them or risk a certain dehumanization.

Her critique of the justification for war is a refusal of Schmitt's notion of the political, even as the polarization she describes critically here is the one he endorses:

Lives are divided into those representing certain kinds of states and those representing threats to state-centered liberal democracy, so that war can then be righteously waged on behalf of some lives, while the destruction of other lives can be righteously defended.<sup>26</sup>

The enemies of the state are depicted as uncivilized, barbaric, inhuman, but the crusades waged against them have the effect of dehumanizing the crusaders. She writes: "Violence in the name of civilization reveals its own barbarism, even as it 'justifies' its own violence by presuming the barbaric subhumanity of the

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<sup>24</sup> TRACY B. STRONG, *Foreword* to CARL SCHMITT, *THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL* xvi (George Schwab trans., 1996).

<sup>25</sup> *FRAMES OF WAR*, *supra* note 23, at 36.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 53.

other against whom that violence is waged.”<sup>27</sup> To Schmitt’s amoral notion of the political, Butler responds with a kind of universalist humanism—albeit one based not on sameness, but on interdependence—insisting that all lives are grievable, that an ethics of responsibility admits of no distinction between enemies and friends. In fact, she insists that the interdependence of humans extends to other living beings: “[T]he ‘ontology’ of the human is not separable from the ‘ontology’ of the animal.”<sup>28</sup>

But I wonder how far we can take this notion when it comes to making political choices. Isn’t it necessary sometimes to ally ourselves with some people in order to defeat others? For example, right now I consider most Republicans enemies, and though I wouldn’t go to war against them, the protection of my community, my values, and my ideals for a different kind of future depend on my repudiating *not only* what they stand for, *but also* who they are. Aren’t those who pursue the wars Butler condemns, those who dehumanize the others they want to subdue or conquer, outside of some moral or ethical community—as the Nazis were—and don’t we want to keep them there? Is pacifism our only ethical option? How can there not be exclusion in the world of politics, particularly in democracies? Derrida puts the dilemma this way:

There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the ‘community of friends,’ without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equals. These two laws are irreducible one to the other. Tragically irreconcilable and forever wounding.<sup>29</sup>

It is interesting to note that Derrida takes the history of friendship in relation to politics to have been an entirely masculine project, at least from Aristotle to Nietzsche. True friendship was, he remarks, a “fraternal affair,” connoting a

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<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 75.

<sup>29</sup> DERRIDA, *supra* note 1, at 22.

certain virility and explicitly excluding women.<sup>30</sup> His search for a model for politics involves exposing the instabilities of this “homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema” and reconceiving friendship as more inclusive and democratic, “just beyond the law, and measured up against its measurelessness.”<sup>31</sup>

Political theorist Danielle Allen also looks to friendship as a model for politics, maintaining that friendship “must be rescued if we are to revitalize political insights that are fundamental to democratic as opposed to aristocratic or oligarchical practice.”<sup>32</sup> Centering her argument on Aristotle’s writings about friendship and citizenship, she interprets fraternity—relations between brothers—not as a matter of likeness, but as a question of overcoming “rivalrous self-interest.”<sup>33</sup> This overcoming means abandoning the affective side of the relationship. It is not the emotional dimension of friendship that is relevant for politics, she says “but rather its core practices.”<sup>34</sup> She cites Hannah Arendt’s comment that “respect . . . is a kind of ‘friendship’ without intimacy and without closeness.”<sup>35</sup> And she emphasizes that friendship involves a non-dominating approach to interaction. “Equity is at friendship’s core,” there is equal agency and reciprocity among the parties.<sup>36</sup> This involves not so much a sacrifice of self-interest, as an assumption of the other’s interest as one’s own. “Only friends fully succeed at converting rivalry into equitability; wherever such a conversion occurs, people become

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<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 306.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> DANIELLE S. ALLEN, TALKING TO STRANGERS: ANXIETIES OF CITIZENSHIP SINCE BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION 119 (2004).

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 126.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 120.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 119 (citing HANNAH ARENDT, THE HUMAN CONDITION 243 (Univ. Chicago Press 2d 1998) (1958)).

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 129.

friends.”<sup>37</sup> In this way, friendship serves as a model for democracy.

Where do communities of friends fit in Butler’s vision of humanity? In the realm of politics, does the construction of self and other work through recognition, and so the necessary inclusion of the other in the self, or in some other way? It’s true that my political community is in part defined by its difference from other communities, but is this the same as the Hegelian, or for that matter the Lacanian, relationship of recognition? Does friendship offer something here that mediates the abstractions of philosophy and the practicalities of politics? Might it have something to do with operations of desire specific to the relationship of friends? What is the nature of this desire? Can we think friendship apart from emotions, as Allen tells us Arendt and Aristotle recommend? From what might be called a *Butlerian* perspective, how can we use the notion of friendship to think politics differently?

In some of her earlier work Butler reminded us of the necessary exclusions that come with movements of identity. And while noting that these were unavoidable, she reminded us that they were temporary coalitions not permanent features of our being. She called for critical attention to the exclusions, a need to be aware of difference in its negative as well as positive operations. How would those insights apply to the questions of politics she now addresses? What can be said about friendship to illuminate the dynamics of political engagement, to counter the dehumanizing moves that make it possible for us to grieve only those lives we value as our own? How can we think friendship beyond its banal usages as a way of conferring a special recognition on those close, but not too close, to us? Is friendship a useful category for our critical analyses? These are the provocations I offer Judith, my friend.

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<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 137.