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QUEER THEORY IN THE BARDO

H. N. Lukes

A Review of *Foucault's Strange Eros* by Lynne Huffer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. 280. \$95 hardback, \$28 paper, \$27.99 ebook.

Foucault's Strange Eros is, indeed, a strange book, in part because it claims to be a completion of Lynne Huffer's decade-spanning trilogy about Michel Foucault's work. I do not believe her. My reasons: (a) I sincerely doubt that Huffer is done with Foucault, the proclaimed object of her mad love; (b) *Foucault's Strange Eros* is a book about decompletion; and (c) as with each book in Huffer's trilogy, this one is not exactly *about* Foucault, as it foregrounds cross-pollination as either a primary source or applicable theory rather than focusing exclusively on Foucault. Huffer's most recent volume is as much about Monique Wittig, Sappho, and Anne Carson as it is about Foucault, who prowls its pages, flashes into clarity, and then recedes, all in unpredictable rhythms. At the end of this book, Huffer includes a letter from a certain "MF," who begins, "I would have really liked to slip imperceptibly into [your book: Sapphic, like Wittig.]" (181, bracketed material in the original). Strange, then, is my task: to review a book by one author about many authors, with the eponymous one seemingly reviewing it from the grave.

Once, Huffer told us that queers had gotten Foucault wrong (*Mad for Foucault*, 2009). Second, she held the polemical hands of feminists and queers and told us that we needed to read more Foucault to understand our differences (*Are the Lips the Grave*, 2013). Thrice, now

again, she has told us to go back to Foucault, but this time in a dreamy yet agitated state of eros (*Foucault's Strange Eros*, 2020). This last move advances work done in *Mad for Foucault* with a seemingly direct analogy: “[E]ros is to sexuality as unreason is to madness” (3). For those who misrecognize Foucault as a sort of historically minded deconstructionist, interrogation of “sexuality” and “madness” as discursive constructs might seem straightforward. Yet this analogy tells us little about these first terms, “eros” and “unreason,” and even less about how these terms might make themselves known from under the carceral logic of their mates (just as Foucault’s famous line “the soul is the prison of the body” does not liberate or define that body with any apposite symmetry). How unreason and eros make themselves heard as more than “a strange murmuring ‘background noise’” is both the topic and method of Huffer’s latest study (3).

This is where things get strange. Riffing on Carson and Sappho herself, Huffer advances eros as a verb, or rather a “preverbal verb” (19). Eros emerges as a passive action of “erosion” that somehow also accretes. Eros does things and makes one do things like prowling, groping, and stalking to effect a “subtle self-undoing” in gerundive suspension at the limit of grammar (5). This verbal eros, according to Huffer, is an ethics and the heart of

Foucault’s archival and genealogical method. It is poetic or, as Huffer claims, an “ethopoietic method: an ethics of eros as a poetics of unreason” (2). Eros is Foucault himself, the poet chasing the historian chasing the philosopher around a Grecian urn. In, by now, classical lesbian–feminist style, Huffer inserts herself in Foucault’s critical and personal roundabout.

It then would stand to reason that we may make another analogy: eros is to unreason as ethics is to poetry. Yet by now it should be clear that the stabilizing grid of analogy first offered is not Huffer’s jam at all, and that eros is not an “it” but rather a lesbian trickster’s “ontological joke” (165). Huffer has much to say about more common Western theories of poetry, ethics, ontology, and history, but *Foucault's Strange Eros* delivers analysis as much through careful explication as through a torquing chiasmus that demonstrates as much as it defines the murmur of eros. This scholarly technique may sound by equal measures delightful and frustrating. It is true that the experience of reading *Foucault's Strange Eros* straight through is akin to when you decided to push your workday with a micro-dose closer to a macro-dose. That said, the incisiveness of Huffer’s interventions do accrue, even as she encourages us to read her book as fragments, her preferred term for the volume’s chapters. On display

across these pages are the full range of strengths featured in Huffer's other books: her loving command and commanding love of Foucault, her savvy as a theoretical comparatist, her alacrity with the old craft of close reading, and her gift for autotheory now fully formed as poetry.

Chapter 1, "Eros Is Strange: Foucault, the Outside, and Historical A Priori (Fragments)," asks how unreason and eros dwell on the "outside" of discourse yet may nevertheless "think-feel," or at least "prowl" across that hyphen (literal diacritics being one of this book's points of passion) (49). Here Huffer again complicates the symmetry of the analogous functions of unreason/thinking and eros/feeling. As an antidialectical thinker, Foucault shows us a version of historicity that is more like a cyclone that picks up local material and spits it elsewhere in order to reorder things than it is akin to the static expansions purported by Hegelian or Marxist spirals of Western history. By Huffer's guidance, we find ourselves in the dusty aftermaths of Foucault's heterotopic archive. The post/present archival disaster (Maurice Blanchot prowls these pages as well) is a space both real and unreal, one that erotically draws us but only ever provides recombinant fragments of a past, yielding genealogy as equivalent to a queer blazon of the beloved's body parts. The impossibility of

the historical a priori from which Foucault mines the archive finds ballast in the archive's inevitability and urgency. The practice, the ethical method of Foucault's genealogy from this placeless space, redoubles in eros as an ethics of vigilance, a care-fullness of watch-keeping.

Expanding on her initial treatment of the archive, Huffer's second chapter/fragment, "*Ars Erotica: Poetic Cuts in the Archive of Infamy*," orchestrates an unlikely poetic affinity between Foucault, Sigmund Freud, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that slices into dominant archives to yield new ethopoietic methods of narratology. Furthering her work in *Mad for Foucault*, Huffer frames Foucault's *dispositif* of madness as coextensive with the "ignoble archives" of sexuality, each products of a shift in European archival records from *fama* to infamy, from the annals of aristocracy and tales of Lancelot to ostensibly scientific knowledge about the likes of mad Judge Schreber (68). Huffer intervenes in accusations of Orientalism in Foucault's distinction between the East's *ars erotica* and the West's *scientia sexualis* by extending his ultimate point in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1 (1976), that sex science had itself become an erotic art for the West by the late nineteenth century. In Huffer's hands, Freud and Sedgwick articulate what Foucault's untimely death forestalled: the methods of Western

ars erotica as noncoercive “pleasure in the truth of pleasure” (Foucault, quoted in Huffer, 71). Its texture is that of poetry, dreams, and fantasy—perverse implantations, true, but ones less productive of empirical data than oystered into strange pearls.

Huffer’s unholy trinity of Foucault, Freud, and Sedgwick is a “stereoscopic” vision made by the overlapping, ragged edges of historically disparate texts that she curates both to animate flickering virtual worlds and to hollow out the thickness of thinkers who have become calcified in the archives of intellectual history (73). Huffer’s brief reading of Freud’s “A Child Is Being Beaten,” which like her trilogy itself is also a non-linear thrice-told tale, pours into Sedgwick’s own threesome of a childhood memory of spanking, sieved through the adult academic’s essay “A Poem Is Being Written” about her prepubescent poetic effort, “The Warm Decembers,” written as an ethopoietic praxis to negotiate routine familial violence. Yet Huffer’s close reading of Sedgwick’s autocriticism offers a fourth turn/term, by the very fact of Huffer’s analysis of Sedgwick’s essay.

Herein lies the key to Huffer’s own ethics of eros as a poetics of unreason. Again, I will claim that Huffer’s set of books cannot be a trilogy for the reason that Huffer is so insistent on critiquing the

dialectical/trinitarian thinking that underlies political theology in the West. A whiff of numerology now enters the very structure of *Foucault’s Strange Eros*. Three thrusts toward “beginning” in the preface, introduction, and first chapter bear the germs of all her arguments, at once fractalizing and erotically blurring out over the following four chapters. This too-muchness of trinitarian excess is matched by the not-enoughness of archives and lesbian fragments, the latter figured throughout *Strange Eros* as amputations, decapitations, and phantom limbs. The “cut” of enjambment punctuates the poetic rhythm of Foucault’s erotic and ethical method. Huffer writes, “As readers, we too are both spanked and spanking: we follow the beat of the poet-genealogist’s rhythmic hand as it cuts into the archive of violence, exposing eros as it falls away. But even as we take up that poetic beat(ing), our relation to the violent realities of Foucault’s ethopoietic genealogies’ name can ever only be oblique” (91). Just as Foucault’s treatment of his *infama* cannot fully redeem the accidents with power that preserved them in archives of control, Sedgwick tells us that “scars don’t answer to the wounds” (88). Nonetheless, as we shall see in Huffer’s last chapter on Wittig, those who are not considered fully formed can never be fatally wounded.

Chapter 3, “Erotic Time: Unreason, Eros, and Foucault’s Evil Genius,” turns to Foucault’s treatment of Rene Descartes, whose “fiction” of the “evil genius” as the menacing threat to reason, develops into “a guilty sexuality inscribed within the organism of nature” and dehisces as knowledge-power by the end of the nineteenth century (100). Across three centuries, “the murmuring evil genius learns to speak, becoming garrulous and sexy” (95). Sexual morality carries its theological good/evil dyad into a redoubled chiasmus of certainty/doubt in the secular, sexological discourse of enlightenment. Returning to the literary method of her last chapter, Huffer clarifies how eros and unreason come into focus: “As unreason’s murmur, eros cannot appear as itself. It can only appear as a metaphor: as a fiction like the evil genius” (95).

We have, according to Huffer, been distracted by the 1963 Descartes debate between Foucault and Jacques Derrida, each of whom agrees that evil genius, the great deceiver that shadows the Cogito, is less a devil than a ghost haunting God as the ultimate Cartesian guarantee of Western civilization’s goodness and certainty. It’s just that Derrida underestimated ghosts (*pace Specters of Marx*, 1993). This ghost *qua* Cartesian “fiction” is akin to the ship of fools in *The History of Madness* and the archive itself, as it mumbles through Foucault’s genealogical

methodology, heterotopically both real and unreal. As Huffer would have it, eros is Foucault’s passionate fiction of how the “outside” haunts from its exclusion as it rattles its discursive chains in prelude to reverse discourse.

Chapter 4, “Prowling Eros: Carriers of Light in the Panopticon,” takes seriously the political activism of Foucault as the founder of the short-lived (1970–71) *Le Groupe d’information sur les prisons* (GIP; Prisons Information Group). This chapter at first feels compensatory, as US police and prison abolitionists have well surpassed Foucault’s work. Yet just as other Left thinkers continue to readjudicate the Paris Commune, the Black Panthers, and Occupy Wall Street as not necessarily successes but events that create a new sensorium that may afford sustainable activism through fidelity in the future, so does Huffer eventalize Foucault’s work with GIP. Huffer emphasizes that advents like The Movement for Black Lives are, in fact, made up by the gathering of smaller disjointed/disappointed moments of vigilance in the past. GIP did not aim for longevity but rather for a pause in the carceral logics of containment, for a suggestion of heterotopic space where the confined may speak, and for an erotic/unreasonable whisper that might obliquely inform the clarion call of later movement politics. If there is such a thing as Foucauldian

politics, it is not progressive: it is out of time. Prolepsis and anachronism are the smashing forces that yield the ever-roiling and disappearing aspect of eros for Huffer.

Having acknowledged Audre Lorde as a fellow traveler of eros in the introduction, Huffer suggests that Foucault's method may, after all, offer a sneaky tool toward dismantling the master's house through the erosive effects of eros and unreason (2–3). The counter-event of prisoners' "not-speech" opens a counterarchive that "gnaws at the continuities of carceral ways of knowing" (143). Concluding with two case studies of GIP recordings of prisoners' speech from the outside, Huffer asks not what it means to admit and then resubjugate/subjectivize the murmuring outside to social science discourse, but rather what kinds of *ars erotica* may come from just/ly hearing these voices and keeping watch with them.

Chapter 5, "Now Again (δεντε): Foucault, Wittig, Sappho," is about lesbians but in a rather expansive sense of "lesbian." Huffer here renews her introduction's fidelity to Anne Carson's innovation of the end bracket (i.e.,]) as a "papyrological event" defining the absence/presence in Sappho's fragments. Huffer bookends (or, rather, doubly end brackets, i.e.,)) *Foucault's Strange Eros* with a gilt-framed photograph of her mother—a late-life

lesbian now suffering a spine disease—as a baby, captured from behind, in a bath. Like Sedgwick, Huffer begins her last chapter by performing autotheoretical poetic cuts, with versions of Carson's closed-bracket jumping-font size and keeping watch alongside Huffer's own poetry, while also "rubbing against quotation" from Wittig (footnotes attest to who is who) and Nicole Brossard's own ethopoietic address to maternal spines (154). Much stranger than Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum, Huffer's gathering of lesbian fragments launches us into a magisterial reading of Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (1973) with a quotation from a cis man (is he a virtual lesbian here?) in the form of Seth Clark Silberman's memorializing of Wittig and his own lesbian mother: "SO I CAN SEEK M/Y RADIANT MOTHER ACROSS THE THRONG OF CAPITALS, ACROSS, QUEER AS IT MAY SOUND, MONIQUE WITTIG" (154). Lesbian, in Huffer's treatment, recurs as what queer was supposed to be: a "'consenting to come undone' that Foucault describes as the thought of the outside" (156).

Huffer's radiant return to Wittig harvests the other chapter/fragments of *Foucault's Strange Eros* and performs the book's argument that ethopoiesis is about both binding and unbinding object, method, and counterinquisitor. She ultimately

does so by joining Wittig's untranslatable split *j/e* to the French linguist Emile Benveniste's estrangement of the *je/tu* couplet. This chapter is also a subtle indictment of how (white) queer theory's purported anti-foundationalist birth in the 1990s has become a hollow vanguardism. Huffer's Wittig erotically recurs as "out of synch," as anachronistic in the face of both ever-expanding gender/sexual identities and the inverse dialectics of the queer academy's polemics, littered as they are with "anti-anti" pre-fixual helixes. Doesn't the experience of being a lesbian always already feel anachronistic? Erotically pre-eroded, not even formed enough to participate in the strong irony of Lee Edelman's "sinthomosexuality," Wittig and Huffer's lesbian as murmuring Sapphic fragment has the last laugh in the cosmic irony of Wittig's geographized lesbian body as an "ontological joke" (165).

Treating Wittig as a worthy "old materialist" thinker, Huffer refuses the "anti-linguistic" turn of new materialisms by showing that "the edges of *words* and *worlds* are inextricably connected in a relational ontology performed by *The Lesbian Body*" (164). Huffer links Wittig's method with Foucault's own insistence that "[w]hen language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not positivity that contradicts it but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go" (Foucault, quoted

in Huffer, 156). Huffer then repurposes the Foucauldian "cuts" of *The Lesbian Body* to talk about how "new materialisms increasingly situate themselves within conversations about the Anthropocene" and opens to a refigured ethopoiesis that may address planetary collapse as a "geontological joke" (157). Neither a bang, a whimper, nor an agonistic fidelity to the death drive, eros is the "disquieting laughter" of knowing that we must go into the void to continue to live at all (165).

While this most recent of Huffer's volumes covers more ground than my review can do due diligence, I will say that *Foucault's Strange Eros* is poignantly and ultimately about Huffer's aging mom and our dying planet. Aging and dying are not the same thing, but they do erotically charge each other in a nonlinear form of the reproduction of an in-between. By accepting the transhumanism already at play in Wittig's materialist geo(ontology), Huffer underlines that it is no longer clear what is animate and inanimate in the bardo of the Anthropocene. Huffer simply asks "How do we keep watch over this process?" Life as we know it may inhere in fragments over mother earth, and its corpses may very well continue to speak. Huffer returns throughout to Foucault's, perhaps, most pointed articulation of his method before the urgency of the archive: "I'm speaking over the

corpses of others. . . . That's why I'm so surprised when I hear them cry out" (Foucault, quoted in Huffer, 169). If not completion, then closure and vigilance—if not

trilogy, then a moving triptych—says Huffer, now again.

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