

Jeanne Ellis

Department of English
University of Stellenbosch
jellis@sun.ac.za

Gayle S. Rubin. 2011 *Deviations: A Gayle S. Rubin reader*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Gayle S. Rubin, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Women's Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, made her first impact on feminist and gender theory in 1975 with the publication of her groundbreaking essay 'The traffic in women: Notes on the "political economy" of sex', in which she introduced the term 'sex/gender system' as a corrective to what she saw as the conceptual limitations of the word 'patriarchy' for theorising gender and sexuality. When 'Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality' (a 'protoqueer' text that became foundational to queer studies) was published in 1984, she had already established her reputation as a fearless and often controversial pioneering theorist of the politics of sexuality and an activist on behalf of sexual minorities, which brought her into open conflict with some sister feminists – notably those spearheading the anti-pornography lobby. As the title of this timely reader of Rubin's work suggests, her essays are *deviations* from norm and doctrine in their sustained and reasoned refusal of convention, including those givens of feminism, and in their centring of the idea and practice of sexual deviance as intellectual concerns that are always, inextricably, both personal and political. (Rubin's explicit appropriation of the terminology of 19th-century sexology is significant and the lineage of the term 'deviant' is comprehensively engaged in her essay 'Studying sexual subcultures'). Her stated objective in 'Thinking sex' to 'contribute to the pressing task of creating an accurate, humane, and genuinely liberatory body of thought about sexuality' (p. 145) underpins the trajectory of the career mapped in her key essays and subsequent reflections on them in afterwords, postscripts and an interview conducted by Judith Butler included in this reader, which, in its entirety, stands as a necessary reminder of the role feminism should play 'as a progressive, visionary force in the domain of sexuality' (p. 275), especially when confronted by the cooption of its discourse by right-wing agendas.

Reflecting on the retrospective imperatives of writing the introduction to *Deviations*, Rubin uses geology – a 'recreational obsession' of hers (p. 2) – as an analogy to situate the essays as 'artifacts of very particular circumstances' or 'different matrices' which 'manifest a consistent lineage of theoretically interconnected interests'. The aptness of the analogy is increasingly evident as one reads through the sequence of essays – each 'something like a piece of amber that preserves' a particular cultural moment and place, to use Rubin's description of 'The traffic in women' (p. 12) – and her later reviews of them in which additional contextualisation deepens one's understanding of their significance, both then and now. She returns to this analogy in her final essay in the collection,

‘Geologies of queer studies: It’s déjà vu all over again’, elaborating it into the central metaphor for an argument that warns Queer Studies against ‘the glitter of the current, the trendy, and the new’ (p. 355) that obscures its roots in influential pioneering early scholarship, often ignored or forgotten. Although addressing scholars of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (GLBTQ) cultures that fall under the rubric of Queer Studies, Rubin’s warning and suggested alternative that ‘[a]ny scholarly project can benefit from an accumulation of knowledge that can be evaluated, validated, criticized, updated, polished, improved, or used to provide new trails to investigate’ have resonance in the broader academy where the metaphor of the cutting edge is wielded, frequently blindly, in pursuit of that will-o’-the-wisp ‘the new’.

Here, too, Rubin’s own work sets the example by meticulously tracing these intellectual genealogies back to collaborations between 19th-century sexologists and their patients – ‘the doctors and the perverts’ (p. 352) – through the 1960s and 70s when sociologists like Howard Becker, John Gagnon, William Simon, Jeffery Weeks, Nancy Achilles, Kenneth Plummer and Mary McIntosh (to name a few of the many, including historians, she recovers and re-establishes as canonical) conducted innovative research on homosexuality and deviance, which was also ‘extraordinarily subversive’ in ‘[g]iving equal consideration to the opinions of disreputable deviants, respectable citizens, and authoritative officials’ (p. 320). More than just the compulsions of an inveterate archivist, which she undoubtedly is (some of the most delightful anecdotes included in the frequent autobiographical excursions that enrich Rubin’s writing recount her adventures in tracking down archives of various kinds assisted by fascinating fellow enthusiasts), the comprehensive listing of prior and contemporary research that influenced her professionally and personally, while having the function to conserve and inform, is also indicative of the integrity of Rubin’s scholarship which is consistently shaped by this protocol of acknowledgment. The six pages of acknowledgements with which *Deviations* begins and the detailed notes to the essays and extensive bibliography with which it ends supplement the archival value of the essays themselves and are an invaluable resource for established and new researchers in feminism, gender and sexuality, specifically for those focusing on GLBTQ cultures.

Moreover, in a society in which the corrective rape and murder of lesbians continue to go unpunished and are implicitly condoned by a Minister of Arts and Culture who walked out of an exhibition that included photographs of nude lesbian couples, which she described as ‘immoral’, much is to be (re)learnt from *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin reader* about the imbrications of sex, gender and politics played out on the vulnerable bodies of those on the margins of the heterosexual centre and from the long history of anti-homosexual crusades that coincide with moral panics of various kinds that it traces. As Rubin reminds us, ‘[o]ur desires can be as selective, exclusive, and imperious as we like; our society should be as inclusive, humane, and tolerant as we can make it’ (p. 251).