

REVIEW

Tom Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), ISBN 978-1438440002

A spate of recent queer theoretical interventions focusing on HIV/AIDS has attempted to locate appropriate frameworks for understanding the virus and its social, political, and cultural ramifications as it enters a fourth decade of existence. The lasting impact of the epidemic upon queer bodies and queer communities has given birth to the additional problem of its commemoration: how, in short, do we archive and memorialize the actions of HIV activists and their deeply important methods of resistance as the nature and impact of HIV shifts from its immanently fatal connotations to its ostensibly more ‘normalized’ form. Nonetheless, though advancements in HIV medicines in combination with assimilationist gay politics have ostensibly promoted a post-HIV, post-queer subjectivity in the global north, the specter of HIV continues to haunt the way in which we imagine queerness to operate. Enter Tom Roach’s *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement*, in which Roach mobilizes the paradoxes and ambiguities of friendship—“friendship as shared estrangement” (2)—in the service of queer politics, AIDS activism, and a renewed understanding of queer relationality and potentiality.

Roach’s text draws from a sustained analysis of Foucauldian friendship, taken predominantly from the thinker’s late work and, as the book’s title overtly declares, best exemplarized in Foucault’s 1981 selfsame-titled interview in *Gai Pied*. In fact, we might concisely summarize Roach’s text as an attempt at unpacking the (queer) political implications of Foucault’s famous statement in “Friendship as Way of Life”: “The development to which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship” (8). By way of a catalogue of thinkers intrinsic to queer theory’s so-called antisocial turn—Judith Halberstam, Leo Bersani, Tim Dean, Heather Love, Lee Edelman, William Haver and various writers and painters including Hervé Guibert and David Wojnarowicz—Roach constructs an anti-assimilationist, post-identarian understanding of friendship which he then applies, first, retrospectively to moments of AIDS activism in the eighties and nineties, and second, though with substantially less emphasis, to the current state of queer politics as to better protect contemporary understandings of ‘queer’ from its perceived tendency toward “concretized, deadened” valences and with “a hope of sorts for mapping sites of resistance to biopolitical administration in the present” (14). As such, *Friendship* is divided into two rather distinct parts. The first three chapters consider the “problem” of friendship for queer politics—particularly concerning AIDS activism—through its relation to biopolitics, Foucauldian sexuality, and queer ontology; the book’s final two chap-

ters, in Roach's words, "aim to return biopolitics to its 'home' in sexuality studies, to bring queer theory up to speed with biopolitical debates, and to articulate a concept of shared estrangement as biopolitical strategy" (13).

Friendship's strongest addition to queer theoretical thought is, naturally, its consideration of friendship; while "Foucault is simply asking more of friendship" (23), it appears that so too is Roach. Under the operative premise that the potentiality of queer friendship emerges in tandem with the uncoupling of truth and sexuality—supporting Foucault's position that manifestations of identarian politics in which truth and sexuality are inherently linked must eventually be surpassed once their political efficacy has been spent—Roach elaborates on forms of relationality which exceed commonality. Roach writes:

Gay liberation, while an important and necessary stage in what Foucault calls "becoming homosexual," was never for him an end in itself. The dialectical reversal of subject-object only paves the way for future becomings—a beyond sexuality, a postliberationist politics—which may preeminently take the form of friendship as a way of life, yielding a culture, an ethics, and as yet unseen forms of relation (43).

Only in our shared estrangement, Roach's first chapter argues, elsewhere described as an ethics of discomfort, can friendship work in the service of mutual benefit. Nowhere is this truer than in response to AIDS, whose ubiquitous mortality demands immediate and communal response across lines of identity, experience, and serostatus. In the face of such an epidemic, only "as yet unseen forms of relation," with its connotations of queer solidarity, may serve as the basis of resistance against state apathy and religious condemnation.

Both how friendship gives rise to such "unseen forms," and thus how friendship serves political ends may require further explanation. Estrangement, for Roach, moves well beyond separation or disaffection. Friendship as shared estrangement implies a relationality "guided by an ethics of discomfort, provoking an openness to alterity" (123), in which friends can only recognize each other as such in concomitance with a recognition of their own finitude, the continuous possibility that they may betray one another, and an openness to irreconcilable strangeness. Only in an abandonment to finitude, betrayal and strangeness is the basis of friendship unrooted from common identity: "it is precisely not recognizing the self in the Other and not sharing common ground. It is instead an acknowledgement—affective, conscious, or otherwise—of an ontologically differentiated homo-ness, a recognition of that common-ness and singularity of finitude" (136; original emphasis). While it may appear obvious that it is through "ontologically differentiated homo-ness" that such an understanding of friendship gains its particularly queer, and thus its activist, valence, the logic behind "homo-ness" (with its ambiguous dash-ness) appears to couple friendship as shared estrangement with a history of queer alterity. That is, to be queer is always already to be in some way unknowable, and thus the basis of queer relationality must be predicated upon a certain unease, a certain distance. The distance and tension that the dash, here, comes to represent—in one register, between communality in homogeneity and its detracting 'ness', in another register, between the fixed identarian position of homosexuality as it is rendered ambiguous—open a space where friendship must do something, where friendship must serve as a productive force.

Roach's prime example of this 'doing' appears throughout much of chapters four and five, which apply the theoretical leg-work Roach advances in the book's preceding sections to moments of queer resistance and activism, which he refers to as "grassroots biopolitical project[s]" (110). Roach considers the AIDS buddy system, in which Persons with AIDS (PWAs) are partnered with community members who in turn provide much needed personal and emotional support. The buddy system, in "addition to lobbying for the social legitimacy of homosexuality and the social tolerance of PWAs... strategically shifted the AIDS debate from a politics of sexuality to a politics of friendship" (111). Not only must the buddy-PWA relationship in this sense often overcome differences in sexual orientation, gender, serostatus, class, and race, but they must do so in the face of immanent mortality. (This last hurdle is amplified exponentially when we consider that many buddies were also PWAs in earlier stages of the syndrome who, in time, would themselves receive buddies.) A friendship founded upon such finitude—"buddying begins at the points where 'normal' friendships end" (113)—must, from its genesis, overcome the ubiquity of death in order to fulfill its very mandate: friendship, here, is conditioned by the mortality of one (or more) of its participants. The product of this shared estrangement in the face of finitude, for Roach, is "an ethics of nonrecognition—I can't see myself in the other, I can't subsume the other into myself—which leaves the radical foreignness of both parties in tact and unharmed. Such nonviolative relationality affords an opportunity to cultivate foreignness, to nurture unseen selves and unusual intimacies" (114). In cultivating foreignness, we create a paradox of proximity whereby we orient and attach ourselves toward that which is irreconcilable to ourselves. As such, the buddy system both creates the conditions for such a renewed understanding of friendship—and its political and social efficacy—and enacts those very conditions in its operation.

Friendship as a Way of Life consequently puts forth a (queer) political model that is rooted in, but ultimately exceeds, AIDS. If AIDS is taken to be an absolute example of biopolitical control, then friendship as shared estrangement serves as a method for its subversion. Put concisely, "only when death is understood as immanent to life does a progressive politics of living have a chance" (146). Friendship as shared estrangement, by virtue of its unrepresentability and its surpassing of any locatable identarian categories, in Roach's words, "points toward a politics beyond representation" (149), beyond any sense of authoritarian or institutional control. The buddy system, to return to my previous example, undergirds the medical establishment, say, or even academic enquiry unable to capture its true ethos. In putting friendship to work, in seeing it anew, queers have created a political framework—or at least the potential for that framework's creation—beyond the reach of biopolitical control. In recognizing the immanence of death and in uncoupling sexuality from truth, friendship as shared estrangement creates a form of queer relationality in excess of administration, categorization, and as Roach argues, regulatory power.

The value in Roach's claim, I argue, lies not only in how we understand queer history to operate—the buddy system becomes all the more significant from this standpoint—but also in how friendships can continue to augment the very nature of queerness in our contemporary social situation. Roach laments the subsumption of 'queer' to homonormativity, and the organicism of queer friendship to state-regulated marriage. The very premises under which *Friendship as a Way of Life* operates could equally instigate fruitful analysis of the current state

of queer politics and serve to bridge the specific generational experiences of pre- and post-AIDS queers. This is, however, where *Friendship* falls painfully short. Though often mired in unproductive theoretical synopsis (of content familiar, I must add, to most readers of Foucault, Blanchot, Deleuze and Guattari, and Hardt and Negri), Roach is at his very best in putting such theoretical understandings to use in the service of renewed understandings of queer relationality and potentiality. Roach's impactful reading of Foucauldian friendship frames Foucault as queer, in the contemporary political sense, *avant la lettre*, and in ways that much of queer theory hasn't yet considered. In sidestepping these issues in favour of, for example, a lengthy critique of Hardt and Negri's failure to consider AIDS in their model of biopolitics, Roach absents the sustained theoretical application he himself finds missing. Looking back at histories of AIDS activism and queer friendship but only haphazardly mining the potential of such histories for the future undermines the potency of his unique perspective. There is a project of enormous value here, it just needs to be completed. As HIV continues its march forward, and as a new generation of queers comes of age without the lived experience of immediate finitude, friendship as shared estrangement may yet serve as a means of liberation, but also as a means of protecting the exceptionality of queer-selfhood as such.

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