CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON 21ST CENTURY FRIENDSHIP

Polyamory, Polygamy, and Platonic Affinity

EDITED BY REBECCA BROMWICH, OLIVIA UNGAR, AND NOÉMIE RICHARD
Critical Perspectives on 21st Century Friendship
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Introduction
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“Friendship marks a life even more deeply than love.
Love risks degenerating into obsession,
friendship is never anything but sharing”—Elie Wiesel

Human beings have friendships. Through our lives, we are socially situated not just in formal networks of kinship, or familial relationships, but also in informal webs of friendship, which locate us in relationship to one another—but voluntarily and not necessarily through any type of filial ties, legal or biological. Indeed, as Ray Pahl has argued, friendship is an increasingly important relationship across contemporary societies, where people are more mobile and empowered to choose with whom they associate in a wider range of circumstances than in the past. Yet what constitutes a friendship and how to clearly define who is or is not a friend are matters subject to disagreement and debate: sociology does not offer a single, uniformly accepted definition of friendship (Allen). However, as sociologist Graham Allen further notes, friendships do not occur in splendid isolation from the friends’ social location: friendships are circumscribed by class, race, age, and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, not all friendships are necessarily based in pleasure or affection: professional friendships may be predicated on mutual interests and business networks.

Our intention in curating this collection of chapters is to take an international and cross-cultural approach to discussions about friendship by curating a set of diverse contributions situated in a transnational
context that takes friendship seriously as a subject of feminist study. It is important to look at the diverse range of friendships that exist cross-culturally in order to tease out the commonalities between experiences of affinity that are enmeshed with the differences between social, national, legal, and cultural frameworks surrounding these relationships of affinity and affect.

This is far from the first text that studies friendship from a range of academic perspectives. Indeed, the concept of friendship has received attention in Western moral philosophy; in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle theorizes that friendship is a path to knowledge of the self (qtd. in Biss), whereas Cicero links friendship to virtue by postulating that true friendship is only possible between good men. Ferdinand Tönnies, David Hume, and even Adam Smith (Shearmur and Klein) have opined and theorized about how friendship has developed new forms under capitalism (Hill and McCarthy). Anthropologists, too, have studied friendship, although it has not received as much attention or study as kinship (Bell). Across a variety of fields in the social sciences friendship is studied, although it is dramatically understudied relative to other human relationships (Pahl). What is fundamentally new about this contribution is its interdisciplinary approach and its breadth; it employs a feminist theoretical lens along with a cross-cultural, transnational scope. Moreover, this volume offers a synthesis between the critical academic study of friendship and feminism, specifically matricentric feminism. This volume has been crafted as a space for discussion—as well as the production of new imaginaries within critical feminist scholarship, analysis, and politics—about what it means to be a friend. This is intersectional feminist scholarship; therefore, this text considers how the categories of women and gender intersect with other dimensions of social identity, such as race, sexual identity, and class. Cross-gender and same gender friendships are also critically considered.

This volume seeks to bring together diverse perspectives through creative contributions, social science research, scholarly work, and critical theorizing about the roles, representations, identities, and work associated with being a friend. This is an interdisciplinary anthology. Contributions hail from a wide range of disciplines and fields, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, women’s and gender studies, cultural studies, literary studies, and legal studies. Creative contributions are also included, including fiction, poetry, and art.
In her book *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks writes the following: “All the great social movements for freedom and justice in our society have promoted a love ethic.... Were a love ethic informing all public policy in cities and towns, individuals would come together and map out programmes that would affect the good of everyone (hooks 6). The notion of friendship critically explored in this volume can take place within the context of marriage, as Mary Wollstonecraft espoused when she advocated marriage as friendship (qtd. in Abbey), but it is a concept not limited particular forms of kinship or status-based relations. When writing about love, hooks is not only contemplating a romantic or sexual concept but also “love as a verb,” (6), which includes relationships between parents and children and between people in platonic relationships. She defines love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (6). Here, love is an enduring sense of warmth towards a person that shows a deep concern for them. It is related to kindness, munificence, and commitment as well as closely connected to what Sara Ruddick has called “maternal thinking.” The care-based, other-centred themes of hooks’s politics of love are resonant with Ruddick’s maternal thinking. This resonance connects the concept of friendship explored in this volume with Andrea O’Reilly’s “matricentric feminism.” O’Reilly explains this as a feminism that positions mothers’ concerns as the starting point for a politics and theories of empowerment. The love and care for an embodied, willful other that defines maternal thinking is closely connected to the relations of affinity that forge friendship, making matricentric feminism highly relevant to this work.

This book draws on the theoretical foundations of hooks’s work and the theoretical lens offered by matricentric feminist scholarship; it also explores the potential of friendship, as Aristotle conceived of it, as a path to virtue—but a collective virtue not just an individual one. The contributions within this volume all resonate with the notion hooks proposes: how might we centre a politics of love when engaging in government of human relationships? And in doing so, how might we talk about friendship as a relationship based entirely on affinity, and not status, property, or filiation? The primary focus of this work is the feminist study of friendships between women, but it takes a constructivist approach to the definition of the project; thus any relationship based on affect rather than romance or filiation falls within the scope of this book.
Friendship is a fluid and not generally fixed relationship, which is based entirely on affinity, as opposed to status, although there can be status-based friendships. Whereas actual friendships often involve some level of inequality, the notion of friendship is a fundamentally egalitarian concept—a relationship of affinity without domination, which is precisely what hooks advocates we centre in contemplating a politics of love.

A liberating politics of love starts by centring friendship as a relationship for analysis, for fostering, and for protection. Following the maternal thinking espoused by Ruddick, moreover, a politics of friendship is an emancipatory politics of peace. This book critically assesses the emancipatory potential of friendship.

The contributions in this anthology are as follows. Sally Param’s chapter, “Responding and Adjusting: Exploring the Friendship Dilemma through the Qualitative Lens of Educated Indian Women in Malaysia,” examines the experiences of Indian women and Southeast Asian women with regards to nonkin friendships. Param interviewed eighteen Southeast Asian women with various middle-class careers and of varying ages, and she seeks to uncover exactly what these women are spending their leisure time on, the importance of nonkin relationships, and the adherence to the traditional view of kinship as the most valued relationship.

Rebecca Bromwich advocates for the decriminalization of polygamy in Canada in her chapter “Blurred Lines and Spaces for Renewal: Reconsidering Polygamy under Canadian Law.” She uses trends in contemporary family law and empirical evidence to explore section 293 of the Canadian Criminal Code and whether it has any parallel to Canada’s current views on family and friendship.

Josephine L. Savarese’s chapter “Research Project Reality Show: Three Poems” explores her experiences working on a research project over three years with a colleague. The poems use various styles and topics, but all center on the friendship found between colleagues.

Meredith Stephens, an Australian woman and mother, recounts her experiences as a bilingual, Japanese-speaking woman living in Japan and the concept of friendship in her chapter “Friendships in the Japanese Language: Intersubjectivity through Mothering.” She compares and contrasts these specific relationships from her life at home to her life abroad by comparing the Western concept of friendship against the
Japanese concept of friendship, specifically the special bond she has created with other Japanese women as mothers.

In “The Ibeji Model: Friendship Bonds as Soul’s Salvation in the Scholarly Writing Process,” S. Alease Ferguson and Toni C. King explore the unfortunate reality that they, as African American women, faced when entering the world of academia—the pressure to publish and the need to form a dyadic-relationship, classified as the Ibeji Model, to survive the patriarchal environment of academia.

Elieen Doherty and Kari Wilson’s chapter, “Women ‘Playing House’: An In-Depth Examination of Adult Female Friendship on Television,” uses the television show Playing House to examine the media portrayal of female friendship. The study uses multiple episodes to categorize the portrayal of female friendship and how it mimics, or rejects, the trends of female friendships in reality.

In “Protecting the Public in the Twilight of Trials: Towards Access to Justice in Relational Conflict via the Regulation of Mediator,” Rebecca Bromwich and Thomas Harrison explore connections between affinity, friendships, collegiality, and the benefits and risks of alternative dispute resolution, specifically mediation, and how it can be more effectively integrated into the current legal environment in The study was conducted using a small survey of fifty-one people of various legal backgrounds in order to gauge the general public’s attitude towards mediation and the desire for it to be a regulated legal practice.

In Myrina Bromwich’s essay “Friendship,” the ten year-old author describes her personal feelings towards, and experiences of, friendships and the value they hold. She explains her positive and negative experiences but ultimately concludes that friendship is an inherent and important part of life.

Finally, Jens Urban’s essay “Polygamy and Human Rights in Canada and France” critically assesses how the legal treatment of polygamy in Canada and in France not only fails to appreciate the nature of human friendships and relationships but also violates human rights law.

It is our hope that this diverse, interdisciplinary collection sparks contemplation and conversations about what bell hooks enjoins us to consider: how politics, law, and theory may be reimagined if we foreground the human bonds of love and friendship.
Works Cited


Chapter One

Responding and Adjusting: Exploring the Friendship Dilemma through the Qualitative Lens of Educated Indian Women in Malaysia

Sally Param

Many have argued that Asian society prioritizes the strength of kin relationships over those of friendships. Noriko Tsuya and Larry Bumpass, as well as Nelson Chow, have shown how familial ties have acted as sources of emotional support, providing kin members’ material and nonmaterial needs. However, processes due to postindustrialization have caused even Asian societal structures to adapt and reorient towards change. Intan Hashim et al. show how the effects of overwork, the decentralization of offices, and the inclusion of nonwork space within employment structures in Malaysia have created a new need for leisure hubs as well as friendship circles. Through the globalization of technological advancements, friendships across borders and continents have been made possible. John Helliwel and Haifang Huang explain that with the click of a button, the definition of social networks takes on a heightened meaning, and the addition of one word, “online,” creates a whole new dimension of friendship. This online phenomenon can be seen as weakening family bonds and strengthening friendship circles. Commenting on urban lifestyles within an Asian context, Wendy Samter et al. discuss how friendship networks rely on
the physical environment, the situation, and nonverbal cues as added elements of friendship. The Malaysian context is similar, as evidenced by Hashim et al. Their statistics show that friendship circles not only reduce stress levels faced at the workplace, but seem to be the preventive tool of numerous social and psychological ailments.

This social context seems ideal to explore the lives of the women represented in this chapter, and to what extent they enjoy friendships. And yet, taking a closer look at racial and socio-economic boundaries is a necessary step as understanding the context of these women’s motivations and aspirations will give insight to their preoccupations (of lack of it) about friendships.

**Current Local Narratives**

Globalization and the push for economic growth have propelled Asian governments to highlight the inclusion of women in their national labour force statistics (Douglass; Kabeer). Narratives in Southeast Asia evidence this as well (Quah), and as with the women of this research, their roles are now claimed as instrumental in moving their national economies forwards. In Malaysia, five-year socioeconomic plans support its gendered employment agenda. The Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016–2020), the most current, continues to carry normative assumptions that most women get married, become mothers, and contribute to the participation rate of women in the labour force. Dual-income households that contribute to the growth of middle-class families are the current target group, as this category is seen as bringing stability to the country.

From the plethora of these politicized narratives, what emerges is the type of Malaysian women that the modernizing nation desires as part of their feminine national identity. Middle-class women who straddle motherhood and employment are projected as the gendered epitome of the nation’s socioeconomic transformation. These women are not only able to feed the global market economy but also to keep their homes in order (Douglass). The women referred to in this chapter fit this desired prescription perfectly. They are educated, employed, mothers, and wives living in urban Malaysia. Together with their husbands, they make up the middle-class, dual-income household, which constitutes the sought-after category in national economic policies. Ideally, these
women’s societal position spells success from every angle. This category of women is the perfect match for the study of urban friendships globalizing, modernizing Asia. As the study by Hashim et al shows, friendship groups are seen as the new norm for urban Malaysia. And yet, what should seem like a natural progression of these urban women engaging with friendship groups is thwarted by unseen obstacles.

**The Shadow of History**

Peter Robb’s work highlights how the Indian community entered Malaya (as the nation was then called) in the late 1800s; as a diasporic minority under British colonial rule. Although almost ninety-five percent of the total population came in as manual workers (rubber tree tappers and railway track labourers), the British did want workers educated in English to form the civil service and administration. From a gendered perspective, Kernial Sandhu’s work depicts clearly that the Indian migration of both manual worker and educated white-collared worker “was essentially a movement of male adults” (Sandhu 154). Both these historical aspects shed light on the lives of the Indian women in this research. Although their grandmothers also came to Malaya as a diasporic entity, their entry into their new homeland was silenced by history books. Only records of ‘male adults’ exist. The women of this research are defined as educated, as their grandparents are part of the white collar worker recruitment by the British. Since then, although more than a hundred years have passed, and the Indian women population has grown, there are still very few public narratives that prioritize Indian women. Writers within the country continue to discuss dominant discourses that focus on ‘bigger’ issues pertaining the Indian community: poverty, patriarchy and (their lack of) political presence (Tate; Sandhu and Mani; Manickam).

Writing about the Chinese minority community in Indonesia, Chang-Yau Hoon explains how the Indonesian government promotes “decorative aspects” of the Chinese minority as part of “their ideal version of minority cultures” (Hoon 155). This is an excellent parallel to the representation of Indian women in Malaysia. Indian women are portrayed within the traditional stereotype of wearing long braided hair and dressed in colourful sarees or salwar kameez. These elements are “celebrated as evidence” that the minority culture lives “happily ever
after” with the dominant cultures (Hoon 155). This image intentionally conveys the idea that only the ‘decorative’ elements of Indian femininity are celebrated within Malaysia; real-life representations of Indian women in social media or popular narratives continue to be few and sparse.

This backdrop explains the silence that educated Indian women face in Malaysia. These women fulfill the current feminine national identity, but only on paper. Borrowing Benedict Anderson’s concept of an “imagined community,” these women enjoy an imagined national identity that denotes success. In reality, they still attempt to emerge from the shadows of a recent history that has eclipsed their identity along gendered and ethnic lines. This perspective will help explain the friendship dilemma in their lives.

Methodology

Twenty Indian women were interviewed for this research, and all of the women live in the heart of Kuala Lumpur (referred to as KL from now on), the capital of Malaysia. The methodological framework for this research is qualitative, and although I am researching on women, I am careful to not call this a feminist lens. To do so would be erroneous, as decades earlier, Shulamit Reinharz exposed how “malestream” methodologists had claimed that quantitative methods were more scientific and, therefore, more masculine. Therefore, although this research studies the lives of women, the framework itself should be gender-free. I have used an interviewing technique that does not follow a strict format of structured questions. My questions are been open-ended and I find that this is the best approach, as it allows the participants to express themselves freely. These women were interviewed one-to-one in the privacy and the comfort of their homes.

My approach is also reflexive and combines the “multi-perspective practise” and the “positioning practise” (Alvesson et al. 483). Both these approaches allow me to complement the women’s perspectives with mine and to contextualize the women’s views against “broader institutionalized norms” (Alvesson et al. 485). These methodological approaches enable the women’s views on friendship to be analyzed not just as a separate entity but as interdependent and interconnected data within the larger context of their lived experiences.
The women’s responses are recorded and transcribed, which are then interpreted, operationalized and analyzed. These women have signed informed consent papers prior to the research, which enables me to use their actual names in this chapter. Each participant mentioned in this chapter had been given a choice to use a pseudonym in spite of their consent, but no one wanted to do so.

**Forming Friendships**

This section looks at the evolution of how these women manage leisure spaces with friends. The meaning of nonkin friendship that I will be using as a reference point is best defined by Daniel Hruschka: a “long-term relationship of mutual affection and support” (Hruschka 2). I explore how these women form and maintain face-to-face friendships within the context of leisured space. Self-care is also delineated under leisure and will be referred to later, but the main focus of this chapter is how these women attempt to form meaningful friendships. The historic neglect and current policies discussed earlier shed light on these women’s positionality in society.

The topic of friendships can be likened to a conceptual leverage in the lives of Malaysian Indian educated women. This is because, as Helliwel and Huang show, having friendships in urban Malaysia is not so much about avoiding loneliness or boredom; rather, for these women, friendships allows them to articulate a feminism that speaks to their ability to be successful in life. This reality echoes older research by Dominic Strinati, which claims that by having time for friendship circles, these women are taking their nonwork lifestyle more seriously. Below are snippets of the conversations I had with these women as they discussed how they negotiate space for meaningful friendships.

Thirty-nine-year-old Shamala is a businesswoman, who decided to resign from an established international computer company and start a retail cake-making shop. Although she is busy with raising her two young sons, she still finds time to be with friends: “Yes, we do make it a point to meet up—not as often as we like, but yes, we do meet up. We have in a way grown up together from college days, and we have fun just going out and being together.”

Thirty-eight-year-old Gauri has two young children, and she stresses her need for her girlfriend time: “Catching up makes a big
difference. We look forward to it, us girls. It’s quite therapeutic for us.”

Both Shamala and Gauri express the closeness they feel with their girlfriends, a connection they have developed over the years. Both these women demonstrate the element of mutual affection that is consciously protected through frequent meet ups. For other women, their friendship circles are measured more in terms of time-based convenience.

Forty-nine-year-old Sudha has two adolescent daughters and teaches in a primary school. She talks about the group of friends she connects with: “The year-end holidays are the best time to travel together, as the kids are off school. My friends and I are busy with work, but we enjoy planning for an overseas trip, and saving up for it throughout the year. It’s something we look forward to. We have gone to India and Cambodia, and are now thinking of where next.”

Forty-two-year-old Priti is a home designer and restaurant owner, and because she runs her own business, her time for friendships is fluid: “If I am not with my [three] kids, I am busy with my business, but if friends want to pop by, they are most welcome. As long as they are ok when I get random calls on the phone about this or that, or if they are ok to dine at my restaurant, then catching up becomes much easier. My friends have to accept my crazy life.”

For these two women, friendship circles are important, but only if it can be dove-tailed into their work-life. While these women also enjoy friendships, the disposition is affected by their work schedules. These women are more flexible in their approach to friendships, where adjusting to work patterns take precedence. While these women enjoy their same-sex friendships, other women joined their husbands in sharing friendships with other couples.

Thirty-nine-year-old Jigna is a department head in an educational institution with two children under fourteen. Her administrative and domestic duties often overlap, but friendship is one thing she does not compromise. In Jigna’s case, her friends are the wives of her husband’s friends. This means that the children of these couples are also involved, and their time together becomes more a combined family outing: “We try our best to meet every weekend. The kids play badminton or some sport, while we get together and chat. I wait for the weekends to come, like a ritual. Friendships like these are important, you know, even for the children, as we can grow together.”

Forty-year-old Yasodha is a mother of two boys and shares a good