



REVIEW

Lynne Huffer, *Foucault's Strange Eros*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. 280. ISBN: 9780231197144 (hardback).

Lynne Huffer's 2020 book *Foucault's Strange Eros* is the final installment of a trilogy that started in 2010 with *Mad for Foucault* and was followed by *Are the Lips a Grave?* in 2013. All three volumes are part of an attempt at mapping grounds for an ethics of Foucauldian *eros*. Throughout this series of books, Huffer argues against the repressive hypothesis of Freud-Marxian claims, and the epistemologies of the closet that feed on the oppositions inherited from sexual politics, in order to think of an ethics of sexuality articulated from the border of historical configurations.

Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* traces the emergence of *life* as a historical and political event. Against the transhistorical idea of life as being intrinsically driven by an *eros* waiting to be freed from the repressive structures of modern capitalism (Marcuse), Foucault's genealogy offers a different practice that Huffer identifies in his "ethopoiesis" of the archive. Prowling her Foucault in search of his strange *eros*, Huffer uses Foucault's *History of Madness* to show how he destabilizes the present, estranging it from the Hegelian, dialectical and teleological readings of history. In doing so, Huffer identifies a poetics of liminality; of *touching* the temporal borders that estrange our sexual identities and practices. *Eros* as a process, as *erosion*, is about the touching of borders that has us welcome the infinite murmur of things falling apart.

From the outset, Huffer reminds the reader about Foucault's "ethics of *eros*" as "thought-freeing speech." An "erosion of interiority," it opens the historically concatenated subject to an ethics that fractures the modern conflation of *eros* and sexuality. A genealogical soundscape is excavated where *eros* is the "murmuring background noise out of which sexology extracts the language of sexuality and produces sexual subjects as objects of knowledge" (p. 3).

Pushing back against "garrulous" biopolitical *scientia sexualis* that strengthens the self, the "ethics of *eros* plunges speaking subjects into the dissolution of their speech" (p. 3). By using the untranslated Greek word, Huffer reinforces the strangeness and indefinability of *eros* and engages in a "recursive" (p. 15) process through which Foucault's archival practice is the "unbinding of a subject bound by the sexual dispositif

of [their] time" (p. 5). Huffer is careful in acknowledging that "our affirmation of ourselves as women, men, trans, or queer" is an act through which "we extract ourselves as truth from a background that falls away" (p. 20) – eros being precisely that "falling away." In doing so, Huffer warns us against the "canned speech" of Marcusean anti-repressive politics but also of "institutionalized queer studies" (p. 157) and their sometimes identitarian overtones: Foucault's eros is not normative, nor is it anti-normative *à la* queer theory.

Against such moralizing tendencies, Huffer insists on Foucault's ethics as "a way of life, a not-at-all-personal mode of *invention* that opens other possibilities for existing" (p. 32, underlining mine) rather than a mere "telling others what to do" (p. 9). Indeed, if Foucault's method is "a strange erotic excavation of the historically sedimented network of relations" (p. 8), the archival practice not only is "a limit-experience that suspends" (p. 9), but as "the archive becomes an ethical invitation to philosophical investigation as an aesthetic practice," it is also an "ethopoietic" (p. 11). Ethopoiesis appears under Huffer's pen as an actualization of the question of ethics (how am I to live?) from "inside the techno-grid that puts us under surveillance and turns each of us, in our turn, into ever more effective surveillants who keep track of ourselves and others as so many forms of life" (p. 33). Foucault's strange eros intrudes as a soft background noise that erodes the self and opens a space for what Huffer refers to as Deleuzian "styles of life" (p. 32).

The opening chapter, "Eros is Strange," reads as a *problematization* of Foucault's historical a priori and its strange contingency. Against the Freudian conflation of eros and life, Huffer sees Foucault's practice in line with Sappho's eros, which is about "fracturing energies" (p. 52). Working with "unreason" as a parallel to eros, premodern eros disappears as *scientia sexualis* becomes a defining feature of modernity. Huffer asks: How does such indefinable and untranslatable eros keeps returning? With Foucault, the "static dualism of the sterile paradox becomes the recursive movement of spiraling time where something disappears and returns with a difference" (p. 57), Huffer argues. That "something" is the *matière première*, the murmur of a linear construction of history, reason and madness through time. However, Huffer returns to Foucault's other "conception of time," a "'strange return' [that] allows us to hear the distant 'background noise' out of which reason's time was extracted" (p. 58). Huffer's argument becomes clear: the spiraling movement of a Foucauldian eros "makes the familiar ground of my now queered sexual knowledge strange again, restoring its rifts, its instabilities, and its flaws" (p. 58), while introducing "the possibility of unbinding and ethical transformation" (p. 57) against the dialectical opposition of repression and liberation.

The book is multilayered; its points of entry multiple. "A book in fragments" (p. 36), its structure is that of repetition with variation; the liminary remarks mushroom again throughout the book in a spiraling movement that reads as a tribute to Foucault's own imagery of the spiral, with which he "introduces the possibility of unbinding and ethical transformation" (p. 57). Each chapter stems from a fragment of Chapter 1. Chapter 2, "*Ars Erotica*: Poetic Cuts in the Archives of Infamy," engages with the question "How ... does eros return to us, in all its untimeliness, to make our present strange?" (p. 56). The answer

is that “Foucault’s rhythmic hand is the hand of a poet in the archives” (p. 89). “Fragmented *poiesis* of archival lives offers reading pleasures that might, indeed, be masochistic. The strange eros out of which those lives are extracted undoes those who encounter it in the archive,” (p. 90) Huffer continues. “Erotic Time: Unreason, Eros, and Foucault’s Evil Genius,” is the title of Chapter 3, where the question is: “What does it cost to tell the truth?” (p. 93). Huffer argues that the “evil genius” from Descartes to Hegel has been a “fiction of eros” (p. 43) that fragilizes the Hegelian claims of truth in history by exposing its very violence. In Chapter 4, “Prowling Eros: Carriers of Light in the Panopticon,” Huffer explores Foucault’s anti-prison activism in relation to his ethical critique of the rhetoric of persuasion. Through the lens of *History of Madness*, Huffer explores “the GIP’s¹ politics of speech as a response to the logic of Foucault’s strange eros: the extractive gesture by which deviants and abnormal are simultaneously produced and marginalized” (p. 126). Eventually, Huffer hears the detainee’s voice as a “counter-archival ‘voice’” (p. 143); a “not speech” whose strange erosion of history undermines the idea of prison as “a ‘black box’ without history” (p. 143). The final chapter, “Now Again (δεῦτε): Foucault, Wittig, Sappho” is a resplendent *envoi* where Monique Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien* illustrates “the poetic limit-experience Foucault calls desubjectivation” (p. 155) in the context of the Anthropocene—a geological era in which humanity becomes a major agent in the transformation of the Earth system. Wittig’s split lesbian *j/e* is a fossil of “an era that has long been displaced by queers and pansexuals of various kinds” (p. 156). Wittig thus “reinscribes Anthropocenic violence as Foucauldian genealogical edges to be worked” (p. 164): against the antitextualism of new materialism, Huffer sides with Wittig’s (erotic) play with edges (edging, really) as a “geontological” (p. 164) intervention. By focusing on the relationship between *j/e* and *tu* not as concepts but as linguistic utterances where the eroding murmur intrudes, Wittig’s lesbian “I” opens itself to the other in an ethical move that Huffer offers as an alternative to the politics of “a fallen subject ... burned at the stake of a man-shaped Anthropocene in a speculative mystification of objects” (p. 180).

What does it mean to practice genealogy today? Ultimately, Huffer’s intervention is also a profound reflection on the crisis of the literary humanities. Foucault’s work has often been read in political science or in approaches to literature that use the text as a “positive” political intervention. Huffer’s Foucauldian ethical turn rather pushes in favor of an aesthetics where the murmur of Foucault’s eros informs an ethical positioning in the world. The murmur Huffer uses to describe the negative space of erosion is a poetic act that the literary humanities are best equipped to attune to. As an alternative to the politics of new materialist democratic ontology (think of Bruno Latour’s “parliament of things”), Huffer calls for a literary humanist ethics that allows for instabilities, fractures and *failles* to proliferate in the reading experience.

¹ The Prisons Information Group was founded by Foucault and others in 1970-1971. A radical movement, the collaborative project involved prisoners, intellectuals and activists advocating for profound transformations of the French police system.

In Huffer's attempt at rethinking sexuality through the lens of eros, relationality is redefined as the erotic touch at words' edges. The truly ethical position is one that welcomes the shaking grounds of genealogical enquiry. When our geological era sees the ground unravel, is there a better ethics than the Foucauldian eros? Has the poetic murmur ever been so important in a world where clear-cut categorization and the commodification of identity (see Huffer's rant against Facebook) threaten the very existence of the "outside"? Contrasting with queer theory's insistence that there is no *outside* of the heterosexual matrix, and thus no alternative to *playing* with its categories (see Butler's dismissal of Wittig in *Gender Trouble*), Huffer's text reads as a powerful call to an ethics of eros where the flaws provide poetic grounds to construct an ethics of erosion.

Huffer's writing is outstandingly poetic; the book is structured in such a way that Foucault's ethical murmur (which although different in nature, as Huffer makes clear, reminds one of the Levinasian murmur of the "il y a") becomes a poetic device. Like a fabric, the book's "aesthetic is disintegrative and rift-restorative" in ways that bind and unbind Huffer's (erotic) *ethos*.

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