

A Gayle Rubin Reader

DEVIATIONS

A John Hope Franklin Center Book

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of whatever was defined as their extended community. An illness, accident, or death triggered an immediate escalation in this system of circulating favors and labor: the women, and a few men, would immediately get to work making casseroles, preparing aspics, baking cakes, and organizing shifts of onsite assistance.

My mother did this for years for just about everyone to whom we were socially connected, and it did indeed all come back around. When my father and later my mother died, flotillas of food quickly materialized. So did a managerial army of efficient hands who answered the door and the phone, ushered the callers in and out, made sure that everyone was fed, took care of cleaning up, kept lists of the gifts that poured in, and freed me and the other dazed members of my family to stagger through the details of death. There was, in short, a very vital communalism that I did not fully appreciate when I was young, and only began to understand when I ran into anthropology and Marcel Mauss.¹⁵ That happened at Michigan. The University of Michigan gave me my education and provided me with a set of analytic tools with which to think, learn, and investigate. If the South shaped my political and social reflexes, Michigan formed my intellectual interests and scholarly habits.

Go Blue

Michigan was a lucky accident. Since this was the period of the space race, the federal government spent money to train young scientists. Among the results were summer science programs for high-school students sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Michigan held an NSF program in microbiology at the music camp at Interlochen. I played the oboe, so the Michigan program seemed ideal: I could study microbiology in the morning and take oboe lessons in the afternoon. My parents drove me to Interlochen, and we stopped to check out the Ann Arbor campus en route. I applied to Michigan almost as an afterthought. Had I actually understood the severity of the climate, I probably would have ended up at some nice southern school such as Duke or the University of North Carolina. But we had visited in the early summer, when Ann Arbor is at its verdant finest. Despite a fervent hatred for Michigan winters, I have endured many of them. The university is an exceptionally well-administered and functional institution.

The bureaucracy is large but efficient, and the faculty is treated well. At least in the units with which I have been associated, people are extremely nice and generally reasonable. Intellectually, the institution fosters interdisciplinarity and interaction on a scale I have rarely encountered elsewhere. Michigan is

a very nutrient rich environment, in which one can prosper by mimicking a large filter feeder, swimming around and sucking up the abundant intellectual plankton.

These features are, in part, a consequence of geography. Because Ann Arbor is a small town, it is easy to get around but there are fewer places to go than in a large city. By contrast, the university is huge and there is always something of interest happening. So people connected to the university tend to hang around campus and talk to each other.

The architecture and layout of the central campus also facilitate frequent contact. A large diagonal walkway (a.k.a. "the Diag") connects the two far corners of the main quadrangle, passes in front of the graduate library, and links most of the buildings on central campus. At each end it terminates at a commercial strip where there are coffee shops, bars, and restaurants. This traffic pattern results in unplanned encounters, and the close proximity of small-scale retail provides quick access to places to get a drink or a meal and continue a conversation. Michigan is also unusual in the strength of the social sciences (an observation for which I am indebted to Claude Steele). Some universities favor the humanities, the hard sciences, or their professional schools. Michigan has all of these, but social science is a substantial institutional and intellectual presence. All of this makes the winters almost bearable.

I enrolled as a freshman at Michigan in the fall of 1966 and quickly went into extreme culture shock. The school had a larger population than my hometown. I was unprepared for much college-level work. South Carolina had one of the worst public-school systems in the United States, but I had been lucky to have some superb teachers. They had provided me with reasonable competence in reading, writing, and languages. My background in math and science, however, was woeful. After a disastrous freshman year it was clear that I was not going to be a physicist.

I was equally unprepared for the political environment. Fights over school desegregation were familiar territory, but I had never heard of Vietnam, much less the movement against the Vietnam War. Ann Arbor was one of the epicenters of a spirited antiwar movement, the New Left, and the counterculture. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had its origins there. One of its founders, Tom Hayden, edited the student newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*, in the early 1960s. The first anti-Vietnam war teach-in was held at Michigan, in 1965. By the time I arrived, demonstrations were as common as pep rallies.

Like chance encounters, such large gatherings were facilitated by the spatial layout of the central campus. In front of the graduate library, the Diag opens up into an expansive plaza that is well suited for public events. A crowd

could gather in front of the library, and speakers could address the assembly from the elevated platform provided by the capacious library steps. This format was used for everything from football rallies to antiwar demonstrations. When there was no large event, the plaza became an open-air public market of ideas. People would gather on the Diag to discuss and debate politics, or set up tables from which they could disseminate literature promoting various groups, causes, or products. In inclement weather these activities were moved inside to the Fishbowl, an enclosed but also spacious area that linked three (and now four) major classroom buildings.

After the initial shock wore off, I got involved in various aspects of campus politics. In the fall of 1967, some friends and I led a successful movement in our dorm house to end the curfews and dress codes for female students. We thought we were acting on our own, unaware that another dorm across campus was engaged in the same struggle, and that similar rules were collapsing on campuses across the country. And there was more: none of us knew that a court case in 1961, *Dixon v. Alabama*, had previously established the conditions for ending administrative supervision of students' time, sexual conduct, dating patterns, and private lives. This decision probably made our spontaneous assault on the women's curfew possible.¹⁶

Eventually, I gravitated to the periphery of the antiwar movement and acquired a boyfriend, Tom Anderson, who was active in draft resistance. This led me into the feminist movement. The sociologist Barrie Thorne has written about the relationship between the draft-resistance movement and the formation of early second-wave feminist groups in the late 1960s.¹⁷ Since women were not subject to the draft, the female partners of resisters were invariably involved in support roles for the men who were. This structural marginality may have helped propel large numbers of such women into the early versions of what later came to be called consciousness-raising groups.

Sometime in 1968, Tom mentioned that I might be interested in a discussion group being organized by some of the wives and girlfriends of other local antidraft activists. I eagerly joined what became Ann Arbor's first ongoing second-wave feminist organization, the Thursday Night Group. At first, we mostly came together to talk about our frustrations with the gender relations encountered in what was then the New Left. The New Left was probably no more sexist than the rest of society, and possibly a good bit less. Because its explicit values were egalitarian, however, we expected more of our male colleagues and were often bitterly disappointed when they failed to live up to those principles or to apply them to women. The story of how much of

women's liberation emerged from such inconsistencies and dashed expectations has been written about elsewhere.¹⁸

As our Thursday night conversations continued, we expanded our focus beyond the antiwar and New Left movements to think about the situation of women in society at large. We later staged the first teach-in on women in Ann Arbor, wrote articles on feminism for the local underground newspaper (the *Ann Arbor Argus*), and protested the Miss Ann Arbor contest.¹⁹ We also joined the political conversations on the Diag and in the Fishbowl by setting up a literature table from which we distributed the early texts of women's liberation. At first these were mimeographed, but soon they were published as pamphlets by the Radical Education Project and the New England Free Press, the same printers who produced much of the antiwar literature.²⁰

After physics, I had briefly declared a major in philosophy. But feminism engaged all of my passions. There was not yet a program in women's studies at Michigan, and the field itself was embryonic. I took advantage of an option available to students in the honors program to declare an independent major in women's studies, with which I ultimately graduated.

In the fall of 1970, I stumbled into anthropology. I needed to find one elective course to get a few credits toward graduation. My roommate, Arlene Gorelick, was an anthropology major. She thought I would enjoy a class she was taking on "primitive" economics from some professor named Marshall Sahlins. So I went to check it out. Sahlins is a mesmerizing speaker and a brilliant thinker. By the time he finished the first lecture, I was hooked: I knew almost immediately that anthropology had the theoretical and empirical tools to explore the issues that mattered to me. By the end of the semester, despite having taken only one anthropology class, I decided to pursue graduate training in the field. I started graduate school at Michigan in the fall of 1971. I loved grad school, and was very lucky to have landed in the Michigan department in the early 1970s.

Sahlins soon decamped for Chicago, but I was in good hands. The intellectual culture of the department was both theoretically vibrant and empirically rich. It was then, as now, a four-field department, something increasingly rare but exceedingly precious. Although I was preparing for a career in sociocultural anthropology, I eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to learn from the other subfields. The linguists deepened my interest in classification and taxonomy and the ways language shapes perception. The archaeologists introduced me to urban geography and gave me ways to think about space and place. They were also intensely engaged in the formation of archaic states and

closely related topics: the emergence of bureaucratic systems, the intensification of social stratification, and the increase in social and economic specialization.²¹

I learned about both evolution and plate tectonics from the biological anthropologists. Plate tectonics and continental drift had only recently been widely accepted as explanatory frameworks for geologic processes and these theories were reshaping large bodies of information across the earth sciences and natural history. One set of implications was of particular interest to scholars of evolution: continental drift resolved issues of the geographic distribution of species that had puzzled Darwin.²² I took a course on human evolution from Frank Livingstone and can still remember his excited lecture about how plate tectonics explained why Madagascar had lemurs, why marsupials were dominant Australian fauna, and most importantly for human evolution, the differences between new and old world primates.²³ Such observations, so commonplace now, were startlingly fresh then.

Frank also introduced me to the critique of race as a useful way of describing human biological variation. The biological anthropologists at Michigan were centrally involved in deconstructing racial taxonomy and the category of race itself.²⁴ A department in which race was a suspect and unstable category was certainly one in which the concept of gender could be similarly dissected.

While the departmental power structures and accepted bodies of knowledge were still heavily male dominated, the intellectual resources for the development of feminist anthropology were readily available. Although there were only two tenured women on the faculty (Norma Diamond and Niara Sudarkasa), this compared favorably with most other departments, only a few of which had any female senior faculty.²⁵ The department did not punish students for political activism, and some of the most respected senior faculty, such as Marshall Sahlins, Eric Wolf, and Joseph Jorgensen, were prominently involved in the antiwar movement.

The generally supportive atmosphere allowed new ideas to flourish. The graduate students were encouraged to be collaborative. We talked incessantly and passionately. The first essay in this present collection is very much a product of the Michigan department in the early 1970s. It began as a term paper for Sahlins's course and was completed when I was in graduate school. For me, "The Traffic in Women" is something like a piece of amber that preserves those heady conversations and that moment in time.

"The Traffic in Women" was published in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna Reiter (later Rayna Rapp). Rayna and I had both been in the Thursday Night Group, and she was also a graduate student in anthro-

pology.²⁶ In 1971, Rayna and a fellow grad student, Lembi Congas, under the faculty sponsorship of Norma Diamond, cotaught the first course at Michigan on the anthropology of women. Rayna had left Michigan to teach at the New School for Social Research by the time the anthology was published, but the book was very much a product of the Michigan department: of the seventeen essays, nine were authored by Michigan graduate students, PhDs, or faculty.

While my paper was thus a profoundly local product, it also resulted from both happy coincidence and deeper structural shifts affecting many feminist intellectuals. The accidental quality is best illustrated by an anecdote about timing. The English translation of Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* was published in the United States in 1969. Similarly, Althusser's article on Freud and Lacan (and Lévi-Strauss) appeared in the summer 1969 issue of *New Left Review*. Both texts were essentially hot off the presses when I read them in the fall of 1970. Had I taken the same class a year or two earlier, neither would have been available. Had I read them later, the possibilities they presented for feminist thought would have already been extracted, digested, and articulated by others. If the connections they suggested were glaringly obvious to me, they were equally accessible to others. French feminists of various factional persuasions were already familiar with these texts and had been working out their own understandings of the implications of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Lévi-Strauss's models of kinship, and structural linguistics. In England, Juliet Mitchell published her synthesis of Marxism, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974).

One important factor that shaped my paper was the availability of a historically specific concept of gender. I coined the phrase "sex/gender system" while groping for an alternative to "patriarchy," which I considered a hopelessly imprecise and conceptually muddled term. Sandra Harding has posed an interesting question in the title of her essay "Why Has the Sex/Gender System Become Visible Only Now?" Harding is more interested in the epistemological questions than the linguistic ones; she interrogates the historical developments that made such a concept possible and necessary, while taking no note of the introduction of the terminology.²⁷

Jennifer Germon's book *Gender* is a fascinating exploration of why the conceptual language of gender was itself available as a theoretical resource. Germon argues that:

Gender did not exist 60 years ago—at least not in the way we understand it today. . . . A lack of attention to gender's origins has led to the common assumption that it has always been available, an assumption due in

no small part to gender's formidable conceptual, analytical, and explanatory power. Yet gender does indeed have a history, and a controversial one at that. Until the 1950s, gender served to mark relations between words rather than people. While there is evidence that it was used sporadically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the mid-1950s stand as the historical moment in which gender was codified into the English language as a personal and social category and so began its ascent as a potent new conceptual realm of sex.²⁸

Germon attributes the introduction of gender in its current analytic form primarily to John Money, although she also credits Robert Stoller with helping to establish this usage. In her chapter on the feminist appropriation of the term, starting in the very early 1970s, she credits me with having introduced "gender" into feminist anthropology.²⁹ She comments that "Rubin's analysis demonstrated that she was—on some level—drawing on Money's concept of gender, yet nowhere in 'The Traffic in Women' is there an indication of whence she took the term."³⁰ Germon observes that in 1972 Money's and Ehrhardt's book *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl* appeared in the collective bibliography of *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, but was not explicitly cited by me.

While I did not cite Money and Ehrhardt, I was indeed influenced by their book and had clearly absorbed aspects of their analytic framework, without grasping its novelty. Their disaggregation of the presumed unity of chromosomal sex, hormonal exposure, internal reproductive organs, external genitalia, and psychological identifications was extremely important, as was their insistence that gender identities could be both disconnected from and more resistant to change than physical bodies.³¹

As Germon and others have discussed, Money's impact is complex, but its relevance for early feminist theory has often been unremarked and underestimated. Germon observes, "That gender is indispensable to feminist theorizing . . . seems so self-evident that it surely goes without saying. Yet it is precisely because gender has achieved that status that its historical legacy is worth examining. . . . Over the past 25 years or so, gender has often been attributed to feminism as though the term had no history outside of that tradition."³² She further argues that Money's research was useful to feminism precisely because it argued for the strength of gender socialization: "That idea was seized upon to demonstrate that women's subordinated sociocultural, political, and economic status was neither natural nor inevitable. Instead it was quite literally produced by culture—itsself a production."³³

I used gender in exactly this sense. Such ideas were in the air, the water, the

conversations, and the feminist pamphlet literature I so eagerly consumed. "Gender" was one of the resources at hand with which to build feminist frameworks. Money's concept of gender was an element that I crunched with Marx's discussions of reproduction, Lévi-Strauss's analysis of kinship, Freud's theories of femininity, and Lacan's linguistic reading of Freud. It must have contributed to my choice of terminology.

I almost did not bother to revise "Traffic" for publication. I told Rayna that Mitchell's book had made my version superfluous. Rayna insisted that I had my own perspective and pressured me to finish the article. I am grateful that she did, and she was correct: my take on Lévi-Strauss, Freud, Lacan, and Marx was different from that of Juliet Mitchell, Monique Wittig, or the French group *Psychanalyse et Politique*.³⁴ Many different feminists were working with common bodies of literature to address a similar set of problems. But local conditions, accidents of timing, and individual idiosyncrasies produced distinctive responses to big seismic changes. We do not make our histories as we please, but we do make them.

Lesbian and Gay Histories

By the spring of 1971, gay liberation had come to Ann Arbor. The local Gay Liberation Front had several men and a single visible lesbian. I came out shortly after that lone lesbian activist visited the Thursday Night Group to explain the new gay politics. Prior to that visit, I had no real concept of homosexuality. Naming is a powerful tool, and the sudden availability of situated and meaningful words such as *lesbian*, *homosexual*, and *gay* was revelatory. The language enabled me to reinterpret my own experience and emotional history. I realized I was in love with one of my feminist comrades and had two immediate goals: to seduce the object of my desire, and to read all about this exciting discovery. Since the girl was unavailable, I headed to the library.

After a disappointing trapeze through the card catalogue at the graduate library, I decided to compile a bibliography on lesbianism. This turned out to be superfluous, as there already was a considerable bibliographic literature. These lesbian bibliographies were difficult to find, but once located they provided a ready roadmap into the available source material circa 1970. Rather than having to reinvent the wheel, I was able to use Jeannette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956) and Gene Damon's (Barbara Grier) and Lee Stuart's *The Lesbian in Literature* (1967), as well as some early compilations by Marion Zimmer Bradley.³⁵

Luck, timing, and location were all involved. The Damon and Stuart bib-