Realizing a Different Lacan?

Meridith Kruse

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Volume 25, Number 1, January 2019, pp. 202-205 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press

REALIZING A DIFFERENT LACAN?

Meridith Kruse

The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects
Mari Ruti
New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. x + 252 pp.

Ruti offers numerous subclaims across this ambitious book, including a critique of Butlerian reiteration and a case for Tim Dean's impersonal ethics. All, however, are largely animated by her central argument that Lee Edelman's Lacan of negativity and destruction, widely accepted as dogma in queer theory, is incomplete and should be revised. While Edelman interprets Lacanian negativity as a matter of self-annihilation, Ruti counters that, for Jacques Lacan, an individual's plunge into self-shattering jouissance is better seen as an ethical act by a defiant subject unwilling to give ground on the "truth of their desire" (8). Although certainly posing a risk to one's social viability, such an act also has the potential to spark feisty agents of political rebellion whose "opting out" of the dominant order can include a fierce loyalty to cherished objects and loved ones (8). In Ruti's view, Antigone exemplifies this dynamic when she defies the hegemonic, symbolic order (Creon's Laws) and risks her own subjective incoherence out of a commitment to the truth of her desire, which is itself animated by intense loyalty to her brother (55). On the book's back cover, in praise of this unique intervention in our field, Heather Love remarks: "By joining Lacanian fidelity to desire with the impulse to repair, Ruti points the way toward a queer ethics that is antinormative without being antisocial." Within the field of queer theory, Ruti hopes that this different, more relational portrait will help clarify the value of Lacanian concepts for affect-oriented scholars who may have avoided such tools because of Edelman's influence as well as bridge the divide between "those who have chosen to follow Lacan (Bersani, Edelman, Dean)" versus "Foucault (Halperin, Huffer)" (4).

In her fourth chapter, "Beyond the Antisocial-Social Divide," Ruti begins work toward these goals by charting points of convergence among adversaries in the antisocial-social debate. For Ruti, the contours of this face-off are exemplified by antisocial theorists such as Edelman, who "tend to emphasize—along Lacanian lines—the constitutive role of negativity in human life," in contrast to scholars

such as "Munoz, Eng, and Love," who focus on more social, "circumstantial and context-specific forms of negativity, wounding, decentering, and suffering" (131). Out of a desire to soften this disagreement, Ruti utilizes her alternative, relational Lacan to argue that "the recognition of the subject's constitutive lack-in-being should not, in principle, keep critics from acknowledging the importance of more circumstantial forms of wounding (and vice versa)" (131). For Ruti, then, the tension between scholars such as Edelman and Love could be reduced if each were able to admit how their common interest in specific kinds of negativity inform each other. Interestingly, Ruti asserts that Lynne Huffer's latest book, *Are the Lips a Grave?* (2013), offers a productive example of this kind of valuable bridgework that crosses the antisocial-social divide as Huffer accounts for the role of *both* constitutive and social forms of wounding to develop her ethics of sex (132–33).

Across *The Ethics of Opting Out*, then, the gesture of reconciliation (bridge building, finding common ground) begins to function as an unquestioned good that implicitly validates Ruti's numerous efforts to secure convergence. At first glance, this focus on alleviating disagreements would appear to be a laudable goal. Given Ruti's citation of Huffer's work, however, I would argue it is vital to recall that Huffer ties her specific sense of ethics in *Are the Lips a Grave?* to a messy, "rift-restoring" convergence that seeks to *preserve differences* when locating sites of "fractured common ground" so that a lively "politics of disagreement" can occur that honors, rather than erases, alterity (7–8). With Huffer's sense of ethics in mind, I now want to consider the stakes of Ruti's claim that Huffer's Foucauldian desubjectivation represents "the same celebration of incoherence" as Edelman's Lacanian self-shattering jouissance (142). Rather than merely a minor quibble, it is my sense that Ruti's equation of these two concepts erases key distinctions between Huffer and Edelman (as well as Michel Foucault and Lacan) which are vital to preserve if queer theory is to address a host of pressing ethico-political concerns.

Typically seen as occupying divergent theoretical positions, Ruti groups Huffer with Edelman because, in her view, both typify a harmful trend in queer theory to unreflectingly push for ever-more intense destructions of the Enlightenment subject in a way that disregards the struggles of everyday people to persist and survive. However, in equating Huffer's Foucault with Edelman's Lacan, Ruti ignores Huffer's important work in *Mad for Foucault* to remind queer theory of Foucault's argument, across *The History of Madness* (1961), that the Freudian-Lacanian psyche represents not a site of rebellion but the very culmination of positivistic science and bourgeois morality that continues to silence and repress unreason. In her fourth chapter, "Unraveling the Queer Psyche," for example, Huffer

demonstrates how the Freudian Oedipus complex functions as a violent internalizing "fold," depositing bourgeois moral norms of shame and guilt "inside" the modern sexual subject such that the psyche becomes a sly site of "caged freedom" (125–33). As a result, Foucault's efforts to undo the modern rationalist subject via his archival practice include an attempt to unravel the trappings of the Freudian-Lacanian unconscious (which Edelman and Ruti leave in place). Importantly, Huffer links Foucault's nonpsychoanalytic pursuit of desubjectivation to his archival practice, where he not only strives to hear the traces of lives snuffed out by reason but also to grasp ethical forms of freedom with immediate relevance for our world. Thus, when Ruti disparages the value of Foucauldian desubjectivation and assimilates it to Edelman's self-shattering jouissance, queer theory again misses out on Foucault's incisive critique of psychoanalysis and loses touch with a range of vital, nonpsychoanalytic tools for pursuing an erotic ethics of living.

To circle back to my opening question, then, does Ruti succeed in offering queer theory a *different* Lacan? It would appear to be a matter of perspective. For American scholars primarily familiar with Edelman's work, Ruti's portrait of a more relational, socially oriented Lacan might seem unique. But for those who are cognizant of Foucault's genealogy of psychoanalysis in *The History of Madness* (1961) as well as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's ongoing efforts to not only critique structuralist interpretations of Lacan but also adapt certain psychoanalytic ideas for their more radical schizo-analysis, Ruti's work will appear quite staid. Already in *Anti-Oedipus* ([1972] 1983), for example, Deleuze and Guattari pinpoint the specific Lacanian theory of desire that Ruti embraces as something to discard and move beyond because of its repression of desiring-production. "Lacan's admirable theory of desire appears to us to have two poles," they note, "one related to 'the object small *a*' as a desiring-machine, which defines desire in terms of a real production . . . and the other related to the 'great Other,' as a signifier, which reintroduces a certain notion of lack" (27). As is widely known, Deleuze and Guattari will deploy this first pole of desire to chart a radically different, transversalist notion of the unconscious. Meanwhile, Ruti and Edelman remain tethered to this second pole as they promote a Lacanian desire tied to the great Other and a constitutive lack-in-being that Deleuze and Guattari denounced long ago for its suppression of both desiring-machines and antifascist modes of thinking and living. As a result, one might say that the value of *The Ethics of Opting Out* lies less in its newness per se than in its ability to remind queer theory of how far it has yet to go to acknowledge the vital transformations to Lacan, ethics, and desire wrought by the innovative thinkers circulating around May '68.

References

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. [1972] 1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, Michel. [1961] 2006. *The History of Madness*. New York: Routledge.

Huffer, Lynne. 2010. *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

———. 2013. *Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Meridith Kruse is a lecturer in the writing program at the University of Southern California.

DOI 10.1215/10642684-7275702

A QUEER ETHIC OF CONFLICT AND THE CHALLENGE OF FRIENDSHIP

David S. Byers

Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair
Sarah Schulman
Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016. 299 pp.

Conflicts, according to Sarah Schulman in her most recent book, are varied, sometimes mundane, and often consequential challenges to dominant understandings. Conflicts can range from simply showing up in interaction, for people whose social identities and sexualities are contested, to active resistance to state and intergroup violence, marginalization, and oppression. Schulman's deceptively simple contention is that such conflicts are so uncomfortable for most people that we pervasively misunderstand or misrepresent them as potentially leading to serious psychological, social, and physical harm. Intentionally or not, we overstate the danger of necessary and inevitable conflict and frame it as abuse.