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BOOK REVIEW

Lynne Huffer, *Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), ISBN: 978-0-231-16417-7

In her 2010 book *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*, Lynne Huffer uncovers an ethics of eros in Foucault's work. On Huffer's reading, Foucault's genealogies invite us to "become again what we never were," to "engage with the borders of a world that we can never fully know, but to which, we are fully accountable."¹ As an ethical practice, genealogy is not a set of moral propositions that would operate as yet another mechanism of discipline and normalization. It is a "postmoral ethics," one that poses questions about subjectivity and truth and traverses the erotic intensities of lives lived. In the archive, Huffer and Foucault encounter alterity in "fragments of life" entangled with power— "traps, weapons, cries, gestures, attitudes, ruses, intrigues, bodies that lived and died."² Neither present nor absent, archival fragments can stir passionate feelings, sensations, curiosities, un-nameable shifts. The call to "become again what we never were" may seem impossible, but it is an apt way to describe the transformations of *History of Madness*, and genealogy in general.

In her most recent text *Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*, Huffer develops and foregrounds this Foucauldian notion of an ethics of eros, making an even more forceful case that it can transform contemporary feminist and queer theory. *Are the Lips a Grave?* is necessary reading for scholars working in contemporary feminist theory and queer theory, especially readers interested in Foucault's contributions to these fields. In Huffer's view, the institutionalization of feminist theory and queer theory, and their increasing distance from one another, signals the need for surprising, "rift restoring" modes of thinking and living. Without an ethics of eros that allows for "new ways of living 'in the present, that difficult tense,'" the divide between feminists and queers will remain complicit with sexist, racist, and homophobic movements of biopolitical power. Huffer's ethics of eros is not an attempt to harmoniously merge or converge queers and feminists. Nor is it an escape hatch out of biopolitical machinations. It is a transformative re-traversal of the fraught terrain of sexual morality.

¹ Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 273.

² *Ibid*, 250.

In early chapters, Huffer develops an account of Luce Irigaray as an unlikely model of queer feminism and Foucauldian genealogy. Given Irigaray's history of homophobic and heterosexist remarks about sexual difference, she is a surprising focus. Her mimetic figure of the lips is often read as essentialist or foundationalist, as a valorization of binary, bodily sexual difference. On Huffer's genealogical reading, however, Irigaray is a "forgotten precursor of queer performativity" whose *anti*-foundationalism has been underappreciated (33). For instance, in early works like *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) Irigaray critiques phallogentric understandings of sexual difference. Within a phallogentric economy of the same, genuine sex alterity is impossible since all differences reflect or derive from the masculine position; likewise, there are no same and opposite sex relations like homosexuality and heterosexuality. According to Huffer, the parodic activity of the lips unmakes the monosexual subject *so as to remake* a sexually different subject. This is not sexual difference in the sense of an essential or foundational binary but sexual difference *as ethical transformation*. Like Foucauldian genealogy, Irigaray's lip reading takes the relationality of the social world seriously and "acknowledges the damage wrought by the normative codification of those relations" (47). The lips "engage negativity in order to deploy it for the work of ethical remaking" (43). They mimic phallogentric rationalities *with a difference*—the transformative *ethopoetic* thought of sexual difference.

Huffer's Foucauldian reading of Irigaray is important because it highlights some of the failures of queer theory in the queer-feminist divide. The title of the book *Are the Lips a Grave?* is also a twist on Leo Bersani's 1987 question about queer negativity, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" While writers like Bersani deploy negativity to critique violent forms of heteronormative subjectivity, the negativity is abyssal, anti-social, and non-relational. In an emancipatory mode, anti-social queer theorists would like to shatter not only the subject of morality but subjectivity in general. However, this goal does not appreciate the subject's thorough entanglement in disciplinary and biopolitical power. A moralizing subject lives on in the queer vision of the undecidable, unstable non-subject. As Huffer puts it,

queer theory, more than any other oppositional theoretical discourse, lays claim to a 'we' that is *more radically unstable, pluralizable, and therefore more universalizable* than even the most universalizing French feminist 'we' because the promise of a potentially infinite pluralization of that 'we' is constitutive of the meaning of queer itself (67, *emphasis mine*).

In rejecting universalist logics, queer theorists oppose any notion of morality or subjectivity that might limit the meaning of queer. To be queer is to be undecidable. So, what it means to be queer is decided. Unsurprisingly, the queer "we" often reflects the subject position of the person using the term "queer" or "we." For instance, Huffer suggests that there is a broad professional bias among queer theorists; undecidability is "a specifically queer *theoretical claim* that, for the most part is not borne out in the lives of people [...] who are continually interpellated as subjects" (66). In her view, the not-so-shattered subject of queer theory fails in their "ethical obligation to examine the conditions of possibility of its own speaking position *as theory*" (68). By contrast,

Foucault and Irigaray model this ethical relationality even as their close relation to one another has gone under-theorized.

On the other side of the queer-feminist split, Huffer raises similar concerns about intersectional feminism. As a knowledge project, intersectionality is not “anti-social,” but it is defined through the juridical imaginary and invested in *the truth* of multifaceted, proliferating subjectivities. By telling truths about identity’s inherent multiplicity, intersectional research contests marginalizing laws and policies and sets forth a moral imperative to “exclude exclusions.” In Huffer’s judgment, a “Foucauldian conception of subjectivity (and its costs) is basically incompatible with intersectionality” (18). From a Foucauldian perspective, the juridical model of power is inadequate to contemporary life and intersectional claims about the truth of subjectivity can obscure how subjects of knowledge are entangled with disciplinary and biopolitical power. Huffer is not insisting that intersectional theorists adhere to a Foucauldian approach, but the notion of power-knowledge does drive her ethical concerns. Without deeper attention to these relations, intersectionality runs the risk of perpetuating the very problems that it had hoped to alleviate. These risks are heightened by the push to institutionalize intersectionality as “the *only* approach to gender and sexuality that takes difference seriously” (18). Often framed as moral improvement, intersectional institutional initiatives can actually forestall more robust critical debate. As Huffer observes, the UN, NWSA, and “identity based academic departments” have embraced “the intersectional language of inclusion in ways that reflect the false promises of the Enlightenment exposed by anti-foundationalist philosophies” (19). And false promises enact real harms.

Instead of moral imperatives, Huffer would like to engage in ethical transformation. The later chapters of *Are the Lips a Grave?* meditate on how to forge this transformation and begin to build an archive of queer feminist eros. The goal is not the reformation of policies, as if the juridical lens could adequately respond to experiences that exceed its realm, in affect, feeling, and otherwise. The goal is “listen[ing] for that which remains unexpressed” and “reengag[ing] subjects in relation to others [...] even or especially when those others cannot speak or be heard” (106). In “Chapter 4: Queer Victory, Feminist Defeat? Sodomy and Rape in *Lawrence v. Texas*”, Huffer models this transformative listening on an account of the Supreme Court case of *Lawrence v. Texas*. The 2003 case victoriously overturned sodomy charges against two gay men for having consensual sex in a private residence. However, its reasoning relies on the lesser known *Powell v. State* case in which a man charged with the rape of his 17 year old niece was convicted of sodomy as an alternate punishment. The justices in the *Lawrence* majority refer to *Powell* as a confirmation of the sexual autonomy of consenting adults. But Huffer asks, what about Quashana, the black 17 year old niece whose account of rape was not believed? Retelling her story threatens to reduce her to a symbol or figure, of sexism and racism in the gay movement or of the injustice of rape and sexual violence. Huffer’s re-telling makes sure to emphasize the thinking-feeling aspects of Quashana’s testimony. She is a young woman, a victim of violence whose words, silences, feelings, affect, are more than any legal account could capture. Retelling her story does not “do justice” to Quashana in any simple way, but it multiplies scenes of interpretation and expands the

relational process. It is a narrative performance that might implicate or stir its writer or its reader. Like Irigaray's parodic lips and Foucault's genealogical method, it is a narrative performance that might unmake so as to refigure the subject of queer freedom.

Of course, an attempt to unmake and rework the subject can also fall flat or even deepen the violent machinations of biopolitical power. As Huffer is well-aware, there is power-knowledge involved in naming harms, retelling stories, politicizing pleasure. These practices can betray their goals or betray real people and relationships that we hold dear. In "Chapter 7: What if Hagar and Sara Were Lovers?" Huffer shares a story of betrayal from her own interracial queer relationship. When a grocery store clerk assumes that her partner is the nanny of their one-year old godchild, it shatters their family intimacy. Her partner corrects the clerk but she is also hurt by Huffer's silence. In recounting the story, Huffer shares her shame and sadness, describing the event as betrayal, an ethical failure and a failure of love, even as they continue on as loving partners. The story is included as part of Huffer's queer feminist archive in order "to mark the ongoing fact of injustice as a political and ethical burden that queer feminists must carry" (148). Although Huffer does not embrace the moral imperative to "exclude exclusion," she wants to reckon with exclusion in a loving way. A mode of loving that fails and carries its failures. As she summarizes it,

The feminist struggle for justice will have successes, no doubt, but will also continue to confront its own failures. No ethics can emotionally soften or intellectually sublimate those failures. But a queer feminist ethics might begin to practice love as a political act of working through, where our collective "shadows and histories, scars and traces" become always ready to transform themselves into surprising new forms of connection (158).

Huffer's eros is an anti-normative but relational ethics, a vision of love that embraces the Socratic ethical question *how are we to live?* as a genuinely heavy, difficult, beautiful, impossible question.

Who is part of this community of struggle and working-through, love and loving failure? What are the borders of queer feminism and the queer-feminist divide? One of the delights of *Mad for Foucault* is Huffer's description of the archive and her transformative encounter with fragments of Foucault's passionate thinking. There is a similar vulnerability in *Are the Lips a Grave?*, a grappling with the site of theory's enunciation, even as the archive is more ambiguous because it is provisional. Huffer is staking out a kinky, lesbian feminist, although mostly white, erotics. In addition to Luce Irigaray, she looks to Alison Bechdel, Virginie Despentes, and Sarah Maitland. What genealogies could dig into this archive, expand its borders and voices? This is the point of Huffer's project—to multiply scenes of interpretation and expand the relational process, to reckon with unacknowledged harms and to think and feel differently. For scholars interested in queer theory, feminist theory, and Foucault's contributions to these fields, *Are the Lips a Grave?* is a worthy challenge to do genealogy, to love, and to find "new ways of living 'in the present, that difficult tense.'"

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