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# Connective Tissue, Critical Ties: Academic Collaboration as a Form and Ethics of Kinship

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## Connective Tissue, Critical Ties: Academic Collaboration as a Form and Ethics of Kinship

Kathleen F. McConnell

*As a proper academic, I turn to others* – John T. Warren<sup>1</sup>

The epigraph for this piece is the opening line of an essay John Warren wrote for the inaugural issue of *Liminalities*. Along the way to a point he was making about genre, he poked fun at the practice of citing others as a way of validating one's own claims. His opening is provocative and his appeal to propriety tongue-in-check. The line would have less punch, though, were it not also true. John Warren did turn to others, often. In addition to collaborating on a number of performances, he co-authored twenty-two essays, a book, a textbook, and two edited volumes. Collaboration is central to his work and therein lays the thrust of his remark. His is not a jab at our hesitancy to advance a claim without a citation or of our reliance on the words of others. It is a nod to that hesitancy and reliance and to the act of collaboration itself.

I didn't know John. Even from a distance though the social network he maintained and the ways in which it cut across academic rank, disciplinary lines, and geographical boundaries impressed me. I was struck in particular by the ways in which his professional practices reflected a belief he often articulated in his work: that knowledge is never a static, finished entity so much as a series of uncertain and ambiguous exchanges. The encounters that he details in his writings—the Marine from his gender and communication class, the student from his performance class, “Jane” from Midwestern University, a cast member of *Stain Upon the Snow*—all serve to illustrate this point.<sup>2</sup> He does not present those encounters as sources of authority that

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<sup>1</sup> John T. Warren, “Watching ‘Flag’ and My Relative Disinterest in Generic Clarity,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 1.1 (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Scott William Gust and John T. Warren, “Naming Our Sexual and Sexualized Bodies in the Classroom: And the Important Stuff that Comes After the Colon,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 14 (2008): 119–20; John T. Warren, “The Social Drama of a ‘Rice Burner’: A (Re)Constitution of Whiteness,” *Western Journal of Communication* 65 (2001): 184–205; Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren, “The Strategic Rhetoric of an ‘At-Risk’ Educational Identity: Interviewing Jane,” *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 2 (2005): 238–56; John T. Warren and Amy K. Kil-

lend legitimacy to his work. My sense is that he re-enacts them for us because they enable him to inhabit and model a critical position made so by the destabilizing perspectives of others.

This performative dimension of his work is evidenced, too, in John Warren's choice to collaborate as often as he did. Formal or informal, those collaborations themselves are a form of argument, each one reminding us that academic work no matter how solitary is made substantive in the relationships we keep with one another. Pat J. Gehrke offers a succinct summary of the same argument in his study of ethics: "we begin in relation." Those relations, "this sheer being together," he writes, "makes it possible for a community to seek to articulate itself, to ask what its purposes ought to be, to explore its definitions or boundaries."<sup>3</sup> In an essay on autoperformance, John Warren makes the argument in his own characteristically personal way: "I admit that, rather than talk, what I want most after a powerful and well-crafted autoperformance is to hug the performer—to have a moment where I can express, genuinely, that I appreciate the risks s/he undertook and the possibility his/her performance has made for us."<sup>4</sup> Here as else where, he makes present the feeling of beginning in relation, being together, and the process of making meaning with others.

In this essay, I cast these acts of academic collaboration as a form of kinship. Kinship may seem an inappropriate characterization given that colleges and universities are not organized along either marriage or blood lines, but recent scholarship on kinship departs from the epic anthropological studies that once attempted exhaustive accounts of human reproductive practices (consanguine theory) and marriage and family traditions (alliance theory).<sup>5</sup> No longer a term that designates relations based either in "primordial natural facts" or a "prepolitical" sphere, new kinship scholars now consider the term a "classificatory technology" of our own making.<sup>6</sup> Anthropologists have revived the concept to study what Janet Carsten has termed "cultures of relatedness," or how and why we form relationships.<sup>7</sup> Kinship as such is a way of

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gard, "Staging *Stain Upon the Snow*: Performance as a Critical Enfleshment of Whiteness," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21 (2001): 271;

<sup>3</sup> Pat J. Gehrke, *The Ethics and Politics of Speech: Communication and Rhetoric in the Twentieth Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 165.

<sup>4</sup> John T. Warren, "Performing Trauma: Witnessing BALL and the Implications for Autoperformance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28 (2008), 183.

<sup>5</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "The Study of Kinship Systems," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 71 (1941): 1–18; E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, "New Directions in Kinship Studies: A Core Concept Revisited," *Current Anthropology* 41 (April 2000): 277; Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), 2; Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13 (Spring 2002): 14–44.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Carsten, ed., *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

thinking about our collaboration with and reliance on others as a generative structure for academic work.

I am compelled to make a case for academic kinship in part because the designation of kin affords relationships a certain weight and texture that terms such as *co-author*, *colleague*, and *mentor* do not. Casting academic relationships as kin acknowledges them as a significant presence in our lives deserving of institutional accommodation.

At the same time, I mean for this project to contribute to a more fundamental reconceptualization of kinship that orients us toward ethical rather than ontological considerations.<sup>8</sup> New kinship studies advance from the premise that our relationships do not occur naturally. Kinship is not something that we can simply know in our blood or feel in our gut. With the recognition that we script and enact kinship comes the burden that we take the time to reflect on those ties and our reasons for forging them. Inspired in part by queer studies, recent scholarship on kinship has troubled the naturalness and taken-for-granted-ness of relations such as biological parents and spouses that we continue to privilege at the expense of other social ties. This work de-centers normative kinship relationships by recognizing unlikely (Helmreich), emergent (Weston), and ambivalent (Peletz) forms of kin.<sup>9</sup> It has, in turn, opened a space in which to imagine new ethics of kinship and to engage in what Michael Warner has termed “world-making:” a critical practice that rejects the belief that the only forms of social life worth living are those that are already established, coherent, stable, and to which we currently grant legal status.<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler suggests that at stake in the renewed interest in kinship is whether “the norms that govern legitimate and illegitimate modes of kin association might be more radically redrawn.”<sup>11</sup> Donna Haraway echoes her: “I am sick to death of bonding through kinship and ‘the family,’ and I long for models of solidarity and human unity and difference rooted in friendship, work, partially shared purposes, intractable collective pain, inescapable morality, and persistent hope.”<sup>12</sup> This project follows from these efforts to queer kinship.<sup>13</sup> To the ones we

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984, Vol. 1*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York, NY: The New Press, 1994), 284. I draw in this essay on Foucault’s discussion and definition of ethics as “the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.”

<sup>9</sup> Stefen Helmreich, “Kinship in Hypertext: Transubstantiating Fatherhood and Information Flow in Artificial Life,” *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*, Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, eds. (Duke University Press, 2001), 116–43; Michael G. Peletz, “Ambivalence in Kinship Since the 1940s,” *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies*, Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, eds. (Duke University Press, 2001), 413–44; Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbian, Gays, Kinship* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 82; Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Donna Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan@\_Meets\_OncoMouse™* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 265.

already recognize it contributes another, academic form of kinship the significance of which lays in its ethical commitments.

I make the case for academic kinship through a series of vignettes that present collaborations with John Warren in terms of four different dimensions of kinship: 1) as a matter of choice, 2) as intimacy, 3) as ritual, and 4) as legacy. Each section offers different insights into the ways in which collaborative processes structure and inform academic work and each testifies to our reliance on classmates, teachers, students, and colleagues. The final section of this essay considers what a case for academic kinship might mean for our conceptions of kinship more generally. The stories in this essay are care of Jnan Blau, Deanna Fassett, Kathy Hytten, Amy Kilgard, Keith Nainby, and Nick Zoffel, all of whom collaborated formally and informally with John Warren.<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to them for sharing their memories. As is often the case, this project started as a thin idea about kinship in the academy. Given my own limited experience with collaboration, it would not have materialized without the stories and insights of others.

### Kinship as a matter of choice

In the United States we tend to define kin as relationships that we do not choose. In the 1960s, anthropologist David Schneider identified sex in service to procreation as the symbol within Western societies that links marriage and blood relations.<sup>15</sup> No other relationships, we believe, are quite like those we have with blood relatives. Spousal relationships, too, appear to us as an indelible bond due to the enduring belief in the sanctity of marriage, the idea that some people are “made for one another,” and to obligations related to childrearing. Due to the association we have forged between sexual and biological impulses, we tend to believe that kin relations are based in biology. And due to the prevailing view that biology demarcates the natural realm as distinct from the cultural and is not itself a cultural construct, we tend to believe that

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<sup>13</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 548; Tavia Nyong’o, “Punk’d Theory,” *Social Text* 84–5 (2005): 31. My definition of queer borrows here from Tavia Nyong’o and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner. Beyond simply absorbing LGBTQ identities into existing heteronormative kinship structures, a queer notion of kinship instead demands, as Nyong’o puts it, “their rights and *more* than their rights, simply to preserve a portion of the mobility [we] had prior to enclosure.” Likewise, Berlant and Warner argue that “queer culture building is not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture.”

<sup>14</sup> Jnan Blau, Interview with author via email (January 21, 2012); Deanna Fassett, Interview with author via email (January 10, 2012); Kathy Hytten, Interview with author via email (January 18, 2012); Amy Kilgard and Keith Nainby, Interview with author (January 10, 2012); Nicholas A. Zoffel, Interview with author via Skype (February 7, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> David M. Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

biology determines kin.<sup>16</sup> We mate because it is our biological nature. We procreate because it is our biological nature. Kin in the conventional sense is something one is, not something one does, and certainly not something one chooses.

Whether we consider certain relationships to be significant because we do not choose them or significant because we do, choice factors into our kin relations. Kath Weston's landmark study of gay and lesbian kinship in the Bay Area, *Families We Choose: Lesbian, Gays, Kinship* (1991), illuminates the degree to which choice/no choice serves as an operating principle for kinship in the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Weston documents a slice of GLBTQ history in which lesbians and gay men were thinking through what it meant to live in exile from one's biological family, and what it might mean to choose a gay family. This work is significant not because it made choice a defining feature of kinship. Rather, it made visible the degree to which matters of choice already governed kinship structures (as evidenced by many people's decision to disown their lesbian and gay family members).<sup>18</sup> What made lesbian and gay men's chosen families a radical politics were the questions that followed from this recognition of kinship as a matter of choice: If not blood and marriage ties, then what, they asked, would be the basis for determining kin? How would we distinguish those relationships from friendships and social networks? As Weston explains, gay and lesbian kinships were distinguishable from other types of associations "to the extent that they quite consciously incorporated symbolic demonstrations of love, shared history, material or emotional assistance, and other signs of enduring solidarity. Although many gay families included friends, not just any friend would do."<sup>19</sup> And rather than feeling obligated to others because they were kin, lesbians and gay men chose to constitute kinship ties by doing-for-others, establishing an ethics of care as the basis for their kin relations. In doing so, they generated an alternative ethics of kinship that valued intentionality over indelibility and reliability over presumption.

**Amy Kilgard:** *And so from my very first class, my first day of graduate school, 9:00 am, Monday morning, Performance Methodologies with Ron Peltas, he's been in my classes and been in multiple classes a semester.... So we became friends first.*

Academic kinship cannot presume a biological bond, nor can it simply replicate the "families we choose" model. Institutional structures mitigate our choice of academic kin by dividing us into classes, cohorts, departments, and disciplines. One of

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<sup>16</sup> Celeste M. Condit, "How Should We Study the Symbolizing Animal?" *Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture*. Delivered at the 90<sup>th</sup> Annual National Communications Association Conference, Chicago, IL, November 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Weston, *Families We Choose*.

<sup>18</sup> Weston, *Families We Choose*, 36–7. Weston notes that many groups in the U.S. organized primarily around race, ethnicity, and class identities (as distinct in part from sexual identities) had never thought of kinship in strictly biogenic terms. See also Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1974).

<sup>19</sup> Weston, *Families We Choose*, 109–16.

the celebrated features of formal education is that it affords us association with people with whom we might never cross paths otherwise. From Thomas Jefferson's 1779 "Virginia Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" to the television show *Glee*, we can trace the commonplace that values schools because they bring us in contact with people different from ourselves. We have devised ways, of course, to eliminate chance and to group ourselves together by kind, but we do not choose our classmates or our students and the extent to which we choose our colleagues, too, is limited. For that reason our academic relationships have the feel of conventional forms of kin: more determined than chosen; more indelible than elective. Institutional constraints and the demands of academia generate bonds, some of which we forge for practical purposes, some of which prove more enduring than others.

**Deanna Fassett:** *I started the M.S. in 1995, and then started the Ph.D. in 1996. John started the M.S. in 1996 and the Ph.D. in 1997. We first met at a house party where, at some point, he proudly announced that he'd read the textbook we'd be teaching from a couple of times already; I remember thinking this was a guy I wouldn't be able to spend much time around... :-)*

*...So often my stories about the people I really care about are incomplete. So, what I remember about our friendship is that John started it. He would call me all the time about a class we were taking together (Teaching as Performance with Elyse Pineau), and, in that class, we took on a group performance with our friend Keith Pounds (John later wrote about this performance in Critical Communication Pedagogy—it's the story about having a terrible sinus infection)...We often had classes together—all the pedagogy courses in our department, plus everything Kathy Hytten taught in Educational Administration and Higher Education—and that's when we got to talking with each other about our approaches to assignments. We also went to all the same social functions, ate lunch together all the time, and so on...*

**Kathy Hytten:** *I first met John when he enrolled in a class of mine when he was a beginning doctoral student (I believe it was the summer of 1997). He went on to take four classes with me (Education and Social Forces, Contrasting Philosophies of Education, Education and Culture, and an independent study on whiteness) and he also TA'd an undergraduate class for me one semester (Schooling in a Diversity Society).*

The conventions of school determine in many ways our academic relationships. At the same time, the institutional conditions and formal processes of schooling can throw into relief those qualities that make some people more important to us than others. In this sense, school prompts us in both painful and productive ways to choose allegiances and forge alliances.

**Keith Nainby:** *I was often put in places where I felt like I was out-classed, like I was sort of in the wrong social class and did not know how to perform appropriately. And I was really hypersensitive to that when we were first at SIU because, I mean these were doctoral students; these were graduate faculty; these were the big time; and this is where I wanted to go but I didn't know anything about the discipline, I didn't know anything about the social and cultural performances that were*

*necessary and so I had this really strong nose for, this really acute sense for who would treat me as merely Amy's partner—the guy who was working at Kinko's—and who would treat me with a kind of equitable tenor to how they treated one another as graduate students. And there were only a few who were in the second category, and John stood out among those people. And so even before I started my graduate course work a year after Amy did, I really felt strongly connected to John because he was one of the two or three people who just shone for me as someone who treated me like an equal even though I was this guy working at Kinko's.... He was important to me right from the inception for that reason.*

As with the lesbian and gay families Weston documents, matters of choice in academic kinship are less an ontological concern than an ethical gesture. Choice in this case is a matter of how we acknowledge our scholarly ties, in what ways we make them present in our work, and the way we approach the teachings, writings, performances, and actions of others.

### Kinship as intimacy

The bonds we feel we have with some people are sometimes affected through physical intimacy. Relationships that have a sexual dimension, like blood relations, stand apart. Because sexual intimacy so often manifests in ways that bring us in contact with other people's bodies, these relationships, too, seem to have a biological basis. Sex does not necessarily generate a sense of kinship, but when it does we often distinguish the relationship in physical ways by, for instance, having unprotected sex.

Sexual kin are one of the few kinds of kinship that universities formally recognize and accommodate. A now common recruitment and retention strategy, spousal/partner hires or "dual career hires" are the triumph of 1960s and 70s feminists who agitated against the anti-nepotism policies that for decades enabled universities to discriminate against women.<sup>20</sup> Couched in terms of employee retention and reserved for

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<sup>20</sup> David Sadker and Myra Sadkar, "Nepotism: A Clause for Concern," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 53 (February 1972): 376–77; Harry G. Shaffer and Juliet P. Shffer, "Job Discrimination against Faculty Wives: Restrictive Employment Practices in Colleges and Universities," *The Journal of Higher Education* 37 (January 1966): 10–15; Rita J. Simon, Shirley M. Clark, Larry L. Tifft, "Of Nepotism, Marriage, and the Pursuit of an Academic Career," *Sociology of Education* 39 (Autumn 1966): 344–58; "Two Careers, One Relationship: An Interim Report on 'Spousal' Hiring and Retention in English Departments," *ADE Bulletin* 98 (Spring 1991): 40–45; L. Schiebinger, A. Henderson, S. Gilmartin, *Dual-Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know* (Stanford, CA: Clayman Institute, 2008). See also: Deborah Blum, *Love at Goon Park: Harry Harlow and the Science of Affection* (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 2002), 128. In the late 1940s, Margaret Kuenne, a Ph.D. in psychology and then new wife of psychologist Harry Harlow (best known for his experiments with rhesus monkeys), resigned her faculty position from the University of Wisconsin after the university found out about her marriage. Despite the fact she had been hired as faculty prior to meeting Harlow, the marriage violated the university's anti-nepotism policies that forbid members of the same family to work at the institution. Kuenne's experi-



domesticated dyads, the practice of spousal/partner hiring is an awkward coupling of institutional and personal interests. The spousal/partner hire is an unusual practice in that it requires universities to be involved in their employees' sexual affairs, though the sexual dimensions of the relationship are invisible. Symbols of domestic life such as shared property stand in for other intimacies, a metonymy that serves an exclusionary function.<sup>21</sup>

Though invisible, sex plays a key role in the spousal/partner hire. It marks in a rather arbitrary fashion the limits of the university's accommodations for our emotional and physical needs. That arbitrariness, suggests Chantal Nadeau, is the reason to take issue with the practice. Rather than agitate for LGBTQ social equality, she argues, we should instead question the university's inconsistent attitude toward intimacy. "The exclusion [of same sex couples], she writes, "is not a matter of visibility, but a question of institutional practices of silence around certain forms of intimacies over others."<sup>22</sup> Nadeau's argument calls out our tendency to ignore the physical and emotional dimensions of academic labor.

The institutional privileges enjoyed by domestic partners makes it difficult to register the similarities between them and academic partnerships. We trust that domestic collaborations have everything to do with biological impulses and embodied practices while assuming academic collaborations occur on a disembodied plane. "Well-formed prose," Carolyn Marvin wryly observes, "should contain no evidence of sleepless nights, binged food, filled ashtrays, or hair ruffled in the service of arranging resistant letters on the page."<sup>23</sup> The presumption that our work deals only in intellectual intangibles erases the embodied dimensions of academic enterprise, making it unnecessary to advocate for employment policies adaptable to people's actual working arrangements and professional obligations.

The act of collaboration, in contrast, offers all kinds of reminders that we are weight bearing, emotional, fallible bodies producing research—bodies that occupy spaces over time and require such things as nourishment and support.

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ence was not exceptional. Many twentieth century women scholars were demoted and exiled from the academy due to anti-nepotism policies.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 175–94; Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). By adopting heteronormative domestic models as the criteria for spousal/partner hires, universities can ignore many LGBTQ and other non-normative forms of kin without appearing to discriminate.

<sup>22</sup> Chantal Nadeau, "Unruly Democracy and the Privileges of Public Intimacy: (Same) Sex Spousal Hiring in Academia," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 9 (Winter 2005): 97.

<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Marvin, "The Body of the Text: Literacy's Corporeal Constant," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 130.

**Deanna Fassett:** *Most of the support was emotional, in terms of being reassuring, curious, sensitively-critical, etc. Some of the support was practical, in terms of explaining how to do something (I rendered John's GTA template syllabus accessible because he didn't know how; John first showed me how to write a book prospectus for a publisher since he'd had that experience with Peter Lang). When we were face to face, it might also involve feeding a baby, doing the dishes, cooking dinner, finding cool yarn, learning how to wind the yarn into a pull skein, etc., etc., etc...*

**Nick Zoffel:** *Because you get to know somebody, you get to know what upsets them. You start to know what keeps them happy, what makes them happy. You get to know their emotional states. And so then as a student, you know [if] your advisor is upset. If I thought John was having a rough day—you know the dude loved breadies from Red Lobster. I can remember one occasion...John just seemed really upset and we knew he loved breadies, so I remember Jason and I, we got in the car, drove up to Toledo, bought a bucket of breadies, and brought them back for our evening class...It's those kinds of little things that you do to be, to sort of have fun, but also to take care of a person.*

The intractable nature of everyday life, too, becomes a factor in collaborative work. While this is true also of solo-authored work, navigating and negotiating another person's schedule and state of mind are challenges in their own right. That process yields a kind of intimacy in so far as it renders us witness to someone else's anxieties and travails—all of the messiness and uncertainty that is no longer visible in published pieces. It proves collaboration to be more than a cross-pollination of ideas.

**Jnan Blau:** *It must be said—as, I believe, John would insist—that John wasn't entirely pleased with our piece. Basically, he felt it was subpar. The thing is, John being John, he was extremely busy with multiple projects—especially the release of his book with Deanna—during the time that we were collaborating. So, by his own admission, he did not give our project his fullest attention. He was deeply apologetic about this to me. Not only did he know the piece could have done more, pushed further, but he also felt he had let me down as a friend and colleague by not being as fully devoted to our collaboration as he might have. For my part, I took the whole thing in stride. For one, I felt that our piece was fairly solid and interesting as it was...I made sure to communicate this to John, to assuage his guilt, to remind him of the fact that we did have good (enough) stuff, and that my belief in him as a friend and colleague was not at all diminished. I was satisfied, in other words. Plus, I completely understood that John was terribly busy, pushed and pulled in a million different directions.*

**Amy Kilgard:** *[John] he would often call and consult with me for reassurance I think about his relationship with performance studies and I laugh because I think of him as a performance person and always did and always would... So we talked a lot about what does it mean to be in performance and what do you have to be and what do you have to do and how do you acknowledge yourself as a performer, as an artist and what does it mean to claim that identity and to not claim that identity to actively not claim that identity and so we talked a lot about that too, formally and informally.*

**Deanna Fassett:** *As you know, writing is not just a practical process—what's on your mind influences what you're able to write and how well you write it. Part of the emotional tending was*

*about dealing with writer's apprehension/anxiety; we'd sometimes try to give each other pep talks, and even more commonly we'd commiserate about all the things we had to do and how we felt like we just couldn't get anything done. But, more than that, John and I would talk about the fight he had in the faculty meeting or with Gina, the latest things his kids were up to, TV shows and books we had in common, knitting projects, etc. John heard about all my dates, my dad's melanoma diagnosis and what that meant to me, etc. A cherished moment that I'm afraid I don't remember very well was talking with John while I was in labor with Zachary. There was a lot of connective tissue that had very little to do—and everything to do—with our intellectual work.*

Even when taking into account the embodied dimensions of academic collaboration, physical intimacy may not be a productive analogy for academic kinship. The intimacy of academic collaboration is not the close encounter of couplings. To think our academic selves apart from those we read and with whom we study is a conceit we maintain for practical purposes. Conventional rules surrounding sexual intimacy (e.g., establish clear boundaries) are nonsensical in the realm of discourse where the words of others are a fundamental and permanent part of us.

**Keith Nainby:** *And I feel like that's the problem for me in some respects—the challenge I shouldn't say the problem—it's the knotty challenge of making sense of collaborative processes qua collaborative processes when thinking about collaborating with John in particular because it's so difficult to untangle my friendship with him from collaborations with him. I mean it would almost be like collaborating with a romantic partner, you know, it's hard for me to see where I end and he begins in any of the pieces that I've written; even those that are solo-authored; even those that are collaborations with other people.*

**Kathy Hytten:** *By the time John and I were working on these articles (mostly via email, since he was living in a different state), we were already very good friends — so it is hard to draw a line between our work relationship and our friendship. We talked often about school, ideas, projects — and read each others sole authored essays and occasionally presented together on panels on diversity, whiteness, social justice, etc. We mostly worked seamlessly, that is, our casual conversations sometimes became work related.*

**Jnan Blau:** *Being in classes with him, dialoguing with him, reading his work, bearing him present at NCA over the years, being friends and confidantes to the extent that we were, and using some of his work in the classroom can all be considered forms of collaboration. This is one of the things I most appreciate about having gone to grad school. As Ron Pelias (Director of Grad Studies at SIU Speech Comm) told us at the outset, some of the best learning happens outside of the formal(ized) space of the classroom, in dialogue and interaction among friends and colleagues. So, while John was not the only person I learned from in this way, he certainly looms large in my consciousness in this respect. He (and others) have very much shaped me as a scholar, teacher, thinker, and person-in-the-world...*

The inconsistencies in our institutional accommodations reflect our assumptions about how intimacy manifests and where it begins and ends. In academia, we have arranged intimacies according to a gendered mind/body dualism. In the domestic, feminine sphere, we acknowledge our dependency on others and attend to bodily concerns while in the occupational, masculine sphere, we operate as independent agents engaged in intellectual work. As an acknowledgement of our continuous physical, emotional, and intellectual reliance on others, academic kinship disrupts those dichotomies.

### Kinship as ritual

The texture of academic kinship is something between the durability of domestic partners and the transparency of professional contacts. These relationships complicate what is already murky terrain for academics—the distinction between professional and personal life, work and play. Their most defining feature may be the inventive, tactical ways in which they materialize.

**Amy Kilgard:** *A lot of graduate students stayed in “the Commune” kind of close to campus...lots of students but lots of Comm graduate students lived in this neighborhood and John and Gina Warren were among those folks. And we started having weekly and then twice a week—Keith and I and John and Gina—nights, evenings of watching the...*

**Keith Nainby:** *Sunday nights was watching Who wants to be a Millionaire? and The Practice and on Wednesday nights was...*

**Amy Kilgard:** Law and Order.

**Keith Nainby:** *And something else. Oh, The West Wing.*

**Amy Kilgard:** The West Wing. *And playing cards.*

**Keith Nainby:** *We all four loved to play cards.*

**Amy Kilgard:** *And eating Mexican food dinner and whatever random other thing that we would create. And we did that twice a week for several years. So, a kind of family relationship with them that has continued.*

We sustain our academic relationships through an incalculable number of micro gestures ritualized over the course of careers. Those gestures do not always take a professional form though they often are born of institutional and occupational conditions, a defensible reason perhaps for academic institutions to formally recognize and support these relationships. Rituals grow out of the particularities of academic life. Modest budgets and indefinite schedules give rise to all manner of making-do. Nowhere is this more evidenced than at conferences and conventions, which are replete with resourceful ritual.

**Jnan Blau:** *It was mainly at NCA each year that we would hang out. It grew naturally and organically, so that eventually it was an absolute ritual for the two of us to hang at NCA. We’d steal away and smoke cigarettes (sorry, Gina), as we were both what we’d call “NCA smokers” (didn’t*

*smoke in our regular lives, but did socially, especially/ mostly at NCA). We'd make a point of grabbing a drink, just the two of us. Keith was of course a big part of this as well, since I was very close with him. Dinners and drinks on multiple occasions in multiple cities (one of the more unsung highlights of the conference experience). And, more than once, I crashed in John's conference hotel room. Keith and Amy and John and Gina (when she went to NCA) would always split a room. And, when Gina wasn't there, John was kind enough to help me out by letting me crash with him.*

**Amy Kilgard:** *NCA for us, we had been roommates with John and Gina Warren every year since—every year that we've been to NCA except for the very first time I went and it was in Chicago and I stayed in Carleen Spry's grandmother's basement...But every year we were roommates. And so this year we were really dreading going because this was the first year we weren't going to have them as roommates.*

Rituals that might first emerge around essentials such as food and lodging become the basis for collaborative work, which has its own routines. Those routines serve the practical purpose of organizing research so that projects progress.

**Deanna Fassett:** *Though it varied some from project to project, we did the vast majority of the conceptual stuff face-to-face, whether at conferences or in visits to one another's homes. Drafting typically occurred independently, after having agreed on who'd take the first pass at what...Phone conversations occurred throughout the drafting and revision processes; for drafting, it was more often to bitch about having to write—though sometimes it was to work out a kink, and for revising, it was often about troubleshooting...We scheduled writing trips usually about twice a year, though that also varied by project. That typically meant a week for me with John and Gina and the kids, and then sometime later a week with me (and later with me and Ed). We'd also pull longer conference trips to get an extra day or more to write/plan...*

Ritual and routine can also serve to establish roles within formal and informal collaborative processes. As Deanna said of her collaborations with John, "I'm reminded of the old couple where one washes the dishes and the other dries them and puts them away; our writing relationship was sort of like that." The informal rituals of academic life, such as meeting on Wednesday nights to play cards, shape formal collaborative projects.

**Amy Kilgard:** *It's been so long since John and I wrote our piece it's hard for me to remember except that I know it was separate to begin with...and so we had each written some pieces, but as I recall, the framework we did, we sat at his kitchen table or the table in the living room and worked that out together.*

Collaborations result in work different than it might otherwise have been. Jnan offered the following description of it: *There is the sense that the insights and the analysis—not to mention the stylistic feel, the voice(s), in/ of the prose—would just not be the same if the work was single-author.*

The ritualistic dimensions of kinship become all the more significant when we think of it in a performative sense, or in Butler's terms as "a stylized repetition of

acts.”<sup>24</sup> We are inclined to think that we attend family holiday dinners and second cousins’ weddings because we are kin. From a performative perspective, however, kinship bonds are constituted through rituals and traditions.<sup>25</sup> This is what Butler refers to as the “socially contingent character of kinship.”<sup>26</sup> As is the case with gender, Butler’s argument seems to hold the promise of an infinitely expansive, radically inclusive conception of kinship. But given the complexity of the repertoire—the time and commitment kin require—the actualities of performing kinship (as with gender) delimit its radical potential. We cannot become kin with just anyone.

**Kathy Hytten:** *My relationship with [John] helped keep me sane. There are a lot of difficult people in the academy, and John was always a person I could say anything to and not worry how he would take it. Since we were in different departments, we always “vented” to each other about the politics in our own departments. We used to meet for lunch at least once a week – and we’d also get together at least one night pretty much every weekend... We supported each other’s work in a very general sense—he was always the first person I would talk to when I had a problem with something, wanted to work through an idea, or was looking for academic advice. I think I played the same role for him. I can’t say our collaboration was the reason for the caring since we were such good friends. For example, I often watched his kids when he and his partner were busy (or went out of town)—we helped each other out in all the ways good friends would.*

**Deanna Fassett:** *Elias [John’s son] couldn’t go home right away—he was preemie, and then he developed cerebral palsy. Amy, Keith and I went long chunks of time (days, which felt like a long time) not really knowing what was happening. I wish I’d been there to make sure they had some macaroni and cheese and clean clothes... I didn’t understand how hard it was for them, not for a long time, and probably not really until I had Zachary. But, in a sense, I did then what I did at the end too: I tended to our work. I made sure we had the bits and pieces the publisher wanted. I made sure there was a cover and a marketing plan and so on.*

A performative understanding of kinship does not liberate us from social conventions so much as burden us in different ways. It is for this reason that we might locate its radical potential not in a particular form of kinship but in the ethics that guide our performance of being in relation. A performative understanding of kinship places a greater responsibility on us for the fate of our relationships. It troubles the assumption that blood runs thick and that our associations will endure without effort on our part. It also makes truly remarkable the relationships we sustain across distances and over time. It gives reason to acknowledge the work we do to maintain those ties, par-

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theater Journal* 40 (Dec. 1988): 519–31.

<sup>25</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1962). Recall Austin’s famous example of the constitutive power of some utterances: the phrase “I do,” which, he argued, transformed fiancés into spouses.

<sup>26</sup> Butler, *Antigone’s Claim*, 6, 57.

ticularly where they also serve the institutions for which we work and the academic, artistic, and political projects in which we are invested. A performative understanding of kinship seems aligned with a critical approach to knowledge production that takes truth claims as partial and contingent social constructs.<sup>27</sup> From a performative perspective, academic kin make it possible for us to do our work.

**Deanna Fassett:** *I think it's worth saying that I commonly spoke to John as much or more than I spoke to my mother. We talked every day when we both lived in Illinois, and at least weekly ever since; for much of our friendship, we talked about twice a week, usually about 45-60 minutes at a time. When Zachary was born, we began to text a lot more and talk a lot less, and this became even more true when John fell sick; this had a lot to do with John's and Zachary's sleep schedules (especially once John started taking a lot of pain meds).... Without a doubt, the greatest regret of my life is that I was not more fully available to John as he was dying (though, even as I write that, I'm not sure what I could have done differently, given how hard it was for me to function right after Zachary was born). I talked with him every day. We talked about living and dying. The last thing I knew was that he was in a lot of pain and that they had some muscle relaxers on order for him, and I said I'd look into acupuncture for him. And then he died. And let me say, it's hard to lose anyone, but it's very hard to lose someone you rely on so heavily to make sense of the world, to think and to learn.*

### Kinship as legacy

**Deanna Fassett:** *Though I don't put it this way in my NCA eulogy, the thing that most rattled me about John's office was that it was like he left on a Friday as though he'd be back on Monday—the coffee cups, the piles of paperwork. I spent and still sometimes spend time thinking about this, about who will handle the contents of my academic life and what they'll think of me when they do.*

Kinship is in many ways a guard against death and loss. We extend ourselves indefinitely into the future through kinship structures by, for instance, producing offspring and bequeathing assets. This dimension of kinship—the management of one's legacy—shares aspirations with the academic project, which is also about preservation and, often, a linear process of knowledge transmission. We painstakingly document our careers and pass along knowledge to students. Such precautions protect us little, we come to find, from the tide of lost connections.

**Nick Zoffel:** *So Jason and I, we've gotten together every year since we've graduated for lunch. We get together somewhere in Ohio or Michigan and we sort of make it work. And if it's close enough to Bowling Green, we always stop by Bowling Green... So I have these series of photos of all the places where John and we all use to go, we used to be. And I remember in one of the situations there is a picture of me like —this- in front of John's office on his couch and I was on the phone with John just a*

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<sup>27</sup> Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren, *Critical Communication Pedagogy* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 9; Jean Lave, *Apprenticeship in Critical Ethnographic Practice* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 10–3.

*couple of minutes earlier and he goes, "yeah, what you guys should do is take all the pictures, like put your arms out like you're standing next to me, and then—you've got Photoshop skills, just Photoshop me into it later."*

**Keith Nainby:** *There is a way in which, not just in thinking about my relationship with John but when I think about the academy writ large, those kinds of familial types of bonds, those kinds of sibling relationships of generations, whether its from a graduate cohort or just people who got jobs at the same institution at the same time. I mean, they really endure for generations in the academy and you see them, and you see very senior scholars have relationships and you realize that there's a kind of deep connection there that's much deeper than just "this is my colleague that I've worked with for thirty years".... Thinking about in twenty years what a graduate student will see from people who are in our generation of people—people who are assistant and associate professors now—it's going to be different because of this. And that is on some level a matter of life and death. The whole structure of connection has changed some how, and so, I don't really know what that means.*

In "Pedagogy of Buddhism," (2003) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reflects on the common Western belief that teaching is a way to know things and thus a way to shore up resources for an unknown future. We teach in hopes of passing along our knowledge for the benefit of others and we learn so that we will know what to do in the next instance, the next opportunity, the next life. Sedgwick registers a deep skepticism for the promises of such a pedagogy. Rather than worry the durability of a legacy of intellectual goods, she proposes a pedagogy of "amnesia, metamorphosis, and ever-shifting relationality" held together by webs of reliance.<sup>28</sup> Her vision of legacy trades out knowing for a feeling of connection: "There is so much companionable space in the imaginable, tutelary difference of a being whom the present I will never know, and who in turn need never wonder about the thread of hope spun somehow into its own, characteristic courage."<sup>29</sup>

**Amy Kilgard:** *I came back home after the memorial service and—I've been doing this hat project, so, I was wearing a different hat every day that I taught. And so I had all of these different hats that I had worn and I was teaching a grad seminar in performance art and they all knew how I had gone to the memorial service and I come back to class and I see one of them and she's wearing a hat—a really great hat—and I'm like "awesome hat" and then I see the next one and she's wearing a hat and you know "great hat" and then it dawns on me that they're all wearing hats as a kind of supportive move. And that performative act of care to me is something that I learn in part from John because I think that in hearing other people narrate their experiences with John at the memorial service at NCA and at other places it's about the ways that he formed connections with people and found these bonds with people and took care of them and takes care of us. And so to find those performative ways of taking care, that to me is part of what I learn about collaboration since John's died,*

<sup>28</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 179.

<sup>29</sup> Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 180.



*but also kind of from our collaboration all the way through. Because I think that as somebody who valued collaboration so evidently in his scholarship, he performed that on the page and in ways that so few other people do. And it's a kind of performative model of collaboration, of writing collaboration. I think it's really rare and maybe that's one of the legacies that he's leaving for us and it has to do with performing collaboration on the page or performing scholarly collaboration, which I think is really important.*

The promise of alternative forms of kinship engenders the possibility of alternative forms of intimacy, ritual, and legacy. Legacies, for instance, can also take the form of repertoires as Diana Taylor defines the term: a process of conveying no more or less durable than an archive that “both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning?”<sup>30</sup> Of interest here, though, is not which legacies are better, more durable and secure, but rather the companionable, generative spaces onto which they open.

*Connective tissue, critical ties*

It is not hard to imagine the concept of kinship being deployed in the academy to reinforce hierarchies and institutional traditions. In a sense we already recognize academic kin through alumni associations, class rings, and citation practices. And simply recognizing collaborative relationships as academic kin would not in and of itself trouble or re-make the institutional status quo. No form of kinship is inherently liberatory. For this reason, a queer conception of kinship is less concerned with the forms that kinship takes than with the ethical precepts that govern them. The stories in this essay, for instance, tell of relationships deserving of institutional recognition and accommodation. But any analytic designed only to justify the right to be recognized will prove ill-equipped for plotting points of contact within the immeasurable depths of our relations.

To be sure, it is important that we recognize non-conventional forms of kin, all of which require support systems if they are to be sustainable. While no one indicated that they were ever discouraged from doing collaborative research, for instance, they did sometimes meet with what might best be described as indifference or benign neglect.

**Kathy Hytten:** *I have been on the tenure and promotion committee in our college and what I have seen is that in some departments, collaborative work is the norm, in others it is not. I have never had any trouble doing or justifying collaborative work – and it seems to be valued as much as my other work (especially if it is in a good journal).*

**Deanna Fassett:** *In part, I feel like it's not that we were blessed or especially rewarded or accommodated, but rather that we made our own way. We did work we cared about, and we did it really*

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<sup>30</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 20.

*without asking anyone for permission. We'd long-ago decided that it was most important to earn tenure doing work we could do for the rest of our lives, and I think that helped. At first we paid a lot of long-distance bills and mailed packages, and we had to find our own funding for travel to write. To say our institutions didn't harm us or prevent us from our work doesn't mean they were particularly supportive, if that makes sense.*

**Jnan Blau:** *Collaboration is certainly talked about. At the university and college level, I head administrators talk plenty about encouragement of and support for collaboration. But, this tends to refer to cross- or inter-disciplinary work. I'm not sure that there are much, if any, specific mechanisms or policies in place to reward collaboration.*

**Nick Zoffel:** *I wish the institution could do something, not to institutionalize the relationship but to provide the environment in which it is about a kinship. I think the thing that is always problematic about institutionalizing something is just that—it becomes institutionalized. Plenty of professors back in the 70s and 60s were too informal with their students, and so then, there's that sort of, how do you find that happy medium?*

To queer kinship means in part to advocate on behalf of unconventional forms of kinship—be they domestic, sexual, or occupationally oriented. At the same time, queering kinship also means giving greater consideration to the ethics that inform our kinwork. Here the concern is the ethic to which a particular form of kinship gives rise. Jnan, Deanna, Kathy, Amy, Keith, and Nick detail a connective tissue made not of blood, or genes, or legal codes, but of acts—card games, proofreading, phone calls, shared lunches and cigarettes—stylized as personal and professional, and actualized through repeat performances. What structures these acts but an ethic that takes seriously our collective occupational reliance on one another? It is that ethic entangled as it is with the academic work of critical inquiry that I wish to recognize.

Such an ethic in place of, for instance, one premised on institutional lineage holds implications for how we organize and conduct our work. It renders untenable, on the one hand, the idea that we might save ourselves in this time of budget shortfalls by closing a few programs, departments, or colleges. It makes viable, on the other hand, all manner of alternative labor structures.

**Amy Kilgard:** *What if I came for a semester to SJSU and you went for a semester to SFSU?... What if we all switched places for a semester and that would allow people to collaborate with other people at those other institutions and for those institutions to get the expertise of people who are really important scholars?*

**Keith Nainby:** *Something I've been pushing a lot in my own department that I think there is just not nearly enough of generally is team teaching. Even within departments. I just think it provides for such a rich experience for the students and especially when we have to teach so much in the CSU. If you're at a Research 1 school, it's one thing to say, "well, I'm going to take a semester and I'm going to teach at this other R1 school and I'm going to develop some research out of it." The truth is that if*

*you're teaching three classes a semester, it's a little difficult to pretend like you're going to be doing tons of research collaboration at the same time. But if instead the focus is on teaching and research that is generated by teaching I think team teaching might be one way to foster those connections.*

In addition to the ethics it models and the possibilities it opens for academic work, the case for academic kinship is, finally, important as a gesture of solidarity. Making this case is a way to empathize with anyone whose relationship status falls into some legal interstice or who otherwise struggles to describe the importance of some one person. It is a reminder of why we all have a stake in the politics of kinship and how we might all benefit from a legal, institutional, and ethical terrain more hospitable to the complexities of our social ties.



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