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Queer Feminism: Cultivating Ethical Practices of Freedom

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ABSTRACT: Occupying an eccentric position with respect to critical theories, Foucault prefigures a queer critical thought and practice. In this paper I make a case for the continuing importance of Foucault for rethinking feminism within the context of neoliberal governmentality despite continuing skepticism about the value of his ethical writings. I draw not only upon the work of Foucault, but also that of queer feminist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Keywords: Queer, feminism, critical theory, neoliberalism, ethics.

Critique doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction that concludes, "this, then, is what needs to be done." ...It is a challenge directed to what is.¹

It seems to me that contemporary political thought allows very little room for the question of the ethical subject.²

We have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers.³

Foucault and Queer Feminism

How do we envision a queer feminist thought that continues to critically engage capitalism, techniques of power and domination, and subjection without relying upon Enlightenment humanism, whether in its more reformist liberal or Marxist formulations? What does Foucault offer those of us post-identity feminists interested in critical thought and social change in the current context of neoliberal capitalism? How might turning to queer theory deepen and extend his insights in ways that are amenable to such feminist purposes? In what follows I address two of Foucault's key contributions. This is done to make a case for his continuing im-

¹ Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method," in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press: 1994), 246-258, 256.

² Michel Foucault, "Ethics of Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press: 1994), 25-42, 36.

³ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume One, Ethics*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press: 1994), 303-319, 315.

portance, if not sufficiency, for any feminist engaged in radical critique in the name of freedom: his understanding of thought as a critical (and ethical) practice designed to loosen our attachment to present ways of thinking and doing; and the role of self-constitution or practices of freedom in his ethics. Insofar as Foucault regarded his books as “experience books” intended not only altered his relationship to himself and his present, but also to create transformative experiences in readers, his critical thought and archival research also constitute part of an overarching ethical project designed to enhance freedom by transforming our relationship to our present and thus ourselves—to alter our sense of how it might be possible to think and live.⁴

I argue for the desirability of a “queer feminism,” a term that refers to an eccentric, provocative and unruly feminist practice, one able to risk, challenge, and transform itself, any static sense of its beloved objects and self-understandings, its sense of temporal and spatial orders.⁵ Such a queer project does not limit itself to focusing on sexuality or gender at all, nor must it rule out talk of subordination and domination, yet it might draw upon certain moments in queer theory that take up Foucaultian intuitions in compelling ways. One such moment, the later writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is particularly compelling insofar as Sedgwick fleshes out and extends Foucault’s project of “thinking [and being] otherwise.”⁶ Sedgwick not only engages in an experiment of non-binary thinking, but she also recognizes a middle range of agency, an ethical project in which subjects constitute and sustain themselves by reworking the materials made available within the conditions in which they find themselves. Thus, she offers us a way of thinking about how to undo our attachments to particular self-understandings and practices and create others in the midst of subjection, normalization and the intensification of neoliberalism.

Linking Foucault’s critical thought to “queer” thinking, draws attention to its eccentric character, its differences from modern emancipatory theories, their theoretical aspirations, and ontological commitments. It could be especially important at moments when dominant political theories have reached an impasse, lost currency—moments when the time is ripe for a new direction in thinking.

Perhaps this is our time. Left feminist critic Wendy Brown captures the spirit of our time poignantly when she asks: “what does it mean for feminist scholars to be working in a time after revolution, after the loss of belief in the possibility and the viability of a radical overthrow of existing social relations?”⁷ Furthermore, she observes that neoliberal capitalism “neither loves nor hates social differences... it exploits them in the short run and erodes them in

⁴ See Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), for treatment of his project as an “erotic ethics.”

⁵ See, for example, Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006) and Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) on the importance of rethinking space and time within a queer feminist project.

⁶ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure, Vol. 2* (NY: Vintage Press, 1990), 9.

⁷ Wendy Brown, “Feminism Unbound: Revolution, Mourning, Politics,” in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 98-115, 99.

the long run.”⁸ Lamenting the emergence and spread of the neoliberal “idea of the self as enterprise with its attendant extension of economic modes of rationality to all aspects of everyday life,” she captures neoliberalism’s capacity to tolerate and even profit from diversity and the queering of identity, a development that, according to some queer feminist theorists, nullifies the resistant potential of this strategy.⁹

To be sure, some feminists might regard Brown’s and other queer feminists’ embrace of a post-revolutionary, post-identity feminism as tantamount to a departure from feminism. After all, feminist theorists and philosophers still rely heavily upon liberal and socialist frameworks. Despite the fact that liberalism and Marxism are typically opposed to one another, both share an analysis of power that Foucault questioned. Adopting one or the other, as many second wave feminists did, committed them to one of at least three possible general strategies: seek equality with men, overturn the damaging values associated with masculinity and femininity while accepting some residual gender difference, or move beyond sex and gender altogether—to a time when sex and gender would lose their significance as markers of difference and human worth. These are not unreasonable tactics in particular situations. Even Foucault endorsed strategic liberal moves such as the demand for homosexual rights, regarding them as valuable but insufficient. Yet, despite his later hostility toward the Communist party, he chose to align himself with leftists. At the same time Foucault posed questions to politics as usual rather than endorse or reject any particular political theory and its program of social transformation.

Whether feminists are drawn to Foucault will depend upon their understanding of feminism and their sense of the main dangers confronting women in the world today. In any case, many of us queer critics can and should identify with feminism, with a sense that talk of subordination, normalization, and biopolitical regulation of women remains a significant and useful project.¹⁰ For example, women across the globe continue to be paid less than men; they are still more likely to be the targets of sexual assault or to be trafficked for sex and domestic work, and the working conditions for many women are abhorrent.¹¹ In the U.S. abortion

⁸ Brown, 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 106. To be sure, there is a growing literature opposed to my suggestion that queer practices can be mobilized against current modalities of power associated with neoliberal governmentality, for example, Shannon Winnubst, “The Queer Thing about Neoliberal Pleasure: A Foucauldian Warning,” in *Foucault Studies: Special Issue on Queer Theory*, edited by Jana Sawicki and Shannon Winnubst, no. 14 (September 2012), 79-97; Ladelle McWhorter, “Queer Economies,” in *Foucault Studies: Special Issue on Queer Theory*, edited by Jana Sawicki and Shannon Winnubst, *Foucault Studies*, no. 14: 61-78; Lois McNay, “Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics*,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26 (6) (2009), 55-77. I respond to some of the key counter-arguments in what follows.

¹⁰ To be sure, many have. Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and, I would add, more recently, Juana Maria Rodriguez, Cressida Heyes, Lynne Huffer, and Shannon Winnubst to name only a few, each appropriate Foucault and queer theory as feminists. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge Press, 2004); Sedgwick; Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (NY: New York University Press, 2003); Cressida Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007); Huffer, Winnubst.

¹¹ See Carole S. Vance’s subtle and sophisticated analysis of melodramatic distortions in feminist literatures on sex trafficking that threaten to undermine progressive legal remedies focused on exploitation of labor

rights are still under attack, poverty is still feminized, and beauty standards are disproportionately applied to women. Feminist commitments to resisting the domination and subordination of women need not rule out focusing on non-feminist resources in our efforts to recognize and resist the most perilous trends facing women across the globe. Moving beyond the limits of modern Western feminism could be understood as part of a necessary project of feminism's self-overcoming—one that cultivates attunement to the myriad forms that subordination and domination of women can take, including subordination that deploys Western feminism as well as queer theory in imperialist ways.¹²

Most importantly, Foucault's analytic of power and his queer approach to critique need not entail abandoning a focus on the subordination and subjection of women and the intolerable conditions in which some women live in the U.S. and across the globe. At the same time any appropriation of Foucault does question the possibility of human, thus women's emancipation, because of its necessary sensitivity to the ubiquity of power relations and the links between truth and power, its methodological refusal of liberal and Marxist economic understandings of power as a transferable possession, the specificity and multiplicity of women's situations, and the historical forces operating upon us such that we are often unaware of both the conditions that make present ways of thinking possible and *what we think and do*. But even if Foucault questioned the possibility and desirability of thinking in terms of total revolution, and by extension the emancipation of women as a group, his critical approach continues to be indispensable for freeing us from habits of thinking and doing that limit us to specific and unnecessarily constraining relations of power/knowledge within the present.¹³

Using Foucault does not commit us to any particular theory at all. Nor does it commit us to rejecting one. Instead he offers resources for those who want to fight specific and unnecessary or questionable constraints on freedom. Moreover, he does not offer us a *theory* of power, but a critico-historical ethical practice, in which he diagnoses trends in the present, develops an *analytic* of power, and identifies resources in the Western tradition for thinking and being otherwise. As I have indicated, one such trend is the emergence of neoliberal governmentality—a trend in global capitalism that Foucault presciently diagnosed thirty years ago.

rather than prostitution: Carole S. Vance, "Thinking Trafficking, Thinking Sex," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, volume 17, number 1 (2011), 135-143.

¹² For examples of the former, see Kelly Oliver, *Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex and the Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), and the latter, Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹³ Foucault remarks: "In fact, we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions. I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas which concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations, which have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century." (Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 316)

Thus, in occupying an eccentric position with respect to emancipatory theory, Foucault prefigured a queer critical practice that may be more important today than ever before. Neither Marxist nor liberal, Foucault invites us to think about and invent a form of governmentality that might increase practices of freedom, a form that he once suggested might be “appropriate” to a new form of socialism, rather than one that simply reverses power relations within established orders.¹⁴ Doing the latter, he suggests, does not change who we have become in the regimes of power/knowledge within which we find ourselves—hence he also turns to ethical work on the self, to practices of freedom necessary for the emergence of other ways of living.

Foucault’s Thought as a Queer Critical Practice

What I am doing in what follows is not particularly Foucauldian. I talk *about* him rather than do what he did in order to emphasize the eccentricity and the surprisingly modest aims of his critical project. Foucault’s queer position *vis-à-vis* existing ideological categories amused him.¹⁵ Rather than use critique to advance a political solution to a particular problem, he believed that the intensification of power/knowledge regimes associated with madness, punishment and sexuality, and ultimately, biopolitics, economics and neoliberalism, posed questions for politics as usual. The form of his critique owed something to observing the events of May 1968 when new social movements posed questions not addressed within extant emancipatory theories, particularly Marxism—“questions about women, about relations between the sexes, about medicine, about mental illness, about the environment, about minorities, about delinquency.”¹⁶ In each of these experiences Foucault identified three “fundamental elements”: “a game of truth, relations of power, and forms of relation to oneself and others.”¹⁷ Here we see the familiar triad of concepts associated with Foucault: knowledge, power, subjectivation, or in a later formulation, modes of veridiction, governmentality, and subjectivation. He clarifies and redescribes his project in this interview in an illuminating way, namely, as a thought practice and a history of problematizations:

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and goals. *Thought is freedom in*

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 94.

¹⁵ In a 1984 interview Foucault remarked: “I think I have in fact been situated in most of the squares of on the political checkerboard, one after another and sometimes simultaneously: as anarchist, leftist, ostentatious or disguised Marxist, nihilist, explicit or secret anti-Marxist, technocrat in service of Gaullism, new liberal, and so on... None of these descriptions is important by itself; taken together, on the other hand, they mean something. And I must admit that I rather like what they mean. It’s true that I prefer not to identify myself, and that I’m amused by the diversity of ways I’ve been judged and classified.” (Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics and Problematizations,” in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 1994), 18-24, 20).

¹⁶ Foucault, “Questions of Method,” 21-22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

*relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.*¹⁸

Typically, to address social problems, political theorists engage in polemical battles about the best approaches (even Foucault occasionally did so). In a polemical exchange the parties are not engaged in a search for truth; they are in an adversarial relationship in which neither party risks his or her own point view, each seeking to discredit or eliminate the others. No new ideas are produced. (A cursory glance at most blog sites and, increasingly, TV news, illustrates this point quite well.) Instead polemicists aim (whether consciously or not) to conserve one set of views at the expense of another. They are in effect caught within alternatives that may not be the only ones. In the place of such polemics, a practice that he found ethically troubling given its violence toward the other, Foucault substituted what he called “thought.” He asked: what makes a particular set of proposed solutions to emerging social problems possible, while others remain unimagined? What is the “general form of problematization” that serves as their conditions of possibility?¹⁹ In writing genealogical histories of such problematizations Foucault’s goal was to “develop a given into a question” and thereby show us how the range of possible, often opposing, approaches for addressing problems (madness, penalty, sexuality) has been either unnecessarily constrained or bound up with inequalities in ways that obscure their pernicious effects. Thus we might refuse particular problematizations and search for resources that enable us to think differently. For example, feminists might ask: what inequalities/power relations are obscured in our current ways of identifying problems and solutions? What are the constraining justificatory regimes in which we find ourselves? Where are we at an impasse in our thinking? What questions should we be posing to politics as usual? How do we open up a space for something different to emerge, for a transformation in our relation to present thinking and to ourselves? Of course this would require doing something like Foucault did.

As I have indicated, some feminists have argued that Foucault’s understanding of power precludes speaking in terms of women’s subordination. In order to challenge this reading I find it useful to revisit some of the key features of Foucault’s analytic of power. Succinctly put, according to Foucault’s conception, “power is the name one gives to a complex strategic situation in a given society.”²⁰ At a certain stage of Foucault’s thinking he understands power as strictly relational, a moving substrate of relations of force that are asymmetrical and unbalanced, forces acting within a calculated set of strategies or rationalities—a “controlled game” of power.²¹ Note though that nothing in this provisional definition of power precludes acknowledging imbalances in force relations, nonsymmetrical relations. This means that in certain situations one finds some individuals or groups at a disadvantage in relation to another group. It never means they cannot resist or fight back, or even reverse particular power

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” 23. (Emphasis added.)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973-1974*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

relations at certain moments. Sometimes a state of domination of one group by another, a state where no moves are possible, can result.²²

The aims of Foucault's approach to an historical analytic of power are easily misconstrued. As he points out in the 1978-1979 lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, he begins his historical work with a study of practices as they are given and as they reflect upon themselves, not with already given objects, namely, "all those universals employed by sociological analysis, historical analysis, and political philosophy" such as the state, the people, civil society, madness, the delinquent, the hysteric, the pervert, and so forth.²³ He continues:

[I]nstead of deducing concrete phenomena from universals, or instead of starting with universals as an obligatory grid of intelligibility for certain concrete practices I would like to start with these concrete practices and, as it were pass these universals through the grid of these practices.²⁴

Thus, with respect to his study of madness, he notes:

My question was not: Does madness exist? My reasoning, my method, was not to examine whether history gives me or refers me to something like madness, and then to conclude, no, it does not, therefore madness does not exist... The method consisted in saying: Let's suppose that madness does not exist. If we suppose that it does not exist, then what can history make of these different events and practices which are apparently organized around something that is supposed to be madness.²⁵

Consider extending this description to his study of sex and the *dispositif* of sexuality. There his method consisted in supposing (not proving) that "sex" does not exist. Once he suspends reference to the stated *raison d'être* for regulating bodies, pleasures, and relational norms as well as developing sciences of sexuality, he can bring into view many events and practices that use sex as an alibi for doing something else, namely, developing and integrating myriad techniques for normalizing and disciplining individuals and regulating populations. Finally, it is important to emphasize that he sets out to describe social and economic rationalities, not total-

²² See Paul Patton, "From Resistance to Government: Foucault's Lectures 1976-1979," in *A Companion to Foucault*, edited by Chris Falzon, Timothy O'Leary, and Jana Sawicki (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) for a discussion of the shifts in Foucault's conceptualizations of power from earlier to late writings, course lectures, and interviews. Patton locates the most "definitive" statement of Foucault's analytic of power in "The Subject and Power." (See Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose. New York: The New Press, 1994), 126-144). Note that the form of power associated with neoliberalism will involve a shift from concerns about training, discipline and normalization of individuals to forms of power associated with establishing statistical norms, and finding techniques for ensuring certain aggregate behaviors in populations. The interior of subjects becomes less important than finding ways to "conduct the conduct" of individuals with more distant and less costly regulatory mechanisms than those required in the disciplinary society that Foucault described in his middle writings.

²³ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

ities—that is, justificatory regimes, the conditions of possibility for the emergence of certain subject positions, what can be said, who can say them—conditions that establish what arguments for and against any give practice or authority can be launched. In effect Foucault brackets existing ontologies in favor of a project to map power/knowledge relations and practices of subject formation occluded within specific justificatory regimes or problematizations that do not question the given.

Rather than tell a story about how history alters or invalidates concepts such as “madness,” “delinquency,” and “sex,” he maps the complex strategic situations and material processes that he finds when he suspends universals at the start in order to diagnose trends in the present not visible otherwise. To be sure, his historical work might suggest that things we take as given (sex is a good example) are historical or social constructs, but in fact Foucault did not set out to show this. He begins with the suspension of the universal, to show us something else, namely, relations of power bound up with enabling, resisting, and ever-changing configurations of power/knowledge. His lectures on governmentality—techniques and rationalities that emerge for conducting conduct—one’s own and that of others—also begin in the same way, they too are histories of governmental *rationalities*. Insofar as any regime of power/knowledge establishes a specific rationality, it constrains the justificatory strategies available within that regime. By mapping parts of these complex strategic games, Foucault in effect gives a better sense of possible moves we might make, and resources that the game affords. This would be just as true of his genealogical work on neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. It treats neoliberalism as a form of rationality, a justificatory regime, a complex strategic situation, a pernicious trend, and not a social and political totality that pervades the globe, though it may threaten to become that.

Self-Constitution and Ethics as a Practice of Freedom

Judgments concerning the significance and value of Foucault’s turn to ancient Greco-Roman ethical practices in the wake of his lecture courses on governmentality are by no means univocal; questions abound about what sort of work his forays into the ancient origins of our ethical thinking do in the present. Do these writings represent an excavation of pre-Christian and pre-modern practices that might provide resources for countering the erosion of ethics within neoliberal governmentality, given its preoccupation with maximizing utilities, returns on human investment, and success or failure? Is he simply excavating the genealogy of “desiring man”? Is his concern principally political? How do we relate the ethical to the political? Is he pointing to possible resources for resisting present modalities of power? Or to resources for a future time when we are freed from forms of domination at the current juncture?

Feminist responses to Foucault’s ethical writings on ancient Greco-Roman ethical practices have ranged from outright dismissal to qualified and even enthusiastic endorsement.²⁶

²⁶ For some recent examples of the latter see Dianna Taylor, “Toward a Feminist Politics of Ourselves,” in *A Companion to Foucault*, edited by Chris Falzon, Timothy O’Leary and Jana Sawicki (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Heyes; Jana Sawicki, “Foucault, Queer Theory, and the Discourse of Desire,” in *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O’Leary and Chris Falzon (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 185-203; and Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

Those who reject the viability and desirability of this turn to ethics focus on what they regard as its depoliticizing, individualistic, and other-disregarding features.²⁷ Others have pointed to the sexist conditions in which the different ancient Greek and Roman ethical schools at issue were developed.²⁸ In a recent engagement with Foucault's ethics, feminist critical theorist Lois McNay encapsulates key features of feminist critical responses. McNay finds Foucault's turn to ancient practices of self-constitution to be an inadequate resource for resisting neoliberal governmentality and the form of subjectivation associated with it, namely, the self as enterprise. In what follows I offer a response to McNay that draws upon both Foucault and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to make a case for the importance of a Foucauldian version of ethical self-constitution today.

In a series of course lectures delivered in the late 1970s Foucault refocused his attention from the disciplinary role of biopower described at the end of *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, to the evolution of liberalism as a form of governmentality that targets populations.²⁹ This form of governmentality emerged in the eighteenth century and depended upon new sciences of political economy and statistics that could deliver knowledge of natural regularities, occurring within populations: birth and death rates, disease rates, economic behaviors premised upon maximizing utilities, and so forth.³⁰ Such knowledge enabled a form of social control linked less to disciplinary power than to mechanisms for managing populations. Increasingly less concerned with enhancing and harnessing capacities of individual bodies by attaching them to normal and abnormal identities (sexual deviant, delinquent, mentally ill, etc.), this new form of governmentality shifts away from micro-techniques focused on surveillance, training, and normalization and toward using this new form of knowledge of regularities within populations to make decisions about how best to regulate and populations through market mechanisms and other techniques for orienting conduct toward socially useful objectives. Foucault traces a complicated evolution of liberalism and its promotion of laissez faire capitalism to more contemporary neoliberal governmentality in which competition is no longer understood as a natural occurrence but one that must instead be secured through government. Government's purpose shifts from intervening to offset the destructive social effects of unrestrained economic freedom to securing the social and legal framework necessary to promote unfettered competition.

With neoliberal governmentality comes a new form of subjection, namely, the self as enterprise, or *homo oeconomicus*. Within this regime of power/knowledge, individuals are encouraged to differentiate themselves, be responsible for themselves, and govern themselves within a legal and social framework structured to regulate and promote competition. Active self-governance replaces submission. Furthermore, neoliberal governmentality can accommodate a range of social differences and values within its flexible market mechanisms. It op-

²⁷ See, for example, Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Lois McNay.

²⁸ Leo Bersani's formulation of the issue reflects feminist sensibilities. See Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

²⁹ See especially *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

³⁰ See Mary Beth Mader, *Sleights of Reason: Norms, Bisexuality, Development* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011) for an incisive and painstaking analysis of the power of norms.

erates at a distance from individuals, conducting their conduct from afar (consider marketing strategies used within Google or Amazon) rather than within myriad and costly disciplinary institutions focused on developing and training individuals. Given this new modality of power, older binary models of struggle between forces or elements within society are increasingly inadequate for understanding how power is exercised, and resistance requires developing new tactics. Poverty and inequality become examples of failure in the enterprise of selfhood, and entire populations might be warehoused or abandoned—rendered responsible for their failure to invest in themselves, to discipline and train themselves.³¹

It is here that McNay locates a dilemma in Foucault's turn to ethics in the wake of his lectures on biopolitics. Insofar as the self is understood as an enterprise and the liberal understandings of the subject of rights as a limit to sovereign power is eroded, individual autonomy is depoliticized. Instead of opposing or limiting abuses of power by government, the self-governing or "autonomous" individual resides "at the heart" of this new form of social control.³² Freedom does not oppose this new modality of power, but rather operates within it. Thus, she argues, Foucault's recourse to ancient ethical practices of freedom or care of the self as a resource for countering the self as enterprise appears depoliticizing, atomistic, and ultimately anemic. As she puts the point: "the experimental process of self-formation that this idea revolves around is uncomfortably close in structure to governance through individualization, and it is therefore not clear how such an atomized practice can pose any serious challenge to neoliberal social control."³³ McNay's critique raises several questions. Is ethical work on the self only justifiable insofar as it represents a political challenge to neoliberal social control? And even if the answer is no, is it still possible that such ethical practices could challenge this new form of social control, and if so, how?³⁴

As it turns out Foucault was not entirely disinterested in the idea of the self as enterprise. As Andrew Dilts observes, in this "radically empty theory of subjectivity. ...the anthropological figure who carries a biographical subjectivity is now gone."³⁵ Thus space is opened within up within neoliberalism for an appropriation of the "freedom" associated with self as enterprise. Foucault understands the self as a relational form, a self-relation that is filled in through practices of the self. These involve taking up materials available within the cultures and spaces in which one finds oneself, not creation *ex nihilo*. Presumably even liberalism and Marxism provide resources that might be taken up differently, put to different uses. After all,

³¹ Aside from prisons, one might also consider the way in which increased access to free online education could become a justification for decreasing students' access to the variety of educational experiences provided in colleges and universities.

³² McNay, 62.

³³ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴ I will not engage the charge that ethical practices of freedom are atomizing here except to say that cultivating new forms of self-relationship could easily be understood as something that requires the support and guidance of others. Indeed one might be drawn into a community because it offers new ways of living. Creating desirable alternatives to dominant ways of living is one way to channel the desires of others in a new direction.

³⁵ Andrew Dilts, "From 'Entrepreneur of the Self' to 'Care of the Self': Neoliberal Governmentality and Foucault's Ethics," *Foucault Studies* (12) (2011), 130-146, 137.

this is the point of Foucault's genealogical tracing of concepts and practices that can combine, weave together, come apart and recombine like strands in a rope to produce contingently linked strategies or complexes of power/knowledge relations. The point is not that we can voluntarily redirect and control the direction of history, but that we can, sometimes, unravel the strands or participate in a process that may in fact produce something different. This is what neoliberals did. They reinterpreted concepts such as "capitalism," "freedom," "competition," "the state," "government," to implement a plan for a new form of governmentality. Just as Foucault suggested that we might resist disciplinary power by separating its capacity-enhancing features from its docility rendering functions³⁶, so to we might divorce the appeal to freedom in the idea of the self as enterprise from its connections with neoliberal forms of normalization.

Foucault understood that detaching ourselves from subjection would require *work* on the self, undoing old habits of thinking and doing and cultivating new ones. Perhaps his interest in the idea of the self as a project found in neoliberalism stemmed from his sense that it might be possible for one to divorce oneself from the "truths" about how best to live being proffered within its frame without sacrificing the idea of the self as a project. Foucault alludes to this possibility when he remarks

For centuries we have been convinced that between our ethics, our personal ethics, our everyday life, and the great political and social and economic structures, there were analytical relations, and that we couldn't change anything, for instance, in our sex life or our family life, without ruining the economy, our democracy, and so on. I think we have to get rid of the idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures.³⁷

Foucault's aimed in part to show us that we are "freer than we feel," that in actuality we are not always trapped within the trends that we capture in our reflections upon what is happening in the present.³⁸ The very act of reflecting upon them, observing how they work, how they came to be, can distance us from them in ways that open the space for other possibilities to emerge.³⁹

Furthermore, Foucault's turn to ethics does not imply that ethical self-constitution, developing other ways of living, is the only thing we should do, but given the spread of neoliberal governmentality, it is reasonable to conclude that experiments with forming other ways of life, new forms of relationality, understandings of self, habits of relating to oneself and others are necessary. They not only require us, as Kant did, to relate to ourselves as free, but they test the limits of present possibilities through practices of self-constitution within communities

³⁶ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 317.

³⁷ Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: Overview of a Work in Progress," in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Volume One, Ethics*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley (NY: The New Press), 261.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, "Truth, Power, and the Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault, October 25, 1982, in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Rex Martin, et. al. (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 10.

³⁹ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 130.

that refuse to conform to reigning habits of thinking and ways of being, and thereby prefigure other possible futures at a time after any specific liberation. Thus, for example, when he remarks that liberation “is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed... to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society”⁴⁰, we should take him to suggest that being freed from any given form of domination or oppression still leaves us with the need to create something to be free for. And caring for ourselves, testing the limits of the present, might be *one* way of addressing this need.

We need not accept McNay’s criticism of Foucault’s ethical turn for several reasons. First, that neoliberal governmental rationality has spread does not mean that there are no spaces untouched by its grip on the present. Indeed, to analyze the emergence of a form of governmentality out of past ways of thinking and doing is not tantamount to describing a system that has sewn up every space. Second, as I have noted, the idea of the self as enterprise presents the possibility of divorcing the idea of freedom entailed within it from the economic and social truths to which it is yoked. Third, even if ethical work on the self does not serve as a form of political resistance, there are reasons to pursue it. Cultivating other forms of life, other types of relational possibilities and understandings aside from those prevalent within neoliberal governmentality can not only sustain marginal groups and populations within the dominant frame, but also provide relatively sustaining communities from which individuals can enter the political sphere while still keeping possibilities for non-entrepreneurial self-relationships alive. Will any or all of these experiments be rendered inert by an encroaching neoliberal commodification and regulation? Possibly, but this is not an argument against pursuing them.

Perhaps what is missing in McNay’s analysis is an appreciation of what queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as “the middle ranges of agency that offer space for effectual creativity and change.”⁴¹ Sedgwick’s evocation of a “middle range” of agency between subjection and freedom, autonomy and heteronomy, with or against, has not had the impact on critical theory that it could.⁴² Sedgwick rejects these false alternatives, preferring instead to look for and participate in the many different and creative ways in which people make their lives livable, even pleasurable or humorous, within the often intolerable and oppressive conditions in which they find themselves. Linking critical theorists’ preoccupations with prohibition and repression to a tendency toward the paranoid readings typical of a hermeneutics of suspicion and its strategy of exposure, Sedgwick describes another kind of reading practice, “reparative reading,” from which we can learn, she says, “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”⁴³ Here she not only echoes Foucault’s later writings on

⁴⁰ Foucault, “The Ethic of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Essential Works of Foucault, Vol. I: Ethics*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley (NY: The New Press), 282–3.

⁴¹ Sedgwick, 13.

⁴² I am reminded here of queer theorists recuperation of the radical potential of butch lesbianism, a way of being often interpreted within second wave feminism as a form of male identification—a problematic form of subjection. In contrast queer theorists have attempted to bypass this binary logic, or at least deconstruct it, by drawing attention to the possibility that the masculine can be a form of femininity. See Butler.

⁴³ Sedgwick, 150-151.

ethics where he describes modes of self-transformation that involve reworking the materials made available within a culture, but also links them to a reading practice oriented toward cultural innovation and experimentation rather than polemical opposition and exposure.

Sharing as she does Foucault's skepticism about psychoanalytic discourses of desire that assume "the centrality of sexual desire to all human contact and feeling," and treat the sexual drive as the ultimate source of "human motivation, identity and emotion," Sedgwick returns to the history of psychoanalysis and psychology as a resource for thinking otherwise.⁴⁴ It is as if she were asking: What in effect was lying *beside* those discursive events that was overshadowed or left behind and what work might these past ideas do in the present?⁴⁵

In collaborative work with Adam Frank, Sedgwick engages the writings of the philosopher and theorist of affect, Silvan Tomkins and urges queer theorists to exploit affect theory in order to gain a perspective on the unquestioned consensus about the obvious value of continuing to reproduce dominant critical strategies of exposure or denaturalization—both versions of the repressive hypothesis, which Foucault deployed in his earliest books and decried in *History of Sexuality Volume One*. For example, Tomkins did not understand shame, an especially important affect for both women and queers, as an emotional and behavioral response to disapproval or transgression, but rather as an experience of having one's interest or joy inhibited. Thus, when others do not respond in a familiar way to one's excitements and engagements, shame and reduction of interest can be the result. Humiliation can shut down curiosity and excitement. It can lead to defensive, rigid and paranoid postures, and to fear of making mistakes. Yet, it is also an indicator of a suppressed capacity for joy, excitement, and curiosity that might have reparative effects.

Attachments to paranoid readings associated with the repressive hypothesis appear as defense mechanisms rooted in negative affects like shame. They aim to foreclose exposure by exposing, to forestall pain rather than to maximize or seek pleasure, to avoid error, to hide shame by performing pride. In contrast, reparative readings resist the inhibiting effects of shame, risk being wrong. Sedgwick suggests that seeking pleasure through reparative reading might be compared to the ethical possibilities associated with Foucault's appeal to care of the self that she describes as "the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure

⁴⁴ Ibid., 17-18.

⁴⁵ Sedgwick brings the preposition "beside" into play as a supplement to more standard critical practices that rely upon the beneath and the beyond. "Beside is an interesting preposition," she says, "because there is nothing very dualistic about it." (Sedgwick, 8) There is nothing linear or temporal about it either. In other words, using this "spatial descriptor" she wants to find alternatives to exposing essentialisms, identifying hidden structures or patterns. She sets aside dialectical, polemical and oppositional thinking as well. Her point is not that they should be rejected entirely, but that other modes of thinking might also be fruitful for furthering practices of freedom. The *beside* involves treating the social field as a space in which there are multiple simultaneous events (subjective and non-subjective) occurring, only some of which are captured within extant narrative or theoretical frameworks. For example, insofar as one thinks only in binary terms of either-or, homo- or hetero-, mind or body, biological or cultural, cause or effect, before and after, beneath and beyond and so forth, one overlooks events that might become the basis of other historical trajectories and other social networks. See also Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009) for a reading of Foucault as challenging binary thinking.

and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them."⁴⁶ Thus, like Foucault, she regards ethical innovation in part as a creative and innovative strategy for survival—an aesthetics of existence.

One of Foucault's abiding values was curiosity and he was certainly sensitive to the docility rendering impact of shame within disciplinary regimes. Indeed, he once confessed that he dreamt of a "new age of curiosity" because he believed that we suffer from "too little: from ...channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient."⁴⁷ His queer ethical project was designed to open up these channels.⁴⁸

Conclusion

I have appropriated the idea of queerness, a term and theoretical orientation that may be waning, one that some regard as inadequate to the task of resisting the dangerous trends in neoliberal capitalism, in order to capture a certain ethos in a promising strand of feminist thought—a queer feminism aimed at opening up possibilities for thinking and being, testing the limits of the possible. Emancipatory feminism too often subsumes the ethical under the political assuming that normative democratic political theory is sufficient to address injustice. Moreover, concerns about the gap between our theories of subjection, and our ongoing attachment to subordinating self-understandings—the problem of agency—have plagued feminism for at least 25 years. What I have argued here is that there are still more resources in Foucault and queer theory for feminists to exploit in their efforts to address or escape these problematizations. In particular, I have highlighted the queer ethical practices of freedom associated not only with genealogical mapping of power/knowledge relations and reparative reading, but also with appropriating materials available in the present to create new possibilities for living in a post-revolutionary world—a world in which Western ideals might continually be contested and redeployed in ways that do not unnecessarily reduce possibilities and constrain freedom.

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⁴⁶ Sedgwick, 137.

⁴⁷ Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (NY: The New Press, 1994), 178.

⁴⁸ Thanks go to Cressida Heyes, Allison Weir and anonymous reviewers for *Foucault Studies* for significant improvements in this paper.