

Befriending Girls as an Educational Life-Practice

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A FICTIONAL CASE

In Sapphire's contemporary African-American *bildungsroman*, *Push*, Miz Blue Rain befriends its 16-year-old girl-hero, abused by her mother and expelled from school because she is pregnant by her father a second time.¹ Illiterate after many years' schooling in Harlem, Precious Jones becomes a student in Miz Rain's basic literacy class of six girls. There, besides reading and writing, she learns to live her life as an affectionate, proud, responsible single mother, able to resist abuse and to develop mature loving relationships with others who can help her sustain both herself and her baby.

Miz Rain listens and responds to each girl's most painful feelings and oppressive needs. In return, Precious listens and responds to Miz Rain with shock upon discovering this teacher who so generously befriended her is lesbian, but feels a new compassion that challenges Precious to unlearn her own heterosexism. Rather than fixing Precious's problems, Miz Rain befriends her students by making her class an intimate circle of mutually devoted friends who help one another find the many resources they need for learning to love themselves and diverse others and to survive their many difficulties, such as domestic violence, homelessness, racism, rape, and HIV. Sapphire likewise indirectly befriends girl readers overwhelmed by such problems themselves, for her novel offers them rare recognition and makes transformative life strategies and circumstances imaginable not only for such girls, but also for adults who care about them. So, too, do I aim to befriend girls with this attempt to conceptualize for educators what it might mean to "befriend girls."

A CONCEPT OF BEFRIENDING GIRLS

Befriending girls can be for any thoughtful adult, as it is for Miz Rain and for Sapphire, an educational "life-practice."² I have read other narratives of it within both qualitative inquiries on girlhood and culturally diverse women's fictions about/for girls, and I have witnessed it in my friends' and colleagues' lives. This deliberate practice on the part of Black women and white adults of both sexes in my own extended family, rural neighborhood, 4-H, Girl Scouts, and schools also educated (and miseducated) me as a lonely, bashful, clumsy, cross-eyed, curious, middle-class, white girl, and I have engaged in it myself as both a public high school English teacher and an adult Girl Scout. Although those who have made a habit of this practice with educative intent are likely to have done so thoughtfully, I have yet to find a name for it, much less a theoretically elaborated concept of it. Yet many contemporary girls' writings evidence some clear consciousness of its potential value. Thus I have named it *befriending girls* and embark now upon theorizing it, so that this educational life-practice might become more widely acknowledged, valued, taught, learned, understood, undertaken, and critiqued—also much more aggressively financed.

Befriending girls can be an individual or collective practice, a private or public practice, or both simultaneously. It can be a professional practice, as in Miz Rain's case. It can be simultaneously professional and non-professional when it occurs within recreational organizations such as 4-H and Girl Scouts. It can be entirely non-professional as well, as exemplified within the African-American cultural context theorized by bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, of "revolutionary parenting" by "Organized, resilient, women-centered networks" of "bloodmothers and othermothers" and "other nonparents" that "challenge prevailing property relations."³ Befriending girls may also become a life-practice for men who respect such networks as it does for fictional street character Uncle John in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*. Uncle John gives Indigo a "new talkin' friend," a violin, to comfort and express her grief at menarche, when her mother forces her to give up her dolls, "friends" whom she has artfully made for herself.⁴ Thus distinct from seeking or holding onto friendship for oneself, *befriending* here refers instead to giving friendship—a gift offered as neither reward nor bribe, but as "a companion to transformation,...the actual agent of change, the bearer of new life" any girl may accept or leave.⁵ Grades, credits, rankings, and diplomas saturate schooling with a market-economy notion of commodity exchange, whereas Lewis Hyde might call befriending girls as an educational life-practice a "gift labor" of developing girls' communities through "the give-and-take that ensures the livelihood of their spirit."⁶ Within this gift-exchange economy, "special needs or areas of disadvantage are compensated for rather than...used as justification for limiting participation," notes Ruthanne Kurth-Schai, and girls are valued as having special gifts to offer one another, too, rather than merely as dependent recipients of adult protection and assistance.⁷

The gift of friendship may be direct, a gift of one's own friendship, such as domestic worker Carrie gives pre-teen Betsey in Shange's *Betsey Brown*.⁸ Or it may be indirect, as when a Camp Fire club leader gives help to girls learning to make and sustain friendships with one another, with someone else or some others, with the non-human natural world or an artistic medium, or with themselves. Optimally girls should be beneficiaries of both sorts of befriending, although too often they are not. Such a gift may be, especially when indirect or impersonal, a material gift—cultural, institutional, or economic help toward such ends—such as Juliette Gordon Low gave the Girl Scout movement that she founded in the United States. But, especially when direct and personal, the gift may in some sense be spiritual, and, like Uncle John's to Indigo, artfully given. Whenever such gifts, direct and indirect, personal and impersonal, are unevenly and unreflectively bestowed, especially within commodity-exchange settings like schools, befriending girls can become a dispensing of favoritism and privilege to some girls at other girls' expense.

Thus any generously attentive partiality to girls in all their diversity can be political, especially within a society that empowers, enriches, and otherwise privileges straight white male adults as well as boys coming of age to claim such manhood, often at girls' expense.⁹ In this context, questions must also arise about what it might mean to befriend sexually, racially, and economically diverse boys. Whether befriending girls or boys with educative intent, however, a practical

attitude akin to what Jane Roland Martin has named “gender-sensitivity” will be necessary if gender oppression is thereby to be resisted.¹⁰ Barbara Houston has characterized this attitude as “self-correcting,” insofar as it entails a habit of asking constantly, “Is gender operative here? How is gender operative? What other effects do our strategies for eliminating gender bias have?”¹¹ Befriending girls may initially seem to render such questions irrelevant since policy issues concerning sex equality and bias may seem unlikely to arise in this context of affectionate partiality to girls. Some critics may even consider that partiality itself an instance of sex bias that I am wrong to advocate, although I would beg such critics to explain on what grounds girls should be denied helpful affection from friends who try to understand what they are going through, especially when girls so often do have to cope with oppressive gender effects to which others are, in their alleged impartiality, blind or indifferent. Beyond mere quantifiable or legalistic “equity,” then, gender-sensitivity in befriending girls must be a generous “wide-awakeness,” an educated alertness to *gender’s* dynamic contingencies, complexities, contradictions, and consequences, coupled with “the loving eye” that *sensitivity* itself requires, a disciplined resistance against what Marilyn Frye calls “the arrogant eye.”¹²

In focusing adult attention upon girls and “the great surprising variety” of the worlds they inhabit, befriending girls is not premised upon some fantastic fixed identity that “girls” represent in opposition to “boys.”¹³ Rather, my concept of this life-practice’s possible gender-sensitivity is indebted to Iris Marion Young’s feminist conceptions of women as a series and of gender as seriality and to Iris Murdoch’s notion of “freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion.”¹⁴ Metaphors borrowed from Sartre and Frye may help sketch Young’s ideas roughly. People standing in line waiting for a bus may constitute what Sartre called a *series*, becoming a self-conscious *group* only when they start to complain among themselves that the bus does not arrive; similarly for women in relation to the “practico-inert milieu” of gender, on Young’s account.¹⁵ As *seriality*, gender is a dynamic structure that puts constraints on the modes and limits of people’s actions, often oppressive constraints like those of the birdcage that is Frye’s metaphor for oppression.

As I apply it here, the label “girls” refers to individuals on their way to becoming “women,” whose identities cannot escape effects of gender. But how gender affects girls’ lives is as particular to each girl as being caged is to each bird that may retreat passively to a top perch, wildly peck the hand that pokes through the rungs, try to escape whenever the cage-door opens, refuse to fly free when it does, or simply while away hours playing or singing. Gender effects’ analogous particularity, together with the many other serialities that may also be constitutive for diverse girls, their responses to gender, and their friendships with one another—serialities such as age, class, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, disability, and so on—raises a difficult question. Can it be valid to conceptualize “girls” as having certain personal attributes universally in common, except perhaps their youth relative to women? In grappling with this question, we need not to lose sight of the fact that, however different, girls’ actions are oriented toward the same or similarly structured objects that construct their bodies’ social meanings, values, and challenges as gendered.

Menarche is a regular and vastly consequential event occurring in most girls' bodies within a general age range, but this biological fact alone does not locate individuals in the series "girls." Social rules and practices surrounding menarche construct gender as a principle both for division of labor and for compulsory heterosexuality, thus constituting girls in a relation of growing vulnerability to boys' and men's appropriation.

Many girls choose to join some group that self-consciously and mutually acknowledges such gender effects upon their lives—such as a teen-queen pageant, a girls' basketball team, a girl gang, Riot Grrrls, Delta Sigma Theta, or Future Homemakers of America. Not all girl groups resist gender oppression, but some do. For example, Girls Inc. advocates for the Girls' Bill of Rights, and schoolgirls whom Lyn Mikel Brown befriended responded to their male classmates' "Hooters" shirts with a shirt design of their own featuring a rooster logo, "Cocks: Nothing To Crow About."¹⁶ Yet many girls face the challenge of menarche engaging no such mutual support or acknowledgment within a self-conscious group of girls. Befriending girls may therefore occur in relation to groups of girls or simply to individual girls or to girls at large, as that passively unified "amorphous collective" Young calls a "series."¹⁷

Gender will figure in every case, albeit probably not identically in all, for, like birds responding to their cage, girls may respond to gender in myriad ways. Although some gender effects are more or less common than others, can one credibly claim that the label "girls" predicts much about who they are, what they believe or want or need or do, or about their precise social location? Any group of girls' histories, experiences, and identities may have much significant or apparently almost nothing in common with one another. May not their actions and goals therefore sometimes coincide and other times differ as well? A girl may precociously "perform gender" by imitating a torch singer's seductive performance, while another may enact "gender insubordination" so well she is routinely mistaken for a boy.¹⁸ A girl may feel compelled to take on domestic labors while her mother does wage-labor to support them, and yet another may take to the fighting streets because she only knows home as a site of violence. Still another may have the rare privilege of growing up in a comparatively affluent, caring, egalitarian household which makes her wonder what all the fuss over gender is about as she befriends both boys and girls and even feels free to acknowledge sexual feelings for this girl as well as that boy. Yet all these girls, even the lucky one who wonders, are confronting gender effects in others, if not also in themselves, whether they are yet more than dimly conscious of such effects or not. I have yet myself to meet an adolescent schoolgirl who has neither experienced nor witnessed sexual harassment.

Befriending girls with gender-sensitivity will entail that same loving quality of attention to diverse girls and their particular differences, changes, and potentials that Sara Ruddick, following Murdoch and Simone Weil, considers vital to maternal thinking.¹⁹ I take seriously Murdoch's insight that "our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention."²⁰ Therefore, if such loving attention is indeed to help girls resist

oppression of various sorts, it must be deeply informed by what Frye calls a “macroscopic perspective.” Metaphorically speaking, this is ability to see the cage as a structural impediment to the birds’ freedom, as distinct from a “microscopic perspective” whose particularism is blind to oppression because it assesses this or that metaphoric bar of the cage as no impediment whatsoever.²¹ Gender-sensitivity in befriending girls requires a macroscopic perspective that is open and fluid, sensitive also to other serialities and their consequential interactions with gender, variously narrated and divergently theorized.

Whenever befriending girls becomes a means of girls’ resisting oppression, it becomes a political life-practice. But what makes befriending girls potentially an *educational* life-practice? It exemplifies what Martin has recently named “multiple educational agency,” conceptually challenging the taken-for-granted essentialist notion of education as schooling and acknowledging that professionals at school and parents at home are not the only important educators of young people.²² Befriending girls can occur within settings as various as street life, athletics, fine arts, employment, health care, travel, community and outdoor activities, religious life, extended-family or home life, school life, and even the world-wide web. Befriending girls may therefore be a site for transmitting hidden curriculum or a site for resisting it. It may occur with or without feminist sensitivity to gender and its consequences in girls’ lives. Thus variously practiced, it may foster or resist oppression of any kind. Insofar as befriending girls can be undertaken manipulatively, aimlessly, or unreflectively, especially so long as it remains un-theorized, the practice may do as much to miseducate girls and put them at risk of harm as it does to educate them and give them new opportunities to improve their lives.

THE AIMS OF BEFRIENDING GIRLS

Befriending girls may be either educative or miseducative for girls. It is not mothering, but mothering may become one context and source of insight for befriending girls. In its educative sense, befriending girls entails active pursuit of a specific educational achievement conceptually derived from Audre Lorde’s autobiographical account of Black lesbian-feminist mothering, and culturally diverse girls’ books authored by women offer fictional cases of child-rearing that clearly aim for this same educational achievement: *girls’ growing capacities and responsibility for learning to love themselves and diverse others, including the non-human natural world, to survive and thrive despite their troubles.*²³ You might call it practical wisdom—a kind of practical wisdom that may entail resistance against oppression but involves much more than that, since girls’ troubles are not all instances of oppression. With this “hidden” curricular aim, befriending girls can be a generous educational practice premised upon the insight that assigning responsibility for this particular achievement only to mothers and schoolteachers, as an obligation that others should not share with them to any great extent, oppresses both women and girls. Indeed, the more contexts beyond home and school where befriending girls with such educative intent occurs, the greater likelihood of success at this culturally anomalous educational achievement.²⁴ I leave open for now the question whether or not this educational achievement requires *teaching* to be an integral phase of

befriending girls as an educational practice. Whatever the verdict on that conceptual question may turn out to be, educative befriending implies a morally strong sense of friendship as both means and end to its educational achievement, reflecting Marilyn Friedman's insight:

The needs, wants, fears, experiences, projects, and dreams of our friends can frame for us new standpoints from which we can explore the significance and worth of moral values and standards. In friendship, our commitments to our friends, as such, afford us access to a whole range of experiences beyond our own.²⁵

And beyond our own families' experiences, as well, offering inspiration and support for "personally as well as socially transformative possibilities usually lacking in other important tradition-based close relationships, such as family ties."²⁶ Friedman draws an important conceptual distinction between "found" communities of origin (such as home, school, and religion) and "communities of choice," friendships—mutually trusting and inspiring relationships with others who share our interests and concerns, relationships within which we can learn openness of heart and mind to differences from ourselves that we may fear until we encounter them in those we have come to like or love.²⁷ Diverse girls and adults who befriend them within such communities of choice may learn how to create with one another those "pluralisms" that Ann Diller has theorized as co-existence, co-operation, co-exploration, and co-enjoyment.²⁸ Thus befriending girls with educative intent aims, implicitly at least, to give girls some experience within what Virginia Woolf calls a "Society of Outsiders."²⁹ For, typically undertaken in relative poverty outside the institutional restrictions even if still within the settings of family, school, worship, or workplace, befriending girls educatively may occur in obscurity, involve creation and sustenance of intentional and purposeful, but loosely structured and pluralistic communities of choice, and invite popular derision.

The courage and moral strength of such educative befriending offer girls thoughtfulness, worldliness, and life-gladness that, for Janice Raymond, are the distinctive fruits of adult female friendship as "two sights-seeing."³⁰ Raymond warns that such morally strong friendship is not easy, as she maps and conceptualizes various obstacles to it under three categories: dissociation from the world, assimilation to the world, and victimization in the world.³¹ She does not write about girls' friendships, but I recognize all these categories of obstacles to friendship as obstacles also to that educational achievement for which befriending girls in its educative sense aims.

It is possible, then, also to read onto Raymond's conceptual map the most distinctive markers of befriending girls in its miseducative sense, which implies a morally weak sense of friendship that censors its invitations to re-examine lived realities as well as moral standards, values, and possibilities, thereby limiting girls' growing capacities and responsibility for learning to love, survive, and thrive despite their troubles. The miseducative hidden curriculum of befriending girls may undermine others' best efforts at that educational achievement; it may blind girls to oppression; it may even foster their oppression or their oppressiveness to one another or to others outside their group. Gangs, cliques, romancers, charming harassers, competitive and jealous peers, racist companions and mentors, seductive

and over-protective family members, lecherous teachers and clergymen, xenophobic and homophobic church groups, conversion therapists, mass-media stars that court hero-worship, trendy girl-talkers, and other cordially manipulative adults in various roles who are eager to convert, control, patronize, or exploit girls all offer examples of miseducative befriending. Within this context, befriending girls educatively can require passionate commitment that may make it something like a worldly devotional practice, a worldly liberation lay-ministry. But, as such, it can also become a controlling and homogenizing “pastoral power” such as Megan Boler has justly critiqued, and give, as Kurth-Schai warns, “the appearance of working on behalf of children while maintaining adults’ vested interest in children’s powerlessness.”³² When this happens, befriending girls ultimately becomes miseducative. Seeking or clinging to a girl’s friendship for one’s own advantage or for a team’s or an institution’s or another collective’s advantage—without primary regard for her learning to love, survive, and thrive despite her difficulties—is miseducative befriending.

Such awareness that befriending girls is so often miseducative leads its educative practitioners and theorists to reflect upon hidden curriculum in widely various contexts. It therefore prompts critical inquiry concerning coeducation, its sexism and heterosexism, its sexual and racist harassment, its other gender-troubled and racialized relations, and its unjust, unethical political economy of gender and race. Befriending girls educatively will also require further inquiry concerning educative and miseducative aims and activities of befriending boys. For, whether undertaken within a sex-segregated or coeducational community of choice, befriending girls educatively requires an ecological perspective on girls’ living and learning that presumes men’s and boys’ presence in their lives for better and for worse.

Befriending girls cannot alter the total environment of girlhood, nor can it often even alter home or school environments where girls learn to love or denigrate themselves, to love or fear others, to survive their difficulties and thrive, or to be diminished and defeated by them. Befriending girls is not a strategy for massive, total social change, but it can take various forms that together may haphazardly constitute a kind of radical social formation that resists oppression, albeit one always vulnerable to co-optation, backlash, and other reactionary subversions and contestations. There is no grand narrative here. However, befriending girls can be a micro-political strategy for changing some societies closest to girls and making material, cultural, social, and spiritual resources available to them so that they can learn to love, survive, and thrive despite their difficulties within a world often hostile to them.

THE ACTIVITIES OF BEFRIENDING GIRLS

The activities of befriending girls are as various as the activities of living itself. Befriending girls and teaching them practical wisdom may upon occasion coincide in one individual’s relationship with a girl, but need they do so? Even if not, befriending girls cannot be educative in a context of indifference to their learning practical wisdom. Befriending girls can, however, be educative, even skillfully so, and still fail. Girls may accept or even seek miseducative befriending that makes

them more vulnerable to harm than they need to be. That risk is the price of educative befriending. For there can be no befriending girls educatively without girls' freedom to pick their own friends, make mistakes, and learn from them. As an adult commitment, therefore, befriending girls makes its practitioners vulnerable to griefs, disappointments, delusions, temptations, and risks both small and large. When undertaken seriously, it always requires active engagement in *self-educative self-befriending*, a practice that can simultaneously present possible instructive examples for girls learning to love themselves, survive, and thrive despite difficulties. When befriending girls in difficulty with educative intent, self-educative self-befriending in the context of befriending girls also entails *befriending women* and learning from us about our myriad ways of loving, surviving, and thriving despite our adult difficulties.

A broad leap of faith in girls' untried possibilities is necessary, too, one that makes habitual and deliberate practice of befriending girls, self, women, and perhaps also boys very much like a spiritual discipline composed of activities such as attention, study, self-examination, consciousness-raising, service, guiding, exploration, play, bearing witness, letting go, celebration, and giving. Such activities neither require nor rule out religious beliefs and affiliations, but some knowledge of religious spiritualities may help one learn how and why one might choose to engage in such activities during political struggles to befriend girls. At the same time, religious beliefs and affiliations dutifully sustained for direction in such activities, without any gender-sensitive and otherwise pragmatically critical inquiry, may render any effort at befriending girls miseducative. Fortunately, a growing new feminist scholarship on girls offers abundant secular examples of such disciplined activities.

I believe philosophers of education can learn from that new feminist scholarship and contribute to it. Many other thoughts and questions about befriending girls as an educational life-practice, and obviously also about befriending boys in their company, remain unwritten here. But I hope this limited effort can at least stimulate among us some lively and sustained conversations about them.³³

1. Sapphire, *Push* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

2. Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

3. bell hooks, "Revolutionary Parenting," in *Feminist Theory* (Boston: South End, 1984), chap. 10 and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 178, 182.

4. Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), 26.

5. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 45.

6. *Ibid.*, 106, xvi.

7. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai, "Ecofeminism and Children," in *Ecofeminism*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 202-3.

8. Ntozake Shange, *Betsey Brown* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985).

9. Marilyn Friedman, *What Are Friends For?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), part I.

10. Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), chap. 5.

11. Barbara Houston, "Gender-Freedom and the Subtleties of Sexist Education," in *The Gender Question in Education*, ed. Ann Diller, Barbara Houston, Kathryn Pauly Morgan, and Maryann Ayim (Boulder: Westview, 1995), 61.
12. Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College, 1976), chap. 3 and Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, California: Crossing, 1983), 66-76.
13. Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Penguin, 1997), 354.
14. Ibid.
15. Iris Marion Young, "Gender as Seriality," in *Intersecting Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 24.
16. Lyn Mikel Brown, *Raising Their Voices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 1.
17. Young, "Gender as Seriality," 27.
18. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), chap. 1.
19. Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell, 1977), 44-45 and Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 119-23.
20. Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 345.
21. Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 4-7.
22. Jane Roland Martin, "The Wealth of Cultures and the Problem of Generations," in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), especially 28-31.
23. Audre Lorde, "Man Child," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg: Crossing, 1984), 74; Susan Laird, "The Concept of Teaching," in *Philosophy of Education 1988*, ed. James Giarelli (Normal, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1989), 32-45; Laird, "Learning from Marmee's Teaching," in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination*, eds. Jan Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Garland, 1998), 285-321.
24. Susan Laird, *Maternal Teaching and Maternal Teachings: Philosophic and Literary Case Studies of Educating* (Cornell University, dissertation, 1988).
25. Friedman, *What Are Friends For?* 197.
26. Ibid., 207.
27. Ibid., 244-45.
28. Ann Diller, "An Ethics of Care Takes on Pluralism," in Diller et al, chap. 12.
29. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1938), 106ff.
30. Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), chap. 5.
31. Ibid., chap. 4.
32. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 146 and Kurth-Schai, "Ecofeminism and Children," 197.
33. Thanks to Susan Birden, Deanne Bogdan, Jayne Fleener, Susan Franzosa, Lissa Frey, Linda Gaither, John Green, Catherine Hobbs, Irene Karpiak, Glorianne Leck, Jane Martin, Jeff Milligan, Marlo Nikkila, Al Neiman, Kate Scantlebury, Deborah Shinn, Lesley Shore, Linda Steet, Amy Sullivan, and anonymous members of the PES Program Committee for reading and responding helpfully to this essay in early and/or recent drafts.