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Still Thinking Sex

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Gayle S. Rubin, *Deviations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xiv, 484.

Reading Gayle Rubin's influential essays all together brings a special kind of pleasure. Some are good old friends, a few surprising strangers. Together they provide an intellectual history of the field of sexuality studies grounded in the dramatic upheavals in U.S. society since the 1970s. The introduction, "Sex, Gender, Politics," begins with Rubin's personal odyssey as, in her words, a "nerd out of Carolina" (2), moving on to Ann Arbor and San Francisco and back to Ann Arbor. Rubin reminds us, using one of her favorite geological metaphors, that texts are like fossils in that we consider both their individual qualities and what they tell us about the environment in which they were formed. The essays are arranged in chronological order, the text left as originally published with added notes to provide updated references, a few corrections, and some additional context. As a whole, they remind us not only of how profoundly Rubin has shaped women's studies and queer studies, giving us the concepts of the sex/gender system and the charmed circle of sexuality, but also the circumstances that have shaped the fields. Deploying another geological image, Rubin points out at the beginning that "Durable texts find new meanings in new historical contexts and evolving preoccupations. But as texts are read in new circumstances, the issues that formed them are often forgotten, as the edges of the old landscape are eroded by time" (1).

With that in mind, we move from the classic "Traffic in Women" to the Paris lesbian world of Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney to another classic, "Thinking Sex," to leather, S/M, and butch to the sex wars to gay communities to queer studies. We see how the three locations that shaped Rubin influenced her thinking. Growing up in a liberal Jewish family in segregated South Carolina taught Rubin about difference. The University of Michigan, where she designed

her own undergraduate women's studies major, came out as a lesbian, and drafted "The Traffic in Women" as a term paper, set her on her intellectual path. And San Francisco, where she launched into field work on the gay male leather community, shifted her focus from gender and feminism to sexuality and queer studies. The one part of her story that, surprisingly, she passes over is the relationship of her decision to write her dissertation on the leather community to her own coming out as a sadomasochist. She describes the research project as the result of a "series of serendipitous events," having realized that it would be a "really bad idea" (19) to study lesbians because she needed distance between her personal life and her research. But that is all she tells us.

Despite all the changes since the 1970s, both in Rubin's life and in U.S. society, there is an incredible consistency across time in the essays. This is the case not only for her central concerns with oppression and power, but also for her uncanny ability to write accessible and playful prose. In "Rethinking Sex," for example, she gives us the memorable line: "Sexualities keep marching out of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and on to the pages of social history" (158). Her use of analogy is both enlightening and amusing. In her essay on S/M, originally published in the Samois collection *Coming to Power*, for example, she denounces censorship laws that forbid texts or images designed specifically to arouse sexually by pointing to the fact that "One may embroider for relaxation, play baseball for the thrill, or collect stamps merely for their beauty. But sex itself is not a legitimate activity or goal. It must have some 'higher' purpose" (110). And in that same essay, she says that the relationship between heterosexual S/M and "normal" heterosexuality is like the relationship between "high-school faggots and the high-school football team. There is some overlap of personnel, but for the most part, all that fanny-patting and even an occasional blow-job does not make the jocks into fags" (131).

There is a lot of reflection on “Thinking Sex” in the context of the sex wars and the right-wing attacks on sexuality, with Rubin making clear that she was not turning away from feminism but moving toward sexuality studies. In an essay published in *GLQ* in 2010, she says she is most proud of the essay’s “protoqueerness” (222). In her interview by Judith Butler, published in *differences* in 1994, she talks about the impact on her thinking of a unionization drive among lesbian and other sex workers in Ann Arbor in the 1970s. Here she makes clear that talking with the striking sex workers tore her away from the predominant lesbian feminist position that prostitution upheld the patriarchy, and that this was part of the context in which she moved toward the ideas in “Thinking Sex.”

For me, the essay that illustrates most forcefully how much has changed is “Of Catamites and Kings,” published in 1992. It wonderfully situates butch and transsexuality in that time period, and calls perhaps prophetically to “Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom” (252). Not that the butch/trans border wars are over, or that FTMs and MTFs meet no hostility in women’s spaces, but the proliferation of gender and sexual identities, from genderqueer to pansexual, are indeed signs of petals opening.

This is, then, a wonderfully invigorating collection. There is, inevitably, repetition, but the essays as a whole build toward where sexuality studies and queer studies are today. Rubin shows us how far we have come but does not let us forget how much work there still is to do. As she says at the end of the introduction, “I hope someday sex really is marginal.”

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