

The Politics of Friendship in Feminist Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: Many feminists have been troubled by questions of friendship in ethnographic research. For some critics, such assertions elide power imbalances, invoking a 'sisterly identification' built on essentialist models of gender. In this article I combine insights gained from partisan ethnography in the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition with feminist theory to argue that the problem lies not with claims to friendship as such, but with a naturalized model in which friendship is treated as a power-free zone. A more politicized approach to friendship offers analytical tools for thinking about methodological, epistemological, political and applied problems in feminist anthropology and politics and to wider questions about the relationship between intellectual and political life, critique and solidarity.

KEYWORDS: engaged anthropology; feminist ethnography; feminist politics; friendship; Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; research relationships

My stomach was in knots. It was my first year of full-time teaching, straight off my PhD, so my reserves were already low when I opened an email from a friend in Northern Ireland. She had taken time to read my thesis and was startled, she said, to find an account of a conversation we'd had in the heat of a political moment. I was pretty sure we had talked about my intention to use such material alongside formal interviews, but I must have been too vague, for there clearly had been a misunderstanding. Sick with anxiety, I phoned my friend to beg forgiveness and ask what I might do to make amends. It turned out I was more upset than she was. She didn't want me to lose sleep over it, she explained, but she felt the exchange reflected one pressure-filled moment, not the longer trajectory of her political thinking. She also thought people might be able to identify her, despite my use of pseudonyms. We discussed the ethics of ethnographic research

– murkier than straight interviews, where the context of data gathering is ceremonially marked by consent forms and tape recorders – and agreed that if I did use the conversation, I would blur the context and generalize the account. I was enormously relieved. My prose might be less vivid, but 'friends are worth more than books' (Glassie [1982] 1995: 11).

Problems like these are not uniquely feminist. However, the confluence of feminist political activism, partisan ethnographic research and friendship points to a wider set of debates about the nature and object of feminist anthropology, particularly for those attempting to do applied, activist or other forms of engaged research. These include the 'standard admonition' to new scholars: 'please leave your politics at the door', because engaged research is bound to sacrifice rigour and complexity to 'reductive, politically instrumental truths' (Hale 2008: 1–2). For feminists, the problem of

engagement has been further conditioned by long-standing worries about the potential for exploitation in research relationships. These emerged acutely in the 1980s and 1990s with stinging challenges to universalistic assumptions about 'women' in feminist scholarship and politics and the 'colonizing' tendencies of some white Western or Northern feminist representations of 'Other' women across boundaries of culture, class, race and nation. In the case of anthropology, critics highlighted a disciplinary history 'produced by, indeed born of, colonial rule' and implicated in the "'nativization" of third world women' (Mohanty 1991: 31–32). Henrietta Moore's (1988) book-length survey, *Feminism and Anthropology*, shared the concerns of its time. Yet Moore was optimistic: 'Anthropology is in a position to provide a critique of feminism based on the deconstruction of the category "woman". It is also able to provide cross-cultural data which demonstrate the Western bias in much mainstream feminist theorizing' (Moore 1988: 11).

By the mid-1990s, when I started my PhD, the deconstructionist critique had long-since won the day (Alonso 2000). Nevertheless, several review essays published at that time discerned a tacit essentialism in how feminist ethnographers described their research relationships, particularly in presumptions to a privileged relationship with female informants. These surveys tended to regard claims to friendship in fieldwork with suspicion. Kamala Visweswaran (1997) was particularly blunt. The postmodernist deconstruction of gender was salutary, but feminist anthropologists tended to drop the ball. All too often, their engagement with this literature 'actually reified unproblematized notions of gender' (Visweswaran 1997: 613). They might pay lip service to the critique of universalistic models, Visweswaran said, but 'then proceed to privilege gender as the centre of analysis. Notions of sisterly identification abound, and feminist ethnography continues to traffic in intimate forms of address ... The terms "friend" and "informant" are

often used interchangeably ... often without further reflection or comment on the intrinsic contradictions of power that are masked in such a slippage' (Visweswaran 1997: 614).

If ethnographic invocations of friendship are based on unreflective assumptions of a 'comfortable congruence between the feminist researcher and women subjects' (Wolf 1996: 19), then Visweswaran and others were obviously right to question both the assertions and the gender politics underpinning them (e.g. Caplan 1994; Wolf 1996; Duncombe and Jessop 2002). Yet, as my opening story suggests, for me, friendship has not worked to hide such problems. On the contrary, friendships that developed in a nexus of research and political collaboration have tended to expose the potential for misidentification and betrayal much more acutely than would a more conventionally distanced research relationship (also Stacey 1988). That is, I agree with Visweswaran's appeal for attention to the power differences, disconnections and disjunctures between women, including feminist ethnographers and their 'subjects'. Claims to friendship are obviously at odds with this project if we imagine it as a privatized or naturalized relationship, a zone of unmediated affinity. However, I would argue that the problem is not so much that claims to friendship allow feminists to avoid the politics of ethnography as that friendship itself is too often conceived as an apolitical relationship.

This article combines feminist and other political theory with reflections on partisan ethnography in a feminist coalition to map out a political model of friendship, one that locates it between people who recognize one another as different and whose relationship encompasses multiple registers that may at times become confused. My intention here is to put theory and reflexive ethnography together in a way that honours the feminist insight that the personal and the political are inseparable, including in relation to the politics of research (e.g. Stacey 1988; Wolf 1996). The original im-

petus was my dissatisfaction with diagnoses of friendship in fieldwork as a kind of feminist bad faith. However, the process of working or thinking *through* questions of friendship in this more political way may also offer a kind of orientating analytic (as opposed to model or metaphor) for central concerns in engaged anthropology, an angle I am borrowing from Jane Cowan's (2006: 10) discussion of the conceptual potential of viewing 'culture as analytic to rights'. Her argument is not to approach human rights and culture as similar 'objects' or to conceptualize rights as 'a culture' but that rights might 'be grasped through [anthropological] methods and orientations to cultural analysis'. Following this lead, a feminist analysis of friendship might help us grasp something about the nature and demands of ethics, engagement and solidarity for feminist anthropologists and activists confronting disengagement in the 2000s – disengagement that is itself perhaps partly an unintended consequence of the earlier critique of gender identity (Alonso 2000; Moore 2006).¹

Political Friends: The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition

Much of what I have to say about the politics of friendship I learned from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC). The Coalition was formed to contest the election to the 1996–98 multi-party talks on the future of Northern Ireland. The goal of the talks was a settlement capable of restoring local government and ending permanently nearly three decades of violent conflict involving loyalist and republican paramilitaries, police and the British army. Irish nationalists, including republicans, had never accepted the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state, aspiring to a united independent Ireland and an end to the constitutional link with Great Britain. Unionists and loyalists were and are committed to maintaining the union with Britain.

Because most nationalists have been Catholic and most unionists have been Protestant, constitutional conflict has sometimes been labelled religious or ethnic. Without denying the salience of sectarianism or the broad association between religious and national identities in Northern Ireland, this depiction underplays the *political* background of conflict and division, especially when religion (or 'culture' or 'identity') is cast as the cause of the conflict. Moreover, if conflict and division have dominated Northern Ireland politics, an oversimplified 'two communities' approach not only marginalizes those who do not easily fit into the dominant categories, it also neglects the possibility that even people who clearly identify with one side in the constitutional conflict may hold complex aspirations and allegiances – for example, nationalist and feminist, or British and Irish (e.g. Nic Craith 2002; Whitaker 2008b).

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was formed against the backdrop of an official peace process centrally focused on reaching accommodation between nationalism and unionism and the possibility of Northern Ireland's future being negotiated entirely by men. At the time, it was widely assumed that two groups were central to securing peace. One was 'the men of violence', as the British Prime Minister of the day put it (quoted in Cochrane 1997: 316), neatly erasing women from both war- and peace-making. The other was politicians. And while it is often said that a generation grew up in the north without knowing peace, the same generation grew up without seeing a female Member of Parliament.² Thus, in early 1996, women's organizations in Northern Ireland drew up a set of proposals for 'gender-proofing' the talks process. When neither the government nor the existing parties responded, a group of activist women – nationalists and unionists, loyalists and republicans, Catholics, Protestants and others – decided to form a women's coalition for the purpose of contesting the elections to the talks. Only a few had any direct experi-

ence in party politics. Yet, in just six weeks, they built an election campaign around three 'core principles': equality, inclusion and human rights. By the time nominations closed in mid-May, the Coalition had 70 women candidates. On polling day, they took enough votes to win a place at the talks. When peace talks opened in June 1996, some parties included women in their talks teams, but the Coalition delegates were the only women at the table as negotiators. At the closing plenary on Good Friday 1998, the only woman to endorse the resulting peace agreement was NIWC negotiator Monica McWilliams.³

The NIWC was not yet formed when I was preparing for doctoral fieldwork, so it didn't figure in my original research plans. After living in Northern Ireland for a couple of months, I approached 'Elisabeth', a local linchpin of Coalition activism, about including the party in my research. By this point, Elisabeth knew me fairly well – I had met her on a preliminary research trip and we had corresponded in the intervening year. She was generous with analysis, encouragement and advice regarding my work on women's activism as well as with opportunities to participate in local women's organizations. When I asked her about researching the Coalition, she responded by doing what she'd done to many other women: she recruited me. Joining, she said, 'will be your passport to the meetings'.

My first reaction was uncertainty. Aside from the received wisdom that research requires political detachment, my training had warned me that feminist ethnographers were all too prone to 'delusions of alliance' (Stacey 1988: 25). But these were not my only reasons for hesitation. I was also unsure about my affinity to Women's Coalition *politics*. For some local feminists, such a coalition of unionists and nationalists could work only by avoiding the national conflict – the whole reason a peace process was needed. These critics agreed there was a real danger women would be shut out of negotiations. But they rejected the idea of

a women's party, arguing that gender could not trump national politics in an election 'designed to give a mandate to negotiating teams who will be negotiating a new constitutional arrangement' (Ayres et al. 1996). I also knew some women who were unhappy when people assumed they were supporters simply because they were feminists. In sum, I worried that the Women's Coalition was based on the very approach to gender identity that Visweswaran had detected in much feminist ethnography: an approach my generation was trained to see as bad feminism.

I was wrong about this. One of the 'common goals' listed in the founding manifesto was 'to include women on an equal footing with men'. The other was 'to achieve an accommodation on which we can build a stable and peaceful future' (NIWC 1996). The first suggests gender identity, and the Coalition did demand social, economic and political equality and inclusion for women. At times, it invoked 'women' and 'women's experiences' in ways that were both strategic and heartfelt. For example, the Coalition argued that women brought something distinctive to the negotiations since, 'over the years of violence women have been very effective in developing and maintaining contact across the various divides in our society' (NIWC 1996). Interviews and conversations revealed that for many – though not all – Coalition members, the original motivation for getting involved was simple: 'Get women to the talks table'.

But in its pursuit of accommodation the Coalition worked from the explicit premise that women are *not* all alike. In a context where the line between us and them, friend and enemy, was often treacherous, the Women's Coalition argued that difference was not an insurmountable barrier to political solidarity. Rather than assuming a common political standpoint, the Coalition included people who recognized one another as alike *and* different. The Coalition's account of what 'women' did during the troubles continued: 'They have created a space for

discussion and an honest exchange of views. In doing this, women have seen themselves as agents of change' (NIWC 1996). Likewise, at its best, the basis for Coalition interventions in the peace process was open debate and negotiation among its unionist, nationalist and other members over the meaning of a commitment to equality, inclusion and respect for human rights in relation to the issue in question.⁴ Sometimes these exchanges were fractious. But rather than seeing them as a barrier, the Coalition made a virtue of the political differences it encompassed, differences that included but could not be reduced to those of national politics. They allowed it to present its membership as a built-in test of 'cross-community' inclusion in the peace process context. Individually, members were encouraged to 'check in' with women from different backgrounds, comparing perceptions of events that polarized the 'two communities' in Northern Ireland.

Put another way, the Coalition did not approach its differences with a 'live and let live' relativism. The demands of live politics required it to take clear positions on even the most contentious issues. The process of reaching these resembled what feminist philosopher Lorraine Code (1991) calls 'second-person' thinking. This approach is based on the premise that personhood requires others, from an infant's dependence on its caregivers to the acquisition and practice of such social conventions as criticism and affirmation. Contrasted with 'third person talk *about* people' (Code 1991: 86), second-person thinking casts 'the production of knowledge as a communal, often cooperative though sometimes competitive, activity. Either way, knowledge claims are forms of address, speech acts, moments in a dialogue that assume and indeed rely on the participation of (an)other subject(s), a conversational group' (Code 1991: 121). Second-person thinking is avowedly inter-subjective and engaged. In contrast with the idea that the strongest knowledge claims derive from autonomy and an attitude of value-neutrality – even when the ob-

jects of knowledge are other people – second-person thinking assumes that personhood, including the capacity for individuality and objective knowledge, is enabled by *social* being. Code is not suggesting that women are inherently caring and other-oriented. She takes her distance from theories that make maternity paradigmatic for a relational model of subjectivity. She is proposing a feminist epistemology, not an epistemology 'for women'. In the process, she draws on Aristotle and feminist readings of his work to make a normative case for the critical potential of friendship – a relationship with no intrinsic reference to gender – for feminist politics (e.g. Code 1991: ch. 3, 259–262). I will come back to this argument. For now, let me note that the Women's Coalition approach meant that politics, in the form of dialogue and dispute, was the basis for solidarity and identity, not the other way around (also see Fuss 1994). In this sense, members did not so much find common cause as make it – an order of priority that might offer guidance on problems of (mis)identification between feminist anthropologists and their female subjects raised above.

Collaboration as Research

The NIWC's way of doing politics facilitated my membership despite my initial hesitation. (It probably did the same for men in the Coalition.) Having joined, I found myself increasingly caught up in Coalition politics. Participant observation became partisan ethnography and the Coalition became my political home for the five years I lived in Northern Ireland as a researcher and non-native citizen. I voted and campaigned for its candidates. I served as press officer in several elections, as a member of the Talks team and the Coalition executive. I helped research and write speeches and manifestos, policy and position papers and press statements. 'The field' became a political scene in which I was actively involved.

This alignment put me in a position that is in many ways similar to action, practicing or applied researchers who co-design and execute research projects with community members to meet a specific need or goal (e.g. Wolf 1996; Lamphere 2004; Hale 2008). However, the locus of collaborative research was a little different. As one of the founding members put it, the Coalition was a matter of DIY (Do It Yourself) politics. Once I joined, much of my own 'doing' of Coalition politics took the form of research and writing, skills developed partly through my academic training and partly through prior experiences in student/community journalism. Thus, policy and political research itself became a primary form of participant observation.

Friendships such as the one I introduced at the start of this article also began in the shared 'doing' of politics: hammering out a last-minute press statement, thinking up a campaign slogan, canvassing for votes. They developed over hours spent talking politics in coffee shops and pubs, shared evenings and bottles of wine. Hannah Arendt's (2005: 15–18) meditation on Socrates captures something of the quality of this engagement. To Arendt, Socrates' famous method was at heart 'a political activity, a give-and-take, ... the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth'. Where we are most familiar with this sort of exchange, of course, is in friendship, which is largely built on 'this kind of talking about something which the friends have in common. By talking about what is between them, it becomes ever more common to them'. Following Aristotle, the emphasis on what lies between them ('inter-est') does not imply agreement, identity or equality (Disch 1995). Rather, community is made through *equalizing*, a process that makes friends 'equal partners in a common world'. Indeed, it is through grasping partners' various coexisting realities that 'the commonness of this world becomes apparent' (Arendt 2005: 16–18). Critically, friendship is cast here as an ongoing production.⁵

If the process of talking and working together in the Coalition was equalizing, it did not erase differences between members. For my part, being a political friend *heightened* my sense that I was a foreigner (as press officer, for example, I sometimes refused to speak publicly for the Coalition, reasoning that a North American accent was not good for our street credibility). Nevertheless, to use a test invoked by one of my Northern Irish friends, some of these are people I could call in a crisis. The first person I phoned after learning my partner faced a cancer diagnosis was the woman at the heart of my opening story. Over the subsequent period of diagnosis and treatment, other friends from the Coalition offered succour of diverse and generous forms. Some of these people could also be described as 'informants'. Their insights, words and actions have informed my work, not just in the sense of providing information and data, but – in common with other engaged anthropologists (Hale 2008) – through the deeply inter-subjective experience of analytical conversations described above, where ideas emerge, get honed and sometimes set aside.

Of course, the more research is entwined with social or political intimacy, the greater the danger of betrayal, which is precisely what led Judith Stacey (1988) to ask: 'Can there be a feminist ethnography?' I have argued that friendship does not depend on identity between its partners. Next, I look more closely at the ground *between* friends, suggesting that it, too, is composed of differences. This approach may be especially pertinent to the dilemmas that haunt activist and feminist ethnographers.

Politicizing friendship

So far, this article has argued that claims to friendship need not inevitably deny disparities between ethnographers and their 'subjects' or between women more generally. A closer look at the nature of the dilemmas that arise when

'informants' are friends shows that we also need to address the differences incorporated within any given friendship, a point readily illustrated by the unhappiness I recounted at the start of this article. That trouble arose less out of the differences between my friend and me than because I confused different aspects of our friendship: research and activist collaboration, private and public. For Bonnie Honig (2001), the ever-present potential for this kind of misunderstanding is precisely what makes friendship political. Where Aristotle classifies friendships by type – distinguishing between friendship as pleasure, virtue or usefulness – Honig (following Jacques Derrida) presents each and every friendship as treacherously straddled across multiple registers. Friendship is threatened when one becomes 'the wrong kind of friend', as happens when friendship as usefulness clashes with friendship based in virtue or pleasure (Honig 2001: 53–54). These confusions arise less because friends differ from each other than because they differ from themselves – friend and informant, friend and researcher, comrade and anthropologist (cf. de Lauretis 1986) – and because the ground that connects friends is shot through with differences. Difference lies inside the relationship, 'pluraliz[ing] passion itself' (Honig 2001: 120).

Anyone who has ever worried about being a bad friend knows that these problems are not unique to social research. However, because it uses people by definition, ethnography throws the danger of being the wrong kind of friend into stark relief. Or perhaps I should say ethnographic *texts* do. When I consulted my supervisor about Elisabeth's suggestion that I join the Women's Coalition, she encouraged me to accept. The big challenge, she warned, would come with writing. She was talking about the problem of writing from a position of deep involvement, where I was documenting a political scene even as I was actively involved in efforts to change it. This is a conceptual puzzle. For me, the greater challenge has been my need to negotiate three fears of betrayal: be-

traying my friends, betraying the cause and betraying the demands of scholarship.

Sometimes, the multiple loyalties entailed make writing difficult, particularly where documenting one kind of betrayal threatens to produce another. Political friendships break up over disagreements about ends versus means: when does usefulness justifiably override virtue and when does it spell an irredeemable betrayal of principle? At what point does participating with the aim of changing oppressive institutions or systems become co-optation or selling out? What should partisans do when the most principled position looks like a vote-loser? Do we support the candidate most in line with our values or the one who has the best chance against our rivals? The Women's Coalition was not immune to such disputes. As a party activist, I contributed to some of them. As a press officer, I was very conscious that partisans, like friends, hesitate to air their internal conflicts (sometimes called dirty laundry) in public. At the same time, an ethnography is not a manifesto and conflict is often the richest source of insight for social researchers. What is an engaged anthropologist to do?

Thinking through Friendship: Friendship as Analytic to Politics

Perhaps these dilemmas – conceptual, ethical and political – are not so separate after all. Joining a political party might not be business as usual for ethnographers. Yet, the issues it raises are common to feminists and other public anthropologists who hope to change the world they are studying, sharing theoretical and political problems with our so-called subjects (Stacey 1988; Narayan 1995; Hale 2008). Shortly before her death, Begoña Aretxaga (2005: 164) argued that anthropologists need to face up to the impossibility of judging with confidence as if from 'outside', as if they could free themselves from 'personal moral responsibility by adopting a position beyond the

realm of good and bad, a position from which it would be possible to establish universal moral truths and judgments'. In this regard, anthropologists face ethical and moral challenges that 'are no different in nature to those confronted by our informants' (Aretxaga 2005: 164). Friendship, understood in the kind of plural way sketched above, is inevitably the scene of such dilemmas. I want to end on an exploratory note. What lessons might thinking *through* friendship offer for political and research relationships?

Aretxaga herself rejects friendship as either a metaphor or condition for politics, arguing that friendship cannot be forced on anyone but sometimes we must recognize others whose politics we find repugnant. From this perspective, to demand friendship may have an *anti*-political effect or, worse, render friendship itself meaningless. As she puts it, 'the awareness of belonging to the same community and feeling free not to be "friends" with someone ... [is what] makes genuine dialogue about political differences possible' (Aretxaga 2005: 176). I agree that friendship and politics should not be conflated. Yet, I also think there is potential in her friend Joseba Zulaika's (2005) extension of the conversation after her death to argue that certain dimensions of friendship are paradigmatic for at least some kinds of politics.

Echoing Code, Zulaika argues that friendship's emphasis on knowing other people as 'essentially "you," second persons' offers 'an epistemic model which introduces the promise of a radically different logic in politics' (Zulaika 2005: 285).⁶ I have already outlined how this kind of thinking operated within the Women's Coalition. More germane here, the party extended this approach to the wider peace process. In a context where 'talking to terrorists' was frequently denounced as unprincipled appeasement, the NIWC called for all parties to be included 'as of right' in the negotiations. Even as it decried any use of violence, the Coalition argued that parties with paramilitary affiliates should be at the table with or without

ceasefires, adding that we would 'talk to anyone'. The Coalition repeatedly put its money where its mouth was on this principle, even at the risk of losing supporters. In 1997, the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) was on the brink of being kicked out of the Talks because its associates in the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) had murdered eight Catholics. The Coalition, virtually alone, argued the UDP should be allowed to stay, reasoning that UDP politicians (unlike UFF gunmen) were working to prevent further killings and that excluding them would likely lead to more, not less, violence. When it became clear that the UDP would be expelled, Coalition leaders met with its delegates and urged them to withdraw voluntarily. They did (see Fearon 1999: 98–99). Many NIWC members, angry and sickened by the UFF violence, were deeply troubled by this engagement but, after differing views were exchanged, ultimately agreed it was most in line with a commitment to inclusion. As this example demonstrates, we can take guidance from the 'second person' quality of friendship described by Code without *being* friends with everyone we engage politically.

Finally, it is easy to see how 'thinking through' friendship pertains to a context where political interlocutors hold obviously antagonistic positions, or in political coalitions of clearly distinctive groups. But as debates introduced at the start of this article indicate, feminist anthropologists and activists are as likely to come to grief over assumptions of shared identity or exhortations to unity as they are from self-evident antipathy. In this light, politicized friendship may be exemplary for feminists as an explicitly achieved or made relationship. As with maternalism, Code argues that assertions of 'a "natural", "found" sisterhood' offer a suspect paradigm for feminists. '[F]riendship's epistemic dimension', in contrast, 'open[s] up creative possibilities for achieving sound, morally and politically informed alliances' (Code 1991: 102). Indeed, friendship offers a better model for relation-

ships between family members than the reverse. 'Friendships are chosen relationships'; relatives might become friends, but friendship requires 'a careful, reciprocal, non-imperialistic' knowledge of the other person that is by no means automatic in families (ibid.: 104).

To recap: as an *equalizing* relationship that requires knowing another in their own right, friendship challenges assumptions that difference need be a barrier to political community. In both membership and ways of working internally, the Women's Coalition was premised on the possibility of alliances across differences, a kind of political friendship that might offer lessons for feminists in other contexts. In terms of the wider peace process, the Coalition argued that an agreed settlement based on democratic accommodation could only be built through second-person dialogue between subjects who were not friends – indeed, whose politics were often presented as mutually hostile. At the same time, foregrounding its chosen and made qualities in situations when friends and allies appear to be 'of a kind' can usefully unsettle the assumption that allegiance flows automatically or 'naturally' from certain forms of identity. Doing so might help counter the interpellations and exclusions that arise from imagining gendered alliances, nations or ethnicities as families. What difference might it make if the key metaphor for national or ethnic belonging *even for the 'born and bred'* was friendship not kinship?

As for research: a more political model of friendship – one that emphasizes differences between people and also treats the ground between them as plural – fits well with a feminist approach to ethnographic knowledge production. If the term 'informants' suggests people are repositories of information, friendship points towards knowledge produced through respectful inter-subjective engagement, including analytical interchange (Code 1991: 86; Disch 1995; Arendt 2005: 16–18). Such engagement will not always be comfortable, based as

it is on a relationship between cognition, recognition (of others) and re-cognition – changing our minds, coming to understand things in a new way – a process that is most powerful when it unsettles or remakes us (Fabian 2001). This is so whether or not our 'subjects' are also our friends, as I have discovered now that my research includes opponents of my best political friends in Northern Ireland. Notwithstanding recent arguments that feminist intellectual work needs to be protected from the urgency of live politics through a 'dynamic distance' (Brown 2001: 43), in anthropology, theory is often advanced through innovative ethnography (Vincent 1990: 24). This provides one answer to the warning that applied and activist research is liable to sacrifice intellectual creativity to instrumental goals. Indeed, the most productive tension between analysis and politics often occurs when we let ourselves get close enough to be changed by the engagement, safeguarding the potential for theory and politics to interrupt each other rather than shut each other down (Hale 2008; cf. Brown 2001: 41–43).

Finally, as with ethnography and politics, the demands of friendship are at once emotional and cognitive. The requirement of trust opens up the possibility of betrayal. Yet this risk is tempered by our concern for our friends. Friendship involves a relational ethics, not an ethics of absolute principles. Saying so is not the key to resolving dilemmas, but it calls into question the idea that loyalty always interferes with good judgement and so makes for bad politics – or bad ethnography (Code 1991; Hale 2008). The challenge is to negotiate between the multiple loyalties of our pluralized passions. Under these circumstances, uneasiness is inescapable but also, perhaps, an ethical safety check.

Conclusion

Returning to the problem of feminist (dis)engagement, despite Henrietta Moore's earlier argument that anthropology's major contribu-

tion to feminism lay in its 'radical questioning of the sociological category "woman"' (Moore 1988: 197), in 1997, Kamala Visweswaran looked back on the anthropological record and concluded: 'feminist ethnographers have been largely unresponsive to feminist challenges to gender essentialism, relying upon gender standpoint theory, which erases difference through a logic of identification' (Visweswaran 1997: 616). Hence, the easy references to informants as friends. As a corrective, Visweswaran called on feminist anthropologists to explore 'strategies of disidentification' from their female subjects (ibid.: 613). The challenge now may be to retain the critique of universalizing claims without turning disidentification into a recipe for disengagement – particularly insofar as Moore is correct that ambiguity, fragmentation and multiplicity have become so taken for granted that difference has become a 'pretheoretical assumption': 'the new essentialism' (Moore 2006: 41; see also Alonso 2000).

In this article, I have explored the idea that thinking through friendship can also help us think through ethical and epistemological issues in feminist fieldwork and politics. However, that potential hinges on challenging the idea that friendship expresses apolitical identity. Rather, its ground lies between friends who are, by implication, separate (Disch 1995: 304). Taking friendship understood in this way as analytic to feminist engagement – whether the scene of that engagement is ethnography, political activism or a combination of these – offers no guarantees. Yet, ultimately it may be more useful than appeals to global sisterhood, for 'justification and consensus' – solidarity – 'must always be fought for rather than assumed' (Moore 2006: 41).

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Notes

1. Essays in Grindal and Salamone (eds.) (1995) show that friendships forged during fieldwork can illuminate diverse ethnographic scenes, as well as the fieldwork enterprise itself. I am not addressing the question of 'cross-cultural variation', but it is worth asking whether the idea (or ideology) of friendship as a purely personal or pleasure-based relationship is only possible under certain political economic conditions.
2. No woman won a Westminster seat in Northern Ireland between 1970 and 2001 – and very few women held local government seats (Wilford 1999).
3. See Fearon (1999) for an account of the NIWC's formation and early years.
4. In place of a stalemate of mutually exclusive national politics, Coalition members could argue about how best to promote these core principles. See Whitaker (2008a) for one illustration.
5. Visweswaran's own ethnographic work (1994: ch. 3) discusses a friendship rooted in shared activist struggle that also served as theatres of personal/political struggle between women who still cared deeply about one another. In Visweswaran's hands, such friendships offer nuanced insights into gendered agency.
6. In addition to Code and Arendt, Zulaika draws on the friendship 'canon': Aristotle, Derrida and others.

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