

## Reading questions:

### Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women."

Originally written as an undergraduate term paper in a seminar with Marshall Sahlins at the University of Michigan, Rubin's essay grapples with the contemporary dominance of Marxism in feminist politics simultaneously with French structuralism and in particular the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss on anthropology. She takes his analysis of kinship and radicalizes it: if we understand that kinship doesn't carry the functional load that it did in earlier societies, can we see it as a now-ideological structure that serves to reproduce a "sex/gender system"?

1. What is a "sex/gender system"? (See pp. 159, 165, 168)
2. "Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever is the local version of 'feminine' traits; in women, of the local definition of 'masculine' traits. The division of the sexes has the effect of repressing some of the personality characteristics of virtually everyone, men and women. The same social system which oppresses women in its relations of exchange, oppresses everyone in its insistence upon a rigid division of personality" [180]. So is [dimorphic?] gender unnatural and androgynous natural? What, exactly, could be being "repressed"?
2. "It is certainly plausible to argue ...that the creation of 'femininity' in women in the course of socialization is an act of psychic brutality, and that it leaves in women an immense resentment of the suppression to which they were subjected" [196]. How does Rubin reach this conclusion? Do you agree that the socialization of girls as 'feminine' in this culture is suppressive? If so, what is suppressed?
3. "The organization of sex and gender once had functions other than itself—it organized society. Now, it only organizes and reproduces itself. The kinds of relationships of sexuality established in the dim human past still dominate our sexual lives, our ideas about men and women, and the ways we raise our children. But they lack the functional load they once carried. One of the most conspicuous features of kinship is that it has been systematically stripped of its functions— political, economic, educational, and organizational. It has been reduced to its barest bones—*sex and gender*" [199]. Does kinship only "organise and reproduce itself"? What reading of kinship in contemporary Canada would support Rubin's case here?
5. "The exegesis of Lévi-Strauss and Freud suggests a certain vision of feminist politics and the feminist utopia. It suggests that we should not aim for the elimination of men, but for the elimination of the social system which creates sexism and gender...[W]e are not only oppressed *as* women, we are oppressed by having to *be* women, or men as the case may be... [T]he feminist movement...must dream of the elimination of obligatory sexualities and sex [sic] roles" [204]. Do you agree? If so, what role (if any) is played by a more current notion of *sex* (as in, features of bodies that currently signify "male" and "female")?
6. "What we need is a political economy of sexual systems. We need to study each society to determine the exact mechanisms by which particular conventions of sexuality are produced and maintained." [177] What sex/gender system have we inherited? What functions does it serve?