

## 4. What Are Friends?

---

We keep talking about friendship, but have been dancing around the question, avoiding taking it head-on. What is a friend? One obvious answer is that friends are not enemies, but that doesn't give us much room to move and boxes us in theoretically. Maybe a better starting point is to ask after the differences between friends and family, and whether that distinction gives us any political daylight.

Family is the past we were handed. Friends are freely chosen. Family is inescapable, friends are fluid. Families yoke us to all their failings and forgettable traits – all the more embarrassing because they are so obviously ours too. You can't do anything about your family, they stain every part of your essence, and everyone can see it plastered all over the way you talk, what you eat and the shape of your nose. It is as common to be chagrined about our families as it is easy to brag about our friends.

So why do people say their best friends are like family? Or that they are our brothers and sisters? Brothers from another mother. Sisters in arms. We are always comparing friends to family with metaphor and allusion, hoping that our friends are as close to us as family, just shed of all its patriarchal and historical baggage.

Family is seemingly the constant aspirational unit. Someone you can always call on. Someone you have to answer to, and who has to answer to you. People who will be there for you through decades. They were there when you were born and will be by your side when you die. Friends come and go, family is forever. You never have to prove yourself to your family, you are part of one another whether you like it or not.

Family is the antidote to all the anxious contingency and leakiness of friendship. But friendship is also the salve for everything that family saddles us with. Friends are a drink of cool water after a suffocating family encounter, the people who can talk us down and talk to us when we are down, who can understand us in ways our families never can.

But all this indexing is only useful in the most limited sense, and, like every binary, falls apart with the most gentle prodding. The flimsy designatory qualifications of who is friend and who are family are not categories – they are unstable, deferred aspirations.

The idea of family has been one of the most volatile and politically weaponized fault lines of the modern era. The political and religious rights have aggressively attempted to constrain definitions of family along nuclear lines, gender norms and role-fixities. This work is often relegated to culture war narratives, but it contains a more powerful undertow. The enforcement of family as an unimpeachable originary organizational unit is critical not just for what it claims, but for what it denies.

If movement is the substance of all things political, conservative renditions of family are fixated on preserving borders, and leakiness is perilous. Attempts to broaden or muddy the family waters are viciously resisted as somehow imperilling the form. But frantically trying to concretize family is wildly ahistorical and runs aground of almost all our lived realities. Consider how so many of us use *Auntie* and *Uncle* to refer to almost any older person. Or how so many cultures use ‘cousin’ or ‘cuz’ for most anyone close to you – maybe or maybe not of any direct relation. Think how many people – and animals – who you share no direct blood with – have been unequivocally part of your families over the years.

There are endless other generous renditions of *family* everywhere, and any attempt to fix the form in place inherently reduces it. The more open the idea of family is, the more powerful it becomes. Porous and flexible renditions of family do not weaken it, they celebrate it. The desire to lock ‘family’ in place is a close ideological sister of moves to nationalism, racializations and gender binaries.

The opprobrium directed at trans people from seemingly otherwise reasonable commentators is as confounding as it is awful, and one pos-

sible explanation is a fearfulness of any fluid freedom of movement – a freedom that echoes evocations of borderlessness. Political and religious conservatives tend to fear and loathe migrants and trans people equally, and for related reasons: a surpassing of carceralities, the horizons of new possibilities and fracturing of certainties. Xenophobia and transphobia are not equivalents, but there are clear correlaries between the desire for certainties that animates them. This is the ocean that friendship swims in. Family and friends are not synonymous, but what is the point of trying to definitionally constrain either?

The work of indexing and cataloguing friendship has been as strenuous as the attempts to mark off the borders of family. Studies of friendship in the western philosophical tradition almost always start with Aristotle. Which is expected: *philos* is the Greek word for friend, both have etymological relationships with *freedom*, and in many ways all philosophy is grounded in thinking about friendship. As Agamben put it in 2017: “Friendship is so tightly linked to the definition of philosophy[...] that without it, philosophy would not really be possible”.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle called friends ‘another self’ and taxonomized friendship into three types – those of pleasure, of usefulness and true friendship, and concluded (in part) that “without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods”. Following his lead, thousands of years of philosophical exploration and near-endless attempts at ordering have worked and reworked these categories, organizing and reorganizing taxonomic species, genus, class and phyla of friendship, and gauging their various worths.

It is tempting to try to articulate the nature of ‘deep’ or ‘true’ or ‘meaningful’ friendships, if only to perhaps be able to better understand how they are formed and lost. But we are convinced of friendship’s fundamental ineffability. Friendship *has to be* a slippery, porous and contingent concept: by definition it has no easy definition, no easy borders. Julietta Singh keeps reminding us not to try and capture the idea: “friendship

---

1 Giorgio Agamben, ‘The Friend’, in *What is an Apparatus?*, Stanford University Press, 2009. 25.

is the name we give to relationships for which we have no other stable name".<sup>2</sup>

There is no question that friendship is a surprisingly elusive, allusive and aspirational relational form – and that lack of definitional clarity is no lack. The capaciousness of the idea is the field where we can contemplate borderlessness, and still, we have to be able to carve out space for talking about the idea. It is not enough to claim it and refuse it in the same breath. It is wholly possible to talk about the shape and substance of friendship without reverting to building a definitional wall: the territory is in the making of it.

We are certain that friendship is always voluntary and consensual. Rationales for who is and is not a friend are never rational – our affections are so often capricious. Friends do not have to be sweet or kind or generous to one another, they don't even have to be friendly, but they do have to have substantive concern for the other's welfare, and they do have to consent to be friends. Friendship is always an exercise in agreement.

One of our main goals here is to extend the customary evocations of friendship as occurring between two people and ask after collective friendships – gesturing towards the notion of shared happiness. As much as we are curious about the political potentialities of interpersonal friendships, we are equally interested in recalibrating our political ontologies, or maybe to ask: can one group of people be friends with another group, even a more-than-human group? If states have proven themselves inept as apparatuses of community, how can friendship lend itself towards other ways of being-together, ones that might be tenable in a time of ecological collapse?

Towards that, there are three threads that we want to pull on. First, is the seemingly foundational and oft-evoked notion of friendship as requiring substantive concern for the other. Theorists of friendship often settle on this as a bland enough launch point, but it strikes us as a simple formulation at the heart of all aspirationally ecological thinking. A 'substantive concern for the other' is the antipode of the grooved orthodoxies of exploitation and extractivism.

---

2 Personal conversations, October 2021.

This 'substantive concern' is reversed in a fun way when we consider the extreme awkwardness of unrequited friendship. It may be that 'unrequited love' is an essentially stupid idea, but there is at least conceptual territory there, buttressed by endless evocations of love/lust/infatuation being unacknowledged/unreturned. Unrequited friendship is embarrassing in that substantive concern for the other is what makes friendship possible: it is not enough to claim someone as friend, they have to claim you back.

Second, we want to stay with the necessarily voluntary character of friendship, closely related to requitedness. Friends have to agree to be so. If friendships are always freely chosen, then they are also shifty and up for grabs. Friendships are constantly being ordered and reordered, lost, refused and revived: we always have to prove ourselves. The borders between acquaintance, friend, good friend, close friend, best friend, bff – and all the subtle distinctions within – are never fixed. Those commitments require us actively maintaining, making, remaking, and evaluating them, and while it may be nice to think that we can rely on certain friends forever, that doesn't work out all that often. That reality is somewhat unsettling, but the instability of friendship is not regrettable, it demands effort and political fidelity.

Third, friendship is a conspiracy. Even in its porosity, it is a private, restricted affair to which invitations are obtuse, and entry is a closely guarded secret, sometimes even to our friends. The trust that conspirators require can always be violated and/or withdrawn, sometimes for the flimsiest, most inscrutable of reasons. Final decisions about who is a friend and who is somewhere in-between are always deferred. But equally, those invitations open and welcome without warning – we can make friends sometimes almost instantly, sometimes we make great friends just for one evening, sometimes for reasons we cannot explain. The act of inviting someone to sit at the table to share a drink, or into the kitchen for a meal is to think past borders, closing distance and hazarding leakiness.

Friendship has nothing to do with morality, which has pretenses to the universal. We treat friends differently with no apologies, offer favours and gifts and time and tolerances that we would never dream of

offering anyone else. This makes friendship aesthetic: it is valuable not because it is moral, but because it is beautiful, and thus always experimental. In this creativity, friendship is always making and unmaking worlds.

In its porous and shifting exclusivity, the political horizons of friendship can push democratic theorizing past its colonial fixities, but at the same time every assemblage of friends has to account for itself. Neither friends nor enemies are static. The enemy can be turned into a non-friend or a friend. Or real enmity can be turned into absolute enmity in the case of war and hand-to-hand combat to the death. Friends and foes are always fluid designations.

There is an easy leap for some to see friendship as redolent of accounts of brotherhood and fraternization, and as much as the vision of assemblages constantly moving and flowing, rhizomatically coming together and reassembling across smooth spaces is beautifully attractive – those assemblages hazard grooving the same patterns of exclusivities, re-enacting the world as it is over and over again.

If decolonization can be perceived as an event, or as Mbembe puts it, as “an active will to community”, then how might an ‘active will to friendship’ offer routes to think politics differently, to imagine what kinds of new formations borderlessness might instigate? And how might friendship be untied from its anthropocentric moorings? Or: how can friendship help us put fire to the colonial fixities of ‘we’?

In Nancy Sherman’s estimation, friendships are relationships that structure the good life, a mode of good living that is necessarily bound to the happiness of others. That experience of substantive concern for the other, of recognizing the happiness of one is essential to the happiness of any and all, is solid footing to build a politics that apprehends a borderless community.