An Encounter with:
Lynne Huffer. *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*.
New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 344 pages.

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The story of queerness—as a story about madness—begins with the story of a split: the great division between reason and unreason. That split generates a story about the Western subject as an othering process that produces madness. (Huffer 82).

Foucault's work is an important site of tension within feminist discourse. On the one hand, his critique of the subject lay the foundations for a large scale deconstruction of essential identities, while on the other, Foucault himself made little to no mention of women in his analyses, and in those instances where he did, he maintained women's positions within limited and gendered spheres. As Lynne Huffer describes in *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* these tensions plagued her own engagements with Foucault, and left her feeling deeply *split* between Foucault's political and theoretical potentialities and his "will not to know us [women]" (7). This sensation of being *split* between competing allegiances became a working metaphor for Huffer's text, indicating both her own experiential engagement with Foucault and (as referenced in the opening quotation above) her notation of the discursive (and material) "event" by which the subject was made *mad*; that is, the event by which the split between reason and unreason was created, and this split instigated the construction of the queerness.

In an effort to reconcile her own contradictory feelings about Foucault's work, Huffer traveled to the Foucault archives in Normandy. There she spent hours poring through unpublished manuscripts, documents, and letters, as well as a four-hundred-page interview with Roger-Pol Droit from 1975, that Foucault asked not be published after its completion. It was in these archives that Huffer experienced Foucault in an entirely new way. She describes this experience as akin to a flash of lightening, or more accurately as a *coup de foudre* (love at first sight) (10). The experience left her feverish and inspired, and sparked her re-reading of Foucault through what is supposedly his own most loved work: *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1961), or the *History of Madness* (2006).

Mad for Foucault is the offspring of this re-reading as it argues that *Madness* needs to be read "belatedly, through a lens of a queer theoretical project that missed it the first time around" (xiv). Huffer claims that those that have studied *Madness* have failed to see its role for discussions of sexuality, while at the same time, those who have drawn on Foucault's discussions of sexuality have primarily gone to the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and have missed *Madness* entirely. Consequently, Huffer argues that *Madness* is a more fitting starting point for queer theorists, as it is in this earlier text that Foucault offers an ethics of eros: an ethic which foreshadows the transformation of self that Foucault turns to in books that followed *Sexuality One*, such as *Care of the Self* (1984) and "On the Genealogy of Ethics" (1997). Hence, Huffer argues that Foucault's interest in ethics is not something he develops only in his later years (as many have said), but something that he was interested in from the very beginning.

The failure to see *Madness*'s relevancy for queer theory has been due less to oversight, as to a lack of access, as until 2006, *Folie et déraison* was only available as the abridged *Madness and Civilization* (1965), translated by Richard Howard. Huffer argues that *Madness and*

Civilization was intended for a popular audience, and was well-received, but that at only one-third the length of the original French title, it lacked a great deal of the nuance of *Folie et déraison* and that Foucault himself was dissatisfied with the truncated version. The unabridged 2006 translation by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa provides much-needed access to Foucault's full critique of moral exclusion and to, what was to become, his lifelong challenge to the "despotic powers of philosophical reason" (xiv).

Mad for Foucault, therefore, represents an "event" in the Foucauldian sense of the term, whereby philosophical discourse is always viewed as an "occurrence" or a "happening," rather than as the means by which to construct concepts. Further, the event-ness of the text extends to the complex relationship between author and text *and* reader and text. Punctuated by her own lived experiences of reading Foucault in the archives, Huffer exemplifies the *affect* of the text on the subject; that is the vitality of the process of reading itself. She writes "My archival encounter was nothing less than an experience of rupture: I was . . . torn to pieces" (ix). Much of the book, though particularly the preface, is self-reflective, linking text with its affect; theory with the passions that drive its continued production, and Huffer traces Foucault's own critical reflexivity in relation to the function of the *preface* as a "declaration of tyranny" (Foucault, as quoted in Huffer xviii) that "allows the author to impose her own image on the book's reception" (Huffer xviii). This critical *doubling-back* is reminiscent of Ladelle McWhorter's reading of her own autobiographical process in *Bodies and Pleasures* (1999), indicating, not only the weight of Foucault's arguments on the topic of autobiography, but the self-reflexive writing process that itself becomes a practice of freedom.

With the impressive aim of re-articulating Foucault's discourse of sexuality, and consequently, the psychoanalytic foundations of queer theory, Huffer takes on no easy task. If

successful, she opens the door for multiple offshoots, and what may be a very rewarding shift within contemporary queer theory and politics. No less important is the project of reading madness and sexuality alongside one another, as Huffer highlights Foucault's own query: "why [have] we made sexuality into a moral experience?" (as quoted in Huffer xv). In effect, it is this question which targets the conflation of the erotic and unreason that has characterized modern epistemological projects, and which has had devastating effects. This conflation has not only meant that *queer* was and is constructed as a form of madness, but that madness itself has been made into the ultimate signifier of the uncontrollable, bodily, "other"; an "other" which feminists have long argued is largely feminized. In order to explicate Huffer's undertaking of these projects more fully, I turn to a more detailed summary of the central arguments of the text, followed by a brief discussion of its implications for future theorizations, imaginings, and *becomings* of the queer subject.

Chapter One, "How We Became Queer," summarizes the central arguments of *History of Madness*, including its focus on the Cartesian moment, or the moment during which the modern subject became a subject of reason at the expense of the body. Descartes' cogito, then, categorically linked the body with irrationality, and this irrationality was expelled from the realm of legitimate subjectivity: "The thinking subject's use of reason to abolish madness from himself exiles the mad into the category of nonexistence" (56). This process effectively constructed madness, or rather, created a *mad subjectivity*, and this *mad subjectivity* was further linked with eros, thus enabling the exile of any forms of sexual deviancy.

Throughout Chapter One, Huffer indicates that while queer theory has successfully interrogated sexual identity, it has been less successful in articulating "an ethics of lived erotic experience" (47). In its effective binding together of erotic love and unreason (61), the Cartesian

moment provides greater insight into the construction of sexual deviancies, as Foucault outlines them in *Sexuality One*. However, Huffer argues that the dichotomous construction of sexual *acts* versus *identities* that comes from *Sexuality One* is a misreading of Foucault and that “It is not the distinction between acts and identities that matters, as so many readers have asserted, but rather the difference between the ethical universes each set of characters represents” (71). It is not so crucial to understand identities as socially constructed as it is to understand their construction by the psychological sciences. Furthermore, Huffer argues that, contrary to the often quoted passage from *Sexuality One* where he writes “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault 43), Foucault does not believe that the concept of homosexuality was invented at one particular point in time, but that its construction occurs again and again in many different ways.

Chapter Two, “Queer Moralities” explores Foucault’s use of Nietzsche in *Madness’s* critique of sexuality. Huffer writes that “Madness is the ‘ransom’ paid by the ‘other’ for the historical rise of the rational moral subject” (92), and that in its construction as such, the moral subject necessarily expels the irrational, the mad, the and the sexual deviant from the realm of the knowable. Materially, the expulsion of madness from reason played out in processes of confinement and exclusion, processes which contributed to the construction of psychic interiority. Thus, the age of rationalism effectively constructed the phenomenon of human interiority as a means by which to maintain social norms, social norms effected by psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis through their focus on the inner psyche as a measure of meaning.

The second chapter also includes a critique of queer theory’s focus on performativity as the queer offspring of Foucault’s subjectivation. Huffer argues that this is not an apt kinship such that the oft-used concept is successful in an *undoing* of gender, but not in the *undoing* of the

subject such that it relies notions of subjectivity and the inner psyche in its resignification of sex and gender. As she writes “with performativity, the subject is not undone but rebelliously remade: she is a joker, a trickster, a sassy artist who operates in the camp mode of ironic subversion” (120). Taking aim at contemporary identity theorists who call for the multiplicity of the subject (see Haraway, 1985; Anzaldua, 1987; Butler 1990), Huffer argues “the goal of moral critique should not be the expansion of moral norms to include a greater diversity of marginalized subjects. Rather a Nietzschean critique of moral interiority ultimately renegotiates subjectivity itself” (115).

Before moving on to the next chapter, it might be useful to ask: what might this “renegotiation” *look* like? Readers and scholars of queer theory are familiar with calls for “renegotiations,” “reconfigurations,” “shifts,” and “turns” but it is difficult to fully comprehend what the material incarnation of these movements could be. One notable absence within Huffer’s text is the presence of lucid examples of this renegotiated subjectivity, or rather, the process by which subjectivity *proper* engages in its own shift. The closest she comes is through her close reading of Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* (Chapter Four), whereby the theatrical irony (both linguistically and bodily) of the nephew indicates one of the moments during which the rational subject recognizes his own madness without allowing the subsequent *split* between reason and unreason. Madness then exists alongside the cogito as an “unsettling edge” (Huffer 222). Huffer’s inclusion of this narrative is relevant, given Foucault’s extensive discussion of the nephew in *Madness*, however, I can’t help but wonder what other examples might look like. Could we open a space for the feminist sex worker whose very existence puts the heteronormativity (and patriarchal) norms of desire into question? Or the queer youth who occupies a critical stance of androgyny? These examples may not perfectly align with Huffer’s

argument, and do not represent a scenario that is prior to the great split between reason and unreason (as *Rameau's Nephew* arguably does), but it would be beneficial to point toward imaginings of the “unsettling edge” of madness/eros/sexuality and its potential for *undoing* subjectivity without reliance on a moral interiority.

Following the argument that psychic interiority was itself produced through structures of moral exclusion, Chapter Three, “Unraveling the Queer Psyche,” takes aim at Freud’s role within queer theory, and furthermore with the ways in which Freud and Foucault have been read alongside one another within the field. Huffer continues her argument that Foucault’s project is at odds with queer psychoanalytic projects, and that *Madness* formulates a full critique of the inner psyche and the firm locating, via psychoanalysis, of sexuality within the unconscious. Instead, Huffer develops Foucault’s argument that psychoanalysis is itself the product of the dichotomy between reason and unreason, and consequently, she is critical of texts such as Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” (1984), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), and Judith Butler’s *Psychic Life of Power* (1997) which construct predominantly psychoanalytic conceptions of identity (and non-identity).

Chapter Four, “A Queer Nephew” develops Foucault’s reading of Hegel alongside Diderot’s *Rameau's Nephew* in *History of Madness*. Huffer translates Foucault’s argument to offer up the Nephew as a site of queer madness, and further positioning Diderot’s text as a heterotopic space: an “other space.” From this position, *Rameau's Nephew* enables the tracing and thinking of difference; the ability to rupture normative conceptions of the subject. The chapter thus moves away from the critique of the psyche and towards opening a space for a desubjectivated ethic as an *ars erotica*. It is through the doubling structure of Hegelian logic that Foucault is able to approach desubjectivation as an ethical event, and furthermore to explore

subjectivity as “dialogic and therefore relational” (230). For queer theorists, the most useful parts of Chapter Four include its return to the critique of performativity, such that Huffer moves the conversation further to illustrate the way that desubjectivation is more than an “explosive art of performative reversals” (233). Instead, Foucault’s own undoing of the subject is the process of disciplined, archival labour; an *ars erotica* that we must learn to practice on ourselves.

The final chapter, “A Political Ethic of Eros,” makes detailed use of a Foucauldian lyricism in an effort to explain what an ethic of eros *looks like*. Huffer describes the “artful,” “poetic,” and “literary” project as one which strips away the structural philosophies that construct reason and madness, and more importantly, which construct these as disparate and dichotomous entities. Instead, one must practice becoming-other: “an unlearning or releasing of the rationalist subject” (243). This chapter includes a final critique of Butler, claiming that she has mistakenly charged Foucault with a “vain utopianism” (255), a reading that fails to recognize his discussion of the heterotopia: the very real spaces of otherness which are neither utopic nor dystopic, but which trouble spaces of despotic reason. Huffer argues that the relationship between the subject and truth was formed in the distinction between “care of the self” and “know yourself.” Where a Socratic privileging of self-care over self-knowledge focused on the cultivation of the self through listening to the needs of the body and attending to them accordingly (see *Care of the Self* 133-146), the Cartesian moment made knowledge the fundamental moral and ethical project, such that *knowing oneself* became the primary access to truth. “The ethics of self as a practice of freedom is, above all, the practice of a critical reflection that will allow us to practice a different living through the art of ethical self-transformation” (264). This positive project of self-transformation, then, becomes a political act, such that by living an ethics of self, the queer and/or mad, inhabit the space of “split decisions,” that is, the

moment between reason and unreason where resignification and resistance is possible and where the *living-feeling* body becomes both a practice of philosophy and a practice of self.

Overall, *Mad for Foucault* is well-situated within the field of queer theory, engaging thoughtfully with its feminist, philosophical, and critical strands. Huffer also notes her indebtedness to Didier Eribon's *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (2004), the only other book that has read *Madness* according to its relevancy for discussions of sexuality. However, where Eribon focuses primarily on the applicability of this re-reading of *Madness* for gay men, and refrained from engaging with the question of ethics, Huffer grounds her project in a distinctively feminist and queer frame, and as mentioned above, she indicates that the development of a queer ethic(s) is of the utmost importance to her project. One welcome, but also contestable inclusion within the book is Huffer's reference to a wealth of Foucault's unpublished archives, including handwritten letters, student lecture notes, and interview transcripts. Although it is exhilarating to be able to catch a glimpse of a more personal, intimate Foucault through these sources, Huffer's use of them may well represent a direct violation of Foucault's own wishes that they remain unpublished. To be fair, Huffer refrains from using all but a small handful of direct quotations from the Droit interview, and in response to this tension, she writes:

I know that my insistence on citing an unpublished interview Foucault disliked will be seen by some as disloyal or, at the very least, in bad taste. But I see it differently. . . . the interview has become a book of sorts. . . . [and] as a book, the interview takes its place as an object-event that . . . must evade the grip of "person who wrote it" (from Foucault *Madness* xxxviii). (Huffer 24)

Thus, in her use of Foucault's archives, Huffer aims to situate their event-ness within Foucault's *queer madness*, a madness that has been waiting to be uncovered in the dusty shelves of a Normandy monastery.

As the citations and borrowed metaphors above surely illustrate, Huffer's writing is a treat, traveling from intimate and poetic to complex and challenging, all the while accompanied by lucid summaries of her central ideas and thus demonstrating a welcome generosity to the reader. As a *poetic eros* is itself a key component of the ethics offered in *History of Madness* Huffer accompanies the theoretical material addressed in her four chapters with an equal number of "Interludes": a tracing of Nietzsche's madness; documentation of a conversation with a therapist friend about the contentious claim that madness is "constructed"; the haunting relationship between the suppressed 1961 preface to *Madness and Civilization* and the published 1972 preface; and the echo of her own "fool's laughter" in the archives of Normandy as she listens to a recording of lecture Foucault gave shortly before he died in 1984. As literal and literary breaks in the text, the interludes ground the reader in the lived bodily experience of madness, sexuality, and autobiography that are so relevant to the arguments in the book. Furthermore, they seemingly trace the various "splits" that haunt Huffer's text: the split between reason and unreason that has been so foundational a frame for modern philosophy and experience; the splits in Foucault's reception within feminist theory; and even the split between theory and practice that often plagues theorists of gender and sexuality.

As a doctoral student, admittedly enamoured with Foucault as he has historically been articulated within the field of queer theory, Huffer's text compelled me to take a step back from the lure of performativity and to really think through its central arguments. The recurring questions of identity and sexual subjectivity came to mind as I was reminded of an afternoon when a student inquired at the end of a documentary on the lived experiences of transgender persons: "how do queer theories and transgender rights connect, given that one is about completely destabilizing gender and sexuality, and the other is about arguing for the right to a

fixed gender?” The student’s question left me then, and continues to leave me curious about how to bridge the gap between the theoretical imaginings that we drum up in our books and articles and the everyday experiences of those who cross gender boundaries, and live in that (often) heterotopic space. It was in the pages of *Mad for Foucault* that I really saw the stakes of the debate shift. Rather than approaching queer theory as a site of contesting sexual identity, Huffer’s re-telling of *History of Madness* encourages one to imagine a practice of self-transformation effected by thinking through *feeling*, a poetic, lyrical practice of eros that engages with the “other” in its very existence.

Ultimately, *Mad for Foucault* is a landmark text, both for Queer Theory and Foucault studies more generally. In its rearticulation of the Foucauldian foundations of queer theory, it undoubtedly sets the stage for a ripple effect, as scholars respond to Huffer’s central tenets, and work out their own interpretations of *History of Madness* in relation to queer theory. As for Foucault studies more generally, the text’s careful and close readings of *Madness* serve to address the absences surrounding the abridged, and problematic English translation of *Madness and Civilization*. As well, it aims to add weight to Foucault’s work on the care of the self and practices of freedom, as they can be further explored in relation to their earlier incarnation in the pages of *Folie et déraison*.

Finally, my own encounter with *Mad for Foucault* has meant that as I return to my familiar texts of queer theory, those that I have piled around me like walls (however unstable) of “truth” and “knowledge,” the texts somehow feel different. The words curve around another, and the characters of the Drag King and Queen, the theatrical figure of contemporary queer cinema, and the genderqueer performance artist begin telling new stories. I find myself reading them

through another lens, one of *madness* and *unreason*. And in this space I feel the spark of reason's queer and defiant offspring taking root and beginning to spread.

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