

# The Shape of Friendship: Building a Model that Represents that “Gummy Jungle”

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“*The bird, a nest; the spider, a web; a man, friendship.*” — William Blake, c. 1790

“*The neighborhood was connected to the city, the city to Italy, Italy to Europe, Europe to the whole planet... it's not the neighborhood that's sick, it's not Naples, it is the entire earth, it is the universe, or universes.*” — Elena Greco, character created by Elena Ferrante in her Neapolitan Quartet.

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## Introduction

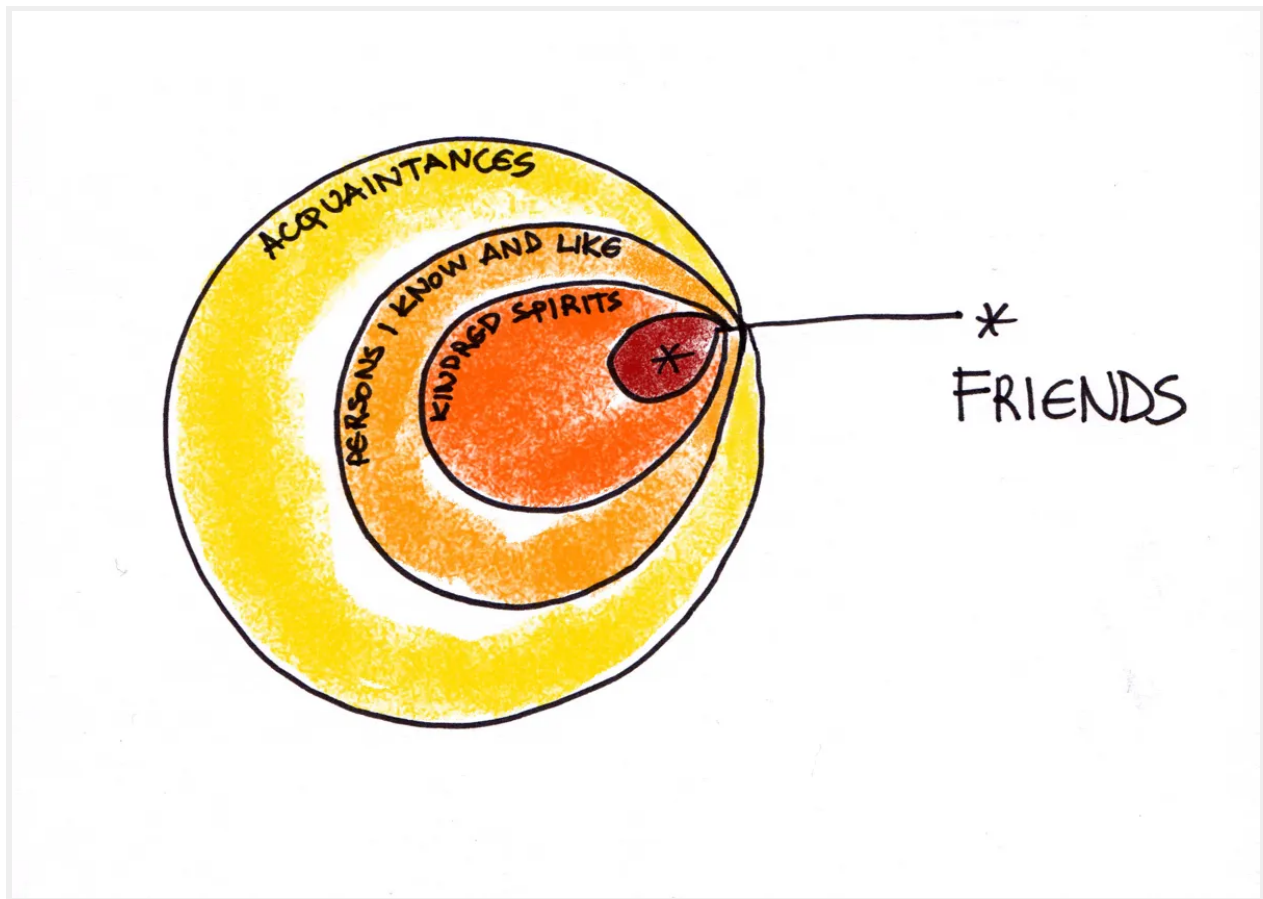
On the surface, answering the question “what is friendship?” might seem easy. Typically we think of friendship as involving at least two people who are not related by blood yet have forged a close bond. This *bond* tends to result from a shared experience, some *common ground* discovered between otherwise unrelated individuals. Beyond this connection that binds people together, every discipline from evolutionary biology to philosophy to literature has attempted to describe the structure of friendship. What is it made of? What does the scaffolding look like?

According to Aristotle, “perfect friendship” can only exist between “men who are good and side in virtue,” and it “requires time and familiarity” to be established (Aristotle & Ross, 1925). Francine Prose also sees time as what increases the connection of a lifelong friendship. That, plus “memory” and “shared experience” (Prose, 2021, p. 19). Seneca considered friendship a “talent” (Seneca & Campbell, 1969), C.S. Lewis extolled the power of friendship to increase virtue in good men but warned of its potential to also increase vice in bad men (1960), Deborah Eisenberg refers to it as a “gummy jungle” (1987). If we consider friendship from an evolutionary standpoint, we can assume that in a “pre-industrial context” it was important for human survival (Apostolou & Keramari, 2020). “Such friendships would be particularly helpful in an ancestral context,” Apostolou & Keramari write, “where people could not rely on the state for assistance in times of need” (p.1).

*Survival.* Ultimately we need other people. But friends are more than people—they’re, according to Nietzsche, “some particular other” (Harris, 2017). In today’s modern context, Maria Popova, the founder and creator of *Brain Pickings*, believes that we conflate the term “friend” to refer to people who are more acquaintances than friends “in the proper Aristotelian sense.” To counter what she calls the “commodification of the word ‘friend,’” Popova created a visual model of linked concentric circles to show where within the visual taxonomy of “platonic relationships” friendship lives.

## **Figure 1**

Maria Popova's model of the levels of inter personhood



Note. This model illustrates the “classes” of people we may interact with as widening and shrinking circles to represent who we have the least familiarity with and the least. [Source: *Brain Pickings*, 2016]

Like Russian dolls, “each larger circle [is] a necessary but insufficient condition for the smaller circle it embraces,” Popova writes, the smallest circle being friendship. The use of circles is important, as they represent people as *classes* that are separate but not wholly closed off or unaware of one another. What Popova describes as the outer world or “ether of strangers” are *acquaintances*, which consists of “all the humans who inhabit the world at the same time as we do, but whom we have not yet met.” This doesn’t mean

that acquaintances can never move from the outermost circle into one of the inner ones, but it does mean that we'll never have a close, intimate connection with most of the people on this earth, even in our own neighborhoods. The next circle—"people I know and like"—is the one most of us tend to conflate as friends but, in Popova's words, we only know as "outlines" of people we *could* love if they ever reached the level of friend. "Kindred spirits" are close to friends in the "fullest sense," but we still don't know them entirely and don't allow them to know us in that way either. There's still a boundary of fear, a boundary that in almost everyone's romantic definition of *friend in the fullest sense* can't exist.

This led me to wonder what a taxonomy for friendship could be and whether Popova's model (or any model) is robust enough to show friendship's interconnectedness. Popova's visualization takes a small-scale view that could be broadened to consider friendship's connection with time, memory, and society at large. In this paper I turn to Aristotle, C.S. Lewis, Francine Prose, Nietzsche, Elena Ferrante, and other writers and philosophers to discover the best way to illustrate the shape of friendship, for as Francine Prose writes, "friendship at its most elevated should ideally serve as the model for a larger social good, as a standard of how we, as a society, ought to treat one another" (Prose, 2021, p. 15). Therefore, the shape of an ideal friendship could also serve as the shape of an ideal society.

Ultimately, I consider whether there is an order that can be applied to friendship or if Ferrante's *frantumaglia*—a jumble of fragments—is the only way to think about it: “the storehouse of time without the orderliness of history, a story” (Ferrante, 2003). Lila and Lenù, the two protagonists in Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet, realistically construct, enact, and embody all the complexities of friendship, one that is haunted by a shared origin (Naples) and experience (poverty and violence). For writer and critic Patricia Lockwood, Ferrante's novels are not just a portrait of a “rich friendship.” They're about how adult society works, and a woman's acceptance and rejection of that. As girls then as women, Lila always saw things for what they were and tried to dismantle them, Lenù always accepted and adapted to living in the “world as it was.” These two actions kept their friendship alive. At the core of Ferrante's work is how we're interconnected. “And we should teach ourselves to look deeply at this interconnection,” Lockwood (2021) writes. *Frantumaglia* might be the “tool” we need to do this.

### **Literature review**

There's something appealing about the messiness of the friendship between Elena Greco (Lenù), the narrator-protagonist of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, and Raffaella Cerullo (Lila), who Lenù would have us believe is her “brilliant friend.” Perhaps it's this messiness that I, and the many other women readers who adore Ferrante's bildungsroman, *recognize* in our friendships and ourselves. Written by an Italian writer under the pen name

“Elena Ferrante,” whose true identity we can only guess at, the four novels—interestingly, Ferrante only ever saw them as one long novel (Ferrante, 2003)—that make up the quartet have been passed “from girlfriend to girlfriend, sister to sister, mother to daughter,” because of their depiction of “the complex inner world of female friendships and women’s experiences” (Norris, 2015, p. 1).

This isn’t to say that one must identify as a woman to understand the experiences of the two female protagonists (though there are moments when one or the other comes across as the *antagonist*), but the model of perfect, virtuous, and ideal friendship presented by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle & Ross, 1925) that says men cannot be friends “unless both are lovable” does not account for the tensions often inherent in the relationships between members of a historically oppressed group. To Bradford Jean-Hyuk Kim (2021), Aristotle’s basic principle of friendship “that all friends love only because of the lovable” is actually “egoistic,” as what is “lovable” would seem to only exist for the sake of one’s own happiness. In the story of Lenù and Lila, the two friends are never striving to reach some ideal friendship in the Aristotelian sense (the smallest circle of Maria Popova’s friendship model); their friendship just *exists*—and its existence is embedded in a tension that neither can break free from.

For writer and critic Patricia Lockwood, calling the Neapolitan novels “a rich portrait of friendship” is “insane” and seems “like something a pod person

would say” (2021). What Lockwood is getting at, I think, is that Lenù and Lila represent a process, a process of inducing action (Lila) and bringing everything back to “homeostasis” (Lenù). Ferrante, herself, has said that the stories she tells are “conventional” in the sense that they’re recognizable to readers, but her real aim is to show “the magma running beneath the pillars of convention” (Ferrante, 2015). The main convention Ferrante’s Neapolitan Quartet breaks/expands is Adriana Cavarero’s theory of *amicizia narrativa* or narrative friendship, which is the feminist idea of “reciprocal narration of two women’s life stories” (Romero, 2019, p. 257).

The process of narrative friendship entails one woman telling her life story to a friend, and then when the friend narrates it back to her “the woman understands *who* she is, while recognizing her inner desire of having her life narrated” (emphasis from author, Romero, 2019, p. 257). Cavarero’s theory “destabilizes” Italian feminist beliefs that the bonds created between women through organizing and consciousness raising “fuel sentiments of sisterhood and encourage female liberation from patriarchal society” (p. 259) by prioritizing the *self*. But while Cavarero presents a “positive” view of women’s friendships embedded in narration, Ferrante’s characters complicate this view as Lenù is compelled to narrate Lila’s story (without permission) for her own benefit as a published author. To say that Cavarero and Ferrante “destabilize” the sisterhood of female friendship—Stefania Lucamante (2018) argues that Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels are the “undoing [of] feminism” by borrowing

from the work of past feminist writers and twisting the narrative to prioritize “individual assertion” over “sisterly friendship—assumes prior stability. It assumes friendship to be rooted somewhere that’s stable. Yet Lenù and Lila’s friendship is not the only one to emerge from the tension between the self and other.

The Neapolitan novels begin with an older Lenù, an absent Lila (we’re told by Elena Greco the writer that she’s managed to fulfill her desire to completely disappear), and 60 years of friendship between them. The only thing for Lenù to do is take the “traces,” the fragments of Lila, and “dig in the archive of memory, unstable and untrustworthy by its very nature,” in order to put their friendship back together (Ghezzi & Teardo, 2019). Lockwood is right: The novels aren’t a portrait of friendship but a diagram to the inner workings of a process. Lila has always seen the process, Lenù has always accepted the surface of things. But in writing Lila’s story, Lenù comes to realize that, as Nietzsche claims, persons are processes (Harris, 2017), and she needs to detangle herself from Lila’s shadow to see their friendship and herself clearly. But the “self-knowledge” she gains from narrating Lila’s story also makes their bond stronger. *Frantumaglia*.

To end, we need to look at the split in the literature on how we might stabilize friendship. By this I mean, “where is friendship embedded?” Borrowing from Aristotle’s definition of an ideal friendship, Maria Popova gives us a model of widening and shrinking circles, with friendship as the smallest



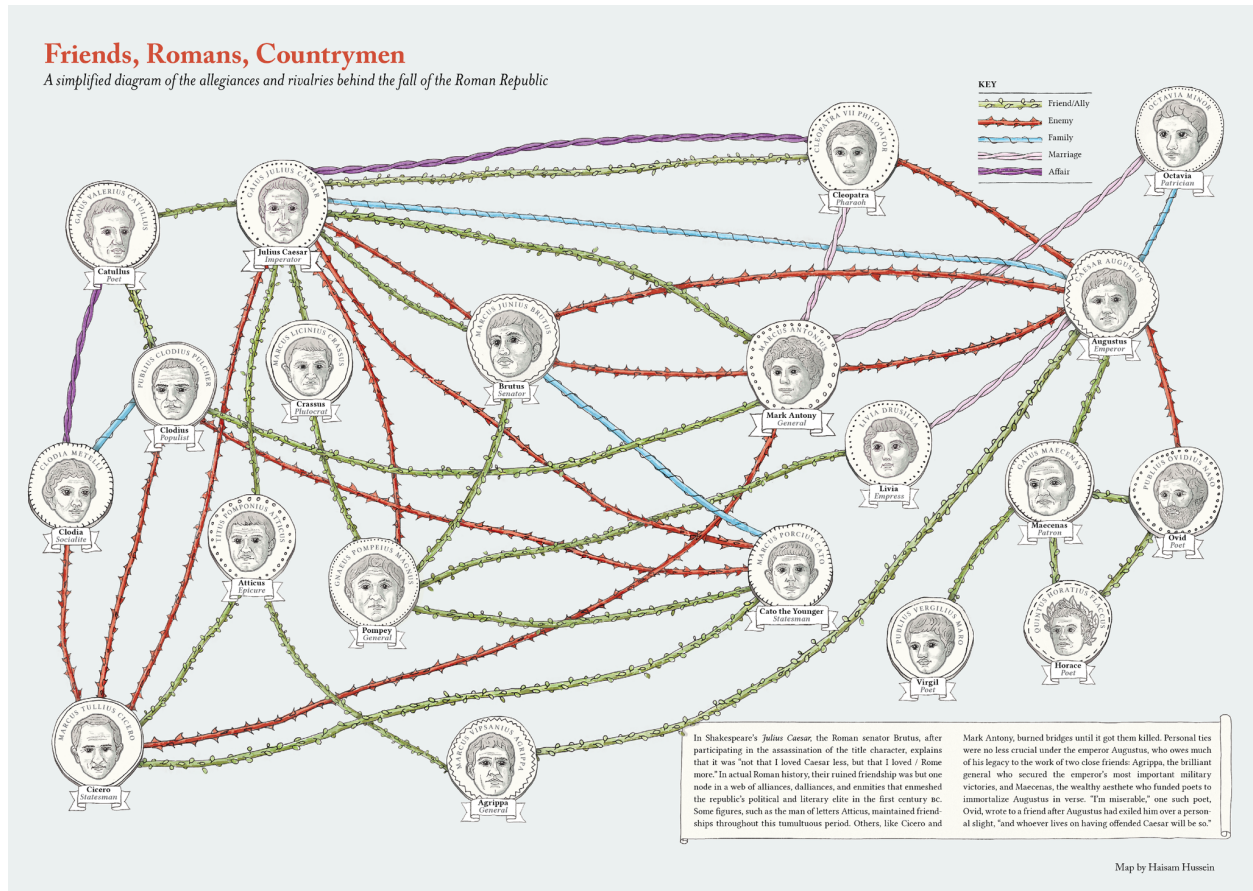
point that's made of the stuff of (yet is not) "kindred spirits." The shrinking circles are meant to represent bonds between persons forming as they find similarities, sameness, another *self*. Both Aristotle and Popova are of the opinion that a true friendship is rare, a circle very few people can and should reach. In his book of essays *Four Loves* (1960), C.S. Lewis uses the circle metaphor to describe the good and the bad of friendships based on "common ground." People with the same opinions—whether those opinions are good or bad—tend to form bubbles or "classes" and become deaf to everything outside their circle. And yet, as Lewis points out, every friendship is a sort of "rebellion" against authority, meaning that if we were to come up with a model for civic or "political friendship" (Romero-Iribas & Smith, 2018) it would need to be something between a society of classes and a society "where all are companions and none are friends," which would remove "our strongest safeguard against complete servitude" (Lewis, 1960).

Nietzsche's view of friendship as a process of individuation and maintaining the right level of distance prioritizes *difference* over common ground (Romero-Iribas & Smith, 2018). For Nietzsche, the "shared goal" of friendship is "separateness" rather than "togetherness," as friends are meant to go on their own philosophical quests and encourage each other to do so. These individual quests allow friends to remain distinct, which speaks to the danger of what Nietzsche refers to as the "merger" of two friends and Lewis's

fear of classes reproducing sameness. But Nietzsche also recognizes the duality to our capacity for friendship, and that is our capacity for enmity.

**Figure 2**

“A simplified diagram of the allegiances and rivalries behind the fall of the Roman Republic”



Note. The green indicates “Friend/Ally,” the red “Enemy,” the blue “Family,” the pink “Marriage,” and the purple “Affair.” [Source: *Lapham’s Quarterly*, 2021, 14(2)].

With this view, Lenù and Lila’s friendship emerged from the two friends’ philosophical quests. Their separateness is key to their bond, and in moments when they appear to be merging, one or the other puts more distance between them, typically through betrayal. Even when Lila disappears, the

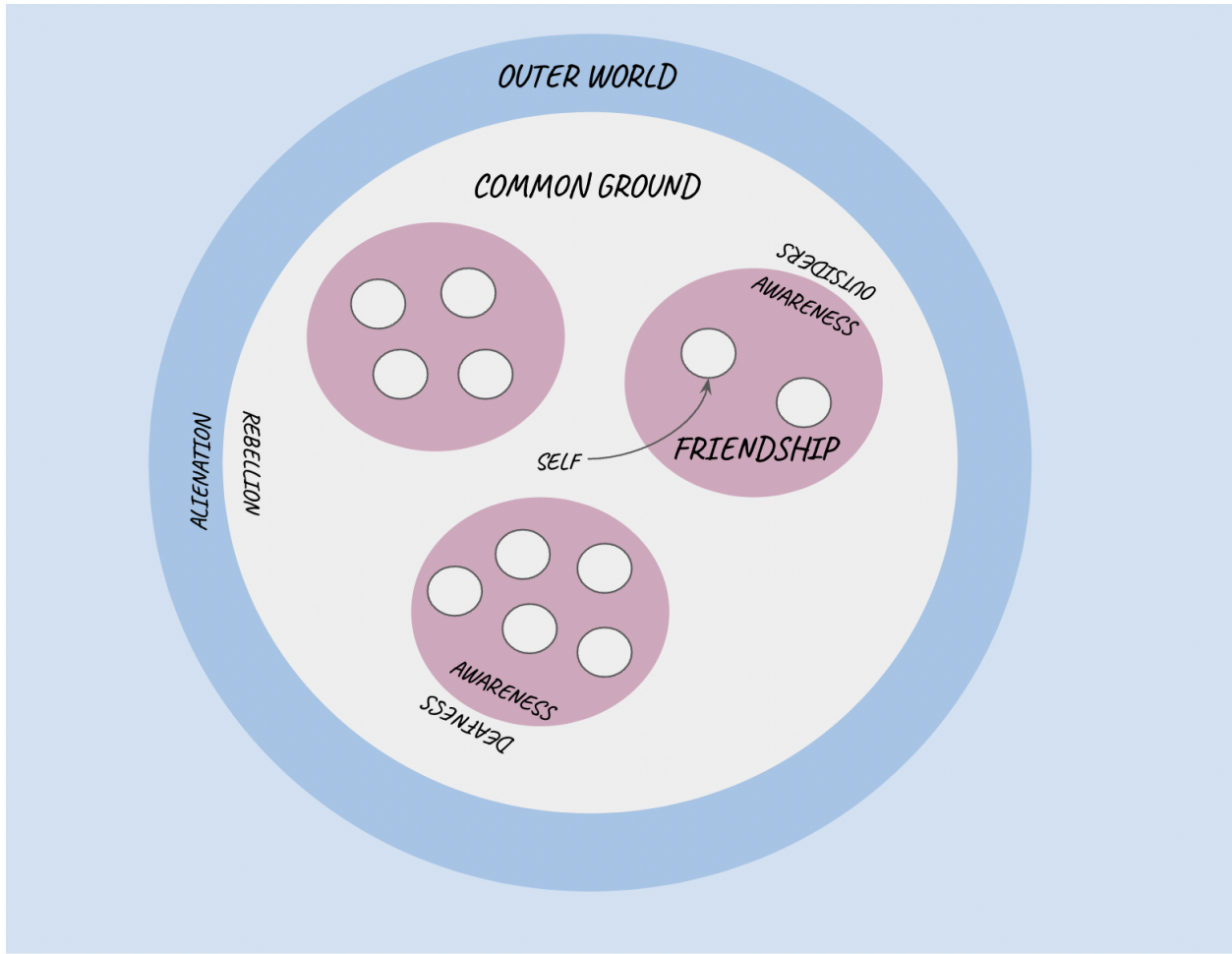
friendship remains. The Neapolitan Quartet—Elena Greco the writer’s attempt to create oneness from fragments—is evidence of that. *Frantumaglia*.

### **Common ground is dangerous ground**

“Alone among unsympathetic companions, I hold certain views and standards timidly, half-ashamed to avow them and half-doubtful if they can after all be right,” C.S. Lewis writes in *The Four Loves*. “Put me back among my friends, and in half an hour...these same views and standards become once more indisputable.” This is all well and good if what a group of friends share is as benign as a love of stamp collecting, but what if the “common ground” friends find is a racist, sexist, ableist, or violent belief? The sameness within a circle of friends is reified into a class, as Lewis points out, which then becomes deaf to any views or experiences outside the circle.

### **Figure 3**

Friendship as a circle against the outer world



Note. A model that shows how “common ground” could only give us an “us-versus-them” concept of friendship.

This model of circles is meant to show a tendency for intolerance that Lewis describes. At first glance, it would seem that it’s difficult for these circles to mix or move fluidly—everything is fixed, including the self as the smallest circle. Using the concept of “unsettling friendship and using friendship to unsettle” from Ghorashi (2018), I’ve used the barriers of the circles to indicate the duality of these inner and outer circles. Also to suggest that we should be able to move in and out of circles. I’ve also used “common ground” as the place to embed self and friendship in this model, but perhaps it should be

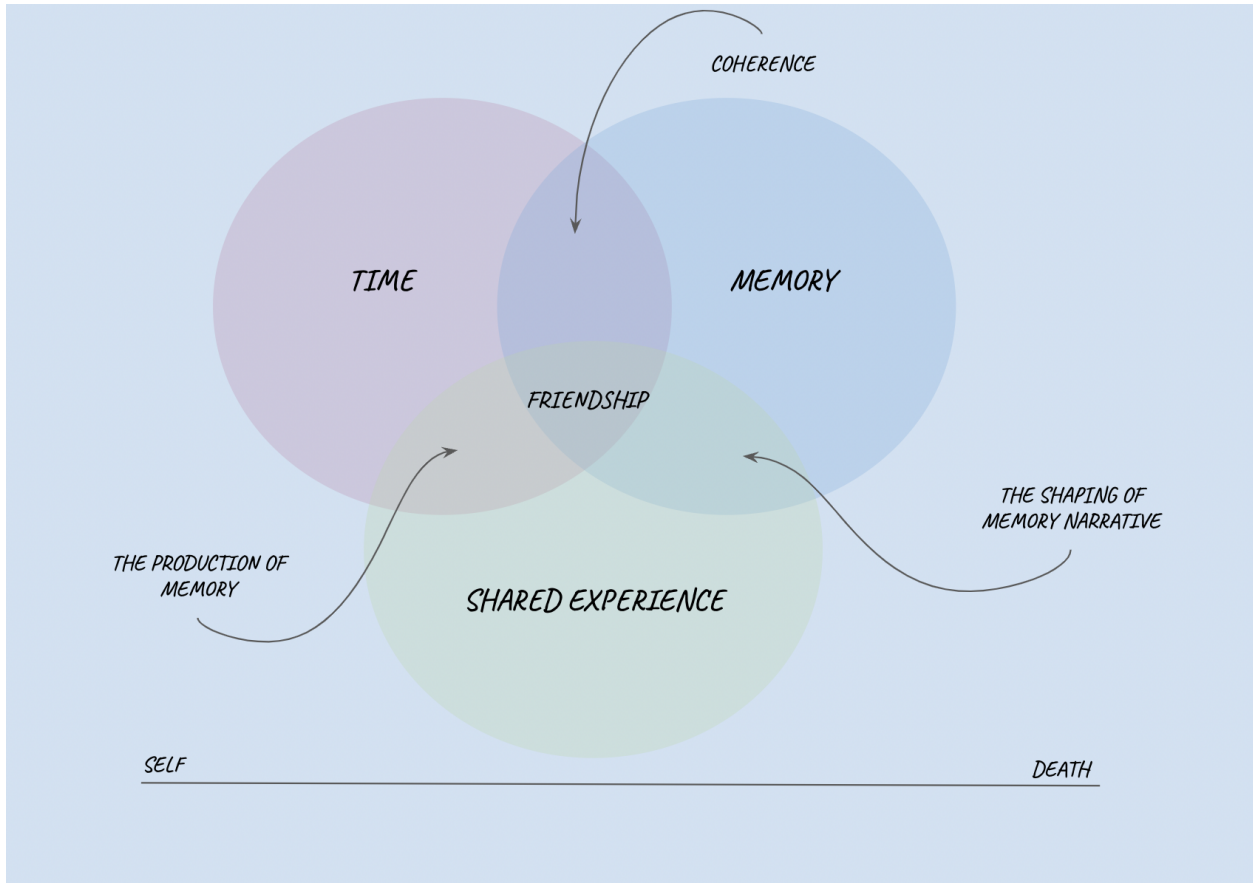
something broader like “basis.” Do all friendships need common ground to flourish, or simply a basis?

### **Frantumaglia**

“I had fled, in fact. Only to discover, in the decades to come, that I had been wrong, that it was a chain with larger and larger links,” Elena Greco writes of her life as being a flight from where she comes from, only to discover that it’s inescapable. It isn’t so much that Naples and her friendship with Lila are inescapable as her relationship with them changes over time. Lenù, like all of us, is a *process*. If we’re all processes, constantly changing, then the only things that could hold friends together are time, memory, and shared experience (Prose, 2021).

### **Figure 4**

Venn diagram of friendship components



Note. Is a Venn diagram the right approach? Can we claim that time, memory, and shared experience are finite and contained? In my view they are finite in relation to the *self*.

In this model, we can see that friendship is created at the intersection of time, memory, and shared experience, but more importantly it opens up the self. The *self* is a line, a journey, that lasts until death. And our experience of friendship can only last as long as we have life, but the friendship continues to live on at the intersection of these fragments. But can this model scale? Can this concept help us work toward a more equal and democratic democracy? Or should we accept that what we are dealing with is *frantumaglia* and cannot be reduced to models?

**Conclusion: Friendship in the deepest sense**

“Friends are ourselves,” says 17th-century poet John Donne. Eliza Haywood (1750) considers friendship a higher and purer form of love, “as we have no regard to the outward frame and are charmed only with those beauties we find in the mind of our friend.” In Gustave Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, romantic love is thought to be “the other thing” that can undermine the highest of all relationships. Just as much has been written about the love that exists between friends as the love that exists between lovers, only it’s a love that exists without carnal passion.

We trust friends to tell us the truth, Francine Prose (2021) says, to “tell us what we need to hear, truths that might not have occurred to us on our own” (p. 14). This is why friends are often described as mirrors that we hold up to ourselves, which Nietzsche says helps us gain knowledge of the self we must overcome (Harris, 2017). But I don’t think we always need friendship in the deepest sense, for it limits the circle of people we care about far too much. We should have a mix of friendships with “varying degrees of closeness and reciprocity” (Captain Awkward, 2021). Perhaps these are what Ghorashi (2018) would refer to as “unusual friendships,” which are more inclusive of the “Other.”

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