

# On Friendship and Mourning the Death of a Friend: Reading *Brodu's* Debut Album

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## On Friendship and Mourning the Death of a Friend: Reading *Brodu*'s Debut Album

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### A note at the outset

“Kbar wisq” (“Too great”). That is how I described the Maltese band *Brodu* (literally, “broth”, but also connoting something like “mediocre” or even “disastrous”) after an intimate gig in a Valletta theatre in 2015. I know that superlatives are more often than not misguided, but there is something I see and hear in *Brodu* that moves me to write something meaningful about their music, and I have been meaning to do this for a long time. On their Facebook page, *Brodu* describes their genre as ‘Folk, Rock, Stoner, Blues, Doom... or... “Broth Rock”’, and this is not an incorrect characterisation of what *Brodu* sounds like at all.<sup>1</sup> The band launched its debut album, *Habullabullojb* (an untranslatable and undecipherable term made up of seemingly jumbled letters), on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, 2014.<sup>2</sup> That was the first time I had ever seen *Brodu* live. Before then, I knew virtually nothing about them even though they had debuted in 2012, and I had heard nothing of their material except for ‘Iċ-Ċimiterju’ (‘The Cemetery’), a single they had released two weeks prior to the album launch. ‘Iċ-Ċimiterju’, briefly, is a softly-sung acoustic song, where a fragile, melancholic persona sings about the hardship that life is, its ups and downs, its confusing paths and, ultimately, its abrupt ending. The song alludes to a nearby cemetery, a place which obviously evokes imagery of finitude and mortality in which the narrator relishes at night-time, accompanied by the breeze, cypress trees, and the glare of the moon. All this is recounted as he sits next to a friend who, with two guitars, two cups of tea and a cigarette, sings with him this sorrowful duet. An evocative song about losing a significant other, I thought at first, and left it at that. A couple of days before the launch, however, I discovered through friends that the song and the album material contained autobiographical material, and that it referred to a friend of the singer who had overdosed on heroin and died. Knowing this sad fact changed the way I approached the launch and the band. I went to the album launch, listened to the music, and once the final note was played, I downed my drink and returned home. It was one of the concerts I enjoyed the most; this essay is written in the hope of demonstrating why.

There are various lines of interpretation that can be followed when writing about a piece of art. I could approach *Brodu*'s album from different perspectives and with different aims. This is not just (or at all) a review of the album. I am not singing the band's praises or discussing their sound. I wish to *think with Brodu* about a topic which is at the heart of their debut album: the topic of *mourning the death of a friend*. This essay will show how friendship is portrayed and understood in *Habullabullojb*, namely through the narrator's recollections and

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<sup>1</sup> Brodu, ‘About’. <[www.facebook.com/pg/Brodu-188544954667503/about](http://www.facebook.com/pg/Brodu-188544954667503/about)>. [Accessed 3 August 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Brodu, *Habullabullojb* (Malta: Reciprocal Records, 2014), LP.

conversations with his dead friend. In so doing, I will consider further the themes of mourning and grief, and what implications these experiences have on one's identity. Inspired by the way in which friendship is conceived in their work, I will read *Brodu* alongside philosophical works on friendship and mourning (that is, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault primarily) to emphasise both how the experience of mourning transforms the self as well as how friendship, not unlike mourning, is not here understood as simply a private phenomenon but, rather, as something that can form the basis of a renewed experience of sociality and community.

### **I'm here, friend (1-2)**

It seems correct to claim that *Habullabullobj* is fundamentally an album about friendship. One can (or, rather, I will) speculate that the undecipherable album title *Habullabullobj* is a jumbled up way of saying "*Habib*" which is Maltese for "friend". The first lines of the fast-paced, album-opening song 'Fejn Hu l-Ferh?' ('Where is Happiness?') immediately points us to the over-arching concern of the album: 'Habib qed narak fit imriegħed u kemmxejn beżgħan. Jekk għajjejt jien lest nimxi miegħek, jew naqbd u ajruplan' ['Friend, I'm noticing that you're a bit shaken and quite afraid. If you're tired, I'm ready to walk with you, or we could catch a plane']. Immediately, the narrator presents himself as a sensitive and concerned person who cares for his friend and promises to never let his friend feel abandoned when hardships strike: 'Il-hajja ttik bis-sieq, biss taqtax qalbek, mhux kollox sabiħ' ('Life kicks you down, but don't give up, not everything is pleasant').

The second track, 'Fil-Bosk' ('In the Woods'), builds on this theme and presents a story in which the narrator is lost in the woods and comes across a stranger. The narrator asks the stranger for help and a sense of direction, but the stranger cannot help: 'Qalli, "Habib jien bħalek, jiena bniedem mitluf" ('He told me, "Friend, like you, I'm a lost man"'). Surprised, the man asks the stranger whether his friends have abandoned him, and the stranger confirms this. This sounds familiar to the narrator, who in turn claims that this has happened to him too; his friend/s has/have abandoned him, and all that remains are memories. Now that he is in this dark forest (of sorrow), the fire in his heart has been extinguished.<sup>3</sup> At this point, the verse breaks into the chorus, a chorus of both hope and resignation: 'Qawwi qalbek, kompli sejjer għax it-tama l-aħħar li tmut. Grif, dwejjaq u dmugħ, parti mir-realtà' ('Stay strong, keep on going, because hope is last to die. Scrapes, sadness and tears are a part of reality'). The song ends on a positive note—not a note that is struck in all the songs; indeed, this is far from the case—when the narrator discovers a torch in his bag which at least illuminates his passage despite not changing the fact that he is still lost. However, he does find himself, quite by chance, before a loud and joyful feast, and he draws a sigh of relief because he realises that this signifies the end of his long journey (of grief). At that moment, he coincidentally encounters the stranger once again, who had earlier offered to leave the narrator to travel on

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<sup>3</sup> The reference to the narrator as a lost soul in the dark forest echoes the opening lines of 'Inferno' from *La Divina Comedia*: 'Midway in the journey of our life I came to myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost'. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2002), p. 3.

his own since he was not really helping due to his similar state of being lost. In this second encounter, though, rather than despair, he invites his friend to rejoice: ‘Ghedtlu, “Habib, wasalna għall-festa! Ejja, dhalna flimkien!”’ (‘I told him, “Friend, we’ve made it to the feast! Come, let’s go in together!”’). It is quite clear that the lost journey represents the pathless process of grief and mourning that follows from the death of a significant other. The surviving friend is left to persist by himself in the unclear path of grief. As Jacques Derrida puts it, in a note he wrote to mark the death of his friend Gilles Deleuze, ‘I’m going to have to wander all alone’.<sup>4</sup> In the hopelessness and fatigue marked by the darkness of grief and the extinguished candle in his heart, he relies on the torch in his bag to keep him from despairing and collapsing in the cold and anonymous woods.

### **The calm before the storm (3-4)**

The following two songs, although welcome additions to the album, interrupt the thematic continuity of the album. A crowd-favourite, ‘Kemm jiena cool!!’ (‘I’m so cool!!’), is narrated in the first-person by a self-declared cool guy who claims to be “cool” because he plays in a heavy metal band, smokes cigarettes, and studies philosophy and the arts. He also claims to live conscientiously by buying fair trade coffee and being both an anti-capitalist and environmentalist. At the same time, this “cool” narrator also reveals that he in fact does not know where he stands, wears a metaphorical mask every morning, is self-centred, and while he thinks he is ‘saving the world’ through his actions, he only hurts those close to him. Track four, ‘Il-Gaffa Hymac’ [‘The Hymac Power Shovel’], is an environmentalist protest song of sorts, and recounts the story of a power shovel that mercilessly ploughs into anything that gets in its way. This man-made ‘tool of the magnates who run the world’ (‘l-ghodda tal-kbarat illi jmexxu did-dinja’), who ‘create the dividing line between a rich minority and the poor’ (‘joħolqu linja bejn dawk foqra w il-ftit is-sinjuri’), knows no love and is set on a mission to destroy, condemning to death anything that seeks to stop it. The theme of death closes this set of songs, and it is the same theme which initiates the next and main motif of the album.

### **The work of mourning (5-10)**

This set of six tightly-knit songs are the heart of the album, dealing directly with the multi-faceted experience of mourning a friend. It is an emotionally intense set of songs, difficult to digest, and uncomfortable to analyse. Track five of fourteen, ‘Sieħbi Jhobb il-Lejl’ (‘My Friend Loves the Night’), opens with the narrator acknowledging the hardships and suffering of his now-dead friend. He recalls his friend telling him of how he loves the night since daytime is threatening and that, paradoxically, it is dawn that brings darkness with it. The narrator knows that his friend had struggled and persisted courageously—presumably to kick

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Gilles Deleuze (1925-95): I’m Going to Have to Wander All Alone’, in *The Work of Mourning*, ed. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 189-95, p. 195.

the habit and its repercussions—yet when his friend stumbled, the enemy had no mercy ('Izda meta žlaqt l-ghadu ma hennx għalik'). The narrator admits that he—presumably, he means "he too", that is, like his friend—is an addict to material things—to food, indolence, and comfort—and that he now knows that pursuing such things (or drugs) to overcome an internal sense of void will not bear fruit. At this point, the narrator feels the pangs of guilt, which resonate with the listener through the sharp, sudden, and hard notes in the latter part of the song, despite his genuine efforts to help his friend to the utmost: 'Stajt għentek ħabib tibda' ħajja mill-ġdid' ('I could have helped you start a life anew, friend'). A denial of sorts, the narrator engages in self-berating and feels responsible for the incidental death of his friend. Now suffering from the loss that his friend's death brings with it, the narrator pleads with his friend to pull him out of the hellhole he is in and make him happy once more: 'Jekk se tagħti l-ferħ, int li tagħti l-ferħ, meta tagħti l-ferħ; meta tagħti l-ferħ, int li tagħti l-ferħ aħseb f'ija.' ('If you're giving happiness, you who gives happiness, when you're giving happiness; when you're giving happiness, you who gives happiness, think of me'). At this point is important to make note of the fact that in this essay I have been focusing almost exclusively on the *lyrical* content of these tracks rather than the melodic. Although the two can (and perhaps should) be discussed in relation to each other, a different approach is being adopted here, namely of thematic analysis. At this point, however, I wish to very briefly note one thing pertaining to sound: towards the end of this track, in a movement consisting of heavier guitar sounds, the singer mimics the droning sounds of the guitar, which makes his voice sound wheezy or moany, almost resembling the discomfoting cries of someone suffering from withdrawal symptoms. Consequentially, the song is given much darker overtones.

This is apt preparation for 'Iċ-Ċimiterju', the sixth track to which I alluded at the outset, and which can now be better understood in the context in which it is placed in the album, rather than as a stand-alone single. It is followed by 'Ix-Xgħajra' (a small village in South-East Malta), this being an interlude consisting of a harmonic and melodic voice (verging, even, on the angelic) of a female guest singer. Although lyric-less, the track evokes feelings of heavenly serenity that provides a soothing interval between the heavier tracks. And heavier they get.

The next track, 'Ma tridx tmur mal-feeling' ['You can't go with what you're feeling'], is one of the more aggressively loud tracks. The lyrics are shouted, as if the words were urgent warnings, as if they were words uttered by someone who knows better, who sees another person leading his life down a dangerous path, and is so concerned about warning him that he cannot keep a level head, shouting to prevent this friend from further destroying his life. It is as though the narrator is trying to scream at the top of his lungs to wake his friend up from his unreceptive state, and to scare away the wolves of his addiction: 'Iċċedix l-armi, tqabad sal-aħħar, sa ma jahkmuk, għal darb' ohra jsallbuk. Ma tridx tmur mal-feeling, le, le la tkunx skjav!' ('Don't surrender your weapons, struggle to the end, until they take over, and crucify you once again. You can't go with what you're feeling, no, no, don't be a slave!').

'Theġġigñi w Toqtolni' ('You Urge Me and Kill Me') and 'L-Ismack' ('The Smack') are probably the two most painfully intense songs on the album, and the hardest to comment

upon. Whenever I witness these songs played live, I am always dumbfounded, stunned, with occasional bouts of dizzying nausea that leave a strange feeling in the stomach. Appropriately, no one in the crowd dares make a sound during these songs. ‘Thegġiġni w Toqtolni’ is a slow-tempo song that addresses someone immensely dear to the speaker. The addressee is not immediately identifiable as a friend; it could be a lover, a relative, a deity. The opening line, sung in a tired, broken voice, immediately sets the tone for a song about ambivalent love: ‘Emminni ma nafx x’inhoss, meta nsibni nħares lej. Għandix nobgħod, għandix ngħożż, dis-sbuħija li inti int’ (‘Believe me, I don’t know what to feel when I find myself looking at you. Whether I should hate, whether I should cherish, the beauty that you are’). The song invokes imagery that exaggerates the importance and beauty of the addressee, culminating in the narrator calling the addressee ‘unur għall-Holqien’ (‘an honour for Creation’). The singer sustains this heartfelt praise for the addressee, while suddenly giving way to feelings of uncertainty as to whether he should really make the addressee know of the immense admiration that he has for them: ‘Ma nafx irridekx tkun taf li inti ohla minn kulhadd. Kieku nqegħdek ġo mużew, biex kulhadd jitpaxxa bik’ (‘I don’t know whether I want you to know that you’re sweeter than everyone. I’d display you in a museum, so that everyone can relish in you’). As the singer finds himself dreaming or fantasising about this person who is clearly dear to him, almost paining himself with all this admiration he feels, he realises that he must wake up and face reality, presumably a reality in which this dear person is missing: ‘Aħjar tgħeżżiżni waħda forsi nqum, inxammar il-kmiem, nibda’ x-xogħol’ (‘It would be best were you shake me vigorously so that maybe I’ll wake up, roll up my sleeves, start the work’).

If ‘Thegġiġni w Toqtolni’ is all about marvelling at the beauty of another person, despite their weaknesses, the tone of ‘L-Ismack’ is a darker one. It foregrounds the physical degradation that heroin addiction brings to the user and the harmful effects of psychological dependency on the chemical. Moreover, it highlights how such an addiction severely strains a friendship to its limits. That is, although the narrator is presented as a genuine friend who stood by and helped their friend throughout the album’s progression, in ‘L-Ismack’ the narrator lets the listener know that this friendship came at a cost. It is not just that one’s helping hand was occasionally a hard thing to offer; rather, the narrator was at times perturbed by his friend, and there were moments when he resented the absurdity of his friend’s behaviour. Nonetheless, as the song’s ending indicates, the narrator ultimately cedes to his friend because he ultimately loves him too much to abandon him. The song’s piano intro and the repetitive tone of the drum machine set the mood for a difficult song. The song starts off with the ambivalence of responding to the cry of an addicted friend. Although one wants to help his friend, it is also difficult to respond to the friend’s desire which, ultimately, is a desire for self-destruction. And so, as the narrator hears the call of the other (the friend), he feels responsible and responds to the call, despite his knowing that the call was not exhorting by himself, but fell upon him and, in the process, made him responsible: ‘Kif nisma’ l-qanpiena tal-bieb, ninhasad, niġi niftahlek. Ġa naf x’se tgħidli, għax issa drajt; “prova għini, illum tal-aħħar”’ (‘As I hear the doorbell, I’m startled, I answer the door for you. I already know what

you're going to say, because I'm now accustomed; "try and help me, today's the last time").<sup>5</sup> The narrator recalls how, though he sometimes resisted his friend's calls, there were times when he yielded, accompanying him and standing by his side as he did what he had to do. Although his friend wants to stay and hang out with the narrator after getting his fix, however, the narrator admits to wanting to leave: 'Ġieli anke wassaltek u bqajt hdejk. Imbagħad meta tistrieħ tkun trid tibqa' miegħi, iżda jiena nkun irrid nitlaq' minn hdejk' ('Sometimes I even took you there and stayed by your side. Then, once you'd calmed down, you'd want to stay with me, but I'd want to get away from you'). The sense of how a friend can be easily converted to an enemy, someone to keep at a distance from you, emerges in these lines.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it is the love that the narrator feels for his friend that justifies their friendship and overrides this frustration felt in the face of his friend's flailing will: 'Nġhidlek id-dritt ma nafx kif int, iżda issa kuntent li sirt naf min int' ('To tell you the truth, I don't know why you are this way, but now I'm glad that I got to know you'). And before the narrator gets to chide his friend (or warn the listener) that 'l-ismack tkissrek; tkissirlek mohħok żgur!' ('smack destroys you; it will surely destroy your mind!'), he relishes in the memory of sharing simple pleasures with his friend, quite like the cups of tea enjoyed with his friend in 'Iċ-Ċimiterju': 'Immorru bilqiegħda fuq il-bank. Nisimgħek, inti tismagħni. Nithajru nixtru xi ġelat. Hemm toghmiet differenti' ('We sit down on the bench. I listen to you, you listen to me. We fancy buying an ice-cream. There are various flavours'). In the midst of the troubles presented when dealing with an addicted friend, one who can be seen crumbling under addiction, it is these fleeting moments of serenity which the narrator feels as defining friendship; moments where they get together, give each other their due time, engage in conversation, and relate to each other. It is the sudden loss of such moments which causes the narrator the greatest sorrow as he tries to mourn his friend.

## The end (11)

'L-Orjent' ('The Orient') is the eleventh track, a funeral march of sorts which recounts the story of a narrator who set sail to the Orient on a ship without a compass, and who relies on the sun for direction. Once he gets to the point of no return, the narrator realises the difficulty of the journey and gives up: 'Qatt ma bsart li nasal s'hawn. Tlift it-tama, tlift id-dawl. Inħossni bniedem spiċċut. Jien għażilt illi immut' ('I never thought I'd come to this. I have lost hope, I have lost the light. I feel like a broken person. I choose to die'). This strange track marks the end of an important chapter of the album with a note of hopelessness, a lack of direction, and death.

<sup>5</sup> There is in fact quite a lot in this song that can be read through the work of Emmanuel Levinas on the impossible realisation of responsibility, the incomprehensibility of alterity, and the unbearable of guilt. See, for instance, Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Adriaan T. Peperzak et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> On Derrida's elaboration on this point, see Jacques Derrida, 'Politics of Friendship', *American Imago*, 50(3) (1993), 353-391, and Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London and New York, NY: Verso, 2005).

### Posthumous collaboration (12-14)

In the text printed on the inside of the album, it is indicated that *Habullabullojb* is a collaboration between *Brodu* and Darren Gatt (1984-2009), the latter being the friend paid homage to in most of the songs. In various “About” sections, *Brodu* consistently present themselves as a band that was set up in 2011 *in order to* record an album of songs by Mark Abela and the late Darren Gatt (a fellow musician). Indeed, tracks twelve to fourteen of the debut album have their lyrics and music credited to Gatt. *Brodu* writes of how it was felt that these tracks—‘Cinderella’, ‘Feeble’, and ‘Graces Street’ (the name of the street on which the friend was found dead, information not given in the album)—had to be included in *Habullabullojb*; this despite the fact that these tracks are stylistically very different from the rest of the album, and, unlike the rest, are sung in English. Born at a time when the friends could still interact and create music together, the singer (Mark “Zizza” Abela) took the difficult responsibility upon himself to give a voice (through guest musicians) and form to these unfinished products. It is as though Abela owed this album to his friend, in recollection of the memories he has of him, and in acknowledgement of his work of mourning his friend. Creating and launching this album, which may feel disjointed when it shifts between different genres, tonalities, and song structures, is a sign of the plural faces of the experience of mourning.

### A simple ethos of friendship

What immediately struck me in *Brodu* is their unpretentious attitude. Oftentimes, in contemporary scenarios, we are faced with two contradictory drives: towards excessive complexification on one hand (making sure to appear as sophisticated as possible, and never bland), and toward simplistic trivialisation of serious affairs on the other. *Brodu* offer a welcome response. They do not try hard to appear conceptually overly-sophisticated. They speak of emotions in a direct and non-convoluted way. Despite our being surrounded by cynical efforts to convince us otherwise, they show the listener that genuine altruism can exist. Whether it is a cup of tea or an ice-cream, they retain hope in simple pleasures and in being on the same wavelength of thought and conversation. They celebrate an ethic of generosity and friendship marked by an effort to raise one’s friend upward and to bring out the best in people. They offer genuine help without expectation of recompense. Writing on the album launch’s event page on Facebook, an attendee said that despite not knowing him well, *Brodu*’s frontman fills him with the altruism that he senses in their music, and that the album contains an admirable honesty. He goes on to say that if lost in the woods, Zizza would not think twice before offering to share his last sip of water, and that one would drink it while completely trusting that what is being offered is not poison. I will be quick to emphasise that one must not confuse this simplicity and honesty with naivety. It is not foolish optimism which is being celebrated here. After all, it is unbearable grief and sadness that are acknowledged through the songs. Yet a form of ungrounded hope persists, and such hope manifests itself in the altruistic ethic of *Brodu* which I find greatly inspiring and exemplary.



### Reading further into *Brodu*: Judith Butler on grief

On the topic of grief and mourning, Judith Butler writes of how these are experiences that most humans share in that we all have a sense of what it means to lose someone or something significant: 'Loss has made a tenuous "we" of us all'. Mourning is that experience through which one realises that, in trying to account for the loss one has suffered, 'one will be changed, possibly for ever'.<sup>7</sup> Such change is not something one *chooses* to undergo. It comes over oneself unsolicited and disrupts any sense of self-coherence one tries so hard to maintain. Hence, grief is unwelcome and unpredictable; that is, what it does to oneself cannot be known in advance. One cannot will away this vulnerability which exposes us to painful feelings. One cannot choose to control one's grief in the same way that one does not really choose to love somebody. In trying to exert control over this un-masterable experience, one realises that any such effort is bound to fail:

I do not think, for instance, that one can invoke the Protestant ethic when it comes to loss. One cannot say, "Oh, I'll go through loss this way, and that will be the result, and I'll apply myself to the task, and I'll endeavor to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me." I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but does not know why. Something is larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's own knowing and choosing.<sup>8</sup>

Butler's insistence on one's inability to fully control one's process of grief is motivated by her ideas on how one's identity, too, is not fashioned by oneself. Although there are moments in which we do act as independent and autonomous agents, Butler points out that, fundamentally, one's life is dependent upon one's relations to significant others as well as anonymous others. One's life is always intertwined and entangled with the lives of others in such a way that it no longer remains straightforward to clearly separate "I" from "you" from "them". The experience of grief highlights the extent to which one's life does not exist independently of all the other lives with which it touches and is touched by. In the disruption that follows the loss of a significant other, the relationality through which "you" and "I" were constituted becomes apparent:

It is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost "in" you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Violence and Mourning* (London and New York, NY: Verso, 2004), pp. 20-1.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

Rather than making us despair of our incompleteness or vulnerability, this awareness can motivate an ethic of generosity which, ultimately, I read in *Brodu*'s ethic. Butler's ideas on how grief foregrounds the way in which we are constituted relationally through our interaction with a wider sociality within which we exist are ideas that are commensurate with as well as 'constitute a disposition of humility and generosity'.<sup>10</sup> This is because, since we are not self-enclosed atomistic agents, but rather are constituted as subjects through the various ways in which we are given over to a world that is beyond our controlling grasp, we are fundamentally dependent beings. This susceptibility to others can be considered as the human condition, and in the same way that we find ourselves to be incomplete and not self-sufficient, we can extend a generous disposition to others who are also limited beings and to whom we can offer solace. It is in this way, Butler writes, that although grief can be seen as a private and solitary process, it is not completely so. Rather, grief is an activity which can furnish a sense of political community that 'brings to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility'.<sup>11</sup> As presented through the songs of *Habullabullojb*, grief marks the way in which the narrator cannot really control how he chooses to feel ('Emminni ma nafx x'inħoss'; 'Believe me, I don't know what to feel'), and the loss he is enduring deprives him of the ability to muster the required agency to counter the pain that debilitates him ('Int li tagħti l-ferħ, aħseb fija'; 'You who gives happiness, keep me in mind'). Likewise, when recalling pleasant memories of his friend ('Nintilfu għal fit, għal fit meħlusin'; 'We lose ourselves for a while, for a while we are free'), the way in which the friend enriched his life and gave him comfort through his company shows the way in which one's identity is more about what one is enabled to be through one's relations, rather than an essence one brings with themselves when interacting with others.

### **Reading further into *Brodu*: Michel Foucault on friendship**

There is another sense of community or communality that I read into *Brodu*'s work, namely that friendship is not only a private, personal experience which we share with others. Rather, friendship can foster a sense of being and belonging that can revitalise one's connection to a wider sociality, and can fruitfully contribute to how one understands themselves as a human, as a relative, as a colleague, or as a citizen. In other words, in the face of impoverished human connection that reduces one's identity to one's professional profile or to one's employment, and that reduces political participation to an impersonal procedure, the deep intellectual and passionate ties of friendship—of a friend who truly cares, who is there to listen to a friend, who pushes the friend to be the best self they can be, who ensures that the friend is not abandoned and left to suffer alone—can be a welcome alternative and a practice of resistance. Of course, not all friendships are the same, and friendship makes sense precisely because one can only be a friend to a restricted number of people. Being everyone's friend equally is an impossibility. But the point is not to assimilate all individuals into one single group. Surely, friendship is not defined by absolute sameness. Two friends need not

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 22.

share similar tastes in everything in order to qualify as friends. Rather, friendship is that relationship and those happy moments which emerge amid the instabilities, conflicts and incomprehensibilities.

In such moments, friendship can function as what Michel Foucault called a 'creative force'. Speaking in 1982 about how homosexual relations can obtain more social legitimacy and respect, he says that what must motivate this is:

the creation of new forms of life, relationships, *friendships in society*, art, culture, and so on through our sexual, ethical, and political choices. Not only do we have to defend ourselves, not only affirm ourselves, as an identity but as a creative force.<sup>12</sup>

Here, friendship is conceived as one of the ways in which individuals actively fashion their life. Although social norms influence human behaviour to a great extent, including what should constitute friendship, Foucault maintained trust in the potential he saw in friendship to counter impoverished or scripted ways of relating, and foster new creative ways of behaving in relation to each other. In this creative act rooted in friendship, new ways of being and relating come to be, pushing us to imagine how we may be otherwise and how the world may be otherwise too. On one account, friendship can appear as a modest phenomenon pertaining to the individual's private realm, devoid of larger scale social ambitions. This is, to an extent, true. Yet, friendship can occupy and has indeed occupied other positions in the social fabric.<sup>13</sup> If, indeed, humans are defined through their relations, and if, indeed, communicating and interacting with others constitute essential features of social transactions and of what it means to be human, then friendship is an experience that includes all these activities. In a world governed by dominant neoliberal discourses of competitiveness and calculability that promote vanity, self-absorption and egoism, friendship that is motivated by a deep concern for the other individual beyond reciprocity, along with care for the other individual's flourishing, can motivate more peaceful and productive modes of co-existing in the world.

## Conclusion

What I have attempted in this essay is an extended review of *Habullabullojb*, the debut album of Maltese band *Brodu*, released in 2014. I reviewed the songs by foregrounding a prominent theme that emerges in the whole project that *Brodu* is, as well as in their lyrics: namely, the theme of friendship and mourning the death of someone dear. The album was discussed in its portrayals of joyful recollections and memories of intimate shared moments, as well as the incapacitating sorrow that defines the work of mourning. Reading even further into *Brodu*'s album, I read their work through the philosophical ideas of Judith Butler on grief and how the

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity', in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. by Paul Rabinow, trans. by Robert Hurley et al. (New York, NY: The New Press, 1997), pp. 163-73, p. 164. My emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance: *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, ed. by Michael Pakaluk (Indianapolis, IN, and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1991); Peter Mallory, 'Political friendship in the era of "the social": Theorizing personal relations with Alexis de Tocqueville', *Journal of Classical Sociology* 12(1) (2012), 22-42; and Richard Mulgan, 'The role of friendship in Aristotle's political theory', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 2(4) (1999), 15-32.

experience of mourning can foster a sense of community. Furthermore, I considered Michel Foucault's ideas on how the consolidation and creation of new forms of friendship can have a socially transformative role and can point toward new forms of being and relating.

As this essay is being finalised, *Brodu* are wrapping up their second album which will be released in mid-2017. They have announced that the new album will be titled *Tfejta* (*I Switched Off*). Having listened to a couple of their new songs in recent performances, the album promises to build on some of the themes explored in *Habullabullobj*, including the theme of friendship and of the virtue of genuinely connecting with others. Until the time comes to analyse their new album, I will end by saying that *Brodu* embody that which is to be cherished in art: the joy of music, the depth of emotions, the virtue of non-trivial simplicity, and the connections between the corporeal, the intellectual and the social. For the effort that these entail, they are to be lauded.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I dedicate this essay to the members of *Brodu* in the spirit of friendship and with gratitude for the pleasure I get from their work.

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