

Introduction

Screen Lessons in the Classroom

You have buried one whom you loved; look about for someone to love. It is better to replace your friend than to weep for him.

—Seneca, “On Grief for Lost Friends”

I write this introduction in 2020, which marks my twenty-second anniversary of teaching university-level courses related to women’s, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS). Although my CV reads like the rap sheet of a pedagogical master of none—Introduction to Philosophy, Reading History, Oppositional Cinemas, Gay Men and Homophobia in American Culture, Sexuality and Culture—in every course I teach, I incorporate feminist and queer theory. Come syllabus prep time, I am typically at pains to locate a text possessing that rare combination of accessibility, rigor, and enjoyableness: an essay, chapter, or book that prompts learners to question widely held beliefs about gender and sexuality while simultaneously convincing them to develop a personal stake in the subject matter. The old reliables continue to work their magic: Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex,” David Halperin’s “Is There a History of Sexuality?,” Anne Koedt’s “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement,” Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” and most anything by bell hooks. More recent gems include J. Jack Halberstam’s *GaGa Feminism*, Jane Ward’s *Not Gay*, Julia Serano’s “Trans Woman Manifesto,” David Halperin’s introduction to *The War on Sex*, and Dean Spade and Craig Willse’s “Marriage Will Never Set Us Free.” These texts have helped make WGSS theory, history, and

cultural analysis matter to my students; to boot, they have made my time in front of the classroom far more exciting.

Over the years, I've noticed that the pedagogical gems share a few features that students frequently latch on to: personal anecdotes, "current events" case studies, analyses of (actually popular) pop culture texts, and, last but not least, humor. Because my students' cultural worlds are so inundated with heroic against-all-odds success stories, heartbreaking tales of personal trauma, and capitalist rags-to-riches clichés, their ears tend to prick up when scholarly authors reveal a little something about themselves, even simply their personal reasons for writing about the topic at hand. While the political Right has proven itself quite skilled at reaching students by personalizing political issues and individualizing global concerns, the academic Left . . . well, not so much. Of course, this is partly due to the fact that the marketplace of ideas has been coopted by the brutes that shout the loudest, the ones who find no value in reasoned debate and gentle persuasion. These same brutes, moreover, would rather undergraduates spend their precious extracurricular time clockwatching in office cubicles to finance their education. The new normal of students working 40+ hours per week to pay outrageous university tuitions effectively eliminates a fundamental component of higher education: *time* to read, write, and think. In my pedagogical experience, I've noticed that students are more likely to make time to listen to the voices and viewpoints silenced by the shouting demagogues when (leftist) scholars make themselves approachably intellectual, smart but friendly, "relatable," as current business-speak would have it. Astute analyses of news stories, legal cases, and pop cultural texts also tend to leave a lasting impression. When I ask a class general, introductory questions about a course reading—such as, "Overall, what did you think of the author's ideas? What struck you, stayed with you, convinced you, or dissuaded you?"—nine times out of ten, discussion begins with a student recounting an author's personal anecdote, a case study analysis, or an author's take on a pop-culture text familiar to the student. The latter conversation starter can be a bit of a red herring (for example, "I disagree with Halberstam's analysis of *Finding Nemo* for these reasons . . ."), but strong personal reactions make for much more interesting discussions than do indifferent shoulder shrugs or intimidated silences. With any luck, memorable stories and analyses pave the way for an eventual comprehension and appreciation of an author's key arguments.

As for humor, we've learned from this century's satirical news purveyors, not to mention Aristophanes, Jonathan Swift, and Dorothy Parker, that laughing does not preclude thinking. Sometimes the best way

to a student's mind is through her funny bone. The political Right paints WGSS scholars and students as cheerless snowflakes triggered by their own shadow, endlessly "virtue signaling" and desperate to create "safe spaces" to silence "free speech" (i.e., alt-right backlash blather) in order to plot the socialist revolution (if only . . .). The WGSS text that can elicit a guffaw while simultaneously stoking feminist passion or queer fury goes some way in undercutting such stereotypical representations. Moreover, that guffaw concurrently ignites and reveals the joy of collective recognition and connection: if I can laugh with you, I might have something in common with you; although we're not the same, perhaps we are alike; perhaps, most importantly, there are others like us. And so the work begins.

I recently designed a course at Bryant University titled Friendship and Intimacy in the Age of Social Media. I conceived the course to work through and experiment with this manuscript's conceptual premise. Teaching the class over the past two years helped me rethink, hone, and clarify my initial ideas; for this, I am thankful to the students of LCS 471. At the risk of turning this intro into a full-scale pedagogical reflection, I describe the nuts and bolts of this course to reveal the key questions that animate this study. All too often the classroom roots of scholarly texts are obscured; here, I want to make it clear that without my students, this book would not exist. It is written for them and for students—whether university registered or not—like them.

The quite verbose course description for Friendship and Intimacy in the Age of Social Media reads as follows:

Modern Western democracy finds its conceptual roots in ancient understandings of friendship. *Philia*, a Greek concept concerning civic friendships between free men, was the guiding principle of governmental power in the ancient *polis*. Fast-forward 2000-plus years to the founding of Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, and the site at which the Second Continental Congress declared the United States free from British rule. The name and historical importance of this city reveal how deeply *philia* is embedded in the conceptual roots of the modern democratic nation.

Similarly, philosophy itself has roots, both etymological and conceptual, in *philia*, in friendship. Although often translated as "love of wisdom," philosophy might better be understood as a friendship *with* wisdom: a relation founded not in property ("I am yours," "You belong to me"), but, rather,

in mutual respect, humility, and interdependence. Given the foundational role friendship plays in Western thought and society, then, it seems fair to say that a nation's dominant understanding of friendship tells us a lot about how that society functions, what matters most to its people, and what type of life is considered most worth striving for. In other words, the way we understand friendship is intimately connected to the way we understand the "good life."

In these times—the age of social media, the age of neo-liberal global capitalism—what model of friendship is considered ideal and why? Has friendship been reduced to business networking and status boosting, or do traditional models of friendship still have relevance? How have global capitalism and social media affected friendship and romance? Should we be hopeful about the democratic potential of social media as they are being implemented in social justice movements such as #blacklivesmatter and #metoo? Or, should we despair that social media are increasingly channels for trolling, racism, misogyny, and political manipulation? What new avenues for creative cooperation and democratic participation become available in the social media context? Which are threatened or foreclosed? These questions will guide us through a philosophical analysis of friendship and intimacy in the age of social media, in which we will pay close attention to non-normative, one might say queer, relationship models through the ages.

The course is divided into three sections: 1) Philosophy of Friendship and Love, in which we read and discuss canonical Western philosophical and literary texts; 2) Neoliberalism and Social Media, in which we analyze globalization and new media theory to assess the relevance of traditional models of friendship and intimacy for the contemporary world; and 3) Beyond *Philia*, in which we explore nontraditional, queer practices of friendship, both historical and emergent, as potential alternatives to current relationship norms that hinder the development of a more just world.

As the ink dries on this manuscript, I've come to realize that this course's goals are far more ambitious than what I set out to achieve here. For example, although I walk my students through an abbreviated and tailored history of the philosophy of friendship and love (*The Epic of*

Gilgamesh, Homer, Sappho, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Michel de Montaigne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Emma Goldman), I spare the reader of this manuscript such a journey (however much I recommend it!). Although most of my undergraduate students learn about neoliberalism for the first time in this course, I assume here an audience somewhat familiar with its basic principles. For the uninitiated, however, I offer here a very efficient, and hence very neoliberal, bullet-pointed list of what I believe to be the key aspects of neoliberal philosophy:

- Competition governs all aspects of life
- Social inequality is necessary and virtuous
- Society = a collection of self-interested, rational market agents
- Collectivism is suspect; individualism should be cultivated
- Economic efficiency = democratic morality
- Economic freedom = political freedom
- Civic values = economic values
- Social problems exist because individuals make bad choices; social structures, systems, and institutions are not to blame.
- There is a natural hierarchy of winners and losers: winners maximize their entrepreneurial potential and have little need for communal or institutional support networks; losers fail to live up to their entrepreneurial potential and rely on social systems, communities, and other individuals for support.
- All aspects of life are measurable and quantifiable: data driven, cost-benefit analyses should be used to assess everything from work performance to public health to interpersonal relationships.

And neoliberal political-economic goals:

- Unfettered free market (“All boats will rise” if the market functions without regulation)
- Small to nonexistent state (rejection of welfare state and socialism *tout court*)
- Strong private property rights

- Free trade
- Deregulation of industry
- Union busting
- Privatization of public services and spaces¹

Given that social media technologies flourish in the neoliberal era, I understand them as the “language” of neoliberalism: efficient, utilitarian, and informational. A central question that concerns me is: How does the neoliberal political-economic-technological-cultural nexus affect our ability to relate ethically? Although in my course I cover a broad range of social media and ask “big questions” about their interpersonal and political consequences, I narrow my focus here primarily to m4m media—known popularly as gay hookup apps—to explore an emergent queer relational ethic. Nonetheless, the conceptual premises of the course and this book remain the same: if *philia* is, at least in theory, the building block of Western democracy, does it remain important to modern ethics? To contemporary political life? Should it? If not, are new models of friendship and intimacy taking shape in network culture that can steer us towards alternative models of sociality not grounded in *philia*?

Philia itself is a notoriously slippery concept, and my students and I spend the first third of the course trying to pin it down. In addition to reading chapters of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, we look to secondary literature, including an essay by David Konstan that offers a succinct definition of *philia*: “In sum, love and friendship in Aristotle are best understood not as entailing obligations or as based on kinship, but as an altruistic desire which, when reciprocated, results in a state of affairs that Aristotle, and Greeks in general, called *philia*” (212). At first, students typically seem skeptical of reciprocal altruism: Why would anyone want to do something good for another person if they are not necessarily going to be recognized for it? Why would anyone put another’s interests before one’s own? Isn’t all altruism egoism in some form? Eventually, however, they come to find *philia* an inspiring, noble ideal (#relationshipgoals), but are quick to point out that this ideal is all too rare in today’s world: social media, in their general estimation, do not lend themselves to the

1. This list is culled from the insights of various critics of neoliberalism, especially Brown, Kotsko, May, Monbiot, Read, and Winnubst.

cultivation of shared virtue between friends. Instead, social media cheapen friendship by turning it into a transactional, superficial, popularity contest. Perhaps unwittingly echoing Sherri Turkle's or William Deresiewicz's critiques of social media friendships,² students grow nostalgic for traditional relationship models that promote a selfless common good and emphasize the mutual striving toward shared virtue.

Although I am heartened by the fact that ancient philosophy continues to inspire, I do not let *philia* off the hook so easily. Once students seem thoroughly convinced that *philia* is the best of all possible relationship models, I reread a sentence from the course description: "*Philia*, a Greek concept concerning civil friendships between free men, was the guiding principle of governmental power in the ancient *polis*." Several leading questions follow: What does this sentence imply? Why "free men"? Were only men capable of *philia*? What about women? Moreover, doesn't "free men" signal that there were unfree men, that is, slaves? Does this mean that *philia* was the conceptual backbone of a patriarchal, slave society? If so, are sexism and racism—or other forms of social exclusivity and hierarchal categorization—part and parcel of this concept? Has our understanding of governmental power been flawed, then, from the outset? Why would we name one of our nation's most politically significant cities after it? Might *philia*'s emphasis on commonality and shared traits inevitably lead to oppressive social hierarchies? What forms of community and politics might develop from friendships and intimacies that challenge the principles of *philia*?

Admittedly, it's a bit of a straw-man setup. Although Aristotle's discussion of political power in *Nicomachean Ethics* certainly applies exclusively to free male citizens, in the same book, he also expresses his distaste for democracy itself. For him, monarchy is a far superior political system. Of the three types of polity—from best to worst: kingship, aristocracy, and timocracy (in which power is based in private property), democracy is merely a corruption of the worst polity. This usually comes as a bit of a shock to students: according to Aristotle, democracy is a perversion of the least attractive political form. In an interesting twist, however, Aristotle claims that democracy is also the least offensive of the three deviations of the three primary polities: tyranny is the most corrupt deviation (of monarchy); oligarchy is the second worst deviation (of aristocracy); and democracy is the least corrupt deviation (of timocracy). Although friendship's import

2. These authors' critiques of screen-mediated relationality rest in quite traditional, more or less Aristotelean understandings of friendship.

varies for each polity, it remains the primary relationship between ruler and ruled and between citizens. In order for governmental power to function smoothly in a monarchy, for example, a king must maintain a friendship with his subjects as a virtuous father would with a son (a tyrant is essentially a bad dad). An aristocrat, moreover, should relate to his inferiors as a husband treats a wife (because the husband's "bloodline," according to Aristotle, is superior to the wife's). Finally, both timocracies and democracies function well when relations between citizens mimic friendships between brothers. *Philia* therefore plays the most crucial role in democracy because democratic citizens are theoretically on equal footing: without daddy or husband to tell them what to do, democratic "brothers" must take care of themselves. "Thus in tyrannies [. . .] friendships and justice hardly exist, but in democracies they exist to a greater extent, because the citizens are equal and so have much in common" (158). A socially harmonious "City of Brotherly Love" therefore rests on an extrafamilial but fraternal-esque kinship between citizens. Aristotle repeatedly emphasizes that the common ground between citizens must be cultivated and nurtured in a polity so reliant on *philia*. A crucial problem for democracy, then, concerns the stranger: the one who is not alike, does not share common ground, and therefore does not deserve the same treatment (or rights) as the brother-citizen. "How a man should live in relation to his wife, and in general how one friend should live in relation to another, appears to be the same question as how they can live justly. For the demands of justice on a friend towards a friend are not the same as those towards a stranger, nor those on a companion the same as those towards a fellow-student" (160).

The operative question of the course thus becomes: How are we to treat the stranger ethically in a democracy? Furthermore, if the stranger in antiquity included women, racialized Others, and noncitizens, who counts as a stranger today? Have social media brought us closer to an ethical treatment of the stranger? How would a polity function if hospitality toward the stranger were its foundational principle? Students are typically eager to consider alternatives to *philia* once the gendered, racial, and nativist implications are revealed. I return to another sentence from the course description, this one a Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari-inspired musing about the relationship between thought and thinker, to orient us toward a non*philial* understanding of friendship.³ "Although often translated as

3. Deleuze and Guattari begin *What Is Philosophy?* with a discussion of the relationship between thought and thinker: "The philosopher is the concept's friend;

'love of wisdom,' philosophy might better be understood as a friendship *with* wisdom: a relation founded not in property ('I am yours,' 'You belong to me'), but, rather, in mutual respect, humility, and interdependence." A thinker's relationship to thought, then, becomes our initial model of a non*philial* friendship. In my reading of Deleuze and Guattari, thought is that which cannot be fully owned, captured, or privatized by the thinker; it is instead an elusive something that emerges in common with often unrecognized others. Mercurial, ephemeral, and always ready to escape us, thought exceeds our reach as we work to tie it down with words, sounds, and gestures that nevertheless fail to represent it fully. Thought, therefore, is indeed strange and remains a stranger: it exceeds the thinker, holds her at a remove, solicits him, teases her, but refuses a dialectical resolution. As an unassimilable foreigner, thought is best approached defenses down and with the utmost humility. It is, after all, the potential of what we are and how we view the world, the becoming of what we might comprehend and experience. Like death, perhaps the strangest of strangers, thought deserves our respect, our vulnerability, and our hospitality.

The *homophilic* bonds that ground Aristotle's democracy of brotherly love—bonds built on an exclusive commonness—lie in direct contrast to the *philoxenic* bonds at the heart of philosophy itself.⁴ Based in receptivity to foreignness, *philoxenic* bonds nurture that which is most alien among friends or citizens: the very differences that are potentially impossible to subsume or assimilate. Like the relation between thinker and thought, this bond is not grounded in property: it resists the terms of belonging (as in, "I belong to *x* group" or "I am yours, you are mine") that turn on an in/out, either/or axis. *Philoxenic* bonds are built on the very things people do *not* have in common, and, most importantly, they resist the desire to fuse, unify, or make those people one. Contrary to a (Hegelian) dialectical conception of intersubjectivity that rests on the subsumption of difference, *philoxenic* bonds encourage a nonassimilative interdependence that valorizes the ontological strangeness of self and other. This

he is the potentiality of the concept. [. . .] Does this mean that the friend is the friend of his own creations? Or is the actuality of the concept due to the potential of the friend, in the unity of the creator and his double?" (5).

4. In *Affective Communities*, Leela Gandhi presents *philia* and *philoxenia* as competing political models of friendship, the former indebted to Aristotle, the latter to Epicurus. My understandings of *philia* and *philoxenia* are profoundly informed by her work. See Gandhi, 28–31.

bond, then, works to preserve strangeness, even to amplify it, instead of making it identical. A community or politics founded in *philoxenic* bonds surely offers an alternative to the *homophilic* power blocs that have plagued Western democracy since the outset. But what would a *philoxenic* community look like?

Inventors and early theorists of the Internet sought to show us. The dream of the Internet—and, later, social media—is arguably to construct a *philoxenic* utopia: to flatten *homophilic*, capitalist, and elitist hierarchies built around knowledge production, access, and communication. In this utopia, users connect with and learn from strangers; they become increasingly receptive to foreignness and ultimately transform into cosmopolitan citizens.⁵ However much this dream may have become a nightmare of capitalist exploitation, self-segregation, disinformation, and political manipulation, the *philoxenic* utopian impulse lies at the Internet's heart. Alas, if not the Internet, where might we locate a *philoxenic* community? In what context might we access or affirm *philoxenic* bonds?

In “Cruising as a Way of Life,” the final chapter of *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*, Tim Dean argues that a certain form of *philoxenia*—what he designates “the psychoanalytic ethic”—guides gay men's public, not digital, cruising. For Dean, the public cruising encounter is an exercise in negotiating foreignness in the world and in our selves. It is grounded in a risky receptivity to strangers and a refusal to personalize or get to know another. “The ethics of cruising is a matter not of how many people one has sex with or what kind of sex one has with them (bareback or otherwise) but of how one treats the other and, more specifically, how one treats his or her own otherness” (177). Cruising becomes Dean's model of *philoxenic* ethics because otherness is neither assimilated through identification nor annihilated through differentiation. “[W]hat seems salutary about cruising is how it can involve intimate contact with strangers without necessarily domesticating the other's otherness. [. . .] [I]t is the intimate contact with the other that does not attempt to eliminate otherness that I wish to advocate as ethically exemplary” (180). Unfortunately, however, public access to cruising and even to nonsexual encounters with strangers is increasingly threatened by privatization and profit. Urban redevelopment efforts, for example, tend

5. Here I am glossing the more optimistic arguments of early Internet theorists. See Ebo and Rheingold.

to make cities more amenable to tourists and corporations but frequently decrease the amount of social space for variously classed and raced city dwellers to gather and interact. The Internet and hookup apps have likewise transformed public cruising into a privatized experience: the dance of desire becomes, according to Dean, a pleasureless hunt “indistinguishable from Internet shopping” and a dehumanizing experience that rests on “a controlled instrumentalization of the other as an object of use” (194). What these different forms of privatization have in common is a desire to reduce the risk involved in encountering strangeness. Often in the name of safety and security, perhaps the two most commonly deployed political terms since 9/11, privatization efforts work to prevent the radical encounter with otherness that might set in motion a transformative ethical experience. The cruel irony, of course, is that such risk-reduction measures end up making our cities—and our psyches—more hostile and more dangerous. Without interclass and interracial contact cities grow segregated and potentially become powder kegs. Without peaceful and pleasurable encounters with strangers, city dwellers become suspicious and often aggressive. Public cruising is one practice, then, that teaches us how to respectfully navigate foreignness in an increasingly polarized world. With the help of Jane Jacobs and Samuel Delany—thinkers who assert that social and, in Delany’s case, sexual intercourse among strangers is essential to a city’s livelihood—Dean makes a strong case for *philoxenia* as the ethical foundation of an authentically democratic society. But, beyond cruising, what would such a society look like? What risks are involved in philoxenia?

Because *Unlimited Intimacy* is in essence an analysis of, and often an apologia for, barebacking subcultures, Dean, like the subjects of his study, takes risks. For example, one of his models of ethically exemplary behavior comes in the form of a handsome man at a sex club who consents to anonymous anal penetration from any attendee whomsoever—no questions asked, no visual or aural identification needed. An archetype of *philoxenic* hospitality, is he not? Well, no, not according to my students. Up to this point in the text, Dean has my students in the palm of his hand: they agree wholeheartedly that a basic respect for and openness to foreignness are essential to democratic harmony; they understand the social pitfalls in privatizing public space (the Disneyfication of Times Square, for example) and digitizing intimacy (Grindr, Tinder, etc.). Although cruising is often an uncomfortable topic for them to discuss—not only because they find themselves talking about it with someone their father’s age, but

also because most of them come to the course with negative prejudices against the practice—they seem to appreciate Dean’s argumentative moxie and persuasiveness. The behavior of this sex club participant, however, is where they draw the line: “Is this guy mentally ill? Is he suicidal? Is he on drugs? No one of sound mind would consent to such risky behavior!” It’s not long before the pitchforks and torches come out: “He’s giving gay people a bad name! He’s a public health menace! He should be locked up! And sex clubs should be closed down!”

The recourse to sex panic rhetoric and respectability politics is familiar and unsurprising. As calmly as possible, I explain a few canonical sexuality studies concepts in an effort to quell the outrage. Up first, Gayle Rubin’s “fallacy of the misplaced scale”: her critique of the excessive amount of *meaning* we assign to sex. Compared to other pleasurable, consensual physical activity, sex is always considered a “special case” that must be adjudicated with unique, and uniquely stringent, moral criteria and legal punishment. Blamed and scapegoated for countless non-sex-related problems, sex in Western culture is deemed guilty before proven innocent. “Heretical sex,” blindly consenting to anal penetration in the age of AIDS, for example, “is an especially heinous sin that deserves the harshest of punishments” (11). But whence comes our bloodlust for nonnormative sexual behavior? Religion, social conservatism, biopolitics, homophobia . . . you name it. So as not to get sidetracked by a search for the origins of the “misplaced scale,” I simply ask some questions: Are we judging Sex Club Guy so harshly because we are viewing his behavior through an inherited sex-negative lens? Are we extra critical because we are overvaluing sex, that is, making it perhaps more meaningful than it should be? Are we being unfair to sex? Do we judge other consensual physical activity—say, massage, bodywork, even sports—the same way? What about athletes who consent to self-harm and who harm others (boxers, football players), are they too *non compos mentis*? Why do we cheer athletes who violently hurt one another and scorn those who consent to “unlimited intimacy?”

Next, a historical backdrop: Michel Foucault’s “perverse implantation,” his cheeky term for the sexological invention of a link between sexual desire and social identity (*History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 36–50). His argument, in a nutshell, concerns the ways in which sexuality becomes a tool of social control in the modern era. By establishing erotic desire as the tell-all secret of personality, psychology, and social behavior, nineteenth-century sexual sciences, including psychoanalysis, performed a great service to

law enforcement, criminal surveillance, and population management. In “implanting” perversions into individuals—that is, goading, forcing, and molding erotic confessions—sexologists created “sexuality”: a window into the soul, a hermeneutic revelatory of what makes us tick. While in previous eras, according to Foucault, sexual fantasies and fetishes bore little relation to a person’s overall character, in modernity they become indicators of *who* we are and *why* we behave the way we do—especially if that behavior is judged criminal. Sexology therefore establishes normative social criteria by which we, the populace, police ourselves and one another. The upshot of our biopolitical work is that population management is far easier for social administrators. What’s more, sexology invents a new class of criminals—zoophiles, pedophiles, homosexuals, etc.—that suddenly lurk around every corner. It becomes the moral and patriotic duty of neighbors and psychiatrists alike to rat out the perverts and bring them to justice. In short, and back to the “misplaced scale,” we are especially vigilant around and suspect of nonnormative sexual actors and actions partly because we have been trained to be so, for at least a century, by the highest juridical and scientific authorities.

Rounding out the discussion of Sex Club Guy is Michael Warner’s critique of sexual moralism: the all too common practice of asserting one’s own virtue by sexually shaming another (1–40). Of course, for Warner, this isn’t morality at all; it’s what sociologists call “downward comparison” (Fischer 52–53). For example, the put-down, “you’re a slut,” implies: “I am not a slut; you are dirty, and I am clean; you are polluted, and I am pure; therefore, I am morally superior to you.” Even “friendlier” expressions of sexual moralism rely on the purity/pollution logic. The not-so-subtle subtext of “no homo,” a phrase typically used by straight-identified American men after expressing even the slightest modicum of affection for other men, seems to be: “Don’t worry, I’m totally normal, bro; I’m not gay, which would make my affection weird, uncomfortable, abnormal.” Again, a declaration of one’s sexual normality assures us of their social normality; so-called “real men” have nothing to worry about once the threat of a morally suspect homosexuality is vanquished. Due to both pervasive sex negativity, an overinvestment in the meaningfulness of sex, and a widespread belief that sexuality speaks volumes about a person’s character, then, sex is an easy target in moral one-upmanship.

Zoom out, and we see this one-upmanship on a social level: dominant groups frequently secure their social perch by pointing to the supposed sexual immorality of other groups. In male-dominated societies,

for instance, a male rapist's criminal behavior is sometimes justified by calling attention to the female victim's alleged sexual impropriety, often ostensibly written on her body in the form of "slutty" clothing or gestures. Groups invested in white supremacy likewise characterize Black sexuality as animalistic and excessive in order to "prove" that minority group's social and moral inferiority. Of course, it's a truism that those with a fragile sense of self shit on people purportedly beneath them in order to feel better. But sex is uniquely positioned to bear the brunt of individual *and* social insecurity. Because shame, anxiety, and embarrassment are part and parcel of sexual desire and development, because we all feel, at one point or another, vulnerable, uncertain, and insecure in regard to sexual matters, it's our collective Achilles heel. Sexual moralism is thus a scoundrel's last refuge: instead of acknowledging that, at heart, we may have something (sexually) in common with people supposedly different from us, instead of recognizing that sexuality is messy, complicated, and *strange* for everyone, the insecure and/or power hungry among us jump at the chance to strike where it hurts most—where it might, in fact, have once hurt the insecure and power hungry most! A nonmoralizing sexual ethics might begin, then, with the following axiom: "If sex is a kind of indignity, we're all in it together" (*Trouble*, 36). A moral code that doesn't take into account that we are all, to varying degrees, humiliated, humbled, and made vulnerable by sex, may be, in the end, immoral.

Discussion around these concepts tends to defuse the situation; reluctant head-nodding and some resigned eye-rolling usually conclude the class session on Dean's work. However, despite the sex panic and moralism, the students ultimately have a point: if we follow *philoxenia* to its logical conclusion we find that the coherence, security, and stability of a *philoxenic* organism is in fact always at risk. Be it a virus infecting an individual body or a noncitizen challenging the laws and mores of a social body, the risk of dissolution and disintegration is ever-present. Indeed, the very identity of the organism is at stake: How can a self or a state define itself, even know itself, if it is unclear where the self/citizen begins and the nonself/noncitizen ends? How can we maintain the boundaries of a self or a state if the stranger is granted all-access entry? How can an organism maintain structural integrity if its very form morphs incessantly? Leela Gandhi, whose staging of the *philia/philoxenia* standoff in *Affective Communities* (13–33) grounds my course rationale, eloquently articulates the stakes of *philoxenic* hospitality: "Poised in a relation where an irreducible and asymmetrical other always calls her being into ques-

tion, she is ever willing to risk becoming strange or guestlike in her own domain, whether this be home, nation, community, race, gender, sex, skin, or species. So too, the open house of hospitality or the open heart of [*philoxenic*] friendship can never know guests-friends in advance, as one might a fellow citizen, sister, or comrade” (31). Not knowing who we are or whom we might be obliged to welcome is indeed a troublesome prospect. It is particularly upsetting to college students who are striving to hone their self-identities and solidify their value systems; even more so to students working to develop personal brands so as to be competitive on the job market. Whereas *philoxenia* in theory might seem the key to creating a truly democratic and welcoming *polis*, when personalized it becomes a scary prospect. If the wall between self and Other must remain porous, how are we ever to know who we are, let alone empower ourselves to become the best we can be? Tim Dean’s argument against the teachings of Christ in the conclusion of *Unlimited Intimacies* becomes the final nail in *philoxenia*’s coffin for many of my students: “Contrary to the Christian ethics of viewing the other as a neighbor and loving him or her ‘as thyself,’ the psychoanalytic ethic insists that the other’s strangeness be preserved rather than annihilated through identification” (212). *Philoxenia* at last reveals its true colors: from my students’ perspective it is not only a threat to personal and national identity, it is, worse, an ethical model espoused by unsafe sex addicts and antichrists alike. It’s difficult to talk them back from that one.

So, I propose, what if ethics were grounded neither in a *homophilic* nurturing of an exclusive sameness nor in a *philoxenic* embrace of radical difference? Is it possible to relate to one another on a level beyond socially assigned identity, beyond personality, and ultimately beyond difference? Can we become *indifferent* to the sexiness of our own and others’ very sexy, very singular psychological depth? What if, instead, we treated one another as nonidentically similar, or as familiar correspondents? Following Dean, what if “getting to know each other” were irrelevant to ethical intimate relations? What if we resisted the temptation to answer to, interrogate, know, and ultimately assimilate and control the Other? Put simply, what if we responded differently to the seductive (siren) song of Otherness: neither fully open to it, nor exclusively against it? What if ethical intimacy begins when we choose *not* to connect with another on a personal level?

Take for example, once more, sexuality: that feature of modern personhood that purportedly tells us so much about who we are. Even though historians of sexuality have provided ample evidence to disabuse

us of the illusion that sexual desire is a reliable, transhistorical indicator of personality, psychic interiority, and behavioral motivation, most everything—from our laws to our politics to our manner of dressing, walking, talking, and consuming—continues to rest on this belief. If I'm a straight American man, I *can't* like *x* cultural activity (figure skating, baking, interior decorating); if I'm a gay American man, I probably *should* like *y* (shopping, dancing, drag); if I desire *x* type of person, there's something wrong with me; if I dream about erotic practice *y*, I should go see a therapist. As the army of armchair psychoanalysts among us would have it, everything we do, say, make, or think is revelatory of whom or what we desire and a clear indicator of the type of person we may not even know we truly are: sexuality is an open secret that always gives us away. Although we might take heart in reports that younger generations are less invested in rigid sexual binaries (Lewis)—despite the fact that most Americans continue to believe in the biological basis of sexual orientation itself (Jones)—we need only look to the increasing severity of legal punishments meted out to nonnormative sexual actors to understand how deeply invested we remain in sexuality as a moral barometer of the self that readily transforms into a tool of social control.

The David M. Halperin and Trevor Hoppe edited volume *The War on Sex* explores the recent increase in policing and punishing nonnormative sexual actors. In the introduction, for example, Halperin provides a brief history of U.S. sex offender registries. Since 1994, the year that Congress began requiring all states to maintain a registry, the number of legally identified sex offenders has ballooned. There are currently more registered sex offenders in this country than there are residents of North Dakota, Wyoming, or Alaska (13). The increase has less to do with drastic changes in people's sexual behavior and more to do with the ever-expanding meaning of the label "sex offender." In some states, a sex offense includes public urination, sexting between minors, and many other acts that are either consensual, involve zero physical contact between individuals, or both (14). Although sex offender registries were created to track and survey violent sexual criminals such as rapists and child predators, a shockingly low percentage of contemporary sex offenders—less than one percent in some states—are classified as violent (14). In many cases, killing another person would merit a lesser sentence than a sex offense that involves no physical harm to another and even no contact with another (24). And while contemporary registries systematically discriminate against minority populations (including people of color, transgender youth, and people

with HIV), they also discriminate against stigmatized sex *practices* (commercial sex, pornography, intergenerational sex, nonheterosexual sex in general) that cut across social identity lines (39). The label, “sex offender,” displayed in red ink across driver’s licenses in some states, severely limits vocational opportunities, residential options, and access to public space; it can result in lifelong restrictions on movement, impossible paroles, prison sentences wildly disproportionate to the crime, and indefinite psychiatric confinement (14, 25–26). Gay-identified men are overrepresented among those who receive lifetime psychiatric detention (perversely called “civil commitment”) for sex crimes (30). In a cruel historical twist, the fight led by gay males for the removal of public cruising from the first sex offender registry indirectly contributed to that registry becoming a Cthulhu-like monster whose tentacles wend their way into so many aspects of modern life: school, work, public and online leisure. As a result, in the eyes of the police, public health officials, and psychiatrists today, we are all potential sex criminals: guilty until proven innocent.

Excessively punitive American sex laws and offender registries are clear indicators of our continued investment in perceiving sexual acts and identities as barometers of moral character and social worth. A first step toward reforming such draconian measures might be to *care less* about sexuality—but not in a simplistically open-minded “it’s all good” sort of way. What I’m suggesting here is that we valorize consensual forms of intimacy in which depth-psychological understandings of sexuality are de-emphasized, if not inoperative. Instead of locating ourselves and one another in sex, we should work to abandon both the self that has been identified and “invented” as sexual as well as the intersubjective intimacies that such sexualized subjects nourish. By betraying normative sexual meanings and arrangements, we orient ourselves toward an understanding of the nonidentical sameness—the equivalence—of people and forms. In short, we learn to become fungible.

Between or beyond *philia* and *philoxenia*, then, *fungibilis* is an anti-individualist, collectivist, or, rather, “collectionist” ethics premised on the formal substitutability of the self. For the moment, imagine it as an extreme form of *philoxenia*: an embrace of foreignness so radical that one and another become mutually interchangeable. This self-substitution is voluntary, pleasurable, and sensual: one welcomes the prospect of losing the self, disappearing into a sea of similitude, and becoming a mere equivalence. Through a process of volitional, aesthetic desubjection—momentarily freeing oneself from social definitions and determinations—the self is afforded

an opportunity to expand outward, to extend itself horizontally toward similar, desubjected aesthetic forms. Unlike *philoxenia*, then, *fungibilis*—or, less pretentiously, fungibility—nurtures likeness rather than foreignness: it is an ethics rooted in an immanentist ontology that understands substance as internally differentiated, asubjective sameness.

Bear with me: I realize that the previous sentence is a mouthful of philosophy jargon. When I try to explain immanentist ontology in lay terms to students, the first things that come to mind are the hippie-dippiest of song lyrics: the (third) chorus of Joni Mitchell’s “Woodstock,” which begins, “We are stardust/Billion-year-old carbon,” or the title of a (much worse) song by Moby, “We Are All Made of Stars.” As saccharine and as naively “we’re cut from the same cloth; we are all the same” as the sentiment behind these lyrics is, it’s a start. As post–Big Bang subjects, we *are* all made of stars, and in that sense ontologically connected. But if human history teaches us anything it’s that the discovery of a shared origin of species does not magically usher in global social equality. The powerful instead willfully misinterpret and manipulate the data to secure their social perch. The very un-Darwinian concept of Social Darwinism, for example, continues to convince many that capitalism is an inevitable part of our evolution and that white supremacy is by design. Rather than emphasizing the constitutive role of interdependence and symbiosis in species’ development, as Darwin did, the “victors of history” lay stress on “survival of the fittest,” which translates economically to unbridled capitalism and eugenically to white power.

This doesn’t mean, however, that we have to give up on the connective thread of cosmic stardust altogether. The fact that “billion-year-old carbon” interacts with the environment, genetic material, and microbiota of each stellar individual can still teach us something about immanentist ontology. Indeed, the billions of microbes—bacteria, protozoa, fungi, and viruses—that constitute the collective microbiome of our species might help us envision an ontological substance grounded not only in “internally differentiated, asubjective sameness,” but also, at least to an extent, in *philoxenia*. “All of human development and all the systems in the body have all evolved, or co-evolved, with our microbes,” argues neuropharmacologist, John Cryan. “As humans we are very much human-focused and we feel that human cells and genes have primacy, but the microbes were there first” (Davis). And while all humans swim in a common pool of the planet’s microbiota, the way it interacts with each socially situated individual is unique: there is infinite variation emergent within and from

this communal pool; there is differentiation within sameness, singularity in the common. Moreover, microbiota, caring little for who we are in terms of social identity, welcome us as strangers—at least when they’re not trying to kill us. The friendlier of the bunch work with our guts to digest breast milk, and hence help many of us survive infancy, and with our skin to potentially protect us from cancer. In this way, microbiota model a *philoxenic* openness to foreignness by cooperating with our strange and terrible species. And though microbes can escape the human body and live without us, which would effectively spell the end of *homo sapiens*, they’ve “chosen” to stay with the trouble (Davis). All this in spite of the insulting fact that we’ve put the cart (the human subject) before the horse (microbiota) for centuries! Indeed, what’s becoming clear in this century is that the designation “human” is so *last* century: “Animals and plants are no longer heralded as autonomous entities,” biologists Seth R. Bordenstein and Kevin R. Theis declare, “but rather as biomolecular networks composed of the host plus its associated microbes, i.e., ‘holobionts’” (1). Once we holobionts accept on a mass scale our microorganismal interdependency, our species and the planet will surely benefit. If we learn to respect the microbiome, show it a little gratitude, and work harder to figure out how to exist with it symbiotically, we might also learn some important lessons about ontology and ethics.

With all due respect to the science of microbiota, the onto-ethical framework I am sketching here—substance (internally differentiated sameness) expressed in various modes (holobionts, geologic cycles, cosmic forces) that become fungible in the search for corresponding forms—is most indebted to the work of Leo Bersani. For Bersani, substance is originary, but actualized and accessible only in its effects. Bersani highlights the way “homo-ness,” his word for substance, manifests and re-manifests in aesthetic and sexual experiences. It is concretized in art, for instance, and sensualized in queer forms of sociability—anonymous cruising, for one. In a Bersanian ontology, being is self-contained fullness, and desire does not originate in lack. Consequently, progress or growth is not dependent on assimilating difference. “One way to describe Bersani’s entire oeuvre,” Mikko Tuhkanen notes in his remarkable *The Essentialist Villain: On Leo Bersani*, “is to say that it seeks other modes of our moving-in-the-world than that compelled by an originary lack” (5). Although Bersani is perhaps best known in queer studies for his psychoanalytic investigations into the self-annihilating sex drive (the so-called “antisocial thesis”), his late work attempts to think beyond the dialectical *sturm und drang* of

an anthropocentric psychoanalytic ethics. In this work, he leaves behind both a sadistic ethics of intersubjectivity and a masochistic ethics of self-shattering. What emerges is an ethical subject that develops according to the rhythms of an impersonal, expansive, and even cosmic narcissism. In its becoming, this subject moves from a centripetal retreat towards nothingness to a centrifugal extension toward corresponding earthly and celestial forms and forces. Through aesthetic and sensual encounters that diminish the power of a voracious ego, the subject becomes aware that she is nothing special—or, rather, that her specialness lies in the capacity to recognize and valorize variations of an essential sameness.⁶

By way of an example, one that I explore further in chapter 5, call to mind (or see figure 5.3) Andy Warhol's *100 Cans*, his famous print of the Campbell's Beef Noodle Soup collection. In this image, the soup cans are essentially the same but superficially unique. What makes each can special is its imperfections, its failure to live up to the Platonic ideal of Soup Can. Whether it's a smeared label or a misshapen cylinder, no can is perfect: all of them "misfit" together in an assemblage of serial similitude (Flatley,

6. Bersani's conception of subjectivity, his preferred self-subtractive practices (cruising, e.g.), and his antisocial thesis *tout court* have been critiqued, most pointedly by José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam, as blind to social difference, especially race, and averse to intersectionality. These critiques are of course necessary and have proven quite productive; they are foundational to queer of color critique. I remain interested in Bersani as an ontologist, as I indicate above, and as a methodologist. Methodologically speaking, my project takes a cue from Bersani's total critique: his radical negation of the *value* of liberal society itself and his transvaluation of the antisocial. Total critique, an immanentist methodology credited to Nietzsche, involves not simply championing the negated object of a dialectical struggle but attacking full force the system that designates and classifies abjection. An absolute negation in this method is conceptually necessary for autonomous creation: *pars destruens, pars construens*. I argue in my previous book, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, that Foucault employs a total critique in his repudiation of sexology and his affirmation of queer friendship. After divesting the homosexual of its sexological essence, Foucault finds in queer friendship "the development towards which the problem of homosexuality tends," and a creation that must be "invented from A to Z" (*Essential* 136). In this project, I likewise valorize a relational form immanent to capitalism—fungibility—in attempt to think beyond the system that exploits it merely for profit. For more on the critique of the antisocial thesis, see Goldberg, *Antisocial Media* 3–5, 25–30; For more on total critique, see Roach, *Friendship* 66–70.