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lesbian friendship: separations and continua

In recent years, feminist reflections on friendship have given special attention to issues of bonding across racial, class, and other socially constructed boundaries. Sarah Hoagland examines friendship across many kinds of boundaries among lesbians in community with lesbians.¹ Maria Lugones and Vicky Spelman have written about cross-cultural bonding in ways that apply equally to non lesbian friendships.² In this chapter I take up issues that arise among lesbians when the boundaries between intimate and nonintimate friendships are thrown into question, or perhaps, into chaos. The way such issues used to be posed was in terms of "friends vs. lovers." And that is how the writer with whom I begin tends to delineate the problems. However, by "lesbian friendship" I mean friendship between lesbians, regardless whether they are, or have been, each other's lovers.

Can Lesbians be Friends?

Nearly twenty years ago, two letters signed "Margy" were printed in the Lesbian Connection (LC) newsletter, under the heading, "Can Lesbians Be Friends?" Margy posed a number of questions about friendship from a lesbian perspective, including why it is often easier for lesbians to find lovers than to find good friends, how to deal with sexual aspects of friendships so as to preserve the friendship, how to "draw the line" between affection and sex, what can be done to prevent isolation in lesbian couples, and what to do with the difficulties of becoming friends with a lesbian who is "monogamously" coupled. The letters were unusual in their frankness and their refusal to glorify lesbian friendships. Readers who responded in subsequent issues of LC tended to agree with Margy on the difficulties.

Margy began by recalling that through her childhood and youth, female friends were the most important people in her life but that in college, men began coming between them. Initially, she thought lesbian friendships would be ideal because men would not come between lesbians. Then came the disillusionment of finding a greater obstacle: sex. Setting aside complications introduced by other lesbians in the life of either, Margy's first letter explored ways that sex seems to become an obstacle to friendship between lesbians. Understanding "coupled" as "monogamous" and "lovers" as sexually involved, she set out the consequences for noncoupled lesbians of having been socialized in heterosexual society to prioritize lovers over others, of seeing every lesbian primarily as a potential lover, and of not having learned how to develop friendships with potential lovers. She described both the damage to and possibility of a future friendship after a lover relationship between lesbians who had not already established a friendship and the damage to established friendships between lesbians who then become lovers but whose lover relationship did not last. Recalling the complaint that in friendships with nonlesbian women, lesbians have felt as though they had to take second place to some man, Margy concluded her first letter, "Well, I'm tired of taking second place to sex."

Margy's second letter took up obstacles posed by sex to friendship between lesbians at least one of whom is coupled with someone else, this time focusing on complications introduced by the lover and by members of a lesbian community that does not acknowledge butch-femme roles. Here, the tendency to see any lesbian primarily as a potential lover created jealousies in present lovers and gossip in the community regarding any two lesbians who begin spending time together. A common upshot is the isolation of lesbians in couples, reinforced by tendencies of many noncoupled lesbians to see coupled ones as "already taken" and thereby a waste of one's time. A lesbian who becomes interested in forming a friendship with a lesbian who is already coupled may have to pass a trial period in which she proves her "trustworthiness." She may have to like and be liked by the friend's lover. She may find it difficult to get to know her friend independently of the lover. Because of all this, some lesbians get together only in groups of couples. While doing so may circumvent gossip and jealousy, it multiplies other difficulties. Not only is it more difficult for many to get to know each other well in *this* way but, also, as couples break up, friendships formed in groups undergo upheavals.

Part of what makes the jeopardizing of friendship regrettable is, as Margy noted, that lover relationships, as such, tend to be relatively unstable, whereas good friendships tend to last and have a greater impact on one's life. She looked forward to the day when lesbians would appreciate and validate the importance of nonsexual friendships. The issues are not just personal. They have political consequences. She raised the question whether we were not getting ahead of ourselves in trying to form lesbian communities and organizations, observing that a lesbian community composed of lovers, ex-lovers, and potential lovers may be missing "a very critical and necessary element--friends."

As Margy noted, lesbians who embrace butch and femme roles may have fewer such problems, because at least butches seem able to become friends with butches and femmes with femmes without creating jealousy and gossip. Roles may facilitate friendship by setting boundaries to sexual involvement. In heterosexual society, family structures with prohibitions against boundary violations among kin may do the same. Aristotle included kinship relations among affiliations he counted as friendships. An absence of all these things-roles, kinship structure, and boundary prohibitions- leaves lesbians in the position of not being able to presume that any relationship formed with another lesbian will not become sexual. This situation presents problems of trust and confidence with respect to seeking support and advice from anyone who is not one's lover, not only advice regarding existing friendships but support in general. For, the possibility of underlying sexual agendas in all transactions raises questions about motives.

Experiences of women prisoners who have almost no opportunity for sexual activity suggest that the problems Margy described are not necessarily tied to the possibility of sexual activity but can arise where there is simply erotic bonding. Some women prisoners seem to have met the difficulties by reproducing elaborate kinship networks among themselves, a practice referred to by sociologist Sister Esther Heffernan as "familying." 5 In "familying," women who bond erotically with each other may adopt one another's friends as "mothers," "fathers," "brothers," "sisters," "uncles," "aunts," and so on, complete with kinship boundary prohibitions against erotic intimacy. These "families" provide counsel and support to members during crises or hard times, socialize new inmates to prison society, and offer a stability that the couple relationships tend to lack. Couples come and go, but the families remain. Since, unlike birth families, these families are largely chosen, they may be even more likely than birth kin to generate friendships.

Rose Giallombardo, who was perhaps the first to do an extended study of such kinship networks in a women's prison (Alderson Federal Penitentiary), reported a similar practice recorded by Ju-K'ang T'ien in

a 1940 study of women in cotton mills in China who worked in same-sex settings and lived away from home in dormitories." 6 She quotes T'ien's description of one such family of female cotton mill workers: "Of the seven 'sons' four have left and entered other 'families' as 'sons-in-law' (according to the matrilineal pattern). One of the remaining 'sons' (worker named Chang) 'married' a worker named Chow. Another 'married' a worker named Ho. The third one is not yet 'married' but is in love with a 'girl.'" 7

She concluded, however, that "by forming exclusive family groups and by relating all meaningful interactions and functions to those inmates who are linked by kinship bonds, the Alderson inmates have in effect created a social structure which deters the possibility of a leadership emerging that could unite many prison families." 8 Although she saw the problem as one of hindered leadership, it may be, more basically, that conflicts between individuals that are mediated by "families" reappeared as conflicts between families themselves with the result that families became rivals instead of allies. This may suggest a need for mediating social structures that do not depend totally on personal loyalties, perhaps something serving the functions of law.

The practices reproduced in women prisons and among women of the Chinese cotton mills-e-sex roles and family structure-have taken highly oppressive forms in society at large. Yet, perhaps kinship networks need not distribute power oppressively: At least one kinship relation, sisterhood, has been adopted as a feminist ideal. Even though kinship networks in women's prisons and other same-sex total institutions have reproduced male-dominant distributions of authority, they may be relatively unoppressive in prison contexts because so little real power is possessed by any of their members. Yet, the problem remains that if the kinship structure itself becomes a source of difficulty, there is no procedure to modify it or address the difficulty.

It may be tempting to blame "monogamy" for the problems Margy described. 9 Without monogamy, where would be the grounds for jealousy or gossip? Yet, I find it unclear to what extent tensions between erotic bonding and friendship result simply from practices, such as monogamy, that have been oppressive to women in a heterosexist, male-dominant society and to what extent conflicts or tensions would arise anyway because of differences having to do with the nature of friendship and erotic bonding themselves. Lovers, for example, require a certain privacy that necessarily excludes others (including friends), even if they are not monogamous, whereas friendship is a relatively public, a matter to which I will return. Margy's letters did not challenge monogamy. The assumptions she questioned were that lover relationships are the most important ones and that one needs a lover for closeness, affection, and companionship. These assumptions are easily seen as carryovers from the heterosexist mandate that a woman find a male lover and structure her life around him. Yet, what about her questions concerning obstacles to future friendship presented by becoming lovers without having first established a friendship? or concerning risk to existing friendship between friends who become lovers? or how to deal with the sexual aspects of friendships and where, or how, to "draw a line" between affection and sex? Nonmonogamy might multiply rather than alleviate such difficulties as these.

The way Margy put the question about getting ahead of ourselves in attempting to form lesbian organizations and communities may suggest a psychologizing of the difficulties of lesbian friendship, as though the solution were to work on ourselves and our assumptions about each other. Alternatively, at least some of the difficulties we face might be alleviated by friendlier background institutions, that is, by the establishment of social practices with friendlier conventions. Perhaps it is a case of the chicken-or-the-egg: do we need first to learn how to establish good lesbian friendships before we can build good lesbian community? or do we first need the background of lesbian community to make possible good lesbian friendships? Not knowing how better to resolve this one, I work with the hypothesis that we

need to go back and forth in a manner suggested by what John Rawls called "**reflective equilibrium**" in **writing about how to evaluate theories of justice**.¹⁰ That is, we might try attending now to the context of social institutions or practices and now to the nature of friendship itself, shifting back and forth, aiming, ultimately, for a good fit between them.

By "institutions" I mean (as in chapters 1 and 3) social practices defined by rules, or conventions, that create such things as roles and positions and through them distribute benefits and burdens of social cooperation. The hypothesis that backgrounds set by social institutions define contexts that encourage or discourage friendships of various kinds, and the idea that friendship itself may be institutionalized, are explored by Janice Raymond in her genealogy of female friendship. I turn to explore some of her ideas next. Identifying supportive background institutions and considering possibilities of institutionalizing friendship inevitably also require attending to kinds and values of friendship. Accordingly, the final section of this chapter takes up the most extended philosophical discussions of that topic prior to the twentieth century, namely, those of Aristotle. Building on pragmatic aspects of his approach, I offer a somewhat Aristotelian approach to evaluating the difficulties of lesbian friendship noted by Margy.

Jan Raymond and "Gyn/Affection"

A decade after Margy's letters, Jan Raymond devoted about a fifth of her treatise, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Friendship*, to obstacles to friendship between women.¹¹ Although elsewhere,

Jan Raymond has taken up lesbian ethics, *A Passion for Friends* does not focus specifically on *lesbian* friendships, nor does it treat sex as an obstacle to friendship.¹² However, its discussion of obstacles created by a social environment oppressive to women is helpful for understanding how sex can be socially constructed so as to become an obstacle to lesbian friendship. *A Passion for Friends* focuses on friendship among women, introducing the term "Gyn/affection" to encompass the varieties of female friendship, taking the "affection" of "Gyn/affection" to include both the bonds of passionate friendship and the impacts of friends on each other, including "influencing, acting upon, moving, and impressing" as well as "being influenced, acted upon, moved, and impressed."¹³

Feminist literature on female friendships has tended to focus on exceptional individual relationships, from Ruth and Naomi to Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan. Jan Raymond argues that without background institutional support, passionate female friendships in a misogynist environment are likely to remain exceptional. She also points out that female friendship does not have the widespread history that male friendship has of being itself an institution. She finds not only that obstacles to female friendships are presently supported by background institutions that may need to be resisted or dismantled, but also the positive furtherance of Gyn/affection may require creating alternative background institutions and institutionalizing female friendship itself.

Thus, she challenges, at least implicitly, the skepticism popular in much current lesbian ethics regarding rules, institutions, and disciplines, arguing that such things need not be oppressive. Institutions do not necessarily concentrate power; they can also *block* concentrations of power. Nor do they only impose restrictions on previously defined forms of agency. Often, they define new forms of interaction, create forms of agency, provide a friendly background setting that can reduce needs for individual initiative-taking to create such a background, freeing up individual energy for creative projects. Just as heteropatriarchal institutions have characteristically supported male bonding, some exceptional institutions have encouraged bonding among women. Writing partly out of her twelve years as a nun, Jan Raymond notes that religious convents fostered such bonding so effectively that the Catholic Church

found it necessary to forbid "particular friendships" among nuns. 14 If we understand our capacities for organization and discipline as positive, as things we can use to further our own interests, rather than seeing them only as externally imposed hindrances or restraints, the questions arise: what kinds of institutions foster the development of female friendships, and to what kinds of institutions do empowering female friendships give rise?

In a society in which friendship among women is made generally difficult, the difficulties of lesbian friendship may be due at least in part to more general obstacles to Gyn/affection. In a more supportive social context, sexuality might not be the threat to lesbian friendship that it often is. Were women commonly jointly engaged in interesting, creative, and politically significant work in the world, sexuality might not have the kind of importance that it acquires in a society where for many women, social options are more domestic than worldly, where women's work-domestic or not-tends to be more routine than innovative and, consequently, women's lives often revolve around little as absorbing as the dramas of sexual involvement. Where less is invested in sexuality, its relative instability may be of less consequence. Our attractions to one another might be based on interest and admiration of many sorts. Bonds between lesbians might become multifaceted, tougher, more resilient. An irony of recent fears over lifting the ban on lesbians in the military is that lesbians have been drawn to the military because it offers precisely such an environment, one in which lesbians can work together at jobs that are interesting, challenging, even exciting, thereby forming bonds that are not based simply on sexual attraction. 15

To begin to answer the questions what kinds of background institutions would support Gyn/affection, Jan Raymond initiates a genealogy of female friendship, working on the hypothesis that where women's development is supported, women will naturally be drawn to each other. She has in mind developing our capacities for constructive discipline and for "the rigors of discernment" (a phrase borrowed from Alice Walker) without destroying our wildness as "loose women" (not bound to men) and without domesticating or taming us. Central chapters of *A Passion for Friends* are case studies of two institutions that fostered such discipline and discernment: the medieval European convent prior to the thirteenth-century rule of enclosure (and similar institutions, such as those of the Beguines), and the vegetarian houses and spinsters' houses treated by "marriage resisters" in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China. 16 In these historical settings, women developed bonds through working together in the world in ways that furthered their moral and political beliefs and aims. They created institutions within which women could take for granted the possibilities of female friendship, as men have been able to take for granted male bonding in heteropatriarchy.

In the case of nuns, vows of chastity might be thought to have "solved" the problems Margy described. However, just as women prisoners have commonly formed erotic bonds (not always thinking of them as sexual), and just as many lesbians elsewhere are not deterred by heterosexist prohibitions, neither are many lesbians in convents deterred by vows of chastity from forming intense couple relationships.

Jan Raymond's general hypothesis concerning obstacles to female friendship is that, historically, *women have suffered from worldlessness* and that "worldlessness produces friendlessness."¹⁷ The early medieval convents and the Chinese vegetarian and spinsters' houses are presented as exceptions to this general situation. They provided contexts enabling women to live and act directly in the world, constructively developing their capacities for discipline and discernment, making them admirable and attractive to one another, successful in working together and, in general, mutually supportive. The Chinese "marriage resisters" seem to have included many lesbian couples who worked together (p. 133).

Jan Raymond notes that such institutions as heterosexual marriage have been responsible, historically, for many women's lack of direct access to the world. However, she takes up in detail three stances enjoying (some) contemporary feminist advocacy that have also resulted in "worldlessness" **for women**. **She refers to these stances as *dissociation* from the world, *assimilation* to the world, and *victimism* in the world.** I will explore the first of these stances, dissociation from the world, as it **raises controversial issues regarding separatism that have been much** discussed in the literature of lesbian ethics.

"Worldlessness" is a concept borrowed from Hannah Arendt, who contrasted "the world" as the public sphere, or "what lies between people," with the private sphere (hearing "privacy" as "privative"), that sphere to which one gets to deprive others of access. 18 "The world" refers not to the physical planet, earth, but to a social construction, the realm of public artifacts, culture, and politics. The world is also, importantly, the source of other perspectives that we need to evaluate our own conduct and that of others.

Jan Raymond's "worldliness" as opposite to Hannah Arendt's "worldlessness," includes having access to the world, being *in* it although not necessarily *of* it (being in it the way that Hannah Arendt's "conscious pariah" or Virginia Woolf's "inside outsider" is in it), and *acting* in it rather than being simply acted *on* by it. Worldly knowledge is important because we need to understand our places in the world or our relationships to it when it contains forces dangerous to us. Hannah Arendt argued that separatism kept European Jews unnecessarily ignorant of forces in the world and of Jewish positions in those forces, leaving many highly vulnerable. Jan Raymond's references to Hannah Arendt's arguments suggest that women might be in an analogous position. We might fail to appreciate our power positions in the world (economic power positions, for example) or in relation to it, thereby failing to anticipate hostile responses of others and becoming vulnerable to hostilities that we lacked the perspectives to appreciate.

But how is worldlessness an obstacle to *female friendship*? Jan Raymond does not address this question directly, apart from the general dangers to one's existence posed by worldlessness. However, the following line of reasoning might fill out a relevant argument, in relation to women's historical domesticity and relegation to menial labor. Like the housewives in soap operas, who have no very direct access to the money, power, and action of the world, relationships among worldless women easily degenerate into a series of emotional dramas, developing our worst potentialities rather than our best, perhaps producing scenarios like those drawn in Margy's letters. Were lesbian friendship a casualty of such decadence, feminist communities offering culture and politics might provide solutions by creating environments more likely to develop our better selves than our worse ones.

Thus, if worldlessness aggravates obstacles to female friendship, one might expect radical lesbian separatist communities to be a viable solution, because they create lesbian *worlds* and get lesbians "out of the closet" if not "into the streets." And, indeed, separatism has been a major issue in lesbian feminist politics for nearly two decades. Sarah Hoagland made the option of withdrawal from heterosexualism central to her lesbian ethics. 20 She addressed her work to members of lesbian community; understood as "the loose network-both imagined and existing now-of those who identify basically as lesbians," "not a specific entity: but "a ground of our be-ing" which "exists because we are here and move on it now." 21 A decade earlier, Marilyn Frye presented separatism as a denial of male access to females, arguing that since "access is one of the faces of Power," such a denial has "the form and full portent of assumption of power." 22

In examining "dissociation from the world," however, Jan Raymond mentioned as examples "some feminist separatists" who have made dissociation a political ideal, foregoing access to power, money; and interaction, most basic conditions of worldliness," risking philosophical narrowness in vision and political vulnerability for the sake of "the freedom and untouchability of outcasts."²³ Neither Marilyn Frye nor Sarah Hoagland has advocated foregoing access to power or money, although Sarah Hoagland does advocate a lesbian ethic that is not centered on control. Their visions have been of lesbians putting resources into alternative communities and practices that may be located geographically in the midst of the misogynist world from which they withdraw. Still, depending on what separatists are willing to attend to, the risks of "philosophical narrowness of vision" and a vulnerability analogous to that discussed by Hannah Arendt may be real. I will return to this after sketching ways in which having *a* world (which others may want to contrast with *the* world) seems to offer a supportive context for female friendship.

"Worldless" sounds like an overstatement when applied to separatist communities that create worlds of their own. Such communities are, in part, a response to having outlaw status in a larger world that does not acknowledge lesbian relationships nor, in general, honor female friend friendships except insofar as they provide support networks for men. The creation of separate communities has made it possible for many lesbians to live far more honest lives than "*the* world" has been willing to countenance. Such honesty is no small consideration with respect to the quality and stability of lesbian relationships—friends, lovers, or both. It makes one less manipulable by others, protects against common forms of extortion. Living in a closet is much closer to being worldless than living in lesbian community. A closet, unlike a community, is not a world; one peers out at the world from a closet. Closeted, one is cut off from community, immobilized, impotent. Lesbian community offers a world in which to act, a forum for politics, perspectives to balance against one's own. Even the language of "*a* world" as opposed to "*the* world" can sound question-begging with respect to values that matter. For, like *the* (larger) world, *a* (smaller) world can be characterized by artifacts, culture, and politics. To members of the latter world, that may *be the* world, that is, the one that really matters.

Jan Raymond mentions "rootedness" as a consideration, pointing out that "in contrast to other oppressed groups, women do not possess the past of a cohesive and self-conscious community with its own political tradition, philosophical vitality and history. ²⁴ Rootlessness, she says, is responsible also for the lack of female friendship. "Gyn/affection cannot be sustained where women have 'the great privilege of being unburdened by care for the world.'" ²⁵ To the extent that separatists create an alternative world for members who do assume the responsibilities of caring for it, it should *be* a place where its members can put down roots, grounding Gyn/affection.

How inclusive a world is necessary to ground gyn/affection? The friendship of the Ladies of Llangollen lasted fifty years, as long as they both lived. ²⁶ Yet, they saw little of the world. Famous people are said to have visited *them*. But the diary left by one does not discuss the French or the American Revolution, major events of their time. ²⁷ They did not even have a lesbian community (so far as we know). Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks had a comparably lengthy relationship, buttressed by Left Bank lesbian communities in Paris that were materially well-off although hardly as politically conscious as one could wish. ²⁸ That relationship was eventually broken not by attacks from outside but by Natalie's unceasing "infidelities." (The life and loves of Natalie Barney, by the way, interestingly exemplify difficulties that Margy described.) Perhaps, however, these relationships were able to endure as long as they did only as exceptions.

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More than one kind of consideration is at stake in worldliness. Insofar as worldliness is a matter of engaging with money, power, and politics, separatist communities can be and often are very worldly. Privacy and publicity are matters of degree. Distinctions between private and public can exist *within* such communities. However, insofar as worldliness is a matter of engaging with outsiders who have the power to impact on one's community, even such otherwise worldly separatist communities maybe in danger.

Both Sarah Hoagland and Marilyn Frye support a redirection of lesbian *attention* and a redirection of interactive engagement by lesbians. Although neither advocates totally ignoring what outsiders do, a major redirection of attention, if not explicitly qualified, could put at risk one's knowledge of the larger world. 29 In view of the danger of vulnerability to external attack, even otherwise worldly separatisms raise the question how it is possible to withdraw from what Sarah Hoagland calls "heterosexuality" (in Jan Raymond's terms, "heteroreality") without withdrawing from the world that is dominated by it. To put it in terms from Marilyn Frye's analysis how is it possible to *deny* male access to females without *losing* female access to the world and thereby to perspectives on ourselves that we may need to understand in order to defend or protect ourselves?

A key distinction for both Malcolm X, in his analysis of Black separatism, and Marilyn Frye, in her analysis of feminist separatism, has been the distinction between *separation* and *segregation*. 30 Segregation, as in Jane and Jim Crow practices in the United States, is done at the initiative of oppressors to serve their interests. Separation, by contrast, as in Black nationalism and lesbian or feminist separatism, is initiated or maintained by the oppressed for their own eventual empowerment. Hannah Arendt's reflections on being a pariah enable us to raise the question whether lesbian separatists might not become in effect segregated in the sense that their separations facilitate the goals of segregation, serving the interests of oppressors and acquiring for lesbians the dubious "freedom and untouchability of outcasts." Just as lesbian and feminist separatists have had to compromise separatism to gain access to material resources and do outreach to women who need separatist alternatives most but are least able to find them unaided, separatists may also need to compromise with respect to attention and the flow of information." 31 Striking a balance between attending to one another and not ignoring one's position in relation to hostile oppressors is a general problem for any oppressed group. What Janice Raymond's work suggests to me in this case is that woman-friendly institutionalizations of female friendship might free up female energy in ways that could make it easier to strike such balances.

Perhaps Maria Lugones' conception of "world"-travel, of moving back and forth among many "worlds," can be sufficiently worldly without invoking a concept of *the* world at all. As a woman of color and a native speaker of Spanish, Maria Lugones has had to "world"-travel daily in the United States to white anglo worlds. The "world"-traveling that she recommends as an antidote to arrogance is, as she puts it, a "willful exercise" of an acquired flexibility in shifting from one construction of life, in which many are understood as outsiders, to other constructions of life, in which some of these (former) outsiders are at home, or more nearly at home, and in which one may figure oneself as an outsider. 32 Sarah Hoagland advocates "world"-travel *within* lesbian communities that are multicultural, intergenerational, and include lesbians of varying physical abilities. Whether that is possible may depend on how historically one understands "worlds." For Maria Lugones, "world"-travel involves encounters with others on *their* terms and on their turf, for which one needs certain psychological preparedness, such as readiness to play the fool and not take oneself too seriously. Marilyn Frye conceived separating as an alternative to assimilating. Maria Lugones's "worlds" of "world"-travel remain distinct. But the traveler grows in experience, understanding, and, ideally, in political wisdom, acquiring and maintaining access to the

perspectives that Hannah Arendt found so important for evaluating and maintaining a realistic assessment of one's own positions in a hostile world.

Jan Raymond's objections to separatisms that involve *dissociation* from the world sound like objections to *isolationism*. "World"-travel might be one answer to isolationism. Another, however, might be to identify nonisolationist separations. 33 If we think of feminist separations as severing certain kinds of relationships, that leaves open the possibility of retaining or substituting other kinds of relationships to some of the same parties. In divorce, one of Marilyn Frye's examples of separation, one set of relationships between parties to a marriage is substituted for another, a formal set for an intimate set. Where the idea of separation is to deny intimate access to us, except on our terms and at our initiative, this tends to mean, as in divorce, a retreat from affective and intimate relationships to formal relationships, from closeness to something more distant. "Distance" here is a spatial metaphor; it stands in no easy correlation with real spatial distance. Retreating from affective to formal relations need imply neither losing access nor giving up one's ability to act. Formality does not preclude communication; it structures communication. Putting relationships with men on a formal basis, as in business relationships, rather than an intimate basis can be a step forward in putting women in a better social position to insist upon access to resources. It enables us to appeal to rights, for example. A significant cost of intimacy is often a foregoing of the appeal to rights, leaving one at the mercy of others' goodwill.

Are formal connections with outsiders sufficient to protect separatist contexts that support lesbian friendship? Formality is an interesting concept in this context in that it both links and separates. I suspect that protecting lesbian friendship may also require respect for formal relationships within lesbian community. In two brief discussions in *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt maintained that love is essentially private, unlike friendship. 35 This leaves the possibility, although strictly does not imply it, that friendship needs a public. Strictly, all it implies is that friendship is not essentially private, not that it is essentially public. In discussing forgiveness, however, Hannah Arendt maintained that respect is "a kind of 'friendship' without intimacy and without closeness," "a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us" (p. 243). In other words, respect, on this view, is a kind of "friendship" for others that requires a public. From this, an argument may be derived for the conclusion that friendship generally requires a public. The argument needs simply the plausible premise that respect is necessary to any good friendship. Fostering lesbian friendship, then, would require creating and maintaining conditions of respect, that distance which the space of the world puts between us, even within lesbian community.

Aristotelian Pragmatism and Lesbian Friendship

Men writing on friendship have not focused on obstacles to male bonding. As Jan Raymond observed, social institutions have supported male bonding to such an extent that men take it for granted. Men have written about dangers to existing friendships, about what loyalty requires, about how to resolve conflicts of loyalty, when to break off friendship, and how to treat former friends. Often, they have been moved to write about friendship on the occasion of a friend's death, as a way of grieving the loss. 36 Despite the differences in perspective between men's philosophical writings on friendship and the situations of lesbians, I have found it worthwhile to examine the best of those philosophical writings for insights that might be extended or developed in other directions. 37

The most-developed, systematic, and insightful classical philosophical discussions of friendship are Aristotle's discussions of *philia*, a term that encompassed a variety of affiliations, including those of kin, companionship, intimacy, and citizenship. 38 The *philia* that interested him most, however, would today also be recognized as paradigms of friendship. Aristotle began by defining friendship as mutually

recognized reciprocal goodwill in a relationship that endures over time and through various trials. He noted that while the wish for friendship arises quickly, friendship itself does not. His further accounts make clear why and also suggest that Margy's observation that it is often much easier for lesbians to find lovers than good friends should not be surprising, that his fact does not distinguish the situations of lesbians from those of others. A supportive set of background institutions, then, should provide contexts in which potential friends are able not only to meet and have fun but also to come to know each other over time and to observe each other and interact in a variety of situations. Bars, for example, have obvious limitations in these respects, but so do even coffeehouses and private house parties.

Aristotle then asked whether there is only one kind of friendship or many, and if many, how they are interrelated. He answered that there are basically three kinds of friendship, distinguished by the bases of good will: friendships of pleasure, friendships of utility, and friendships of excellence. In friendships of utility and friendships of pleasure, the bases of well-wishing are utility and pleasure, respectively, whereas in friendships of excellence, the basis is the friend's character. Anticipating Ludwig Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" idea, Aristotle maintained that friendships of utility and of pleasure are called "friendships" because of their resemblances to friendships of excellence, which are also, ordinarily, useful and pleasant. Friendships of excellence give his interpretation of "true friendship." He finds it unambiguously the best kind of friendship and the most stable, although he allows that the others are valuable, too, as far as they go. When he speaks without qualification of friendship, he usually means friendship of excellence, to which I will usually refer, hereafter, as "true friendship."

Aristotle also offers further Classifications of friendships as between equals or unequals and as having mixed or the same motives, noting that special difficulties arise for unequal friendships and those involving mixed motives. The tripartite classification on the basis of motivation, however, remains basic, and he appeals to these differences time and again in answering questions commonly raised about friendship, such as how many good friends one can have at once, how long a good friendship should last, and whether only good people can be friends. He engages in more casuistry (examination of cases) regarding the ethics of friendship than regarding any other topic in his writings on ethics.

Lover relationships, as such, for Aristotle, exemplify friendships of pleasure. The relative instability of lover relationships is thereby explained: where pleasure is the basis of a relationship, one can expect the relationship to last only as long as the pleasure. 39 There is no need, in the nature of the case, for lovers to admire each other's characters, although they may. The pleasure uniting them as lovers does not require deep acquaintance, even if it gives rise to illusions here.

Others of Margy's concerns require more consideration of the nature of true friendships. Recall that her letters to LC raised the questions how to deal with the sexual aspects of friendships, how to become friends with potential lovers and remain friends with former lovers, how to keep sex from ruining already established friendships, how to prevent lesbian isolation in couples, and how to become friends with lesbians who are already coupled with others. An approach I find suggestive for responding to these questions is to consider what friends do that makes them friends, and then consider' what being able to do this well requires and what is required for being able to continue doing it well-- not simply what character traits are required but also what background institutions support the development of the relevant traits.

Insofar as Aristotle saw politics as providing this kind of background to ethics, and insofar as what good friendship requires is the development of excellences of character, understood as habits of choice and

of voluntary emotional response, this approach may be considered Aristotelian. However, Aristotle did not develop the implications for friendship systematically in writings of his that survive. Here, the genealogical analyses of Jan Raymond, exploring European medieval convents prior to enclosure and Chinese marriage resisters and vegetarian houses, are highly suggestive and helpful.

In the case of friendships of pleasure and friendships of utility, there is no special mystery about what the friends do. They do whatever is the source of the relevant pleasure or utility. But what do *true* friends do? Aristotle's views here often seem excessively vague: true friends live together and exercise their excellences toward each other; that is, they display in their conduct toward one another their virtues (excellences) of character, which are discussed elsewhere in Aristotle's ethics---such things as courage, temperance, liberality, and so on. But in what kinds of behavior does their conduct toward one another consist? In his casuistry of friendship, Aristotle mentioned reciprocal favors. Elsewhere he mentioned receiving help in times of trouble and sharing joys in times of prosperity. He referred to a variety of shared activities, noting that these vary from friend to friend---some are bodily, some are artistic, others philosophical. However, he did not relate the activities of friends systematically to virtues *specific to* friendship, even though some of his observations about how friends respond to one another seem to imply such virtues. He noted, for example, that "the friend wants, if possible, not merely to feel pain along with his friend, but to feel the same pain." 40 This alludes to a capacity to empathize, which is mentioned nowhere explicitly as a virtue. One might conclude that he did not think friendship required any *special* excellences of character. Such a view would be surprising. For, there are good people who seem to lack true friendships, and they are often naive with respect to certain forms of practical wisdom. Yet, such a view would make sense of Aristotle's difficulties in explaining why a virtuous person should also need friends in order to be happy.

Aristotle's general approach to ethics inspired the pragmatism of my question, "What do (true) friends *do*?" For Aristotle, a life is the history of an ensouled being, and different kinds of ensouled (living) beings are defined by the different kind of *doings* of which they are capable. A good one performs its characteristic doings well. It develops through exercise traits that consist in dispositions to perform well the activities that make that soul the kind of soul that it is (in this case, human). Well developed, these traits are one's virtues (excellences). We can look at the *Nicomachean Ethics*' catalog of virtues-for which Aristotle does not claim completeness-as a list of ways of performing well the kinds of activities that Aristotle takes to define a life as human: courage is being good in battle, temperance is being good in the activities of eating, drinking, and sexuality, liberality is being good in spending, magnificence is being good in spending huge sums, pride is being good in self assessment when one is also otherwise a good person, and so on.

A survey of these activities reveals, actually, that the life that most interested Aristotle was not simply human but male, free, and fairly "well born." His list of virtues reflects that perspective, both in what it includes and in what it *omits*. It includes virtues with respect to consumption, fighting in war, and spending money, for example, but not virtues with respect to *producing* material necessities or engaging in basic *care-taking or maintenance*. Thus, it does not represent well the doings of women and other laborers of ancient Greece, those not so free or "well-born," a matter over which Aristotle stumbled briefly in Bk I of his *Politics* and then moved on. 41

Justice, which the *Nicomachean Ethics* treats in a book to itself, does not fit well the model of the other virtues. Not only does it have only one opposite, injustice, whereas the other virtues have two (for example, rashness and cowardice, in the case of courage), but also it applies to *relationships* between persons, not simply to the dispositions of individuals. Justice applies to the way shares are distributed

among men governed by law or common practices. Nevertheless, in developing the idea of justice as a virtue, we can inquire with what kinds of human activities justice is associated and what it means to do well in relation to those activities. Thus, John Rawls defines the sense of justice by reference to principles for evaluating social institutions according to how well they distribute the benefits and burdens of social cooperation. 42 Agency here is, first of all, that of institutions, and then, of individuals within contexts those institutions define.

Friendship does not fit Aristotle's model of the other virtues, either, because it is a relationship between two or more parties. It occupies something like the position of justice. Sometimes, Aristotle seems even to consider it another way of getting at the topic of justice, observing that "to inquire ... how to behave to a friend is to look for a particular kind of justice, for generally all justice is in relation to a friend" and "justice involves a number of individuals who are partners, and the friend is a partner."⁴³ As with justice, we can ask what activities define friendship, what friends do *as such*, and then consider what it means to do those things well and what doing them well requires.

Aristotle's list in *Rhetoric* II:4 of characteristics by which observers recognize people as friends or enemies comes closer to addressing such questions than the accounts in his more theoretical ethical works. In the *Rhetoric* he notes, for example, that friends are not too ready to show us our mistakes, are not cantankerous or quarrelsome, that they have the tact to make and take a joke, that they praise such good qualities as we possess, especially the ones that we are not too sure that we *do* possess, and that they do kindnesses unasked and without proclaiming the fact that they have done them. 44 A natural place to pick up the thread in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is with Aristotle's mutually recognized reciprocal goodwill: through what activities is goodwill expressed in friendship? Answers might yield an approach to friendship that is "Aristotelian," that is, in the spirit of Aristotle, even if it is not what Aristotle said (although perhaps it is what he should have said).

Like a life, friendship has a history: a beginning, a middle, and an end (if only because eventual death intervenes). Different activities may be more characteristic at different points in this history, although some continue throughout. Consider, for example, the "getting to know you" stage. Characteristic activities here are exposure and exploration, activities with potentialities for developing trust—provided nothing terribly untoward occurs during trial exposures and explorations. These are activities that may continue throughout the friendship. The friendship may become boring if they do not. Goodwill here is communicated by (perhaps, means) friendly interest and receptivity.

Other activities that evidence growing friendships are seeking each other out (sometimes for no special purpose) when fate happens not to conjoin you and manifesting joy at mutual encounters when it does (tail-wagging in dogs, people smile).

A natural next stage is defining one's spaces, setting boundaries and gaining recognition of them. This may take trials and a few skirmishes. It also sets limits to (at least to the timing of) exposures and explorations begun earlier and to the aggressiveness and nature of contact-seeking. We might think of this stage as one of gaining, then maintaining, respect.

Once boundaries have gained respect, friends may move on more comfortably to mutual "grooming" or "stroking" rituals-pleasantries and small services beyond what utility requires. At least part of what feels good about the "grooming" or "stroking" is that it is done by the other person, not by just anyone, and that she chose you, not just anyone, to receive it. Like exposure and exploration, nurturing and grooming activities also ordinarily continue through a friendship. If boundaries have not been worked

out, however, this activity risks being construed as, and might easily become, sexual. One response to the question how to "draw the line" between expressions of affection and sexual behavior is that without friendly background institutions, that is, rule-defined social practices, to define the social meanings of "grooming" or "stroking" rituals, individual understandings need to be reached at the stage of defining spaces in friendships between lesbians who could potentially become lovers. Here is a place where friendly background institutions can be useful in reducing troublesome ambiguity and needs for taking initiatives. Here is a place where lesbians are apt to feel the lack of what Adrienne Rich called "a common language."⁴⁵

Probably the most discussed mutual activity of friendship is sharing. As Elizabeth Telfer has pointed out, sharing takes many forms.⁴⁶ One form is offering something to be appreciated, as my cat once brought me a mouse. Sharing joys and sorrows, which Aristotle mentions, may fall under this kind of sharing. Appreciation ordinarily requires a basis in shared values, although one may appreciate the intent in any case. A different kind of sharing is pooling resources. Yet another, which Aristotle also mentions, is doing together things, such as eating, sleeping, working, or playing, that one could have done alone or with someone else.

Perhaps the next most discussed range of activities of friends is one that includes giving gifts and performing services, doing and accepting favors, offering to come to each other's aid or defense and at least sometimes accepting such offers, nursing each other's wounds, providing mutual support.

Finally, when friends have been engaged in such activities over a long period of time, if one dies or disappears, the other grieves.

This list is not exhaustive. When a friendship breaks up or is challenged, other activities enter. However, this is enough to respond to Margy's remaining questions concerning lesbian friendship. This model allows for degrees of closeness in a relationship, according to how intimate activities become. And it allows for friendships of varying degrees of comprehensiveness and depth, according to how comprehensively and how fully and well the patterns of interaction are developed. Elizabeth Telfer finds it also important that friends acknowledge and affirm the pattern, thereby exhibiting a commitment to the relationship. ⁴⁷ People can discover that they have developed a friendship without having committed themselves to it, although at the point of discovery, continued friendship may require such affirmation, as a failure to affirm it might tacitly communicate rejection.

By the way, friendship-like eating, drinking, and sex appears not to be an exclusively human phenomenon, although it has specifically human forms. The activities of friendship, abstractly considered, appear also to be found in dogs and monkeys, for example. Aristotle thought the ability to perceive another's choice made only humans capable of true friendship, although he recognized friendships of pleasure and utility among other animals. ⁴⁸ His understanding of "choice," however, includes *deliberation*. ⁴⁹ It may be more basically "the capacity for human language that distinguishes human friendship. Language makes more kinds of space to define, explore, and share. If "choice" is not understood to require deliberation but is understood more simply as uncoerced, intentional acceptance or rejection, many nonhuman animals may be capable of choice and at least sometimes of telling the difference between the presence and absence of choice in others.

The virtues Aristotle discusses in Books II and IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*—courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, pride, good temper, friendliness (not to be confused with friendship), truthfulness, and ready wit—are clearly an aid to friendship (pp. 63-105). Yet, friendship requires in

addition more *responsiveness and receptivity* than that list exemplifies—such things as trust, respect, empathy, and sympathy (some of which Aristotle's observations on friendship imply). Had he included among his paradigms of friendship the cooperative activities required by production and maintenance and the relationships of care-takers to those whose well-being they nurture, his list might have been more comprehensive in these respects. Friendship requires different kinds of initiative-taking than are exemplified in Aristotle's earlier lists, for example, showing interest, what Marilyn Frye and Sarah Hoagland, following Simone Weil, have called “attending.”⁵⁰ These things are also subject to *choice* and thus count as doings in the relevant sense, and they may have their own associated virtues. The answer to the question what friendship contributes to a good life should be, first of all, that it develops the virtues of friendship, as justice develops the civic virtues. Exercising the virtues of friendship is as definitive of a good life as is exercising the virtues Aristotle cites elsewhere.

In terms of this Aristotelian model, lesbian lovers can also be true friends. What began as a friendship of pleasure or utility may deepen into true friendship. Without time and trials, one may have no way to tell whether a friendship is “true.” However, those who become lovers before becoming friends may find it difficult or painful to go back and gain respect for defining their spaces differently, which they may want to do to become better acquainted. The more promising route seems to be to ground the friendship nonsexually, first. However, Margy also noted that friends who then became sexually involved sometimes found that they were unable to continue as friends when the sexual involvement ended. Again, it may be difficult to gain mutual respect for retreating to an earlier understanding of boundaries. However, in this case, the reason for wanting to retreat is different. Here, one may want to retreat if the level of sexual feeling on both sides *docs not wane at the same rate*. If retreat proves impossible, it may be necessary to withdraw from active friendship. If the problem of nonreciprocal waning of sexual feeling does not arise, boundary may issues may not arise, provided the friendship has been true. Many lesbians who have been lovers find that they are able to continue as the best of friends for the rest of their lives. However, in relationships known to me, where this has been true, they were usually friends already before they became lovers. (Some who became lovers first may, of course, be lucky.)

The ‘Aristotelian analysis’ of friendship implies that if one’s true friends (those whose relationships to oneself are characterized by the *virtues* of friendship) and one's lovers are not the same, one does better to live with friends. It supports Margy's values. The publicity required for respect in friendship seems also to require that true friends - not be too isolated in couples. With regard to the difficulties of becoming friends with someone who is living with a lover, I have two suggestions, both supported by Aristotle's understanding of the conditions of true friendship and by Jan Raymond's genealogy of female friendship. One suggestion is to support the background practice of lovers *not* sharing a domicile unless they are also true friends. The reason is that the privacy a lover requires tends otherwise to envelope the life of the beloved, cutting her off from true friendships, and doing other sorts of mischief. ⁵¹ Challenging the practice of lovers' *cohabitation* may be thought of as an alternative to challenging monogamy, which is more usual. Without challenging a monogamous focus of sexual or erotic energies during a given period, one may advocate cohabitation with friends, even with many friends. Individuals may still benefit from this suggestion even if it is not generally adopted as social practice. Yet the benefits would be multiplied if it became social practice.

The second suggestion is that we think of *cohabitation* with friends as basically sharing a habitat, an environment, that emphasizes work and play in *the world*, a world larger than the domicile to which one may return periodically for rest and sleep, rather than thinking of cohabitation primarily as sharing private sleeping quarters. Thus, Jan Raymond's examples of the medieval convents, prior to the rule of enclosure, and of the vegetarian and spinsters' houses in China, illustrate cohabitation of friends (some

of whom may also have been lovers) whose lives seem to have been more worldly than domestic. Such a social world of female friendship sounds amazonian, in a sense that would no doubt have appealed to Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

When someone is already living with a true friend or friends, the Aristotelian approach suggests that getting to know her with a view to true friendship does require including her true friends as well. This is not quite the same as the situation lamented by Margy. For, if the friend's relationships really are true friendships, although the expenditure of effort to join the circle may be high, so presumably would be the rewards, including a stability that lover relationships frequently lack. The difficulty of being able to spend the requisite time and resources to make friendship true with many people was one of the things that led Aristotle to the conclusion that one should not have many such friendships. (The other was the rarity of individuals with high character.) This still leaves room for many more limited ones, friendships of pleasure and of utility, which have their own value. Perhaps, however, Aristotle should also have acknowledged the possibility of many friendships that are *true* even though not based on *extensive* mutual knowledge. 53 If what distinguishes friendship as true is its basis in character, one may be able to ground a friendship of excellence despite knowing relatively little of the other's history, likes and dislikes, and so on. Character can sometimes be revealed in significant choices in a relationship that is limited in its extensiveness. A friendship may be true in as far as it goes and yet, because of circumstances, be unable to go as far as the friends might otherwise have chosen to take it. Such relationships might be very important to the viability of lesbian community (perhaps, to the viability of any community).

To return to Margy's concern about founding a lesbian community based on lover relationships, it seems important to acknowledge at least these two things. First, true friends are not necessarily intimate friends. And second, when lovers *are* also true friends (which they need not be), a community founded on their relationships would seem to have as solid a beginning as one could imagine. To endure over time, however, and to grow to any great size, lesbian communities may need to foster friendships that are in an important sense "true" among lesbians who have never been and may never be lovers and who many never even know many details of each other's lives.