

# Why Feminists Should Engage in the Queer Theory

by Sonia Corrêa

**A personal note**

When the editors of *WIA* invited me to contribute to this issue, I hesitantly said yes. But even after accepting the assignment, my reluctance did not vanish. The reason behind it is that while I see the creation of bridges across dominant feminist thinking and queer theorising as one main challenge of our times, the time frame in front of me was too tight to examine the subject as deeply and as thoroughly as required. When I finally decided to engage in the task, it was to be in a limited frame. I will use the next few pages to argue why it is crucial for feminist activists to be more acquainted with contemporary theories of gender and sexuality. These arguments derive from my own intellectual trajectory. But they also relate to the meaning of these theoretical frames in current moral and political debates as well as to the polyphony of voices claiming rights in contemporary gender and “sexscapes.”

The reflections that will follow are, however, far from complete. They do not do justice to the vastness of existing literature on how gender, sexuality, and feminism interweave but which, at the same time, also become often out of joint. The reflections also barely tackle the richness and complexities found in the sexual politics of our times. This writer apologises for these limitations, and expects that in another opportunity and with more time, they can be overcome.<sup>1</sup>

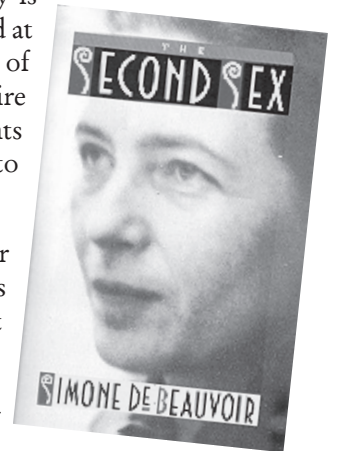
**Anatomy, (patriarchy), gender, and beyond**

The first signals of what we presently call “queer theory” were already present in Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949)

affirmation in *The Second Sex* that anatomy as a destiny determines the placement of women—in history, philosophy, and twentieth-century societies. Its corollary is that all projects aimed at changing the position of the “second sex” require the biological imprints of male and female to be contested.

While de Beauvoir was my first serious exposure to feminist thinking, the next one would be Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), leading to the adoption of patriarchy as my key feminist concept. Engels’s thinking in respect to the connections between women, sex, the economy, and biology is paradoxical. His major insight was to identify sexuality as a crucial site to be examined if we want to understand men’s control over women and the need to explore the linkages between male sexual control and sexual division of labour. However, his assumptions about sex, women, and biology remained embedded in nineteenth-century scientific positivism:

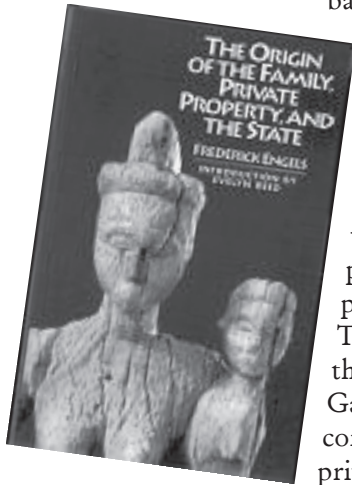
Engels identifies female sexuality as a means of production. Patriarchs control women’s sexuality to control inheritance just as they control the trees to gain control over land property.... The theory does not lack cultural and political consistency and appeal. But from the epistemological point of view it can and should be included



- 1 **Sonia Corrêa**  
(photo by RD Marte)
- 2 **Judith Butler**  
([www.brynmawr.edu](http://www.brynmawr.edu))
- 3 **Friedrich Engels**  
([sbdisorientation.org](http://sbdisorientation.org))
- 4 **Jeffrey Weeks**  
([cadigweb.ew.usna.edu](http://cadigweb.ew.usna.edu))
- 5 **Gayle Rubin**  
([www.lsa.umich.edu](http://www.lsa.umich.edu))
- 6 **Simone de Beauvoir**  
([www.weltchronik.de](http://www.weltchronik.de))
- 7 **Michel Foucault**  
([www.photos12-vintage.com](http://www.photos12-vintage.com))

among the various expressions of sex essentialism, or of sex as natural force, a natural means of production that precedes social life (Corrêa, 1996).

Therefore, looking at it retrospectively, my shift from de Beauvoir to Engels made me step backwards with respect to a more substantive critique of the supposedly unshakeable male and female nature. But in 1980, I had the opportunity to read Rayna Reiter's *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (1975), in which a few landmark feminist pieces of the seventies were published, including "The Trafficking in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," by Gayle Rubin.<sup>2</sup> After 30 years, I still consider Rubin's article to be one privileged point of entry for those who want to know better about and engage in sex thinking.



It is not possible to summarise Rubin's insights in shorthand. But, in the context of this brief exercise, doing this cannot be evaded. Rubin starts by sharply criticising the caveats of Marxist theory to explain women's subordination to subsequently engage in a hard wrestling with Levi-Strauss, Freud, and Lacan theories. She sorts out of the match—having in hands, as a trophy—the one definition of the sex/gender system that would extensively influence our endeavours in the years to come:

A Sex/Gender system corresponds to the totality of arrangements through which society transforms human biological sexuality in human activities, and through which human needs can be both

satisfied and transformed. The adoption of a gender system favours the deconstruction of gender differences which were and still are interpreted and rationalised as being the result of an immutable natural and biological order, as to start thinking of them as socially and historically constructed circumstances, which can be transformed...<sup>3</sup>

In between, Rubin provides striking illustrations about the variation of sex and gender orders—mostly collected in non-Western cultures—while she searches for the underlying logic that would explain the inequality of power between men and women across these variations. Her first main insight derives from Levi-Strauss and concerns the meaning of kinship, marriage and, most principally, of the exchange of women between groups of men:

Kinship systems do not merely exchange women. They exchange sexual access, genealogical statuses, lineage names and ancestors, rights and people—men, women and children—in concrete systems of social relationships.... The exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights themselves...<sup>4</sup>

In a further step, this insight is interweaved with Rubin's critical revisiting of core psychoanalytical concepts—the incest taboo, the Oedipus crisis, phallic dominance, female masochism. The aim of this inquiry is to more fully understand how in the transition from biology to culture—from imprinted drives to language—one becomes a man or a

woman. After this complex path, Rubin (1975) daringly affirms:

I personally feel that the feminist movement must dream of even more than elimination of the oppression of women. It must dream of elimination of obligatory sexuality and sex roles. The dream I find most compelling is one on an androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and to whom one makes love."

Though Rubin was not the only feminist author engaged in the invention of gender in the seventies, it was through her that my imagination was captured by the concept of a sex/gender system.<sup>5</sup> As years elapsed, I would be exposed to other gender frames, such as those specifically designed for gender mainstreaming (Moser: 1990; Young: 1990). Nevertheless, the subversive imprint of gender/sex theory, as Rubin had deployed it, remained alive at the back of my mind.

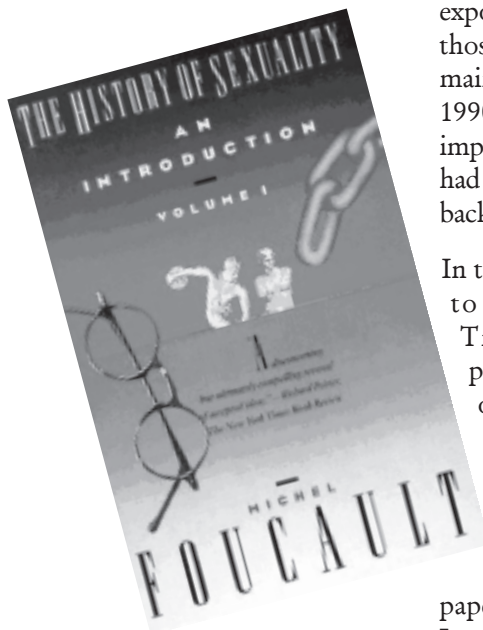
In this brief overview, it is important to note that Rubin's "The Trafficking in Women" was published one year before the series of 1976 seminars conducted by Michel Foucault, from which emerged the *History of Sexuality* (1980). Once again, like in Rubin's work, it is not possible to fully examine in this short paper Foucault's outstanding legacy. In a nutshell, the *History of Sexuality* would become the other main intellectual enterprise behind the contemporary understanding of sexuality as a historical construct and

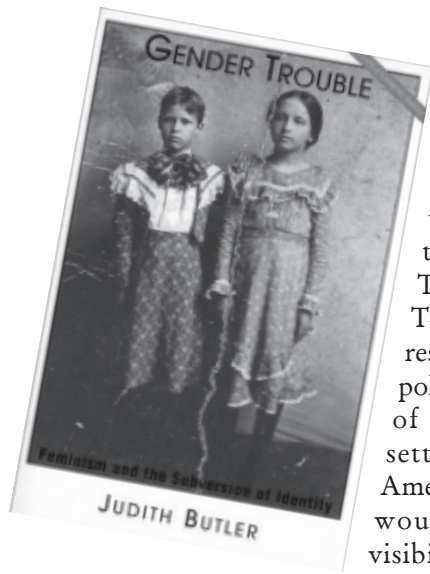
of the necessary distinction between sexual acts and sexed identities. Additionally, Foucault sharply articulates sex and power by examining the way in which discourses and disciplines—religious norms, law, and scientific assumptions generate "sex." In the words of Butler (1990):

Foucault officially insists that sexuality and power are co-extensive and that we must not think that by saying yes to sex we say no to power. [He] argues that sexuality is always situated within matrices of power, that it is always produced within specific historical practices, both discursive and institutional, and that recourse to sexuality before the law is an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory sexual politics.

From there on the intellectual production on gender and sexuality as socio-cultural constructs would blossom (Vance, 1984 & Weeks, 1981 are just the better known examples).<sup>6</sup> In 1984, Rubin (in Vance, 1984) critically revised her initial frame by distinguishing the gender and the sexuality systems as two articulated but different spheres of social representation and practice. In the same paper, she grounded the notion of sex hierarchies, which is one important building block of queer theories. This new wave of theorising was put into circulation in a peculiar political and social scenario.

In industrialised societies, while the societal effects of the sixties' cultural revolution waned, moral conservative reactions gained strength, such as the





anti-abortion and anti-pornography movements in the United States (US) and the election of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations. This triggered movements of resistance and re-creation of political agendas. In the South of the Equator, in a few settings, particularly Latin America, gender and sex issues would gain strength and visibility under the impact of democratisation.

Most importantly, in the most diverse settings, the outburst of the HIV and AIDS epidemics would forcefully open the grounds for public debates on sex and enhance the surge of new political sexual communities and identities. In this changing environment, the strength of these theoretical frames illuminated new in-roads in research (but also in advocacy) that argued for sexual pluralism, plasticity, and

never do precisely because that would get one in trouble.... The prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task [is] how to best make it, what best way to be in.

Once again what I can bring here is a minimalist illustration of Butler's remarkable work that weaved the initial embroidery of what would later be named queer theorising. Like Rubin, she bravely wrestles with philosophy, psychoanalysis, and anthropology to destabilise all conceptual strands that attributes to "sex" a sort of material nature, which after being molded by culture becomes "gender." Instead, Butler affirms that "sex" (the naming of anatomical differences) is itself a cultural construct. She also recaptures concepts such as "masquerade" (from Joan Riviere, the early twentieth century British psychoanalyst), impersonation (from anthropological and cinema studies) and, most principally, the observation of drag queen performances of being a woman (the drag queen Divine is her illustration) to define bodies "*as variable boundaries, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated*" and to conceptualise *gender performativity* (one *leitmotiv* of queer theory):

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malleability, even if the pace of absorption of these new ways of thinking gender and sex varied widely across countries and communities.

In 1990, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* was published. The book starts with an instigating game of words:

...To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its own genesis, the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend those

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not agreeing to believe in them....  
The historical possibilities materialised through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress (Butler, 1990).

Butler’s idea-image of performativity leads our imagination almost automatically to the fringe expressions of gender bending: the drags, the tranvestites, the transgender and transsexuals or the *metis*, *hijras*, and *kotis* from India. Although these “margins” remain crucial sites of queer research and theorising, Butler’s project is more ambitious in proposing that the “queering” (masquerade, impersonation, parodies) of sexual dissidents, most principally, provides us with a lens to critically disclose the fake nature of genders, or, if we want, of heterosexual identity itself. It is quite hard to admit the fake nature of genders. The idea that male and female are true, natural, stable, and discrete realities is deeply imprinted in our mindsets (perceptions about who we and others are), bodies (the ways bodies are domesticated and used), spaces, and tools (sexual division of placement and labour).<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, it is maybe useful to resort to movie imageries to more precisely illustrate the depth of Butler’s project. Today, we know that not a few Hollywood actors—icons as they were—led quite heterodox sexual lives. The list includes Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant, Montgomery Cliff, Cesar Romero, and Rock Hudson, among others. Despite their bisexuality and homosexuality, the images they have projected on the screens sustained, for decades, in US society and far beyond, the idealisation of heterosexual love. Through Butler’s lenses, these female and male fascinating Hollywood impersonations—that left deep traces in my own “gender formation”—reveal the queerness of the contemporary Western romantic couple. Butler’s reflections, in addition to eroding the fixed sexed constructions of men and women, also provides a conceptual frame to contest other identity-based rights claims. Saying it differently, her thinking also destabilises gay, lesbian, and transgender rights conceived as minority rights.

I did not become acquainted with Butler’s work immediately after its publication. In fact I am still “reading” *Gender Trouble*. But, at that point, I had the opportunity to closely engage in Richard Parker’s work. His anthropological studies of male homosexuality in Brazil systematically underline as well the disjunctions between gender identity and sexual desires and practices (Parker, 1991). Another key contribution made by Parker is a conceptual frame that combines differentiated gender, sexuality and erotic systems. This multilayered perspective allows us to

examine how social identities, desires, sexual acts, and sexual norms may be entirely out of joint in the experience and perception of persons. It also enhances the visualisation of erotic justice, a daring concept few of us have been juggling with for some time (Corrêa, 1996).<sup>8</sup> Erotic justice in articulation with sexual rights may open the space for rights claim work that is not grounded in fixed gender and sexual identities.

### The uneasy match of theory and action

The connections and disjunctions between theory and political action are an unresolved inquiry of progressive political philosophy. The absorption of contemporary “sex thinking” and feminist activism is just one specific illustration of this perennial problem. In the early nineties in Brazil, this novel literature on sexuality

was read by feminists; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) people; and, most principally, HIV and AIDS researchers and activists, even when the use of theoretical frames was quite uneven and sometimes subject to controversy.<sup>9</sup>

By then my engagement with feminist global activism, most particularly in the realm of sexual and reproductive health and rights, intensified. Significantly, when I started moving “globally,” I realised that, in the political imagination of Pacific, Asian, African, and Caribbean activists, sexuality was not as relevant as it was in my own setting. In the DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) regional dialogues preceding the “International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD),” quite often the raising of sexual matters sounded “queer.” At that stage, the gender frame privileged by my partners emphasised empowerment—though in political not sexual terms—within the Feminist Marxist frame of social reproduction and sexual division of labour (which was consistent with the broader gender and development perspective emphasising North-South disparities).

In many places, feminists strongly criticised reproductive technologies—as an expression of capitalist male-dominance over women’s bodies. But very rarely was this critique extended to the disciplinary function of biomedical discourses and practices with respect to female sexuality along the lines developed by Foucault. It is not excessive to say that in the very eve of Cairo and Beijing, and their immediate aftermath, not many

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Photo by Malyn Ando

feminist voices would contest sex essentialism (sex as an unchangeable natural drive) and the fixed binary “nature of genders.” However, the feminist critique of “population

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discourses” would lead us unequivocally in the direction of fully addressing sexual matters simply because:

Sex is pivot in relation to which technologies of life are developed: sex is a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species; this means that sex offers a means of regulation of both individual bodies and the behaviour of “population” (*le corps politique*) as a whole (excerpt from Weeks’ summary of Foucault concept of biopower, 1996).

Not surprisingly, the ICPD Programme of Action was considered by many to have too much sex in it. Most importantly yet, as we know, a year later in Beijing, feminists were able to politically legitimise women’s sexual rights, even if paragraph 96 in the “Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)” does not explicitly mention the term. This was also a crucial partial achievement. However, the second sentence of the paragraph has a strong heterosexual imprint (Petchesky, 2000).<sup>10</sup> In addition, we have lost language on sexual orientation in the human rights section of the BPFA.

But in this context of analysis, what is more relevant to acknowledge is that paragraph 96 triggered in the most diverse settings a new and very positive way of conversations about sexuality (and gender) within feminist communities and, most importantly, between feminists and the many other subjects of sexual politics (ARC International & Action Canada for Population and Development, 2004; Campaña por la Convención de los Derechos Sexuales y los Derechos Reproductivos, 2005; CREA, Sangama and TARSHI, 2004).<sup>11</sup> These dialogues may favour the gradually overcoming of the estrangement between feminist activists and contemporary sexuality theories.

This, in my view, is crucial, because in my own perception, even if and when feminist activists have somehow absorbed the overall critique of sex essentialism, the distinction of sex (as nature) and gender (as culture) and the related binary conception of genders remains unshaken. Rosalind Petchesky constantly reminds me that to deconstruct feminist one-dimensional and binary thinking is one main challenge those of us engaged in sexual rights must tackle. The most widely known manifestation of this binary logic is found in the widespread conception/image of male total sexual power versus female sexual objectification.

I also often hear in feminist circles the argument that sexuality theorising is excessively complex to be adopted in gender-based feminist advocacy. This argument is not entirely out of place. The systematic and severe critique deployed by contemporary



sexuality theories with respect to institutions (particularly the State) and disciplinary systems—such as religious norms, biomedical assumptions, and the law itself—makes it not so easy to be absorbed by activists whose main focus is to change policies, norms and laws. But as Currah (2001), analysing specifically the US context, suggests: There are good reasons for rights claim

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(either civil rights or human rights) work in the domains of sexuality to be informed by insights of queer theorising even if *“those insights require some translation before they can be effectively deployed in the legal/political arena.”* We are therefore challenged to find ways to overcome this theoretical resistance and the eventual feeling of being lost in translation.

I am conscious that the reshaping of these lenses is not a minor task. First and foremost because male sexual brutality is a reality that everywhere requires political responses. But we must acknowledge that these realities do not portray the wide heterogeneity of sexual practices, whether these involve men and women or those in

which other sexualities are at play. Most importantly, it is extremely difficult for feminist activists to entirely detach themselves from the idea of women as a foundational category of political and juridical representation because a full step in that direction will make, somehow, the ground vanish beneath our feet. Philosophers and anthropologists who locate themselves at a distance from the muddy waters of political action can eventually do that step without panicking. But this should automatically disqualify their insights. As Joan Scott said a long time ago: There are no easy responses for difficult conceptual and political problems. If almost 60 years ago, de Beauvoir had not dared to contest anatomy as women’s destiny, many political realities would not have changed as they did.

### The “real politics” of queering

Those of us directly engaged in the preparation for the Beijing Conference lively remember that in the March 1995 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) session operating as the last Preparatory Committee for the conference, the term “gender” was bracketed in the negotiation under the pressure of the Holy See and few Islamic countries. Meanwhile, pamphlets were distributed to delegates affirming that:

Unfortunately there is a gender feminism,’ often homosexual, which strongly promotes the idea that gender is something fluid, changing, not related naturally to being a man or being a woman. According to such feminist/

homosexual ideology, there are at least five genders! (Coalition for Women and the Family)

At that point, this grotesque propaganda made many of us laugh. But a few of us already detected in the operation a serious engagement on the part of the religious right with queer theorising.<sup>12</sup> But it would take some time before we fully realised the extension and depth of this right wing intellectual investment. This would take place in August 2004 when the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith issued the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World.” Upfront in the introduction, the text of the Letter analyses the evolution of feminist thinking—without ever mentioning the term “feminism”—to say that it has shifted from a confrontational position between women and men to a new approach that:

*In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of*

*historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed sex, is minimised, while the purely cultural element, termed gender, is emphasised to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels. This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from biological determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.*

This doctrinaire perspective was amplified and deepened in the recently launched encyclical letter “Deus Caritas EST,” whose full analysis would require much more space than what is available in this paper. But I can briefly share that in 2006 “International Women’s Day,” one main Brazilian newspaper had the ludicrous idea of publishing as its main March 8 opinion-editorial piece, an article by Dom Javier Echeverria, a Prelate Bishop of Opus Dei. The article “The World Needs the Feminine Genius” argues, in a very sophisticated language, that the ontological difference between women and men—as discrete and distinct manifestations of God—must be retained in order to preserve the positive contribution of the female genius to the sustaining of love and the world.

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While the absorption of contemporary gender and sexuality theories remains subject to resistance and suspicion among us...[the religious right] are systematically investing in a broad intellectual endeavor to politically disqualify contemporary sex thinking.

As we know, this perspective can easily capture ordinary people's imagination. Most importantly, it has strong affinities with the positions of not few feminist strands. It is not by accident, in my view, that the title of the article is directly derived from the French feminist thinker Julia Kristeva's trilogy on Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Collette, entitled *The Feminine Genius* (Kristeva, 1999). I do not want to imply that Kristeva—a remarkable theorist whose ideas about singularity are very inspiring—is politically aligned with Pope Benedict XVI. But rather to suggest that by making this choice, the Vatican (and Opus Dei) intellectuals reveal that they are fully aware that Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, developed a substantive critique of Kristeva's inquiries on "women's body and language (semiotic) difference."<sup>13</sup>



These new trends are both ironic and frightening. While the absorption of contemporary gender and sexuality theories remains subject to resistance and suspicion among us, our formidable adversaries [the religious right] are systematically investing in a broad intellectual endeavor to politically disqualify contemporary sex thinking. Concurrently, they are further carving existing rifts between distinctive streams of gender and sexuality theorising in an obvious *divide et impera* (divide and rule) political maneuvering.

But this unexpected and insidious operation of our adversaries is not the only compelling political reason for us to more fully engage in sex theorising and politics. As I was finalising this article, the Latin American Chapter of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission issued a statement structured in two sections: "Las Inominadas," and "Las Ausentes" ("The Unnamed" and The Absent").<sup>14</sup> The text is aimed at calling attention to the invisibility of intersex, transgender, *travestis* and transsexual women in the International Women's Day:

Their genitals are shown, commented, and studied, but their names are never mentioned. Their voices are not heard. The history and the struggle of women do not include them. Many bear in their flesh the experience of an endless violation. But for many they are not even real. They do not exist (As inomidas, 2006).

Many are caught by the police in the streets simply because they use dress and sandals. The majority does not find work. They are associated with scandal, prostitution, drugs, and crime.... They are objects of the eternal curiosity of the media as well as objects of study. But never as subjects themselves (As Ausentes, 2006).

These brief and incomplete reflections strongly suggest that we feminist activists are caught between the Vatican discourse on dignity and ontological female nature, and the call

for plasticity, visibility, and justice expressed by transgender, *travesti*, transsexual, and intersex women. These are signs of how dangerous and complex the political landscape in which we move has become. We may panic and retreat. But we can also use these dangers and complexities to reconsider the reluctance in respect to queer theories, and to start exploring its potentialities, as a tool to respond to fundamentalist voices and a bridge towards renewed dialogues and alliances across gender and sexual identities. ♪

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## Endnotes

1 *This author being a Brazilian, these reflections also reflect a situated perspective—and this is not trivial—from a so-called Southern-based feminist perspective. As hybrid as our culture may be, we do recognise the relevance of the Western legacy in it, particularly with respect to its intellectual dimensions. I belong to a specific generation that was both influenced by Marxism and French contemporary feminism and philosophy. It was much later that I got acquainted with the Anglo-Saxon feminist literature. Lastly, in recent years, my inquiries have shifted more and more from gender towards sexuality.*

2 *I should say the privilege, as at that point, we communicated by mail. In Brazil, many years could elapse before we had access to relevant materials published in other languages. Five years later, not many Brazilian feminists had been already exposed to Rubin's thinking. I greatly thank my dear friend Leni Silverstein for sending me the book at such an early stage in my feminist search for good theories.*

3 *This definition was elaborated by the Mexican feminist Teresita de Barbieri on the basis of Gayle Rubin's original frame. My preference for it is that it emphasises the greater disciplining strength of gender systems during the reproductive phase of human lives.*

4 *And she adds the following: "We need to study each society to determine the exact mechanisms by which particular conventions on sexuality are produced and maintained. The exchange of women is an initial step towards building an arsenal of concepts with which sexual systems can be described."*

5 *The list also includes Louise Lamphere, Michelle Rosaldo, and Shirley Ortner in the seventies, and Joan Scott in the early eighties, which I read much later.*

6 *Vance, C (Ed.). (1984). Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality; Weeks, J. (1998). La construcción cultural de las sexualidades. *Que queremos decir cuando hablamos de cuerpo y sexualidad?**

7 *This definition is inspired in Pierre Bourdieu's first famous article "La Domination Masculine."*

8 *To be fair, the notion of erotic justice emerges from both Parker's frame and the principles laid by Rubin in her 1984 paper about the requirements of fair treatment of sexual variation in both private and public domains.*

9 *For instance, Joan Scott's paper "Gender as a category for historical analysis" was clearly more widely read and accepted in feminist circles than Rubin's and Foucault's insights and approaches. In particular, "Thinking on sex," her 1984 revision that criticised the fusion of gender and sex, often provoked uneasiness. But these authors were widely accepted and used by sexuality and HIV and AIDS researchers.*

10 *Paragraph 96 reads as follows: "The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behavior and its consequences."*

11 *Just to mention a few examples: CREA, Sangama and TARSHI organised a conversation on sexual rights in India (2004). ILGA, IGLHRC, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, ARC International & ACPD were involved in a wide mobilisation of sexual rights activists around the "Resolution on Sexual Orientation and Human Rights" presented by Brazil at the UN Human Rights Commission in 2003. Since 2004, in Latin America, the "Campaign for a Convention on Sexual and Reproductive Rights" has mobilised a series of dialogues among feminist, gays, transgenders, travestis, and sex workers. In 2005, the Institute for Development Studies organised a broad-based workshop on realising sexual rights.*

12 *I remember Rosalind Petchesky in Beijing intensely saying to me: "These guys are reading post-modern theories of sexuality to more consistently erode our positions."*

13 *Kristeva's thinking is too complex to be summarised. But—in order not to leave the mention to female difference floating in the air—one way of synthesising her position is to say that she emphasises female semiotics or poetic language, which, in her view, is what can erode the Symbolic (that in the Lacanian tradition of psychoanalysis is always Phallic). In her vision, poetic language derives from the impossibility, especially for women, to fully relate with the inaccessible body of the mother.*

14 *This initiative must be situated in relation to a recent debate that swept Latin American feminist communities. In the preparations for the October 2005 "Regional Feminist Meeting," a harsh polemic burst out in respect to the participation of transgender and transsexual women. Few known transgender feminist activists were prohibited to attend the event. This action triggered a debate in the meeting itself in which it was finally resolved in favour of the participation of transgender, transsexual, and intersex women in the next event.*