

## ***Gayle S. Rubin: Deviations. A Gayle Rubin Reader.***

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*Reviewed by Angelika Tsaros*

Gayle Rubin's first essays, "The Traffic in Women" (1975) and "Thinking Sex" (1984), changed the way we think about sexuality. The publication of these seminal essays provided the then-emerging field of sexuality studies and the developing women's movement with the vocabulary to tackle some of the problems we are still discussing today. Rubin tackled issues such as the sex/gender divide, and did not shy away from discussing inter-generational sex, pornography, and sadomasochism at a time when this meant alienating herself not only from study groups and networks but making herself academic outcast. She is a fixture in the queer pantheon: a feminist, an anthropologist, and an archaeologist of the layers of sexual studies previously forgotten, who has entranced generations of students in women's studies, queer studies, and anthropology.

The aptly titled *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* is a collection of Rubin's most influential essays. While it does not include much of her more activist writing in community publications, it gives a coherent and in-depth picture of what I must call a genealogy of sexuality studies from the 1970s until today. Most notably, Rubin is a pioneer of intersectional research, even if she would quite vocally disagree and insist on crediting not herself but a number of scientists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century who provided some of the layers on which her work builds. Nonetheless, she pioneered academic enquiry into sexual subcultures through her combination of theoretical research and anthropological field studies. Many of the essays, especially "Genealogies of Queer Studies," stress "how much we have already forgotten, rediscovered, and promptly forgotten again" (347) and urge readers not only to rediscover hidden layers of knowledge, but also to preserve the ones already uncovered for coming generations. Rubin calls for a more bureaucratic way of preserving knowledge. While this seems odd at first it makes sense when reading her descriptions of the beginnings of many now-famous collections of queer writing as boxes full of papers, stored away in basements and barely accessible to anyone.

The selected essays are above all a representation of Rubin's multi-faceted thinking. This makes the collection not just a reader, but a historical account covering the emergence of sexuality studies as a field. In the "Introduction" especially, she elaborates on her personal history which is intimately connected to the history of contemporary sex studies. The collected texts are amended with afterwords and put into the context of her personal life, as well as political developments of the time. Ad-

ditionally, they are updated with comments which situate the essays within a current framework and do not shy away from admitting mistakes, or reminding the reader to see a text within its historical context rather than from today's point of view. The afterword for "The Traffic in Women", for example, was specifically written for this publication. Like the afterword for "Thinking Sex", it traces the developments in the field and discusses previous analytical errors and criticism directed at her texts by other theorists, such as Susan Stryker<sup>1</sup>. It also addresses issues raised by others, e.g. in a 2011 special issue of GLQ edited by Heather Love<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the arguments remain both effective and persuasive: the amendments show how issues from the 1970s and 1980s remain equally important to the field of sexuality studies today.

*Deviations* also presents some less well-known texts, and show Rubin's passion for critiquing political decisions that intrude on personal lives. "The Leather Menace" is an account of political and legal repercussions faced by practitioners of sadomasochism in the early 1980s, while "Misguided, Dangerous, and Wrong" is a passionate polemic looking back at the anti-pornography efforts a decade later, illustrating that Rubin is equally accomplished at critical analysis as she is at making energetic arguments. "The Catacombs" presents part of Rubin's early urban ethnographical work within the San Francisco gay leather community, and "Studying Sexual Subcultures" continues to elaborate on this facet of her work which is often overlooked as a result of the attention received by her earlier essays. Finally, she included an interview with Judith Butler and the "Introduction to *A Woman Appeared to Me*". Owing to this variety, the collection gives a rounded impression of her continuously prolific work.

For many scholars who have been actively involved in the field, *Deviations* offers the chance to re-read classic texts, as well as learn about the personal circumstances within which they were written, and consequently offer the opportunity to discover them from a new angle, and revealing new layers of knowledge. To anyone new to the field, or students in the area of sexuality or gender studies, the collection presents a unique introduction and colourful history of some of the major events that have shaped the discourse surrounding feminist debates of the past 30 years. As Rubin notes throughout the anthology, a knowledge of the past will facilitate a critical examination of the debates sexuality scholars are currently engaged with. Reflecting on these essays offers the opportunity to embark on the path to the bureaucratic future that hopefully awaits.

1 Stryker, Susan 2011, 'The Time Has Come to Think about Gayle Rubin', GLQ *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 79–83.

2 *Rethinking Sex*, GLQ *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, ed. Heather Love.