

Lynne Huffer

*Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*

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Ela Przybylo (York University)

**Ela Przybylo** works on bodies as they move in and out of pleasures, desires, and erotic practices. Her work on asexuality has appeared in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Sexualities*, *Feminism and Psychology*, *Psychology and Sexuality*, and in the book *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*. Ela is a doctoral candidate in Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies at York University.

<http://yorku.academia.edu/ElaPrzybylo>

przybylo@yorku.ca

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Lynne Huffer's *Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* is a text concerned with acrimonies, fissures, rifts, and betrayals. It tracks the rift between feminist and queer philosophies of sex, questioning queer distancings from feminism that station "frumpy, sex-phobic feminist[s] . . . against their kinky, stylish queer cousins" (6). Huffer explores the ways in which two cousin projects--one feminist, one queer--intimately interwoven in their commitments to dislodging normative sex habits, have become deadlocked against each other. The text examines this queer-feminist rift as a difference in figurations of the ethical subject and puts forward a proposition for thinking queerly with feminism, rather than without it, as has been proposed, for instance, by Janet Halley (Halley 2006). Despite its moribund title, *Are the Lips a Grave?* is ultimately a joyous academic text intent on resuscitating philosophical commitments to an antifoundationalist feminist tradition, on disheveling queer theory's rendition of frumpy, prudish feminism, and on celebrating a queer feminist ethics that provides unique insight on the contemporary suturing of morality with sexuality in modern subjectivity.

Throughout, Huffer pivots the following central questions around the coordinates of queerness-feminism-ethics-sexuality: What is a queer feminist ethics? What is provocative about inhabiting queerness and feminism in concord despite a twenty-year track record of affective distancing? How will rehabilitating an antifoundationalist feminism reignite queer and feminist kinetics? What insight might a queer feminism offer to the project of assessing the fusing of sexuality with apparatuses of morality? And, also, how can we project an ethics of sex that is queerly feminist?

The lips in *Are the Lips a Grave?* are the edgework of dissonant theories and multifocal pleasures. They are a lippy response to the anally focused antisocial thesis of a male-driven queer theory put forward by Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman (Bersani 1987; Edelman 2004). The lips are also, crucially, a figure for a nonreproductive, relational, antifoundational, lesbian-informed queer feminist ethics. The title piece--"Are the Lips a Grave?"--binds the queerness of Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (Bersani 1987) with

the feminism of Luce Irigaray's "When Our Lips Speak Together" (Irigaray 1977) in a projective hopefulness. The lips do not complement the phallus; they do not abet a reproductive iteration of sexual difference. Instead, Huffer evokes lips as a figure for an erotic ethics based on the incommensurability of difference, the narrative performance of the self and other, and the aphonic qualities of pleasure. In asking "are the lips a grave?" Huffer also asks a chorus of other questions: Can we love without betrayal? Can we speak in silence? Can we put forward a queer ethics of sex that is not disdainful of feminism? In other words, the lips work the edges of impossible aporias, holding opposites together in joyous ethical dialogue.

Huffer's excellent text offers three key contributions to philosophies of sex. The first of these is a commitment to the Foucauldian suspicion of the repressive hypothesis, that veritable urge to speak for and of sex as if "our 'liberation' is in the balance," as if "by 'saying yes to sex' we are 'saying no to power'" (Foucault 1978, 159; Huffer 184). With its routinization, queer theory often gets away with speaking on behalf of "transgressive" sex acts as if they led us to freedom and away from power. To have and speak of sex thus becomes a marker of a properly queer subject, and this incitement to "talk dirty in theory" is a servicing of sexuality's normativizing function within biopower (75). Related to this, Huffer studies what is all too often sidelined in sexuality studies across the board: namely, the ways in which sexuality functions as a moral apparatus in the production of subjects. Thus, celebrations of the queer, as much as of any manifest aspect of sexuality, speak to the binding of sexuality to morality that constitutes modern subjects. Thus Huffer helps us develop a criticality toward the normativizing tendencies of queerness, a criticality often lost in queer theory's colorful celebrations of transgression.

Second, Huffer speaks against the categorical separation of queer and feminist thinking, inviting a queer feminism to flourish. Queer theory and feminist theory--as two central philosophies for thinking sex--each in turn become easily reified as the "correct" school of doing sex. Tracking the staging of the queer-feminist split back to the inception of queer theory and especially to Gayle Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Rubin 1984; Sedgwick 1990), Huffer draws on Annamarie Jagose and Robyn Wiegman to argue that feminism is queer theory's central source of inspiration and its ongoing interlocutor (Wiegman 2004; Jagose 2009). Yet feminism is stationed as a project without the thrill of queerness, consequently leading it to be eclipsed by queer theory. Both philosophical schools, despite overlap, study sexuality in distinct ways. Queer theory is invested in antinormative sexual practices, performative and self-shattering disruptions of the subject. Feminist approaches to sexuality, on the other hand, tend toward a narrative conception of the subject and study sex in regard to a gendered order. Also, whereas queer theory's focus on the performative touts a rather individualizing and atomistic subject, feminist theories of sex explore a more relational, ethically entangled subject. Throughout the text, Huffer stages and restages, tells and retells the split between queer theory's performative and feminism's narrative conceptions of subjectivity, cycling the question of their ethical oppositionality. Ultimately, she puts forward a restorative queer feminist ethics since "politically and ethically, queers need feminists and feminists need queers" (9).

Third, in putting forward a feminist queer ethics, Huffer develops an *ethics of eros* as an attempt to imagine a sexuality that is not anchored to biopower. *Ethics* here entails an approach to subject-making that tracks our boundedness to one another. *Eros*, as an "erotic ethics of alterity" (12), signifies an imagining of sexuality that exceeds its routinized deployment as a tool of normalization. An ethics of eros is thus a way to listen to moral dissonance, providing a holding space for alterity and conflict, making a queer feminism possible.

Developing these three key contributions, Huffer offers readers eight chapters and an afterword. In the first chapter, which bears the title of the book, Huffer centralizes French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's antifoundationalist thinking as an imaginative project of queer heterosexuality. Having had a key influence on anglophone feminist philosophy in the 1980s, Irigaray has been omitted and distanced from queer philosophizing even despite her initial focal presence in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990). Huffer marks this as a critical iteration of the queer-feminist rift, that is, queer theory's rejection of the queerness on offer within feminist thinking on sex, such as in the writings of Irigaray. This rejection of feminism's influence on queer theory is also indexical of an anxiety around the status of sexual difference in queer theory, a problem with alterity that shadows queer theory despite its commitment to shattering coherent, proud male subjectivity. Recuperating Irigaray's place within queer theory, then, Huffer explores Irigaray's project of the undoing of the masculine monosubject of modern subjectivity. This chapter thus serves as an Irigarayan elegy to an erotic, queer feminist ethics.

"There Is No Gomorrah" builds on the work of the first chapter, exploring the queer-feminist rift by way of queer commitments to performativity and feminist inclinations toward narrativity. Reading French novelist Colette's *The Pure and the Impure* and Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* as allegories of feminism and queerness, respectively (Colette 1941/1966; Proust 1922–1931/1981), Huffer evokes the biblical story from Genesis of the punishment of homosexual abandon in the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Queer theory, Huffer maintains, tends to be sought out as the site of theoretical thrill and antifoundationalist authenticity because it functions on the grounds of performative disruption. Yet queer theory, in its prioritizing of the self as a subject constantly made and unmade, tends toward asociality, the bracketing of intersubjectivity, and the loss of questions of otherness and ethics. Feminism, on the other hand, although more committed to ethics and relationality, tends to be read as boring and outdated because of its inclination toward narrative forms of inquiry that rely on a gendered subject that is in existence before the act or utterance. Huffer's contribution in this chapter, in addition to her continued analysis of the queer-feminist split, is to put forward "narrative performance" as a suturing of queer and feminist ideational strategies. Since narrative is already a performance in that it is a particular form of utterance or speech act, narrative performance is a compelling way to think about storytelling. Huffer also argues, though less clearly, for narrative performance to mark a move to focusing on intersubjectivity, or the ethical co-constitution of subjectivity in close sociality with others.

In "Foucault's Fist," the third chapter, Huffer further discusses queer theory's tendencies to elide feminism and gendered specificity. "Queer," she argues, all too often slips into "gay men." Namely, drawing on Foucault's utopian call to "bodies and pleasures" in his final words in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (Foucault 1978, 159), Huffer discusses the elaboration of a culture and ethics around practices such as gay fisting as tending to cloud the production of both a gay male operative and an incitement to a power-bound sexual discourse. An act and figure evocative of androgyny, fisting becomes tied, all too often--Huffer asserts--to gay maleness. Second, the incitement to talk on behalf of "perversions" tends to enfold subjects in the normalizing apparatus of sexuality. An "incitement to talk dirty in theory" (75), although it "might feel transgressive" (76), spirals us into the racy seduction of sex-talk that is deployed in service of biopower to encourage bodies to act in concord with ever-evolving iterations of normative practices and outlooks. Here the reader might pause and ponder: if, in Huffer's Foucauldian sense, sexual innovation is harnessed to reproducing normative regimes the minute it is set in language, what is the point at all of sexual innovation, of the formation of new sexual cultures and communities, and of extending our bodies beyond what is sexually "normal"? Readers are not provided with an answer, but the redemption Huffer offers is ultimately a rethinking of the fist as a narrative performance, an "etho-poetic" practice, not merely a fist but a hand "determined by its temporal unfolding: folding, unfolding, and folding again" (78). The chapter thus cycles us back to the question of ethics: between feminists and queers as between bodies-at-sex.

The fourth chapter, "Queer Victory, Feminist Defeat?," examines the production of sex by the law through the embeddedness of the *Powell v. State* (1998) ruling in the landmark *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) decision, which decriminalized sodomy. Huffer uses performative retelling to examine how the celebratory story of the decriminalization of sodomy cloaks the silent erasure of sexual violence, as in the case of a sodomy charge applied to forced cunnilingus in *Powell*. Huffer uses this discussion to think about the place of storytelling, and emotions and nonverbal communication (such as crying) in the legal system. The queer-feminist rift surfaces again in this chapter in the different approaches to legal critique that characterize queer and feminist politics. If, as Huffer holds, feminist politics focuses on using the legal apparatus in its juridical dimension to combat sexual violence, then queer politics tends to be suspicious of law while pursuing the legal implementation of privatized sexual freedom. The story of *Powell* in *Lawrence*, Huffer assesses, hides questions of both sexual violence and racialized violence in favor of telling a domesticated, homonormatively celebratory story of progress of the national fight against homophobia.

The subsequent four chapters stage an erotic, lesbian, queer feminism that compiles a particular genealogy of examples. As a term and as a feminist or queer concept, *lesbian* marks a "forgetting of sexual difference that has itself been forgotten" (118), being relegated to a position of embarrassing silence, even despite lesbian feminism's central contributions to feminist theory of the 1970s. Huffer, repositioning lesbianism as "an event of marginalization that is erotically charged" (118), draws on the queer lesbianism of writers Alison Bechdel, Violet Leduc, Colette, Sara Maitland, Valerie Solanas, and director Virginie Despentes to explore a lesbian *jouissance*, an intertextual narrative

performance that engages ethical questions of the Other. Speaking also to reading relations, Huffer argues for a one-handed masturbatory reading that is attuned to a relational model of subjectivity that telling and retelling, as well as writing and reading, entail. Notably, in chapter 7, Huffer fuses her own personal narrative to the Genesis story of Abraham, Sarah, and their Egyptian slave, Hagar, to think about betrayal as a "moment where love falters" (144) and of betrayal as coexisting with love, including in its queer and feminist renditions.

Taken as a whole, Lynne Huffer's *Are the Lips a Grave?* is a graceful and evocative, if at times cyclical, exploration of queer–feminist antagonisms, making a poetic case for a *queer feminism* that works with, rather than smoothes out, the rifts between these two schools of thought. Huffer's scholarship is textured and layered, and her contributory remarks on queer theory's eclipsing of feminist thinking are brave. At the "authors meet critics" launch for *Are the Lips a Grave?* at the National Women's Studies Association annual meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico (on November 14, 2014), the major critique that surfaced regarding Huffer's book was that Huffer is too quick to criticize feminists' key theoretical contribution of intersectionality. Although, as Huffer herself pointed out at the event, intersectionality is present on only a few pages of a 200-page book, Huffer questions feminists' panicked insistence on using intersectionality as *the one and only* tool for examining difference. For instance, Huffer argues that intersectionality, although indisputably an important critical tool, has become a mechanism of normalization in feminism, fostering a "moral imperative to exclude exclusion" that leads to policing effects on feminist scholars (19). My unfulfilled wish for *Are the Lips a Grave?* consists of my own masturbatory reading: How can queer feminism reinstate a commitment to centralizing sexual difference that does not let other "differences" go?

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