

Interview

Sexual Traffic

Gayle Rubin is an anthropologist who has written a number of highly influential articles, including “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” “Thinking Sex,” “The Leather Menace,” and “Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong: An Analysis of Anti-Pornography Politics.” A collection of her essays will soon be published by the University of California Press. She is currently working on a book based on ethnographic and historical research on the gay male leather community in San Francisco.

Rubin has been a feminist activist and writer since the late 1960s, and has been active in gay and lesbian politics for over two decades. She has been an ardent critic of the anti-pornography movement and of the mistreatment of sexual minorities.

Her work has offered a series of methodological suggestions for feminism and queer studies which have significantly shaped the emergence of both fields of study.

JB: The reason I wanted to do this interview is that some people would say that you set the methodology for feminist theory, then the methodology for lesbian and gay studies. And I think it would be interesting as a way

to understand the relation between these two fields for people to understand how you moved from your position in “The Traffic in Women” to your position in “Thinking Sex.” But then also it would be interesting to hear a bit about the kind of work you are doing now. So, I thought I might begin at one of the beginnings, namely “The Traffic in Women,” and ask you to elaborate a little bit on the context in which you wrote it, and also to ask you when you began to take distance from the position you elaborated there.

GR: Well, I guess I have a different sense of the relationship of those papers to feminist thought and lesbian and gay studies. Each was part of an ongoing process, a field of inquiry developing at the time. “Traffic in Women” had its origins in early second wave feminism when many of us who were involved in the late 1960s were trying to figure out how to think about and articulate the oppression of women. The dominant political context at that time was the New Left, particularly the anti-war movement and the opposition to militarized U.S. imperialism. The dominant paradigm among progressive intellectuals was Marxism, in various forms. Many of the early second wave feminists came out of the New Left and were Marxists of one sort or another. I don’t think one can fully comprehend early second wave feminism without understanding its intimate yet conflicted relationship to New Left politics and Marxist intellectual frameworks. There is an immense Marxist legacy within feminism, and feminist thought is greatly indebted to Marxism. In a sense, Marxism enabled people to pose a whole set of questions that Marxism could not satisfactorily answer.

Marxism, no matter how modified, seemed unable to fully grasp the issues of gender difference and the oppression of women. Many of us were struggling with—or within—that dominant framework to make it work or figure out why it didn’t. I was one of many who finally concluded that one could only go so far within a Marxist paradigm and that while it was useful, it had limitations with regard to gender and sex.

I should add that there were different kinds of Marxist approaches. There were some pretty reductive formulations about the “woman question,” and some especially simplistic strategies for women’s liberation. I remember one group in Ann Arbor, which I think was called the Red Star Sisters. Their idea of women’s liberation was to mobilize women’s groups to fight imperialism. There was no room in their approach to specifically address gender oppression; it was only a precipitate of class oppression and imperialism, and presumably would wither away after the workers’ revolution.

There were a lot of people working over Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Engels was part of the Marxian canon, and he *did* talk about women, so his work was granted special status. There were dozens of little schemas about the ostensible overthrow of the supposed early Matriarchy and the invention of private property as the source of women's oppression. In retrospect some of this literature seems quaint, but at the time it was taken very seriously. I doubt people who weren't there could begin to imagine the intensity with which people fought over whether or not there was an original Matriarchy, and whether its demise accounted for class differences and the oppression of women.

Even the best of Marxist work at that time tended to focus on issues that were closer to the central concerns of Marxism, such as class, work, relations of production, and even some very creative thinking about the social relations of reproduction. There was a wonderful, very interesting literature that came up around housework, for example. There was good work on the sexual division of labor, on the place of women in the labor market, on the role of women in the reproduction of labor. Some of this literature was very interesting and very useful, but it could not get at some core issues which concerned feminists: gender difference, gender oppression, and sexuality. So there was a general effort to differentiate feminism from that political context and its dominant preoccupations. There were a lot of people looking for leverage on the problem of women's oppression, and searching for tools with which one could get different angles of vision on it. "Traffic in Women" was a part of that effort and is an artifact of that set of problems. There were many other articles dealing with similar issues; one of my favorites was "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," by Heidi Hartman.

The immediate precipitating factor of "Traffic" was a course on tribal economics given by Marshall Sahlins at the University of Michigan, about 1970. That course changed my life. I had already been involved with feminism, but this was my first experience of anthropology, and I was smitten. I was utterly seduced by Sahlins's theoretical approach, as well as the descriptive richness of the ethnographic literature.

Then I was co-writing a term paper with two friends on the status of women in tribal societies. Sahlins suggested that I read Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. To use the vernacular of the time, "it completely blew my mind." So did some of the other literature of French structuralism. I read the Althusser article on Freud and Lacan from *New Left Review* right around the time I was reading *The Elementary Structures of*

Kinship and there was just some moment of revelation that these approaches had a relationship. Then I went and read most of the classic psychoanalytic essays on “femininity.” The confluence of those things was where “The Traffic In Women” came from. I was very excited about all these connections and wanted to incorporate them into the term paper for Sahlins’s class. One of my co-authors was reluctant to include this wild stuff in the body of the paper, so I wrote the first version of “Traffic” as an appendix for the paper. Then I kept reading and thinking about it.

At that time, the University of Michigan allowed students to declare an independent major through the honors program. I had taken advantage of the program to construct a major in Women’s Studies in 1969. At that time, there was no Women’s Studies program at Michigan, and I was the first Women’s Studies major there. The independent major required a senior honors thesis, so I did half on lesbian literature and history, and half on this analysis of psychoanalysis and kinship. I finished the senior thesis in 1972 and kept reworking the “Traffic” part until Rayna Rapp (then Reiter) extracted the final version for *Toward An Anthropology of Women*. A penultimate version was published in an obscure Ann Arbor journal called *Dissemination* in 1974.

Something that people now probably forget is how little of the French structuralist and poststructuralist literature was available then in English. While Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, and Foucault were very well translated by 1970, Lacan was not readily available. Besides the Althusser essay on him, Lacan was mostly represented in English by one or two articles, *The Language of the Self* (translated with extensive commentary by Anthony Wilden), and a book by Maud Mannoni. I remember seeing maybe one or two articles by Derrida. Most of Derrida, as well as Lyotard, Kristeva, Irigaray, and Bourdieu were still pretty much restricted to those fluent in French. This kind of thinking was virtually unknown in the United States. When I wrote the version of “Traffic” that was finally published, one of my friends edited it. She thought maybe ten people would read it. I said I thought fifty people would read it, and we agreed on fifty.

JB: You were saying that in some ways you wanted to make an intervention in Marxist feminism, and make feminism something other than a kind of subsidiary movement in Marxism. Would you elaborate on that?

GR: I felt that if people privileged Marxism as the theory with which to approach the oppression of women, then they were going to miss a

lot, and they did. I think of “Traffic” as a neo-Marxist, proto-pomo exercise. It was written on the cusp of a transition between dominant paradigms, both in progressive intellectual thought in general, and feminist thought in particular. But the basic problem was that Marxism had a weak grasp of sex and gender, and had intrinsic limitations as a theoretical framework for feminism. There were other issues, such as the whole problem of trying to find some theoretical basis for lesbianism.

JB: It seemed to me that you based much of what you say about sexuality and gender in “The Traffic In Women” in an understanding of kinship that you were taking from Lévi-Strauss. To the extent that you could show that kinship relations were in the service of compulsory heterosexuality you could also show that gender identities were in some sense derived from kinship relations. You then speculated that it might be possible to get beyond gender—maybe “gender identity” is the better word—if one also could do something like overthrow kinship. . . .

GR: Right, and the cultural residue and the symbolic manifestations and all of the other aspects of that system, and the inscription and installation of those structures and categories within people.

JB: It was a utopian vision of sorts.

GR: Well, we were all pretty utopian in those days. I mean this was about 1969 to 1974. I was young and optimistic about social change. In those days there was a common expectation that utopia was around the corner. I feel very differently now. I worry instead that fascism in our time is around the corner. I am almost as pessimistic now as I was optimistic then.

JB: Yes. So could you narrate something about the distance you took from that particular vision and what prompted the writing of “Thinking Sex”?

GR: There was a different set of concerns that generated “Thinking Sex.” I suppose the most basic differences were that, theoretically, I felt that feminism dealt inadequately with sexual practice, particularly diverse sexual conduct; and practically, the political situation was changing. “Thinking Sex” came from the late 1970s, when the New Right was beginning to be

ascendant in U.S. politics, and when stigmatized sexual practices were drawing a lot of repressive attention. 1977 was the year of Anita Bryant and the campaign to repeal the Dade County gay rights ordinance. Such campaigns are now, unfortunately, the common stuff of gay politics, but at that time the bigotry and homophobia that emerged in that fight were shocking. This period was when Richard Viguerie's direct mail fund-raising operation was underwriting a new era of radical right wing political organizing. By 1980 Reagan was in office. This shifted the status, safety, and legal positions of homosexuality, sex work, sexually explicit media, and many other forms of sexual practice.

"Thinking Sex" wasn't conceived in a direct line or as a direct departure from the concerns of "Traffic." I was trying to get at something different, which had some implications for my previous formulations. But I think those last few pages have been overinterpreted as some huge rejection or turn-about on my part. I saw them more as a corrective, and as a way to get a handle on another group of issues. I wasn't looking to get away from "Traffic in Women." I was trying to deal with issues of sexual difference and sexual variety. And when I use "sexual difference" I realize from reading your paper "Against Proper Objects" that you are using it in a very different way than I am. I am using the term to refer to different sexual practices. You seem to be using it to refer to gender.

JB: You mean, I am using "sexual difference" in the way that you were using "gender" in "Traffic in Women"?

GR: Well I'm not sure. Tell me how you are using "sexual difference," because I'm not clear on it.

JB: Yes, well, I think that for the most part people who work in a "sexual difference" framework actually believe in some kind of symbolic position of the masculine and the feminine, or believe there is something persistent about sexual difference understood in terms of masculine and feminine. At the same time they tend to engage psychoanalysis or some theory of the symbolic. And what I always found interesting in "The Traffic in Women" was that you used the term gender to track that same kind of problem that came out of Lacan and Lévi-Strauss, but that you actually took a very different direction than most of the—what I would call—sexual difference feminists who now work almost exclusively within psychoanalytic

domains. And what interested me in “The Traffic in Women” was that you, by using a term that comes from American sociological discourse—“gender”—by using that term, you actually made gender less fixed, and you imagined a kind of mobility to it which I think would be quite impossible in the Lacanian framework. So I think that what you produced was an amalgamation of positions which I very much appreciated, and it became one of the reasons I went with gender myself in *Gender Trouble*.

GR: Well, I didn’t want to get stuck in the Lacanian trap. It seemed to me, and with all due respect to those who are very skilled at evading or manipulating the snares, that Lacan’s work came with a dangerous tendency to create a kind of deep pit from which it would be hard to escape. I kept wanting to find ways not to get caught in the demands of certain systems, and Lacanian psychoanalysis both provided leverage and posed new challenges. Lacanian psychoanalysis is very useful in dealing with structures of gender and desire, but it comes with a price. I was concerned with the totalizing tendencies in Lacan, and the non-social qualities of his concept of the symbolic.

JB: Yes. This is actually an interesting problem. My sense is that in British feminism, for instance, in the seventies, there was a belief that if you could reconfigure and change your kinship arrangements that you could also reconfigure your sexuality and your psyche, and that psychic transformation really followed directly from the social transformation of kinship arrangements. And then when everybody had done that and found out that their psyches were still in the same old pits that they had always been in, I think that the Lacanian position became very popular. I guess the problem became how to describe those constraints on sexuality which seem more persistent than what we can change through the transformation of social and kinship relations. Maybe there is something intractable, maybe there is something more persistent. . . .

GR: Leaving aside such issues as how much these social and kinship relations have actually been transformed at this point, the magnitude of such changes and the time spans required to make them, and the fact that most of our psyches were long since formed and are resistant to such swift re-education, what is the something that is *intractable*? One of the nifty things about psychoanalytic approaches is that they explain both change and intractability. But there is something about the particular intractability of what

is called the symbolic that I don't understand. Is there supposed to be something in the very nature of the structure of the brain and the way it creates language?

JB: I would say the structure of language, the emergence of the speaking subject through sexual differentiation, and how language subsequently creates intelligibility.

GR: That makes it somehow necessary to have a masculine and a feminine?

JB: As you know from some of the reading of Lacan that you have done, there is a tendency to understand sexual difference as coextensive with language itself. And that there is no possibility of speaking, of taking a position in language outside of differentiating moves, not only through a differentiation from the maternal which is said to install a speaker in language for the first time, but then further differentiations among speakers positioned within kinship, which includes the prohibition on incest. To the extent that is done within the constellation of, say, Mother/Father as symbolic positions . . .

GR: There is something intrinsically problematic about any notion that somehow language itself or the capacity for acquiring it requires a sexual differentiation as a primary differentiation. If humans were hermaphroditic or reproduced asexually, I can imagine we would still be capable of speech. A specific symbolic relation that precedes any social life whatsoever—I have a problem with that. One of the problems I have with Lacan was that his system didn't seem to allow quite enough latitude for the social structuring of the symbolic.

JB: Right. I agree with you on this. But I think that it is one of the reasons why the social doesn't have such a great name and is really not of interest for many who work in the Lacanian domain. I guess what I always found really great about "The Traffic in Women" is that it actually did give us a way to understand psychic structures in relationship to social structures.

GR: Well that is what I wanted to do, and I didn't want to get entangled in a symbolic that couldn't be socially accessed in some way. People often assume that if something is social it is also somehow fragile and

can be changed quickly. For example, some right wing anti-gay literature now argues that since homosexuality is socially constructed, people can (and should) easily change their sexual orientation. And as you were saying earlier, frustration with the enduring quality of certain things sometimes leads people to think that they can't be socially generated. But the kind of social change we are talking about takes a long time, and the time frame in which we have been undertaking such change is incredibly tiny.

Besides, the imprint of kinship arrangements on individual psyches is very durable. The acquisition of our sexual and gender programming is much like the learning of our native cultural system or language. It is much harder to learn new languages, or to be as facile in them as in our first language. As Carole Vance has argued, this same model can be useful for thinking about gender and sexual preferences ("Social"). As with languages, some people have more gender and erotic flexibility than others. Some can acquire secondary sexual or gender languages, and even fewer will be completely fluent in more than one position. But most people have a home language, and home sexual or gender comfort zones that will not change much. This doesn't mean these things are not social, any more than the difficulties of acquiring other languages means that languages are not social. Social phenomena can be incredibly obdurate. Nonetheless, I wanted in "Traffic" to put gender and sexuality into a social framework, and I did not want to go completely in the direction of the Lacanian symbolic and be stuck with a primary category of gender differences which might as well be inscribed in granite.

JB: So, if you would, talk about the theoretical and political circumstances that made you turn toward "Thinking Sex."

GR: "Thinking Sex" was part of a movement away from an early structuralist focus on the binary aspects of language, such as the binary oppositions you see very much in Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, toward the more discursive models of later poststructuralism or postmodernism. If you are really going to take seriously that social life is structured like language, then you need complex models for how language is structured. I think these binary models seemed to work better for gender, because our usual understandings posit gender as in some ways binary; even the continuums of gender differences often seem structured by a primary binary opposition. But as soon as you get away from the presumptions of heterosexuality, or a simple hetero-homo opposition, differences in sexual conduct are not very

intelligible in terms of binary models. Even the notion of a continuum is not a good model for sexual variations; one needs one of those mathematical models they do now with strange topographies and convoluted shapes. There needs to be some kind of model that is not binary, because sexual variation is a system of many differences, not just a couple of salient ones.

We were talking earlier about the ostensible relationship of “Thinking Sex” to MacKinnon’s work. Retrospectively, many people have interpreted “Thinking Sex” as a reaction to MacKinnon’s work against pornography.

JB: I’m doubtless guilty of that. . . .

GR: While the early feminist anti-pornography movement was an issue, most of the work for “Thinking Sex” was done before MacKinnon became a visible figure in that movement. To many, MacKinnon has come to represent the feminist anti-porn movement, but actually she was a relative latecomer to it. She became visible as an important actor in the porn wars about 1984, after the passage of the so-called “civil rights” anti-porn ordinances, first in Minneapolis late in 1983, and subsequently in Indianapolis. Her fame tends to eclipse the early history of the feminist anti-porn movement, which is represented better by the anthology *Take Back the Night*. I mostly knew about MacKinnon from those two articles in *Signs*. The first was published in 1982, and I had seen an earlier version. I had already been working on versions of “Thinking Sex” for some time. But I could see where MacKinnon was heading, at least at the theoretical level, and I was going in a different direction. She wanted to make feminism the privileged site for analyzing sexuality and to subordinate sexual politics not only to feminism, but to a particular type of feminism. On the grand chessboard of life, I wanted to block this particular move. But it was not the impetus for the paper. At some level, I think there were some underlying social and political shifts that produced “Thinking Sex,” the feminist anti-porn movement, MacKinnon’s approach, and the right-wing focus on homosexuality and other forms of variant sexual conduct, among other things.

JB: You are referring to MacKinnon’s “Marxism, Feminism, Method and the State.”

GR: Yes. “Thinking Sex” had its roots back in 1977–78, and I started doing lecture versions of it in 1979. I think you were at one of these, at the Second Sex Conference at the New York Institute for the Humanities.

JB: Right. The first time I saw a copy of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*.

GR: Was I waving it around?

JB: Yes. You introduced it to me.

GR: I was really, just totally hot for that book.

JB: Yes, you made me hot for it too . . .

(laughter)

GR: The paper actually began before I ran into Foucault, but his work clarified issues and inspired me. In any event, the sources of this paper were earlier, and a little different. First of all, I started to get more and more dissatisfied with what were then the stock feminist explanations for certain kinds of sexual behaviors. A number of different debates, incidents, and issues forced me to start questioning the wisdom, if not the relevance, of feminism as the privileged political movement or political theory for certain issues of sexuality and sexual difference. One was the debate on transsexuality. Even before that debate hit print toward the late 1970s, the discussion really flipped me out because it was so biologically deterministic. When it finally erupted into print over the hiring of Sandy Stone, a male to female transsexual, by Olivia Records, there were a number of articles in the lesbian press about how women were born and not made (House and Cowan) which I found rather . . .

GR & JB: (in unison) . . . distressing.

GR: To say the least. And then there were other issues that came up. Around 1977–78, there was a repression, to use an old fashioned term, going on in Michigan, directed against gay male public sex. All of a sudden men were being arrested in a much more aggressive way for sex in parks and tea rooms. There were a couple of old cruising areas on the Michigan campus, one in the Union and the other in Mason Hall. The cops came in and arrested some people. There was a truck stop on I-94 between Ann Arbor and Detroit where a number of men were arrested, and in one park sweep I think one of the officials of the Detroit public school system was nabbed and

subsequently fired. And as these stories started to percolate through the feminist and lesbian communities, the most common opinion I heard was that these were just men doing horrible masculine, patriarchal things and they probably should be arrested. This was not a position I could accept. No one was going around arresting all the people having heterosexual sex in parks and automobiles. To support or rationalize the arrests of anyone for engaging in consensual homosexual sex was abhorrent to me.

There was another set of incidents that happened, again in Ann Arbor in the late 1970s, around sex work and prostitution. There was a really interesting visionary woman named Carol Ernst. We had disagreed on many things over the years; she was very involved with ideas for which I had little patience, like matriarchy theory and the patriarchal revolt as an explanation for women's oppression, and the idea that women had political power in societies that worshipped female deities. But you know how in small communities people tend to talk to each other even if they disagree or have really different perspectives. That was the case there, and we were friends. Carol did a number of things which were very important in that community. At one point she went to work for a local massage parlor. She ended up trying to unionize the sex workers, and sometime in the early 1970s she spearheaded a labor action against the parlor management. There were hookers with picket signs on the street in front of this dirty book store in downtown Ann Arbor, and the striking sex workers even filed an unfair labor practice complaint with the Michigan Labor Relations Board. It was amazing.

Then Carol left the massage parlor and went to work for the bus company, where she was also deeply involved in labor issues and unionization. Many Ann Arbor lesbians ended up working either at the massage parlor or the bus company, which we fondly referred to as "dial-a-dyke." During the mid 1970s, the three major employers of the lesbian community in Ann Arbor were the university, the bus company, and the massage parlor. It's pretty comic but that's how it was.

Then the massage parlor where many of the dykes worked was busted. One of the arrested women was a really wonderful, good-looking, athletic butch who happened to be the star left-fielder of the lesbian softball team. The local lesbian-feminist community suddenly had to deal with the fact that many of their friends and heroes had been arrested for prostitution.

JB: Fabulous.

GR: Most of the rest of us initially had a stock response, which was that they shouldn't be doing this work and that they were upholding the patriarchy. The arrested women and their supporters formed an organization, called PEP, the Prostitution Education Project. They put the rest of us through quite an educational process. They asked how what they did was so different from what anyone else did for a living. Some said they liked the work more than other kinds of work available to them. They asked why it was more feminist to work as secretaries and for longer hours and less money. Some said they liked the working conditions; the busted parlor even had a weight room where the jocks worked out while waiting for clients. They demanded that we deal with prostitution as a work issue rather than a moralistic one. They brought in Margo St. James and had a big hookers' ball to raise funds for the legal defense.

Carol Ernst was later tragically killed in an automobile accident. But she was a visionary, and her peculiar combination of feminist and labor politics really left an imprint. She challenged me on my rhetorical use of prostitution to make debating points about the horror of women's oppression. I used to convince people to feel moral outrage by comparing the situation of women in marriage and similar sexual/economic arrangements to prostitution. Carol argued that I was using the stigma of prostitution as a technique of persuasion, and that in so doing I was maintaining and intensifying such stigma at the expense of the women who did sex work. She was right. I finally realized that the rhetorical effectiveness came from the stigma, and decided that my rhetorical gain could not justify reinforcing attitudes which rationalized the persecution of sex workers. All of these incidents began to eat away at some of my preconceptions about how to think about power and sex, and the politics of sex.

I was also getting more and more alarmed at the way the logic of the woman-identified-woman picture of lesbianism had been working itself out. By defining lesbianism entirely as something about supportive relations between women rather than as something with sexual content, the woman-identified-woman approach essentially evacuated it—to use a popular term—of any sexual content. It made it difficult to tell the difference between a lesbian and a non-lesbian. These were tendencies of thought common in local lesbian communities. Adrienne Rich in a way codified a certain approach that was widespread at the time, in which people didn't want to distinguish very much between lesbians and other women in close supportive relationships. And I found this both intellectually and politically problematic. A lot of things that were not by any stretch of the imagination lesbian

were being incorporated into the category of lesbian. And this approach also diminished some of what was interesting and special about lesbians. I had initially been incredibly excited about the woman-identified woman ideas, but I was starting to get a sense of their limitations.

JB: Is it that you objected to calling “lesbian” the whole domain of female friendship?

GR: In part. I objected to a particular obfuscation of the categories, and of taking the limited world of nineteenth-century romantic friendship, bound as it was by rigid sex role segregation and enmeshed in marriage relations, as some kind of ideal standard for lesbian existence. I objected to the master narrative that was then developing in lesbian historiography, in which the shifts which undermined that world were seen as entirely negative, a fall from grace, an expulsion from Eden engineered by nasty sexologists with their knowledge of carnal desires. I did not like the way in which lesbians motivated by lust, or lesbians who were invested in butch/femme roles, were treated as inferior residents of the lesbian continuum, while some women who never had sexual desire for women were granted more elevated status. This narrative and its prejudices were expressed in the title of the Nancy Sahli article, which was called “Smashing: Women’s Relationships Before the Fall.” It is highly developed in Lillian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men*. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s original 1975 essay deliberately blurred some of the distinctions between categories of lesbianism as a sexual status and other types of female intimacy, but she refrained from using romantic friendship as the standard by which lesbianism should be measured. I suppose the most vulgar reduction of this “paradise lost” narrative of lesbian history can be found in Sheila Jeffreys’s work.

JB: But then Rich’s notion of the continuum, I take it you . . .

GR: Rich’s piece shares many of the same elements and assumptions that turn up in the historical work. I was not opposed to historical research on these relationships, but thought it was a mistake to privilege them in defining the category of “lesbian,” either historically or in a contemporary context, and to judge other forms of lesbianism as wanting, degraded, or inferior. For example, from reading *Surpassing the Love of Men*, you might conclude that “mannish lesbians” were concocted by the sexologists as a plot to discredit romantic friendship. In addition, both Sahli’s and Faderman’s

analyses imply that the conditions which enable the emergence of sexually aware lesbians, conscious lesbian identities, and lesbian subcultures in the late nineteenth century are regrettable, because they undermined the old innocent passions and pure friendships. Then nothing much good happened for lesbians until the emergence of lesbian feminism in the early 1970s. Unfortunately, this ostensible dark age happens to coincide with much of the early development of lesbian cultures, literatures, identities, self-awareness, and politics.

This narrative structure oversimplified the complexities of these friendships, obscured their class components, and obliterated many important distinctions. This is a much longer discussion than we can have here, but the point I want to make is just that this categorical system submerged many historical and social complexities in a romantic, politicized, and limited notion of lesbianism. It, moreover, displaced sexual preference with a form of gender solidarity. The displacement was both moral and analytical. While female intimacy and solidarity are important and overlap in certain ways with lesbian erotic passions, they are not identical and they require a finer set of distinctions.

Another problem in the late 1970s was presented by gay male politics. Feminism was also used quite a bit as the political theory of gay male politics, and it didn't work very well. Very little gay male behavior actually was granted the feminist seal of approval. Most of the actual practice of gay male culture was objectionable to many feminists, who mercilessly condemned drag and cross-dressing, gay public sex, gay male promiscuity, gay male masculinity, gay leather, gay fist-fucking, gay cruising, and just about everything else gay men did. I could not accept the usual lines about why all this stuff was terrible and anti-feminist, and thought they were frequently an expression of reconstituted homophobia. By the late 1970s, there was an emerging body of gay male political writing on issues of gay male sexual practice. I found this literature fascinating, and thought it was not only helpful in thinking about gay male sexuality, but also that it had implications for the politics of lesbian sexual practice as well.

And then there was just the whole issue of sexual difference. I am using the terminology of "sexual difference" here to refer to what has otherwise been called perversion, sexual deviance, sexual variance, or sexual diversity. By the late 1970s, almost every sexual variation was described somewhere in feminist literature in negative terms with a feminist rationalization. Transsexuality, male homosexuality, promiscuity, public sex, transvestism, fetishism, and sadomasochism were all vilified within a feminist

rhetoric, and some causal primacy in the creation and maintenance of female subordination was attributed to each of them. Somehow, these poor sexual deviations were suddenly the ultimate expressions of patriarchal domination. I found this move baffling: on the one hand, it took relatively minor, relatively powerless sexual practices and populations and targeted them as the primary enemy of women's freedom and well being. At the same time, it exonerated the more powerful institutions of male supremacy and the traditional loci for feminist agitation: the family, religion, job discrimination and economic dependency, forced reproduction, biased education, lack of legal rights, and civil status, etc.

JB: OK. Well let's go back for a minute. You spoke earlier about how you were forced to rethink the notion of prostitution, and I gather that it became for you something very different. You spoke about rethinking prostitution both as a labor question and a question of women's work. You then talked about the desexualization of the lesbian, and you also talked about how gay male politics had feminism as its theory, and yet that theory didn't really fit with the kinds of practices that gay men were engaged in.

GR: Toward the late seventies and early eighties, just before AIDS hit and changed everyone's preoccupations, there was an emergent literature of gay male political theory of sexuality. Much of this appeared in North America's two best gay/lesbian newspapers at the time, *The Body Politic* and *GCN (Gay Community News)*. There were articles on public sex, fist-fucking, man-boy love, promiscuity, cruising, public sex, and sex ads. Gay men were articulating an indigenous political theory of their own sexual culture(s). This body of work evaluated gay male sexual behavior in its own terms, rather than appealing to feminism for either justification or condemnation.

Looking back, it seems clear to me now that many things were happening almost at once. Somehow, the political conditions of sexual practice were undergoing a shift in the late 1970s, and the emergence of creative gay male sexual political theory was part of that. The major development was the phenomenal growth of the New Right. By the late 1970s it was mobilizing explicitly and successfully around sexual issues. The New Right had a strong sexual agenda: to raise the punitive costs of sexual activity for the young, to prevent homosexuals (male and female) from obtaining social and civic equality, to coerce women to reproduce, and so forth. Then the anti-porn movement erupted into feminism in the late 1970s. WAVPM (Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media) was founded around 1976-77, and WAP

(Women Against Pornography) followed in 1979. Samois, the first lesbian SM organization, was founded in 1978. There was something profound going on; some larger underlying shift in how sexuality was experienced, conceptualized, and mobilized. “Thinking Sex” was just one response to this change in the social and political weather. I think my work shifted because something different was happening and my set of operating assumptions and tools was not adequate for helping me navigate the shifts.

JB: I gather that you also objected to the available language in which so-called sexual deviants were described.

GR: I looked at sex “deviants,” and frankly they didn’t strike me as the apotheosis of patriarchy. On the contrary, they seemed like people with a whole set of problems of their own, generated by a dominant system of sexual politics that treated them very badly. They did not strike me as the avatars of political and social power in this society. So I asked myself, what’s wrong with this picture? It seemed to me that many feminists had simply assimilated the usual stigmas and common hatreds of certain forms of non-normative sexual practice which they then rearticulated in their own framework.

I was also becoming dissatisfied with the dominance of certain kinds of psychoanalytic interpretations of variant sexualities, and the common presumption that psychoanalysis was the privileged site for interpreting differences of sexual conduct. Despite its limitations and its problems, psychoanalysis has a certain power and utility for thinking about issues of gender identity and gender difference. By contrast, much of the psychoanalytic approach to sexual variation, also known as perversion, struck me as incredibly reductionist and over-simplified. Moreover, many of these traditional approaches to “perversion” had come into feminism almost uncriticized. For me, the explanatory potency of psychoanalysis seemed much more limited with regard to sexual variation.

For example, to look at something like fetishism and say it has to do with castration and the lack, or maybe it’s the knowledge of castration, or maybe it’s the denial of the knowledge of castration, or maybe it is the foreclosure of the knowledge of, or the displacement of the knowledge . . . well, it says very little to me about fetishism.

When I think about fetishism I want to know about many other things. I do not see how one can talk about fetishism, or sadomasochism, without thinking about the production of rubber, the techniques and gear

used for controlling and riding horses, the high polished gleam of military footwear, the history of silk stockings, the cold authoritative qualities of medical equipment, or the allure of motorcycles and the elusive liberties of leaving the city for the open road. For that matter, how can we think of fetishism without the impact of cities, of certain streets and parks, of red-light districts and “cheap amusements,” or the seductions of department store counters, piled high with desirable and glamorous goods (Walkowitz, Peiss, Matlock)? To me, fetishism raises all sorts of issues concerning shifts in the manufacture of objects, the historical and social specificities of control and skin and social etiquette, or ambiguously experienced body invasions and minutely graduated hierarchies. If all of this complex social information is reduced to castration or the Oedipus complex or knowing or not knowing what one is not supposed to know, I think something important has been lost.

I want to know about the topologies and political economies of erotic signification. I think that we acquire much of our grammar of eroticism very early in life, and that psychoanalysis has very strong models for the active acquisition and personalized transformations of meanings by the very young. But I do not find the conventional preoccupations of psychoanalysis to be all that illuminating with regard to the shifting historical and social content of those meanings. So much of the input gets—to borrow some phrasing—foreclosed, denied, or displaced. There is a lot of very interesting and creative and smart psychoanalytic work. But when I wanted to think about sexual diversity, psychoanalytic approaches seemed less interesting to me. They seemed prone to impoverish the rich complexity of erotic meaning and conduct.

Moreover, it seemed that many psychoanalytically based approaches made a lot of assumptions about what certain variant erotic practices or preferences meant. These interpretations, mostly derived *a priori* from the literature, were then applied to living populations of individual practitioners, without any concern to check to see if such interpretations had any relevance or validity.

There has also been a kind of degradation of psychoanalytic approaches, when the language and concepts are applied with great enthusiasm and little discrimination. Instead of vulgar Marxism, we now have a kind of vulgar Lacanianism. Even the best ideas from truly creative minds can be overused and beaten into the ground. I remember sitting in the audience of one conference and thinking that there was now a “phallus ex machina,” a kind of dramatic technique for the resolution of academic papers. I was remembering an image from a famous Japanese print, where

the men have these very large cocks, and one man has a member so huge that he rolls it around in a wheelbarrow. I had this image of the phallus being brought up to the podium on a cart. I have heard a few too many papers where the phallus or the lack were brought in as if they provided profound analysis or sudden illumination. On many of these occasions, they did neither.

At some point, I went back and read some of the early sexology and realized that Freud's comments on the sexual aberrations were a brilliant, but limited, intervention into a preexisting literature that was very dense, rich, and interesting. His brilliance and fame, and the role of psychoanalytic explanation within psychiatry, have given his comments on sexual variation a kind of canonical status. Even though many of his successors ignored or reversed his insights, Freud's prestige has been used to legitimate the later psychoanalytic literature as the privileged discourse on the "perversions." This has eclipsed a vast sexological enterprise that was roughly contemporary with Freud and which was actually more directly concerned with the sexual "aberrations" than he was.

Early sexology has many problems of its own. Besides being sexist and anti-homosexual, the earliest sexology treated pretty much all sexual practice other than procreative heterosexuality as a pathology. Even oral sex was classified as a perversion. The dominant models were drawn from evolutionism, particularly a kind of Lamarckian social evolutionism that was deeply embedded in ideologies of the ostensible superiority of the societies of white Europeans. But sexology, particularly after Krafft-Ebing, actually *looked* at sexual variety, taking sexual "aberrations" or "perversions" as its primary subject. Sexologists began to collect cases, and to record studies of living, breathing, speaking inverts and perverts. Their data collecting was very uneven—some were better at it than others. And many historians are pointing out the limitations of their empirical practices. For example, from her work on the Alice Mitchell trial, Lisa Duggan has discussed how sexologists unsceptically treated newspaper reports, or reports from other sexologists, as primary data. Robert Nye and Jann Matlock have analyzed assumptions and prejudices, especially about men and women, which shaped the early configurations of the categories of sexual fetishism and perversion. Nonetheless, early sexological compendia are incredible sources to mine. Even Krafft-Ebing is useful. For example, actual "inverts" and "perverts" read his early work and wrote him. They sent him their life histories, their anguished self-examinations, and their angry social critiques. Some of these were duly published in the later editions of *Psychopathia Sexualis*. So there are these amazing voices, like the early activist invert who

eloquently denounces the social and legal sanctions against homosexuality. Or there is an account of what was called the “woman-haters” ball, but was actually a drag ball in turn-of-the-century Berlin. The detailed description notes that the dancing was accompanied by “a very fine orchestra” and that many beautifully bedecked “women” suddenly lit up cigars or spoke in a deep baritone.

JB: Who were the other sexologists you were thinking of?

GR: Well Havelock Ellis is one of the best of them. Magnus Hirschfeld was also very important. Ellis and Hirschfeld probably did the most, before Freud, to normalize and destigmatize homosexuality and other sexual variations. An indication of Ellis’ power as a polemicist can be seen in the famous letter Freud wrote to an American mother who was worried about her homosexual son. Freud assured her that many great individuals were homosexual, and that homosexuals should not be persecuted. He advised her, if she didn’t believe him, to go “read the books of Havelock Ellis” (Abelove 381).

Ellis and Freud both acknowledge a considerable debt to Hirschfeld. Virtually everyone who writes about homosexuality at the turn of the century cites Hirschfeld’s journal, the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* [*The Journal for Intermediate Sexual Stages*]. Other important sexologists included Albert Moll, Albert Eulenberg, and Iwan Bloch. In the first footnote to his famous essay on the sexual aberrations, Freud lists several of the most influential sexologists. These are the writers with whom he is in dialogue. They each have their own approach, and some are more interesting than others. Despite a limited theoretical apparatus, there is a rich social, historical, and cultural complexity reflected in this literature that gets lost in much later psychoanalytic writings.

My sense is that Freud was not all that interested in “perverts” or “inverts”; he seemed much more excited by neurosis and the psychic costs of sexual “normality.” Yet his interventions into turn-of-the-century sexology have overshadowed the context in which he was writing and the memory of that substantial and fascinating literature. In any event, instead of just taking off from Freud or later psychoanalysis, I thought it would be a good idea to go back to that literature before the psychoanalytic branch became so dominant, and see what could be learned from the issues and materials that were salient to those who first looked at sexual diversity as their main object of study.

JB: And Foucault, I presume he offered you an alternative to psychoanalysis. You were reading the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* somewhere around this time as well.

GR: Yes. That was published in English in 1978. I immediately gravitated to it. As you can see from my copy here it is very marked up and dog-eared. That was a very important book. I do think that because of his undoubted stature, other work in the field of sexuality is retrospectively credited to him. There was a debate recently on one of the gay studies lists on the Internet, in which Foucault was credited as the originator of "social construction" theory. The key roles of people like Mary McIntosh, Jeffrey Weeks, Kenneth Plummer, and a host of other historians, anthropologists, and sociologists were completely erased in the context of this discussion. It astonishes me how quickly people forget even recent history, and how much they are willing to project current attitudes back as a fictive chronological sequence. I was influenced by Weeks as much as Foucault. In my opinion, Weeks is one of the great underappreciated figures in gay studies and the social theory of sexuality. He published the basic statement of social construction of homosexuality in 1977, the year before Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was translated.

Many others who were working in the field of gay or lesbian history were rapidly coming to the same kinds of conclusions. I had been researching the history of lesbianism in the early 1970s, and quickly became aware that there was some discontinuity in the type of available data and the kinds of characteristic persons called "lesbian" before and after the late nineteenth century. There were earlier records of women who had relationships with women, and records of cross-dressing or passing women. But it seemed there was no significant evidence of self-conscious, self-identified lesbians, or lesbian communities, or a kind of lesbian political critique, until the turn of the century.

In 1973, I took another course that changed my life. It was "The Urbanization of Europe, 1500–1900," and was given by Charles Tilly (also at the University of Michigan). Tilly described how industrialization resulted in massive transfers of population from countryside to cities, how urban life was subsequently transformed, and how the forms of voluntary association available to city dwellers differed from those in peasant villages. Another major theme of the course was how the language and repertoire of political action changed in different historical periods. We spent a lot of time on different structures of revolutionary action and political protest in France,

and how these changed over time and were specific to particular historical circumstances. Another theme of the course was the way in which forms of individual consciousness changed in the course of all these developments. We discussed E. P. Thompson's work on shifts in how people experienced time, and I was already familiar with Althusser's discussions of different forms of historical individuality (*Reading* 251–53). It was a short jump from the impact of urbanization and industrialization on repertoires of political protest, the conventions of time, and forms of historical individuality, to thinking about how different forms of sexual identity and subjectivity might have resulted from the same large scale social changes. These ideas seemed to make sense of what I was finding in my explorations of lesbian history. I didn't label any of this as "social construction," but I was reaching for ways to think about such issues. But many different scholars were taking the common approaches of social history, anthropology, and sociology, and applying these in a consistent way to homosexuality. There was a widespread convergence of this kind of thinking about male and female homosexuality, and a sudden paradigm shift, in the mid 1970s.

I was unaware of the extent of Foucault's involvement in this emerging paradigm, but I had some idea that he was doing research on sexuality and homosexuality. I had met Foucault earlier, when I was studying in France in the summers of 1972 and 1973. One of my friends was a wonderful man named Larry Shields. We were both completely obsessed with "structuralism," which was what we then called most of the contemporary French thought. We had read Lévi-Strauss and what there was of Lacan, and books of Foucault's such as *The Order of Things*. But there was so little of this material around, and we wanted to go to the source. We got grants to go off to Paris to do research on structuralism. Well, Larry dutifully sat in the main reading room at the Bibliothèque Nationale reading Godelier, Lyotard, Kristeva, and Baudrillard.

But I found that my French was inadequate to this task. As a game to find my way through the labyrinthine catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale, I started looking for some obscure lesbian novels that I had not been able to get my hands on for the part of my senior thesis on lesbian literature. When I found that they had Liane de Pougy's *Idylle Sapphique* (her *roman à clef* about her affair with Natalie Barney), I went up to the Réserve room to read it. I found a whole deposit of books by the Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien crowd, with penciled marginalia containing incredible biographical information on the cast of characters. So I ended up spending the summer in the Réserve, clutching my dictionary and verb book, reading dirty lesbian novels.

GR/JB: (in unison) My/Your French was good enough for that!

GR: Well, one day Larry spotted Foucault in the main reading room, and we got up our nerve and asked him out for coffee. We were totally dumbfounded when he accepted. So we went out for coffee, and he asked us what we were doing. Larry enthusiastically reported on his explorations of cutting edge theorists. When Foucault asked me what I was doing, I very sheepishly admitted that I was reading lesbian novels upstairs in the Réserve. To my surprise, he seemed completely nonplussed, and just said, “Oh, I’ve been studying sodomy convictions.” He explained that while sodomy laws were on the books for most of European history, they were only sporadically enforced. He was curious about what determined such patterns of enforcement. This was totally unexpected; I was astonished.

He was incredibly friendly and approachable, and gave us his address and phone number. I thought no more about it until I saw the *History of Sexuality* in 1978. I was just starting my research on the gay male leather community in San Francisco. I was going to France for a feminist conference. I mailed Foucault the very rough draft of my dissertation proposal, and told him how much I loved his new book. I thought my work might interest him at a theoretical level, but I expected him to be put off by specific things, like the focus on gay male SM. Once again he surprised me, by inviting me to dinner. It was not until I got to the dinner that I finally realized that he was homosexual, that he seemed perfectly comfortable about SM, and that I could stop worrying about offending him.

JB: So what was it in Foucault that you found useful to your thinking about sexual practices and sexuality in general?

GR: I thought his discussion of the emergence of a new relationship between systems of alliance and sexuality, at least in certain Western industrial countries, was very insightful. You know, I said earlier that many people seem to have overinterpreted the last few pages of “Thinking Sex.” I was not arguing there that kinship, gender, feminism, or psychoanalysis no longer mattered in any way. Rather, I was arguing that there were systems other than kinship which had assumed some kind of relative autonomy and could not be reduced to kinship, at least in the Lévi-Straussian sense. When I wrote about that, I very much had in mind the section from the *History of Sexuality* where Foucault says, “Particularly from the eighteenth century onwards, Western societies created and deployed a new apparatus which

was superimposed on the previous one” (106). He never says it *replaces*, he says “superimposed.”

JB: Right, right.

GR: “And which, without completely supplanting the latter helped reduce its importance.” That is the actual phrase. It does not supplant, it simply reduces its importance. “I am speaking of the deployment of sexuality: like the deployment of alliances it connects up with the circuit of sexual partners, but in a different way. The systems can be contrasted term by term.” And then he says, “For the first”—that is, alliance—“what is pertinent is the link between partners and definite statutes. The second is concerned with the sensations of the body, the quality of the pleasures, and the nature of impressions, however tenuous or imperceptible these may be.” Then on the next page he goes on to explain that “it is not exact to say that the deployment of sexuality supplanted the deployment of alliance” (107). He writes, “One can imagine that one day it will have replaced it, but as things stand at present, while it does tend to cover up the deployment of alliance, *it has neither obliterated the latter, nor rendered it useless. Moreover, historically it was around, and on the basis of the deployment of alliance that the deployment of sexuality was constructed*” (emphasis added). And then he goes on to write, “Since then it has not ceased to operate in conjunction with a system of alliance on which it had depended for support” (108). He even says the family is the “interchange” of sexuality and alliance. “It conveys the law in the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality, and it conveys the economy of pleasure, and the intensity of sensations in the regime of alliance.” He even calls the family “the most active site of sexuality” (109). Echoing this discussion, it never occurred to me that anyone would think I was arguing that kinship or the family, and their respective dynamics, have *ceased* to have any relevance. What he was saying helped me to think about the outlines of another system that had different dynamics, a different topography, and different lines of force. In this whole section by Foucault, you can hear the echoes of his conversations with Lévi-Strauss and Lacan. I felt that his assessment of those relationships was novel, insightful, and accurate.

There were so many things I loved about this book—the brilliance and descriptive richness of his writing, his rearrangement of the dominant concepts of sexuality, his interpretations of Freud, Lacan, Reich, and Lévi-Strauss, the dazzling insights, his models for social power, his ideas

about resistance and revolution, the depth of his commitment to social and historical causality.

He generated many wonderful phrases—such as the proliferation of perversions. It gave me new ideas, provided some really clear and vivid language, and confirmed that my own preoccupations at the time were not completely absurd. I had given a couple talks on the emergence of modern lesbianism and homosexuality, and many people who heard them probably thought, politely, that I was out of my mind. Finding out that both Weeks in *Coming Out* and Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* had come to similar conclusions, and had a similar understanding of a set of historical and theoretical issues, was immensely reassuring and helped shape my subsequent work.

JB: I realize that you don't want to discount the force of kinship altogether, but isn't there another issue here, namely, developing a vocabulary to articulate contemporary configurations of kinship. I guess another question for me is whether various supportive networks within the lesbian and gay community can't also be understood as contemporary forms of kinship.

GR: You can understand them that way, but then you are using kinship in a really different way. When people talk about gay kinship, for example, they are using a different model of kinship. Instead of Lévi-Strauss, it is based more on the work of David Schneider, who wrote about kinship in America. You have to be specific about how the term is used. In a Lévi-Straussian sense, kinship is a way of generating a social and political structure from manipulations of marriage and descent. In a more vernacular sense, particularly in complex societies like this one, kinship can mean simply the social relations of support, intimacy, and enduring connection. This use of kinship is very different from the Lévi-Straussian notion of kinship.

JB: Well of course it is. But doesn't that mark the conservatism of the Lévi-Straussian notion?

GR: Yes, but I'm saying that the terms are not quite commensurate. In feminist theory, a lot rides on that Lévi-Straussian notion of kinship, which can't just be switched into a more fluid notion of modern or gay-type kinship systems. So one has to be careful about what one is then saying about

kinship in this different sense. A system of voluntary association is very different from a system in which obligatory marriages create dynastic systems or other forms of political organization.

Lévi-Strauss is talking about societies in which those relations of marriage and descent *are* the social structure. They either organize almost all of the social life, or they are the most important and visible institutional apparatus. In modern systems, kinship is already a structure that is much reduced in institutional importance. It is not radical to say, in anthropology, that kinship doesn't do in modern urban societies what it used to do in pre-modern cultures. Furthermore, gay kinship closely resembles what anthropologists would call "fictive" or "informal kinship." Such systems of informal or fictive kinship are even less institutionalized and structurally stable than those relationships which are reinforced by state authority.

JB: Right. Well, I would certainly say that kinship can't possibly be the predominant way in which we try to take account of the complexity of contemporary social or sexual life. I mean, that seems clear. On the other hand, it seems to me that the Foucaultian historiography that you have just noted takes for granted the Lévi-Straussian account of kinship and presumes that this form of kinship is itself something in the past.

GR: No. I don't mean to suggest that. Again, one issue is how we are defining kinship.

JB: OK. Because if we understand kinship as obligatory relations, or we think about societies that are governed by obligatory kinship relations, then certainly we would be able to say that is not commensurate with social life as we live it. On the other hand, it seems to me that kinship itself may have lost some of that obligatory status, or is in the process of losing it. And I am wondering if there is some value in holding on to the term "kinship" precisely in order to document that shift in the way in which the social life of sexuality is reconfigured and sustained.

I guess this becomes important when people want to say that feminism, especially in its psychoanalytic or structuralist mode, could talk about kinship. But that particular discourse can't possibly describe the complexity of more modern arrangements or regulatory powers that are governing sexuality. And I think that the problem has been that some people have taken this distinction to be the basis of the distinction between what feminism ought to do, namely look at kinship and gender and psychoanalysis, and

what sexuality studies ought to do. And then some people, I think, have taken that a step further and have said that sexuality is the proper “object,” as it were, of gay and lesbian studies, and have based the whole methodological distinction between feminism and gay and lesbian studies on the apparent autonomy of those two domains. So maybe it would be better if I just asked you to address that question now.

GR: You have several different issues here. To take one pertinent at the time I wrote “Traffic,” there was a still a kind of naive tendency to make general statements about the human condition that most people, including me, would now try to avoid. When you read Lévi-Strauss or Lacan, they make pretty grandiose generalizations. Plus they never hesitate to call something *the* theory of this and *the* theory of that. I often wonder if that usage reflects a grandiosity that is no longer possible or, if it is only an artifact of the translation. In French everything has an article in front of it. So “*la théorie*” in French can mean something quite different from *the* theory in English. In “Traffic,” I simply absorbed the idioms and innocent universalism of the time. By the time I wrote “Thinking Sex,” I wanted to make more modest claims. That was part of why, in “Thinking Sex,” I noted that the Lévi-Straussian/Lacanian formulations might or might not be accurate for other societies, even as I was certain that they had limited applicability to our own. I had acquired some skepticism about the universality of those models.

As for this great methodological divide you are talking about, between feminism and gay/lesbian studies, I do not think I would accept that distribution of interests, activities, objects, and methods. I see no reason why feminism has to be limited to kinship and psychoanalysis, and I never said it should not work on sexuality. I only said it should not be seen as the privileged site for work on sexuality. I cannot imagine a gay and lesbian studies that is not interested in gender as well as sexuality and, as you note in your paper, there are many other sexualities to explore besides male homosexuality and lesbianism. But I am not persuaded that there is widespread acceptance of this division of intellectual labor between feminism, on the one hand, and gay and lesbian studies on the other. And it was certainly never my intention to establish a mutually exclusive disciplinary barrier between feminism and gay and lesbian studies. That was not an issue I was dealing with. I was trying to make some space for work on sexuality (and even gender) that did not presume feminism as the obligatory and sufficient approach. But I was not trying to found a field. For one thing, at that time the institutionalization of gay and lesbian studies was a fond dream that seemed

far removed from the realm of immediate possibility. And yet, on the other hand, gay and lesbian studies as an enterprise was well underway. “Thinking Sex” was part of that ongoing process.

Some of the context for “Thinking Sex” was the developing project of gay and lesbian studies, especially gay and lesbian history and anthropology. There now seems to be a certain amnesia about the early work of lesbian and gay studies, as if the field only just started in the early or mid 1980s. This just isn’t true. There are whole strata of work in lesbian and gay scholarship which date from the early 1970s and which came out of the gay liberation movement. These in turn built on even earlier research based in the homophile movement. Gay scholarly work was not institutionalized in academia and many of the people who did that work in the 1970s have paid a high price in terms of their academic careers. Lesbian and gay studies certainly didn’t start with me, or at such a late date.

For example, the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project started in 1978. A lot of work was begun in the excitement of that time: Allan Bérubé’s work on gays in the military, Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis’s work on the Buffalo lesbian community, and my research on gay male leather were all undertaken then. By that time, there were many other scholars involved, and most of us were in communication and dialogue with one another and with one another’s work.

Jonathan Ned Katz’s *Gay American History*, John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, Jim Steakley’s *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany*, and Jeffrey Weeks’s *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain* were from an even earlier period. There was another book on the German gay rights movement by John Lauritsen and David Thorstad published in 1974. By the very early 1970s, lesbian scholars were starting to build on the earlier, pathbreaking bibliographic studies by Jeannette Foster and Barbara Grier. I bring this work up to note that gay and lesbian studies preceded “Thinking Sex” and that it was a thriving scholarly enterprise long before it began to be institutionalized.

JB: Well, tell us what you had in mind then when you wanted to designate the provisionally autonomous status of sexuality as a field.

GR: I wanted to have better scholarship on sexuality, and a richer set of ideas about it than were readily available. I wanted to be able to articulate a sexual politics that did not assume that feminism was the last word and holy writ on the subject. Just as I had a decade earlier wanted a way

to think about gender oppression as distinct from class oppression (though not necessarily unrelated or in opposition), I later wanted to be able to think about oppression based on sexual conduct or illicit desire that was distinct from gender oppression (although, again, not necessarily unrelated or in opposition to it). I felt that we had to be able to articulate the structures of sexual stratification and make them visible in order to contest them. I thought that if we did not, progressive constituencies would unwittingly play into a very reactionary sexual agenda, which has, alas, too often been the case. I was afraid that if there were no independent analysis of sexual stratification and erotic persecution, well-intentioned feminists and other progressives would support abusive, oppressive, and undeserved witch hunts.

I think by then a certain kind of feminist orthodoxy had become an edifice with some of the same problems that had earlier plagued Marxism. Instead of class, gender was often supposed to be the primary contradiction from which all social problems flowed. There was an attitude that feminism now had the answers to all the problems for which Marxism was found wanting. I remember that one Marxist scholar made a wonderful comment about a certain approach to Marxism, which I thought was beginning to be applicable to a certain kind of feminism as well. I cannot recall who made the comment, although I think it was Martin Nicolaus. But the comment criticized those Marxists who treated *Capital* as if it were a lemon, as if by squeezing it hard enough all the categories of social life would come dripping out. By the early 1980s, there were many people who approached feminism in the same way. For some, feminism had become the successor to Marxism and was supposed to be the next grand theory of all human misery. I am skeptical of any attempt to privilege one set of analytical tools over all others, and all such claims of theoretical and political omnipotence.

I approach systems of thought as tools people make to get leverage and control over certain problems. I am skeptical of all universal tools. A tool may do one job brilliantly, and be less helpful for another. I did not see feminism as the best tool for the job of getting leverage over issues of sexual variation.

I certainly never intended “Thinking Sex” as an attack on feminism, any more than I intended “Traffic” as an attack on Marxism. “Traffic” was largely addressed to an audience drenched in Marxism and can be easily be misunderstood in an era whose preoccupations are so different. I find the current neglect of Marx a tragedy, and I hope to see a revival of interest in his work. Marx was a brilliant social thinker, and the failure to engage important and vital issues of Marxist thought has weakened social and political analysis.

“Thinking Sex” similarly assumed a largely feminist readership. It was delivered at a feminist conference, aimed at a feminist audience, and written within the context of feminist discussion. I do not consider it an attack on a body of work to say that it cannot do everything equally well.

Finally, I wanted to add sexual practice to the grand list of social stratifications, and to establish sexuality as a vector of persecution and oppression. In the 1960s, the important stratifications were pretty much understood to be caste, class, and race. One of the great contributions of feminism was to add gender to that list. By the early 1980s, it had become clear to me that adding gender did not take care of the issues of sexual persecution, and that sexuality needed to be included as well.

JB: Your own work has become descriptively very rich, especially the ethnographic work, and earlier, with respect to the sexologists, you applaud their efforts for being full of valuable descriptive data. You mention as well that they “looked at” cases and practices. Is “looking at” in this sense a theoretical activity? In other words, don’t we look with or through certain kinds of theoretical suppositions? And are certain kinds of practices “seeable” or “unseeable” depending on which theoretical presuppositions are used? Perhaps you would like to take this opportunity to speak a bit more about the relationship between descriptive and theoretical work?

GR: Yes, of course; whenever we look at anything we are already making decisions at some level about what constitutes the “seeable,” and those decisions affect how we interpret what it is that we “see.” The paradigms that informed early sexology produced a certain set of interpretations and explanations which I would reject, particularly the presumption that sexual diversity equals sexual pathology. The assumptions of sexology structured many of the categories and presuppositions that we are still dealing with today, for example, the idea that women are less capable of, less prone to, and less adept at sexual perversions than men. At the same time, their approach enabled sexologists to bring sexual diversity, however misperceived, into their field of view. It is, as it were, at the center of their lens, at the focal point of their enterprise. While Freud had, in general, a lens with better optics and higher resolution, sexual diversity was more at the edge of his field of view. In a way, it remains there in much subsequent work, including large parts of feminism.

But your question raises another issue for me, and that is the way in which empirical research and descriptive work are often treated as some

kind of low-status, even stigmatized, activity that is inferior to “theory.” There needs to be a discussion of what exactly is meant, these days, by “theory,” and what counts as “theory.” I would like to see a less dismissive attitude toward empirical work. There is a disturbing trend to treat with condescension or contempt any work that bothers to wrestle with data. This comes, in part, from the quite justified critiques of positivism and crude empiricism. But such critiques should sharpen the techniques for gathering and evaluating information rather than becoming a rationalization for failing to gather information at all.

One friend of mine likes to say, “All data are dirty.” Take this to mean that data are not just things out there waiting to be harvested, with intrinsic meanings that are readily or inevitably apparent. Data, too, are socially constructed, and there are always perspectives that determine what constitutes data or affect evaluations of what can be learned from data. Nonetheless, it is a big mistake to decide that since data are imperfect, it is better to avoid the challenges of dealing with data altogether. I am appalled at a developing attitude that seems to think that having no data is better than having any data, or that dealing with data is an inferior and discrediting activity. A lack of solid, well-researched, careful descriptive work will eventually impoverish feminism, and gay and lesbian studies, as much as a lack of rigorous conceptual scrutiny will. I find this galloping idealism as disturbing as mindless positivism.

I also find preposterous the idea that empirical work is always easy, simple, or unanalytical. Unfortunately, virtuoso empirical work often goes unrecognized. Good empirical research involves as much thought and is as intellectually challenging as good conceptual analysis. In many ways, it is more challenging. I know this is a completely heretical opinion, but it is often more difficult to assemble, assimilate, understand, organize, and present original data than it is to work over a group of canonical texts which have been, by now, cultivated for so long by so many that they are already largely digested. There is plenty of “theory” in the best empirical studies, even if such studies often fail to cite the latest list of twenty-five essential authorizing or legitimizing “theorists.”

Moreover, many people who deal with data are trained to be sophisticated about how to evaluate empirical material. Some who proclaim the supremacy of theory and who are contemptuous of empirical research can be quite naive about the material used in their own “theoretical” work. Often, data come in, as it were, by the back door. In the absence of empirical research or training, some ostensibly theoretical texts end up

relying on assumptions, stereotypes, anecdotes, fragments of data that are out of context, inaccurate details, other people's research, or material that is recycled from other so-called "theoretical texts." So some extremely dirty data get enshrined as "theory." The opposition between "theoretical" and "empirical" work is a false, or at least, distorted one; the imbalance between conceptual analysis and data analysis needs some redress. In short, I would like to see more "interrogation" of the contemporary category of "theory," and of the relationships between such "theory" and empirical or descriptive research.

There is another specific problem I see with regard to sexuality. There is a common assumption that certain kinds of conceptual analysis or literary and film criticism provide descriptions or explanations about living individuals or populations, without establishing the relevance or applicability of such analyses to those individuals or groups. I have no objection to people performing dazzling analytic moves upon a body of assumptions or texts in order to say interesting things about those assumptions or texts. I have nothing against philosophy, literary analysis, or film criticism per se. But I have a problem with the indiscriminate use of such analyses to generate descriptions of living populations or explanations of their behaviors.

For example, there is a trend to analyze sexual variance by mixing a few privileged "theoretical" texts with literary or film criticism to produce statements about either the thing (e.g. "masochism") or the population (e.g. "masochists"). The currently fashionable "theory" of sadomasochism is Deleuze's long 1971 essay on "masochism." Despite the fact that Deleuze based much of his analysis on fiction, primarily Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs* and some texts of de Sade, he is taken to be an authority on sadism and masochism in general. Since he is known as a theorist, his comments on sadism and masochism are surrounded with the penumbra of "Theory."

Deleuze treats differences in the literary techniques of de Sade and Sacher-Masoch as evidence for ostensible differences between "sadism" and "masochism." But what are the "sadism" and "masochism" of which he speaks? Are they literary genres? Practices of living sadists and masochists? Floating formations of desire? He makes sweeping generalizations about "sadism" and "masochism," such as "sadism negates the mother and inflates the father; masochism disavows the mother and abolishes the father. . . . There is an aestheticism in masochism, while sadism is hostile to the aesthetic attitude . . ." (115). I find statements like these fairly meaningless, intelligible only because of a psychoanalytic tradition that has equated par-

ticular constellations of sexual desire with alleged universals of childhood development. What troubles me is that such generalizations are and will be taken as descriptive statements about those persons and populations who might be considered “masochistic” or “sadistic.”

Deleuze is very smart, and it also seems clear from his text that he had some acquaintance with practicing perverts. But his empirical knowledge enters primarily as anecdote. He seems familiar with female dominance, particularly by professional Mistresses. He seems to generalize from some literature and some kind of personal knowledge to make statements about “masochism” and “sadism” in a broader context. This essay is fascinating, yet hardly definitive. It is nonetheless becoming an authoritative text for writing about masochism and sadism.

There are now discussions which draw on Deleuze to analyze the “masochistic aesthetic,” “the masochistic text,” “masochism’s psychodynamics,” or “masochistic narrativity.” Such usage implies that masochism is an “it,” a unitary phenomenon whose singular psychodynamic, text, aesthetic, or narrativity are not only knowable but known. Leaving aside the issue of what terms like this mean, I see a danger that statements about what “masochism” in this sense “is” or “does” or “means” will be taken as descriptions or interpretations of what actual masochists are, do, or mean. Yet, the authority of these statements is not derived from any systematic knowledge of masochism as it is practiced by masochists. It is derived from an analytic apparatus balanced precariously upon Deleuze’s commentary, de Sade’s fiction and philosophical writings, Sacher-Masoch’s novels, psychoanalytic writings on the etiology of masochism, various other texts and films, and personal anecdote.

I have this quaint, social science attitude that statements about living populations should be based on some knowledge of such populations, not on speculative analysis, literary texts, cinematic representations, or preconceived assumptions. And I can hear the objection to what I’m saying already: “but Deleuze,” someone is bound to say, “is Theory.”

JB: So tell us more about the kind of work you are currently doing, and how it negotiates this tension between conceptual and descriptive domains. You just completed your study on the gay male leather community in San Francisco. What is it that you sought to find there?

GR: Well, when I started this project I was interested in the whole question of sexual ethnogenesis. I wanted to understand better how sexual

communities form. This question came out of work I had done in lesbian history, and initially I was trying to figure out where lesbian communities came from, or how they come to exist. I became curious about gay male as well as lesbian communities. Then I realized that many sexualities were organized as urban populations, some quite territorial. I started to wonder about what stork brought all of these sexual populations, and how it happened. This was all part of reorienting my thinking about such categories as lesbianism, homosexuality, sadism, masochism, or fetishism. Instead of seeing these as clinical entities or categories of individual psychology, I wanted to approach them as social groups with histories, territories, institutional structures, modes of communication, etc.

As an anthropologist, I wanted to study something contemporary. There were a number of reasons why I picked this community, but one was that it had crystallized since World War II. There were still individuals around who were involved then, from the late 1940s on. I had access to them, and could study this fascinating process whereby some sexual practice or desire that was once completely stigmatized, hidden, and despised could actually be institutionalized in a subculture in which it was considered normal and desirable. The building of subcultural systems designed to facilitate non-normative sexualities is an interesting process.

And in many ways, the gay male leather community is a textbook case of sexual social formation, although the sexualities within it are more complex than I initially thought. For one thing, "leather" does not always mean "SM." Leather is a broader category that includes gay men who do SM, gay men who are into fisting, gay men who are fetishists, and gay men who are masculine and prefer masculine partners. Leather is a multivalent symbol that has different meanings to different individuals and groups within such communities. Among gay men, leather and its idioms of masculinity have been the main framework for gay male SM since the late 1940s. Other groups organize similar desires in different social and symbolic constellations. For example, heterosexual SM for most of the same period was not organized around the symbol of leather, idioms of masculinity, or urban territories. "Leather" is a historically and culturally specific construct in which certain forms of desire among gay men have been organized and structured socially.

I also did not know when I began this research that at least one sexual activity, fist-fucking, seems to have been a truly original invention. As others have pointed out, fisting is perhaps the only sexual practice invented in this century. It may have been practiced in the early 1960s. But it really

became popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then spawned its own unique subcultural elaboration and institutionalization.

Within the gay male leather community, you get this particular unity of the kinky and the masculine in a way that you don't see among heterosexuals or lesbians where those things are mapped out differently. It is a very unique and interesting way of putting certain sexual practices together.

JB: What is the significance of the combination of masculinity and kinkiness?

GR: That is a huge subject, and requires a much longer discussion than we can have here. Among gay men, the adoption of masculinity is complicated, and has a lot to do with rejecting the traditional equations of male homosexual desire with effeminacy. Since the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a slowly evolving distinction between homosexual object choice and cross-gender or trans-gender behavior. A masculine homosexual (like a feminine lesbian) was once considered an oxymoron; such persons existed but were "unthinkable" in terms of the hegemonic models of sexuality and gender. The development of the leather community is part of a long historical process in which masculinity has been claimed, asserted, or reappropriated by male homosexuals.

Gay male leather, including gay male SM, codes both desiring/desired subjects and desired/desiring objects as masculine. In this system, a man can be overpowered, restrained, tormented, and penetrated, yet retain his masculinity, desirability, and subjectivity. There are also symbolics of effeminate homosexual SM, but these have been a relatively minor theme in the fifty years of gay male leather. Other communities don't combine these things in the same way. During most of the same time period, heterosexual SM was organized more through sex ads, professional dominance, and some private social clubs. For heterosexual SM, leather was a fetish, but not the core symbol which anchored institutionalization. Straight SM was not territorial, and if anything, the dominant stylistic idioms were feminine.

The imagery of heterosexual SM and fetishism draws on a lot of feminine symbolism. SM erotica aimed at male heterosexuals often has mostly female characters, and the few male characters are often effeminized. There are many reasons for this, including the idiosyncrasies of the history of legal regulation of SM erotica. But evidently many heterosexual men have fantasies of being lovely young ladies. Most of the better equipped houses of

dominance have a special room for cross-dressing male clients who pay handsomely for the privilege. These “fantasy” rooms are distinguished from “dungeons” or “medical” rooms. They are often decorated in pink frills and ruffles. One typical heterosexual SM scenario may involve a woman dressed in feminine attire, dominating a man who may be overtly or covertly “effem-inized.” Moreover, this feminine imagery is not as hegemonic for heterosexual SM as is masculine imagery for gay male SM. I do not mean to imply that there are no “masculine” heterosexual male masochists or sadists. But a visible and common style of heterosexual SM involves a feminine woman and an effeminated man, a sort of fantasy “lesbian” couple. Meanwhile, among actual lesbian sadomasochists, there seems to be a pretty even distribution of masculine and feminine styles, genders, and symbolism.

JB: I'd like to bring us back to gender.

GR: You would! I will only say that I never claimed that sexuality and gender were always unconnected, only that their relationships are situational, not universal, and must be determined in particular situations. I think I will leave any further comments on gender to you, in your capacity as the reigning “Queen” of Gender!

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