

2012

A Queer Studies Foremother: Review of *Deviations, A Gayle Rubin Reader* by Gayle Rubin

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Recommended Citation

Shah, Svati P., "A Queer Studies Foremother: Review of *Deviations, A Gayle Rubin Reader* by Gayle Rubin" (2012). *Women's Review of Books*. 23.

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Buck's poem "Wild Poppies" reveals her spirit. In addition to being part of this collection, it is the title poem of a 2004 CD on which two dozen poets, including Sonia Sanchez and Devorah Major, whom Buck admired, read her works aloud. One could love this writer on the strength of this poem alone:

Wild Poppies

I remember red poppies, wild behind the school house
I didn't want to be there, but I loved to watch the poppies

I used to sit in the window of my room, sketching charcoal trees
what happened to those magnolia trees, to that girl?

I went off to college, escaped my father's thunderstorms
Berkeley. Rebellion. Exhilaration!

the Vietnam war, Black Power, Che took me to Chicago

midnight lights under Wacker Drive.
Uptown. South Side. Slapped
by self-determination for taking Freedom
Wall photos without asking

on to California, driving at 3:00 in the morning in the mountains
I got it: what self-determination means
a daunting task for a young white woman, I was humbled
practice is concrete ... harder than
crystal-dream concepts

San Francisco, on the front steps at Fulton Street
smoking reefer, drinking "bitterdog" with Black Panthers and white
hippie radicals, talking about when the revolution comes

the revolution did not come. Fred Bennett was missing
we learned he'd been found: ashes, bones, a wedding ring
but later there was Assata's freedom smile

then I was captured, locked into a cell of sewer water
spirit deflated. I survived, carried on, glad to be like a weed, a wild red poppy
rooted in life.

There are some writers—Karen Blixen, Flannery O'Connor, Zora Neale Hurston—whose lives are so unusual that an appreciation of their work deepens with an acquaintance with the life. Buck's work can best be appreciated in terms of her commitment to anti-imperialist activism and her internment in federal prisons for nearly three decades. She somehow managed to find, in that harsh confinement so unfamiliar to most of us, meaning and friendship, and she imparted to the world through her work, moments of insight, consolation, and joy. ®

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A Queer Studies Foremother

Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader

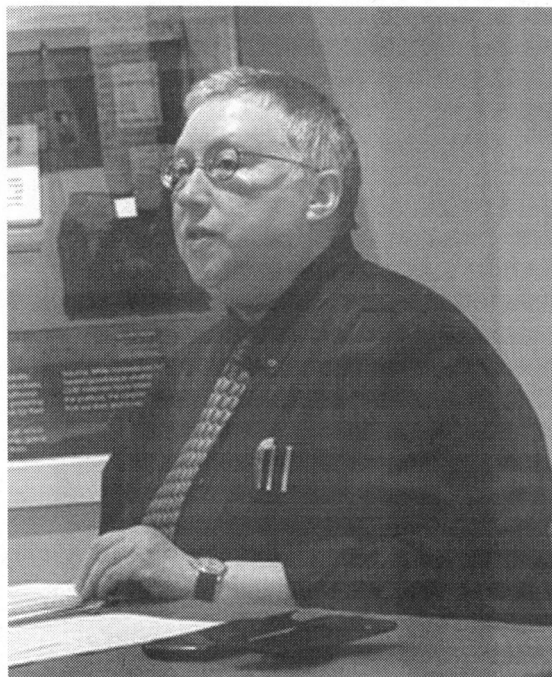
By Gayle S. Rubin

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 504 pp., \$27.95, paperback

Reviewed by Svati P. Shah

The definitive collection of Gayle Rubin's work is now available. Published over a period spanning some 35 years, from the 1970s to the 2000s, these essays were ground breaking in the fields of feminist and sexuality studies. Rubin's efforts to theoretically specify the relation between sexuality and gender, and sex and gender, as well as her insistence that sexuality is inextricably linked to politics—and to political economy in particular—formed a cornerstone of lesbian and gay studies in the 1980s, from which sexuality studies later emerged. Rubin's work continues to be foundational to the idea that sexuality is not reducible to biology, and that a clear understanding of sexuality would be profoundly social, political, economic, and historical.

Rubin wrote most of the pieces in this collection before the institutionalization of women's studies, let alone sexuality studies, which is still in the process of formation. They are the works of an academic writing in the spirit of independent scholarship, almost in the tradition of the British pamphleteers of the nineteenth century. For example, before Rubin's essay, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" found purchase as a published piece, she presented it as a paper at conferences, discussed it in informal gatherings, and distributed it as a photocopy among her friends. Later, it and other essays of hers were included in the wave of anthologies produced during the late 1980s and early 1990s, often by small presses specializing in feminist or lesbian and gay studies. Throughout the



Gayle Rubin

book, Rubin reminds us of the spirit of independent scholarship that drove her own work and that of others—long before universities acknowledged, and resourced, the study of sexuality in the humanities and social sciences. In her introduction, for example, Rubin addresses the evolution of LGBT archives: "Most of the early community-based queer archives were closer to [the gay activist] Jim Kepner's cot in the basement of his rented storefront," she explains, "than to the

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University." The publication of this collection by a prestigious university press thus signifies the sea change in institutional support for studies of sexuality—a sea change that these works helped to bring about, by providing theoretical foundations for the field, and by demonstrating what rigorous anthropological and theoretical work on sexuality could look like. Serious intellectual inquiry on sexuality has now traveled from margin to center—even, in some instances, from margin to canon.

As Rubin began to write about people who, in the spaces of official knowledge production, did not exist—such as LGBT people who participate in bondage and discipline, and sadomasochism (BD/SM)—she developed new terminology and conceptual frameworks that enabled her to engage with questions of politics, class, urbanization, and history in relation to sexuality. *Deviations* includes the essays in which she first presented concepts such as the sex/gender system, or the relation between biological sex and socially constructed gender; the sexual hierarchy, in which normative sex occupies a "charmed circle" of social privilege; and the sex panic, the sensationalizing of a social phenomenon involving sexuality, such as pornography or prostitution, which produces a call for social and legal controls on sexuality that reproduce or may even exaggerate status quo moralisms. In her essay "The Trouble with Trafficking," Rubin reflects on the title of her well-known essay, "The Traffic in Women," and explains why her essay should not be apprehended as

“Contemporary scholars are asking why the issue of pleasure was sequestered within white women’s organizing and debates, while black women, it was implied, experienced only harm.”

support for the call to suppress or abolish prostitution, as is the case in contemporary antitrafficking discourses. She also explains her choice of the phrase “the traffic in women”:

When I was preparing the essay that became “The Traffic in Women” for publication, I needed a title. And I found one in Emma Goldman’s essay “The Traffic in Women” (1910). Her title was a great and catchy phrase that seemed to convey the sense of my argument...However, I did not realize at the time that the phrase smuggled in a whole collection of associations of which I was blissfully unaware.

These kinds of reflections offer a rare opportunity to look back, with the author herself, on the original essays and the moments in which they were produced. In this case, “The Traffic in Women,” an essay that synthesizes Marxism, anthropological theories of kinship, and psychoanalysis in the service of elaborating a theory of gender-based oppression, (first written when Rubin was an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan), is placed alongside Rubin’s critique of the term “trafficking,” in both our context and in Emma Goldman’s.


In addition to expanding the conceptual universe for studying sexuality as socially produced, Rubin helped to pioneer the use of anthropology for the study of sexual subcultures and more broadly, for the study of people who were criminalized and stigmatized on the basis of sexuality. In her 2002 essay, “Studying Sexual Subcultures,” Rubin explains the value of such study. In contrast to judgmental stereotypes, she says, “[t]he social sciences—particularly anthropology, sociology, and history—can often articulate a countervailing intellectual tendency toward accepting the moral equality of social diversity.” In works such as “The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole,” on gay sex parties in San Francisco in the 1970s and early 1980s, and “Of

Catamites and Kings,” on butch identities and sexualities, Rubin skillfully weaves together ethnography and theory, elaborating a phenomenological critique of sexuality in the process. By using anthropology to study people who were stigmatized on the basis of their sexual orientations or sexual practices, Rubin was able to argue that biology and physicality are not sufficient frames for understanding sexuality. Sexuality is also bound up in politics and is produced socially, as are the stigmas attached to certain sexualities and practices. Asking how these are all produced in a social context over time, Rubin contributed to carving out a space for thinking through sexuality that did not simply reduce non-normative sexuality to pathology and deviance.

The implications for sexuality studies of this kind of perspective are particularly apparent in the ongoing historical critiques of feminist debates on sexuality, including on pornography. Feminists today generally agree that one of the first major upheavals in the contemporary US women’s movement was over race, in the 1970s and eighties. However, there is more ambivalence about the debates on pornography during that period—especially about the ways in which the politics of sexuality were racialized under the auspices of second-wave feminism. In a new body of work on black feminisms and the second wave, contemporary scholars are asking why the issue of pleasure was sequestered within white women’s organizing and debates, while black women, it was implied, experienced only harm. This idea was produced through feminist arguments against pornography, which claimed that pornography was an instantiation of women’s abjection, since it was essentially “rape on paper.”

For example, in “Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Anti-Pornography Feminism,” (*Social Text*, Winter 2008), Jennifer Nash argues that black feminism has tended “to foreground examinations of black women’s sexual exploitation, oppression, and injury at the expense of analyses

attentive to black women’s sexual heterogeneity, multiplicity, and diversity.” This bifurcated worldview, in which nonwhite women are *a priori* signifiers of sexual harm, was a product of antipornography feminism, says Nash. Given the importance of debates on the inclusion of women of color and their political agendas in shaping the periodicity and politics of contemporary American feminism, a discussion of black feminism’s relationship to questions of sexuality requires an understanding of the ways in which feminist debates on pornography—and their descendants, the current feminist debates on prostitution—are exercises in racialization. In this regard, *Deviations* could not be timelier, providing a text that includes work written within the context of the debates on pornography, along with multiple assessments from Rubin of what these debates might mean today. In “Blood Under the Bridge,” for example, published in 2010, Rubin comments on the personal and professional consequences of the publication of “Thinking Sex” and on how she, along with other feminists critical of the antipornography feminist position, were subsequently marked as “unacceptable feminists.”

With the publication of *Deviations*, this aspect of the American feminist conversation on sexuality can be more deeply historicized and interrogated. This, along with Rubin’s insights into class, the political economy of sexuality, and the efflorescence of American feminisms, are necessary pieces of a complex story that is in the process of being told. *Deviations* offers up articles that shaped the thinking of the modern feminist and LGBT movements, while contextualizing the gradual institutionalization and canonization of sexuality studies. In providing the opportunity to think through the history of American feminism, including the racialization of feminist debates on sexuality, *Deviations* provides an impetus for “thinking sex” even more critically. 

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