

Lesbian Ethics Part 3 - Lesbian feminist friendship - Lynne Harne

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Following on from Elaine Hutton I am going to talk about the significance of lesbian feminist friendship particularly in terms of the ideas developed by Jan Raymond in her book *A Passion for Friends*.ⁱ I will also refer to some of the ideas that were already developing in the lesbian feminist community in the UK about friendship in the early 1980s.

Jan Raymond built on Adrienne Riches' ideas from her essay *Women and Honour*ⁱⁱ and those of others such as Mary Daly. . She primarily saw lesbian feminist friendship as both political and personal relationships which could help us to develop more effective politics and women's political power through female bonding. She saw this as a challenge to what she called hetero-relations and hetero reality defined by the ideology that women primarily exist for men. She did not view lesbianism as a purely sexual category but also as a social and political category where lesbianism is a choice.

She invented an ideal of friendship which she termed 'Gyn Affection' and said that it means

"Personal and political movement towards each other. As the personal is political so too the political is personal. Although politics and friendship cannot always go together we need to create a feminist politics based on friendship"

She saw this type of friendship as sustaining lesbian feminist community and political resistance to male power and male bonding against women. I should also say that she did not necessarily exclude heterosexual women in developing these ideas of friendship, but acknowledged this was much more difficult for heterosexual women. Nevertheless, I believe that for the most part she was referring to the lesbian feminist community.

She stated that Gyn affection is not only a loving bond between 2 or more women but it is also a freely chosen bond which involves reciprocal assurances based on honour (which I interpret to mean trust), loyalty and affection.

Despite this slightly romanticised idea of female friendship she recognised it as an ideal to which there were several obstacles.

These included certain forms of lesbian separatism which she called 'disassociation from the world.' While recognising that lesbian separatism can have value in strengthening bonds between women she also saw long term disassociation from the world, as negative because it fails to confront and challenge male power in the form of hetero-reality and hetero-relations.

This argument is similar to one made by Adrienne Rich in an essay called 'The meaning of our love for women is what we have to constantly expand' (1977). Rich argued that total separatism is a 'temptation into sterile correctness, into powerlessness and an escape from radical complexity' and that turning our backs on issues like women's reproductive rights mean that we are turning our backs on compulsory heterosexuality where women are forced for different reasons to have sex with men. She also stated that violence against women, motherhood, childcare and racism were all issues which involved lesbians, so needed to be challenged for these reasons alone.

Other obstacles to the kind of personal and political friendship that Raymond was proposing included what she termed therapism; relationism; the tyranny of tolerance and victimism to name

but a few. While I do not have time to discuss all these here I want to focus on some aspects that can still have relevance today.

As Elaine Hutton has already highlighted although therapy as a practice is no longer so relevant now, the ideas behind it are.

For example in using the term therapism Raymond talks about ‘a tyranny of feelings where women come to believe that what really counts in their lives is their psychology’ and where a refusal to tell how one feels is seen as repressive and a denial of one’s inner life.

She argued that we live in a therapeutic society where self-exposure of feelings is seen as one of the highest virtues. Psychology has created a new type of person the human confessing animal which also leads to the publicising of personal life. Thus in her view therapising where women often act as sisterly co-counsellors is a substitute for genuine female friendship. She argues that the personal is political does not mean the publicising of ones personal life, where the intimate and private are expected to be exposed. I hesitate to refer to facebook here, but in my view and probably many of my generation facebook is not the place to reveal our most deeply felt thoughts about our lives.

In relationism as applied to the lesbian feminist community, she refers to the tyranny of relations where she argues that the lesbian obsession to be in an ‘erotic relationship’ is no different from heterosexual women being obsessed with having a relationship with a man. ‘It seems’ she says, ‘that in one sense, lesbians have replaced men with women as relational objects.’

A critique of relationism or what in the UK we called couplism was also being developed here in the early 1980s. For example in a journal called REV/RAD - the revolutionary and radical feminist magazine couplism was critiqued as a form of relationship where lesbians in sexual relationships do everything together. Such behaviour makes it impossible to have autonomous friendships with either individual in the relationship. Couplism was also seen in relationships where friendships were secondary and friends only became important usually when the relationship was in trouble.

I do not have time here to go into more detail on all the obstacles that Raymond identified. She recognised that what she was describing was *ideal* and that many women had felt betrayed by their personal and political friendships in lesbian feminism. She argued that we shouldn’t have too high expectations of each other and that feeling the ultimate victim of women’s betrayals are the result of too high expectations that women will behave differently from men. She states that in a woman hating world women will internalise and externalise anti-woman values. But that this is only a partial truth, and while we should continue to have high expectations of women, we shouldn’t be surprised when they are not lived up to.

References

ⁱ Janice Raymond 1986 *A Passion for Friends*. The Women’s Press. London

ⁱⁱ Adrienne Rich 1979 *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. Virago. London

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