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My friend, I love you

Wire, string, tape, fabric and acrylic

My piece, “My friend, I love you” represents the elements of close, intimate friendships using wire sculptures hanging in balance with each other. As I conducted my research on friendship, I repeatedly found information about the importance of connection as it related to platonic intimacy. This research inspired the creation of my mobile, in which the working nature of it relies on connectivity and balance. My past experiences with friendship have largely informed my work as well. The level of authenticity and realness of each relationship I have encountered in my life has led me to explore the topic of intimacy. I wanted to create a piece of art that was representative of vulnerability, beauty, and authenticity. I took inspiration from the book *All About Love* by bell hooks and her wisdom about the art of loving in friendships.

Throughout the process, I experimented with many different materials before choosing to work with wire, which forced me to work solely in a continuous line. I used sketches to base my wire sculptures off of. The colorful tape, fabric, and string were used to fill the spaces in the elements. The two faces are representative of friends, and the wire elements beneath them are the different components of intimate friendship.

My hope is that my artwork symbolizes the beauty and realness of platonic relationships. The practice of intimacy is a binding force that connects people, and my goal is that my mobile will inspire people to be more genuine with each other because friendship can be life changing.

Intimate Friendships:
A Return To Platonic Love



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Writer's Note: In this paper, I address the relationship between intimacy and friendship, and the benefits it can provide. I use queer theory, personal narrative, and other sources to analyze the role of intimacy in platonic relationships and queer friendships. Intimacy holds different meanings across cultures, sexualities, races, genders and classes. It's a notion that unites us all through radical connection—underscoring the urgent need for our society to return to love.

When I was in 4th grade, I met a girl named Ruby Jean who had moved to my small town of Starksboro, Vermont from Montreal with her mom, dad, older brother, and older sister. She lived down the road from me in the old bed and breakfast that was positioned right beside the flowing river, Lewis Creek. As my family got to know hers, I began to befriend her in school and soon, we started to hang out. She quickly became my close friend and we saw each other constantly. While I had a few other friends, Ruby Jean came at a moment in my early life where I didn't even know I needed her. We spent hours together at her house, at mine, in the river, at school, on the playground, at her mother's artisanal soda shop, and running up and down the hills around my house. We knelt on her rug on the floor of her living room and doodled, the heat from the electric fireplace warming our bodies. She was an inspiration before I knew what that meant, her art always striking me as beautiful in a way I had never seen before. During summers, we would wander over to the breezeway, where the swing would call our names, and her mother would have to come over and tell us to stop swinging so high, claiming that we would bring the whole house down.

My time with Ruby Jean was at a bittersweet point between my childhood and preteen years. We talked about a lot of things, and questioned the ideas I thought had to be right. She opened me up to new perspectives and feelings, like how it felt moving to a new town where she

didn't know anybody and the feelings of isolation that ensued. She was by my side through my later elementary years, until the beginning of 7th grade, when we drifted apart. Looking back, I take most of the blame for that. I was too worried about my appearance, and I was nervous to go into middle school with people I did not know from other towns. Anxiety got the better of me and we moved apart while still remaining friendly. I didn't know much about how she was doing or any specifics about her life because of her shy and reserved nature, but our paths would cross as we grew older and started high school.

By the beginning of 10th grade, Ruby Jean and I were brought back together by chance during our American Studies class. We reconnected during that period, and while tentative, it was nice to hear about her life and her family a few years after we drifted apart. One week we had an essay due for class that we were both struggling with, and she texted me wondering if I wanted to work on it together in person. I suggested she come to my house, and while I waited for her to arrive, I became increasingly anxious about seeing her. Heat climbed up my back as I wracked my mind with things that could go wrong. As the seconds ticked by, my body buzzed with anticipation and fear of awkward silences. It was not like I didn't want to see her, but it had been so long since I had spent one on one time with her, and I was nervous. Soon, I heard her knock at the front door and knew I had to face reality. I opened the door to her wrestling with her bike as she leaned it up against the outside of my house. Hellos were exchanged, and as we settled down into work spaces in the dining room, we both seemed nervous. As we began to talk about the progress we were making on our essays, the conversation soon morphed into joking about our class and the people in it. We both began to joke about people we knew in elementary school and our childhood. Slipping into an easy rhythm, the room filled with laughter, and we performed imitations of our favorite teachers from 5th and 6th grade. I felt very warm and happy, thinking of times when we

were younger. Then, it seemed like the world was so small and everything was so important. Looking back on those times with Ruby Jean, I was able to appreciate our relationship and the intimacy we had at that age. It was funny to think about the sleepovers we had and the things we did together. It was easy between us at that moment.

Later, my family and I asked her to stay for dinner and she agreed. We enjoyed a meal together and it felt like the old days because as younger kids, we spent significant amounts of time around my mom and dad. Even though it was slightly awkward in some moments, I was ultimately glad that she came and spent time with me, and it was even more telling that we didn't make any progress on our essays. Reflecting back, this brief night with Ruby Jean was grounding and made me remember the importance of friendship and community through the years. When I think about friendships, I feel grateful and lucky that I get to experience that type of love and connection with other people.

My past friendships have taught me the importance of emotional vulnerability, despite living in a culture where I feel pressured that I should keep it all in, and strive to succeed by myself. In "Intimate Relationships Across Cultures" by Charles T. Hill, he states that "Intimate relationships exist in social domains, in which there are cultural rules regarding appropriate behaviors" (Hill, 2019). Since the society we live in dictates and judges who we love and how we engage with each other, one might find it hard to imagine a world in which you could love freely without these restrictions. That's why I wanted to explore ideas around intimacy and closeness between people. I wondered what it really means to be intimate in a platonic way. Intimacy is the defining force for authentic relationships and friendships across all sexualities, races, genders, and cultures. What does it mean to be close to somebody?

I. Platonic Friendships

Within the bounds of American society, there are structures in place that tell us how to love. Currently, the capitalistic power structures that are based on a superiority of one group over another affect our perception of ourselves, the people around us, and how we interact and create relationships with each other. Therefore, in American culture, friendships have significantly less weight than romantic and familial relationships. Mass media and societal portrayals of intimate relations focus on and perpetuate an ethic of domination and violence that has guided our population to believe in a culture of lovelessness. “There are not many public discussions of love in our culture right now” (hooks, 1999, intro). The media’s message is that love is less complex and less compelling because people who are “in love” just fall into bed without discussing their needs, wants, and fears. That is the information we have on love. It is media’s ignorance that “gives love its erotic and transgressive edge” (hooks, 1999). This idea has been brought on by people who have no idea about the art of loving, about being close to somebody.

In our society, friendships are valued less than romantic relationships. There is an immense amount of pressure to achieve a straight, romantic relationship as soon as you reach your preteen years, and not enough emphasis on the benefits of authentic friendship. Committed love relationships are more likely to become codependent when ties are cut with our friends (hooks, 1999). As friendships begin to fade away, it creates an emptiness inside of us. Sexual and romantic relationships are not the only grounds for close, intimate connections. “Put differently, the existence of sexual relations between two people is not a necessary, let alone sufficient, condition for intimacy” (Gordon, 2014, p. 166). When we begin to realize the power of love within friendships, it opens up a world of possibilities. “Friendship is another space that provides the possibility of an intimate relationship. It is to friends we turn when our romantic relationships

reveal their inevitable limits” (Marar, 2012, p. 7). It is vital that we break away from this notion that our value or love comes from being in a heterosexual relationship, rather than simply existing with friends that support us and make us happy.

Physicality between friends can be important too. In “What Is the Physical Touch Love Language?” Sarah Sheppard says “Note that physical touch as a love language is not all about sex. A hug, a shoulder squeeze, a handhold, even a pat on the back can be an expression of love that is just as meaningful to your partner.” This creates even more of a connection, and can really solidify an intimate, platonic friendship. Finding the deepest connections with friends rather than romantic partners is a necessary ongoing practice and process.

The amount of time invested in friendship will play a large role in the level of intimacy of that relationship. It can be challenging to devote a good amount of time to intimacy because of intense workaholic standards imposed by the workplace (Bennett, 2000, preface). The books and resources we look to on intimacy focus on the difficulties of achieving it. It is hard to navigate this terrain because we are both drawn to and in fear of the idea of intimacy because it is something that we want but requires a level of vulnerability and emotional labor. In *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks writes “You can never love anybody if you are unable to love yourself”, she also adds “do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give yourself” (68). In isolation, self love cannot expand. bell hooks explains that if we give ourselves this gift of self love as a practice, we will be able to reach out to other people in search of authenticity and intimacy, not from a place of longing for the love one doesn’t have (hooks, 1999). Bennett also talks about intimacy beyond romantic bounds. “We have been taught that intimacy means sexuality, closeness, and disclosure, and that time means money. But intimacy is not only about having sex, or feeling good about each other. Intimacy is not a goal we achieve by attaining these

outcomes. It is more about process than outcome, more about mutual meaning” (Bennett, 2014, preface). Practicing loving and intimacy in our friendships creates a pathway for a lifetime of love and fulfillment.

Intimate friendships are one of a kind in that they can be stripped of all expectations: “It allows us to let our guards down and be ourselves in the face of the other. This is because friends do not require us to conform to predetermined patterns of behavior or adhere to conventional standards of discourse” (Gordon, 2014, p. 165). In dysfunctional family life or unsupportive homes, friendships are actually the place where a lot of people get another chance at love and a supportive community. hooks sets up what she believes genuine love looks like by combining care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect (hooks, 1999). Love within friendship gives space to manage our problems while experiencing intimacy in a joyous community.

Additionally, humor adds fun and enhances the level of comfort within the relationship or community: “Above all, humor can greatly reduce the tension among people and enable individuals who are different from each other to get along and even live together in harmony” (Gordon, 2014, p. 168). Humor also allows people to be more open to new ideas and listen to new perspectives that may differ from their own. It exposes our learned behaviors and allows us space to accept other people’s viewpoints.

Overall, platonic love in friendships benefits us in other facets of our lives. “Learning to love in friendships empowers us in ways that enable us to bring this love to other interactions with family or with romantic bonds” (hooks, 1999, p. 134). Loving, intimate friendships provide structures for growth, healthy development, and community building. The strength of friendship is tested by the ability to make changes that are necessary within that connection. Regaining the

courage to open up, to change, to lose our egos and to move past fear is essential in order to find true intimacy and friendship.

II. Queer Platonic Friendships

Within friendship, queerness opens up even more doors to new possibilities and dreams compared to present day a culture of heteronormativity. Historically, queer friendships trace back to phrases like “Boston Marriages” during the 19th century that meant that two women shared a life and lived together, often in intimate nonsexual friendships (Sarkar, 2021). Terms like queerplatonic signified relationships that bent the normative rules of what platonic partnerships looked like. They pushed away a heteronormative culture that was structured around straight romantic bonds.

One of the beauties of queer friendships lies in the simple fact of being friends with someone who understands your struggles and joys and shares the commonality of being a person who doesn't exist within society's heteronormative constraints. Being involved in these bonds changes lives. “Queer friendships, built on a shared sense of belonging and care, can be transformative. My queer friendships not only offered me solidarity and support, they were also a space where we could collectively question and unlearn the heteronormative patterns we had inadvertently internalized” (Sarkar, 2021). Within these areas, there is room to envision queer futures together, where community is at the forefront and intimacy merges the spectrum of identities together.

Further, being in queer friendships shows the value of queer people outside the bounds of coming out and then achieving queer “coupledom.” It is enough to simply exist as a queer person, have other queer friends, and not be in a relationship. In fact, it can be even more rewarding and profound. In “The infinite Possibilities of Queer Friendships” by Sohel Sarkar, she explains how

queer friendships can disrupt the separation between romantic, sexual, and platonic relationships if that's what they need to be (Sarkar, 2021). Sarkar also introduces the individual and structural concepts of queer loneliness. Meg-John Barker, PhD explains that a lot of friendship socializing still tends to focus on stereotypically masculine/feminine things, which queer people don't necessarily adhere to (Barker, 2016; Sarkar, 2021). Dr. Barker writes, "[It is] important to feel that friends accurately read your gender, get your relationships and how they work, and see beyond stereotypes of queerness. It's vital that they're not always asking ignorant, intrusive questions, making jokes, or using inaccurate language. In a culture which assumes heterosexuality and cisgender-ness unless a person 'comes out' as otherwise, queer friendships can enable queer people to breathe easier and have a sense of just being themselves" (2021). Having this comfort is essential for the growth and development of intimacy, so finding a friendship within a space where one can truly feel like themselves is important.

Queerness also presents the ability to create friendships and intimacies that "refuse to conform to normative ideas of what relationships should look like" (Sarkar, 2021). Queerness acts as resistance to strict definitions and labels put forth in the heteronormative culture we live in. It leaves space for imagination, of worlds built on trust, respect, closeness, and understanding. The intimacy that is associated with queer friendships spring from shared struggles and allows the articulation of traumas, fears, and hopes (Sarkar, 2021).

III. Love and Friendships Across Cultures

Furthermore, American culture paints relationships and the power of intimacy in a very structured way. Many other cultures celebrate love and friendship more widely than the US. For example, in this study of the value of friendship across Chinese and Western cultures, it was concluded that

“Chinese participants emphasized the moral quality of close friendship and the connection of friendship and society more than Western participants did” (Keller, 2022). Their web of relationships is way more complex and valued and there are other ways of community building that shy away from individualism and move towards a collective good.

In *Sister Outsider* by Audre Lorde, she notes the learned binary nature of how we should think about diversity among humanity. “Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, superior/inferior” (Lorde, 1984). In other cultures, people have other understandings of human differences and ways to interact with people, whether it be with family, friends, or in romantic relationships. They understand intimacy in varied ways. “Valuing friendships was more strongly related to subjective well-being among people living in countries high in income inequality” (Lu, Oh, Leahy, and Chopik, 2021). The greed for wealth and popularity has plagued American culture to the point where it is surprising to us that people that aren’t as rich are living with love and appreciate the relationships they have with their friends. The gratitude they have for the friendships and closeness they share with people is a model for how we could be.

For people of all religions, one generally common concept included in their belief systems is the power of love. Spirituality carries significant weight and acts as a guide for many people. The spiritual guides we go to commonly originate from cultures that value interdependence and working for a collective good as opposed to cultures that center capitalism, individualism and racist ideologies. In “All Above Love,” bell hooks highlights that the biggest spiritual accomplishments are unimportant if love is not there to support it, to be the foundation for everything we do and stand for. Specifically, she called for an end to segregation in Christianity,

to end the historically racist belief systems ingrained in many white churches. She wanted love to be brought to the forefront of everything spiritually.

In a 1967 lecture opposing war, Martin Luther King Jr. said “When I am speaking of love I am not speaking of some sentimental or weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.” To love being open to different perspectives and belief systems is to love wholly. hooks (1999) said that committing to a life led by spirituality meant embracing the eternal principle that love is all, everything, our true destiny. “We still seek to know love, despite facing the pressures to conform to the culture of lovelessness” (p. 77). We should strive for love in our friendships so completely that it truly becomes the foundation of our lives.

When we start to push back against our culture of violence with love and intimacy, it is radical. In our society, you are a product of the environment you grew up in. If you didn’t know or experience love growing up, you will have to unlearn the practices of mistreatment. The power of self love comes through and allows you to branch out and support other people with the same love and appreciation you have for yourself. Exercising self-love and platonic friendships allows us to create connections that are incredibly special and life changing. Therefore, intimacy beyond the bounds of the heteronormative, white supremacist society we live in is profound.

I have learned that the binding factor within friendships is intimacy. Coming to the Oxbow School has opened me up to the world of platonic intimacy and queer friendships, and I know it has for a lot of other people as well. There is so much power in spending time together to create intimate connections and relearning the power of love and gratitude. What will you do to create meaningful and authentic friendships while maintaining true to yourself? How will you work to create harmony and community in a loveless society?

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