THE NAMES OF FRIENDSHIP
Questions for the imagination of other relational horizons

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Abstract

Despite having historically been a space of invention of social relations and dissident networks, friendships are still considered secondary in relation to consanguineal or marital bonds, and its role in fundamental human practices of affection and solidarity, as well as in social reproduction, is often overlooked and invisibilized. In face of this customary hierarchization of friendship in comparison to more traditional forms of kinship, as regarded by Western society and institutions, we question in what ways might different symbolic organizations and ontologies of friendship affect their material possibilities, providing them with more complex connotations and rendering legible collective presents and futures beyond heteronormative structures. Taking into account the radically transformative potential of semantic operations and political fictions that function as technologies of subjectivation, establishing regimes of truth and modes of existence, we inquire performative procedures of fabulation and enunciation as strategies for blurring the borders between friendship and kinship, as well as for affirming dissident relational practices.

Keywords

friendship; kinship; interdependence; queer-feminist politics; micropolitics; political imagination; speculative feminisms; fabulation.

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1.

We met about two years ago, in a new city and country we had migrated to at around the same time. Since then, we have come to care for and support each other in many ways, and to realize that both of us maintained similar relationships with other feminized, *fancha* and queer subjects that, for lack of a better word, we called friends. 'Friendship' commonly designates a wide range of relationships, mostly by exclusion: it is not a relationship within a biological family, nor is it a sexual or conjugal tie. The term is usually

understood in contrast to other, more privileged forms of kinship, and can alternatively assign a relationship with someone with whom one occasionally coincides with, as well as with another with whom one maintains enduring bonds of companionship and mutual support. Despite having historically been a space of invention of social relations and dissident networks, as well as adequately suiting contemporary notions of kinship such as that suggested by Marshall Sahlins, as a "relational network between people or groups of people who recognize themselves in solidarity regarding their being in the world" (in Esteban, 2017; 43), friendships are still considered secondary in relation to consanguineal or marital bonds, and its role in fundamental human practices of affection and solidarity, as well as in social reproduction, is often overlooked and invisibilized.

Mobilized by experiences in feminist collectives and mutual support communities in Brazil, Spain and Portugal, as well as by Donna Haraway's (2016) stance for innovative ways of making and naming kin outside traditional Western family apparatuses, we shared the urgency of investigating symbolic and political technologies that would embody the affects that constitute such relational practices, and that might allow us to envision more habitable horizons for our relationships. This mutual aspiration resulted in the emergence of the questions and provocations that follow, introducing some aspects to thinking speculatively about friendships and the strategies that may create new references for different modes of existence. From this partial perspective, we attempted to develop a research methodology that feeds on personal experience and literature revision; and although no case studies are yet provided, intends to contribute to thinking about "storying otherwise", as well as to situated knowledges that may allow us to become answerable for what we learn to see (Haraway, 1988; 583).

We began the investigation by trying to understand and describe what characterizes and differentiates such significant modes of relationship and 'clanarchist' (Skurnick, 2015; 10) practices. Although Haraway makes the stance for kinship that surpasses human relations to encompass other species, entities and agencies, here we keep to friendships amongst humans, more specifically queer-feminist humans, to begin imagining how our available conceptualizations and figurations may come to open up relational virtualities or limit desires and vital horizons. The purpose of mapping the affective foundations and qualities of such relationships does not aim to describe them as generalist virtues or programmatic values, but as the bases that constitute and sustain ways of being-with that are cultivated in opposition to the normalization, pathologization and precarization of our lives.

As Marilyn Friedman (1989; 289) puts it, "perhaps it is more illuminating to say that communities of choice foster not so much the constitution of subjects but their reconstitution." For the author, friendship is more likely than many other relationships "to be grounded in and sustained by shared interests and values, mutual affection, and possibilities for generating mutual respect and esteem" (p. 286). Friedman states that the motivations for such relationships are prone to escape what is socially assigned, ascribed, expected, or demanded, not owing allegiance to moral identities or normative legitimacies and traditions, thus being more likely to overcome hierarchies of domination and subordination and to provide "models of alternative social relationships as well as standpoints for critical reflection on self and community" (p. 290). In this regard, the philosopher states that:

> Friendship is more likely than many other close personal relationships to provide social support for people who are idiosyncratic, whose unconventional values and deviant life-styles make them victims of intolerance from family members and others who are unwillingly related to them. In this regard, friendship has socially disruptive possibilities, for out of the unconventional living which it helps to sustain there often arise influential forces for social change. (pp. 286-287).

In an ethnography about love, Mari Luz Esteban (2014) investigated relationships amongst feminists who participated in networks and mutual support communities that maintained stable material, political and symbolic bonds, defying categories of family or domestic groups. Characterized by *el hacer conjunto*, doing together, as well as the sharing of distinct elements such as "mutual protection; economic, material, psychological and moral support; activities of maintenance of everyday life; practices of care in relation to health or child rearing; entertainment, social and political activities" (p. 42), Esteban also identified other particular aspects, such as:

> (1) the commitment (...) between these women regarding the attention to the emotional and material needs of other people; (2) the awareness of being developing, both in theory and in practice, complementary relationship strategies and, at the same time, alternatives to the family as understood by a narrower and more restrictive vision; even though the people who make up the network are also part of other family groups, with whom they interact (...); and (3) related to the previous two, I would add that it is a form of mutual symbolic and practical support that transcends the daily and common needs of any person, and that are materialized in the protection and support to develop alternative ways of life and individual and collective projects. (Esteban 2014; 42-43)

Furthermore, a great number of quantitative and qualitative studies have documented the centrality of friendships in providing material support and care in a diverse range of contexts and social and existential conditions. The

solidarity and mobilization present in LGBTQI+ communities and feminist support networks has been extensively evidenced in academic literature, more notably in regard to matters such as violence, discrimination, abortion, HIV/AIDS, mental health, grief and precarity. Researchers have found that "friends provide about as much care as live-in lovers and far more than family members" (Trimberger, 2002; p. 4) and that through friendship, identities and communities are created, transformed, maintained, and reproduced. According to Kath Weston (1997), these networks are neither opposed to collectivism nor are they privatizing, and have been capable of integrating relationships through different forms of material and emotional assistance as well as parenting arrangements and other forms of support, blurring the lines between personal and political horizons.

Other studies have also depicted the importance of individuals and communities of friends as providers of support for mothers as well as single, divorced, widowed and elderly people, recognizing the cultural invalidation and institutional disregard of policy makers for their contributions to effective care work as well as emotional support. In view of this, much is left to be nuanced in terms of privileges given to family members and spouses over other important relationships regarding demographics, subsidies, leaves and other institutional policies, such as those regarding who can be consulted in emergency and life risk situations.

Moreover, from our experiences, we came to understand that such relationships gain consistency through gestures of availability, recognition and care, and that the reiteration of this committed presence is what consolidates trust, complicity and a space where one can expose oneself even when most vulnerable. Such bonds tend to not entail a search for complementarity or completeness, brought about by romantic ideals - but they are also not free from needs of acceptance and appreciation. What seems to maintain such relationships thus is the continuous affirmation of affection and solidarity through forms of accompaniment which are not free from tension or conflict, but that are sustained in time through reciprocal practices. In this sense, María Lugones writes that:

> I find friendship interesting in the building of a feminist ethos because I am interested in bonding among women across differences. Friendship is a kind of practical love that commits one to perceptual changes in the knowledge of other persons. The commitment is there because understanding the other is central to the possibility of loving the other person practically. Practical love is an emotion that involves a commitment to make decisions or act in ways that take the well-being of the other person into account. Because I think a commitment to perceptual changes is central to the possibility of bonding across differences and the commitment is part of friendship, I think that

> friendship is a good concept to start the radical theoretical and practical reconstruction of the relations among women. (Lugones, 1995; 141)

Likewise, Joan Scott (2011; 38), referring to political theorist Danielle Allen's approach to friendship as a model for politics, states that equity is at friendship's core: "there is equal agency and reciprocity among the parties. This involves not so much a sacrifice of self-interest, as an assumption of the other's interest as one's own." It seems to us that this involves non-linear and at times asymmetrical practices of mutuality, according to one's material and emotional possibilities at a given moment, but that a common relational ethos lies at the foundation of these enduring affective links, often originating from common constitutive experiences and understandings of our existences as vulnerable or interdependent. The affective, political and ethical dimensions interlap in such encounters, and this resonates in how priorities are set, in how decisions are made and in how one shares responsibility for another.

2.

According to Judith Butler (2002; 37), "kinship is itself a kind of doing, a practice that enacts that assemblage of significations as it takes place." Such significations encompass different forms of enunciation, visibilization, performance and celebration; symbolic stances that make them legible and open up distinct social and subjective spaces. In face of the customary hierarchization of friendship in comparison to more traditional forms of kinship as regarded by Western society and institutions, we wondered in what ways might different symbolic organizations of friendship affect their material possibilities, providing them with more complex connotations and rendering legible alternative collective presents and futures.

Initially, our immediate answers to this provocation seemed to mirror the current possibilities of civil association, relying on the juridical effects they might have. We considered forging the demand for a civil statute that could grant us legal, social and symbolic recognition as friends. Subsequently, however, we realized that the claim for institutional legitimation would inevitably lead to rendering the state/market more power to regulate, codify, limit and normalize relationships, defining what is possible.

In that sense, Butler (2002; 17) points out that to be legitimated by the state is "to enter the terms of legitimation offered there and to find that one's public and recognizable sense of personhood is fundamentally dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation." This act is necessarily followed by an exclusion of another sort, consequently displacing the site of illegitimacy. Discussing the issue of nonheterosexual marriage, the author

questions legitimacy by the "sanctifying law" as a desire and point of reference, as well as the assumption that the state must furnish the norms for social practices. Butler claims that the argument in favor of legal alliance "can work in tandem with a state normalization of recognizable kinship relations, a condition that extends rights of contract while in no way disrupting the patrilineal assumptions of kinship or the project of the unified nation that it supports" (p. 16). Furthermore, Butler writes:

> (T)he norms of recognition supplied by the state not only fail to describe or regulate existing social practice, but they become site of articulation for a fantasy of normativity, projecting and delineating an ideological account of kinship, for instance, precisely at the moment when it is undergoing social challenge and dissemination. Thus, it seems that the appeal to the state is at once an appeal to a fantasy already institutionalized by the state and a leavetaking from existing social complexity in hope of becoming "socially coherent" at last. What this means as well is that there is a site to which we can turn, understood as the state, that will finally render us coherent, a turn that commits us to the fantasy of state power. (p. 28)

Accordingly, Michel Foucault (1997; 137) claimed that being gay - and here, perhaps, we could alternatively use the term *fancha* or queer - is to try to define and develop a new way of life. The author considered homosexuality a matter of existence, a possibility of inventing ways of being that are still improbable by opening, multiplying and modulating affective and relational virtualities not resembling those that are institutionalized, and thus yielding a culture and an ethics (p. 138). The author states that one must put in practice a certain inventiveness to show that what currently exists is far from filling all the possible spaces, hence leading to an unavoidable question: "what can be played?":

> (A)ffection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie and companionship are things that "our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force.(...) These relations short-circuit it and introduce love where there's supposed to be only law, rule, or habit. (p. 136).

3.

Language produces sensibility, intelligibility and visibility, making other forms of sociability readable. With this in mind, we turned to inquiring the disruptive potency of micropolitical and queer-feminist strategies, to the invention of fugitive or defying terminologies, technologies and political fictions that may surpass lived experience and give rise to ontologies and "non-innocent translations" (Haraway, 2004; 4), producing subjectivities and other habitable realities. Since narratives and vocabularies actuate on perceptions and sensibilities, how can we be resourceful in conceiving

meanings and representations of friendship that might radically expand our thinkable relational possibilities beyond cisheteronormative structures and institutions?

Even within the contemporary hegemonic Western family structure there seems to be a lack of names for existing bonds. The possibilities of familial formation and dissolution that have emerged in the past decades have exceeded by far the traditional parental, collateral, and in-law ties, the latter being a particularly explicit term in English which locates the origin of priority kinship established by marriage in the statute of legality and legitimacy consigned to this institution. In Portuguese, there are also other bonds that fall in the limbo between friendship and family and which are named *de consideração* [of consideration], expressly denoting their fictive position in this particular relational hierarchy. In the "Encyclopedia of human relationships," Pearl Dykstra questions the appropriateness of traditional definitions of kinship in scientific vocabulary in relation to other forms of relationship, commenting that:

> In scientific texts, the terms "quasi" or "fictive" kin are often used to denote relationships where the traditional rules of kin membership do not apply. These terms carry the connotation that there are "real" family relationships (defined by blood and marriage) and "other" family relationships." There is a need to rework the definition of kin relationships to take better account of social reality. (…) Increasingly, conceptualizations of kin relationships need to consider construction and flux, rather than take an assumed established structure as their point of departure. (Dykstra, 2009; p. 2).

In order to desubstantialize kinship and to modify the notion of nature that underlies it, disrupting the necessary association between sex, conjugality and family, Janet Carsten (2000) moves away from the opposition between the biological and the social and suggests the category of *relatedness*, translated to 'connectivity' in Portuguese, to signal an opening to native categories of connection that might allow one to wonder what other symbols beyond blood, semen and breast milk could create the kind of relationship normally associated with the sphere of relatives. In a similar direction of emphasizing the affective dimensions of choice, Katherine Weston suggests the term "family we choose" in opposition to "family we were born into."

A particularly notable example of how changes in terminologies affect forms of sociability to the point of dissolution is present in Silvia Federici's *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (2018). Here, the author describes the change in connotation that the word 'gossip' underwent throughout history, in particular during the centuries of attacks against women in the emergence of modern England. Deriving from 'god' and 'sibb' (relative), the term changed from signifying 'god parent', which was also used in addition

to its religious connotation to describe female friends and companions during childbirth, to become a term of defamation and ridicule that helped destroy sociability among women. Federici advocates for a process of excavation of words and names, claiming that "to narrate the history of words which are frequently used to define and degrade women is a necessary step to understanding how gender oppression works and is reproduced." (p. 89)

There are things that no longer are, but that still exist as images because there are names to call them. There are things which existed long before they were named, as there are others that came to be in the moment that there were words to define them. Haraway states that "we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections" (2016; 101). The author's purpose is to make 'kin' mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy, since "making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story" (p. 103). Regarding the notion of figurations, Haraway writes:

> Figures collect up hopes and fears and show possibilities and dangers. Both imaginary and material, figures root peoples in stories and link them to histories. Stories are always more generous, more capacious, than ideologies; in that fact is one of my strongest hopes. I want to know how to inhabit histories and stories rather than deny them. I want to know how critically to live both inherited and novel kinships, in a spirit neither of condemnation nor celebration. (Haraway, 2004; 1).

Likewise, we believe that by inquiring the political, speculative and utopian imagination, and also memory, by the conjuring of other genealogies, new places can be created for dissident relational configurations. For Haraway (2016; 208), "these are not just words; they are clues and prods to earthquakes in kin making that are not limited to Western family apparatuses, heteronormative or not." In terms of categories, many queries regarding friendships arise: could we dispute generic, enclosed or co-opted terms, such as 'consort', 'accomplice', 'ally', 'partner' or 'peer'? Or re-signify and expand the notions of 'companion', 'mate', 'lover' or 'relative'? Could imposing such terminology originating from family and marriage transfer normative expectations and undermine friendship's possibilities? Regarding this, Martha Ackelsberg (2001; 1) argues that "using the language of kinship to describe powerful (...) non kin bonds reinforces the ideological primary of traditionally-constructed families, and obscures the social inequalities that are often perpetuated through families."

Contrarily and situatedly, Pat Alake Rosezelle (1995) writes about the legacy of 'sister' in the Black community in the United States, and describes

the term as providing a sense of connection and establishing "familial tie where there is no blood; women trusting, celebrating, loving and being bound to other women." (p. 139) The author claims its use as a political act that "becomes a way of redeeming, of respect, of resistance" (p. 139) in the face of experiences of racism as well as of the traumatic history of enslavement and fragmentation from families and places of origin. Rosezelle also locates the term's appropriation from the Black community by the first generation of white women in the Civil Rights movement, who adopted 'sisterhood' as a stance against male domination, but rapidly came to erase the differences between women and "embrace the racism that they were fighting when they learned to call each other 'sister'" (p. 141).

Accordingly, Maria Lugones (1995) criticises the use of the term amongst white feminists, as it not only operates a naturalization and sentimentalization of female friendship but also presupposes the patriarchal and troubled institution of the family taken as a model for such relationships, which in turn do not have any legal or institutional components. Lugones suggests the term "compañera" for its connotation of egalitarianism, but inforces that the "egalitarianism is one of companionship and participation in a common political struggle" (p. 138), setting it apart from unconditional bonding to denote the creation of ties across differences, in constant and complex processes of understanding positions of inequality and forming coalitions.

In light of this, perhaps, we could follow the queer tradition and reappropriate words commonly used in derogatory and sexist manners, for example, claiming the ambivalence and disdain of 'witch', 'hag', 'flapper'. Or would we rather create a diversity of tropes, neologisms modulated within each singular relation, affirming the multiplicity of forms and meanings of being-with and making up new relational prefixes, suffixes and hyphenations? Diversely, it may be the case for an opposite movement, one of defamiliarization and indetermination, for the abolishment of names that assign differences and respective roles, hierarchizing subjects and relationships towards extended possibilities of mutuality, responsibility and love beyond already accepted categories of kinship and friendship.

In that respect, and beyond the realm of terminologies, another potent strategy for thinking about the performativity of desire and speculating forms of mutual implication are rituals, contracts and binding agreements. The invention of instruments and performative stances has been profusely investigated in the field of sexual politics and intimate bodily practices, in which new kinds of symbolic organization have been generated as a strategy of affirmation for dissident relationships and practices.

Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle's *Ecosex Manifesto* (2011), for example, merges intersectional activism and sexual identity politics in its aim to reconceptualize the way we see and relate to the Earth, "shifting the metaphor from Earth as mother to Earth as lover." Through wedding ceremonies and other forms of performance, visual art and educational activities, the artists make strategic use of romantic culture in order to expand the possibilities of emotional attachment to non-human beings and organic entities such as rivers and mountain ranges. Through vows of commitment to environmental struggles, Sprinkle and Stephens subvert the institution of marriage while establishing affirmatively and erotically a sense of ecological accountability.

In a radically different sense, Paul B. Preciado's (2018) *Counterssexual Contract* aims to establish an equivalence of all living bodies through contractual engagement in sexual practices which foreswear individuals' biopolitical positions within the framework of the naturalized heterosexual system. The figure of the "somatic translator" emphasizes the transformation that the political subject undergoes in the abolition of sexual difference as a cultural code that allows a body to be integrated into a human community. This is carried out by the resignation of such attributes as well as of all kinship, in its privileges and obligations assigned by the cisheterosexual regime, and to the sexualization of the whole body in commitment "to the search for pleasure-knowledge" (p. 21). Countersexuality, thus, is described as a destituting practice which "is not the creation of a new nature but rather the end of nature as an order that legitimizes the subjection of some bodies to others" (p. 21).

Taking into account the thoroughly transformative potential of these semantic operations and political fictions that function as technologies of subjectivation and, therefore, are capable of establishing regimes of truth and establishing modes of existence, we conclude that there is much room for inventive procedures of fabulation and enunciation as strategies for exploring the potentialities and blurring the borders between friendship and kinship. This gives rise to further questions about the horizons of possibility that could emerge from these devices –after all, if we are actually able to name or visibilize our dissident relationships, inventing and performing other social practices for instituting kinship, what would a genealogical tree look like for such forms of relationship, or rather, their rhizome? How might other collateral and contiguous arrangements proliferate in this relational web, adding to collective heterodox configurations that already exist? What other forms of non-identitarian, intergenerational and intersectional alliances, yielding new social practices of shared economies, communal living, affiliation, coparenting and co-caring might arise from these self-named and self-organized relational assemblages, generating new conditions for endowing us with other possibilities for common life?

As these questions motivate the continuity of the investigation and the production of categories, cartographies, concepts, figurations and glossaries, it brings forward tensions that incite us to put into question the risks of reclaiming social organization of friendship in a moment of reactionary backlash against LGTBQI+ movements and of widespread promotion of private selfcare, as well as of responsibilization of individuals and civil collectives as an alternative to the dismantling of welfare state politics. This challenges us to understand and undertake these linking practices as expanding, invigorating and rhizomatic movements of intensification of ties that simultaneously create existential spaces and other forms of intersectional alliance and resistance, instead of an enclosure that would keep us from forging and engaging in other urgent relations of comradery and solidarity that may not necessarily encompass similar identifications or emotional dimensions. Nonetheless, we believe that to affirm and radicalize the multiplicity of counterhegemonic ways of existing, perceiving and loving is to manifest the inherent bond between the personal and the political, and that proliferating forms of kinship can contribute to broadening an understanding of interdependence and, as Haraway (2016; 98) puts it, a "more ontologically inventive and sensible" becoming.

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