

## History and the Laboratory of Sexuality

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### Foucault at Berkeley: Twenty Years Later

Symposium at Townsend Center for the Humanities/Institute for European Studies, UC Berkeley, October 16, 2004

“In the *École militaire*,” Foucault said in 1977, “the battle against homosexuality and masturbation was spoken by the walls.”<sup>11</sup> *Dite par les murs*: Such phrases summed Foucault’s work for me when I began reading it in college in 1976. Starting in ’78 and every few weeks for the next ten years, I’d often pack a Foucault text for the train to New York. New York mostly meant Studio, where we were often stuck at the door, and the St. Mark’s, where we could always do anything. I came to Berkeley as a postdoc in the summer of ’86; Foucault had died in June, 1984. I wanted to see the San Francisco he’d described in interviews so tantalizingly. “A sexual laboratory.” What did *that* mean? I hoped it meant what I thought it did. And I was lucky—it did. Sort of. In ’86, the scene Foucault had witnessed was dying—as it was back in New York. The city had closed the baths four months after Foucault died. But here, at the end of gay sex as I’d known it, was the beginning of my vocation as a gay historian: living through the history Foucault the historian had predicted. Not that he anticipated AIDS—far from it. But he knew that such setbacks—conjunctions undesired and

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<sup>11</sup> “L’œil du pouvoir,” in J. Bentham, *Le Panopticon* (Paris, 1977) = Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, eds. Defert and Ewald, III, 193; “The Eye of Power,” *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York, 1980), 150 (“In the Military Schools, the very walls speak the struggle against homosexuality and masturbation”).

unexpected, sometimes deadly, sometimes pleasurable, sometimes both—such reversals imprint homosexuality *as* historical, whatever it might be as a natural fact. Twenty years later, I'd still endorse his insight—and precisely because his gay life in the 80s now appears to me to be long, long ago and far, far away.

In interviews granted in the early 80s to the gay press, Foucault criticized gay culture of the day and its identitarian politics—its affirmation of a human “gayness.” As Foucault already told one activist in 1975, “the term ‘gay’ has become obsolete.”<sup>2</sup> “What we should work on today is not to liberate our desire,” he suggested to French readers of *Gai Pied* in 81, “but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasures . . . intense relations that don’t resemble what’s been institutionalized. . . . To be ‘gay’ isn’t to identify oneself with homosexuality but to seek to develop a mode of living . . . an historic occasion for reopening relational and affective virtualities.”<sup>3</sup> As he explained to *The Advocate* in 82, “to be the same is really boring.”<sup>4</sup> Now some might be surprised by the last statement. In 1975, when he spent a semester here at Berkeley, followed by long visits in 79, 80, and twice in 83, Foucault plunged into the world of the “clones,” as he and others called the gay men inhabiting San Francisco’s Castro

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation overheard by Simeon Wade, May, 1975, and reported by James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York, 1993), 254. As Foucault told a group of historians and Lacanian psychoanalysts in 1977, “the homosexual liberation movements remain very caught at the level of demands for the right to their sexuality, the dimension of the sexological”—even though he also pointed out that the “American homosexual movements . . . begin to look for new forms of community, co-existence, pleasure” (“Le jeu de Michel Foucault,” *Ornicar?*, 10 July 1977 = *Power/Knowledge*, 220).

<sup>3</sup> “De l’amitié comme mode de vie,” *Gai Pied* 25 (April, 1981) = *Dits et écrits*, IV, 165. Foucault made similar points for American readers of *Christopher Street* in 1982: “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will: A Conversation with Michel Foucault,” *Christopher Street* 6, no. 4 (May, 1982), 36-41 = *Dits et écrits*, IV, 308-14 (the interview was conducted in 1981). Challenging the readers of *Arcadie*, he asked “do we truly need a true sex?”: “Le vrai sexe,” *Arcadie*, 27, no. 328 (November, 1980) = *Dits et écrits*, IV, 116. (The magazine printed the French text of the preface Foucault wrote for the American edition of *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite* [New York, 1980], vii, which had not appeared in the 1978 French edition.)

and Folsom districts and other North American so-called “gay ghettos.” I’ll return to the equation Foucault perceived between “clones” and “ghettos.” Here I can remark that “being the same” (boring as it might have been for Foucault) was a manifest order of things, a structure of knowledge, in the cruising places south of Market—one of “the things spoken” (as in “dite par les murs”): an intricately codified discipline of gay male comportment, encompassing the finest details of facial and body hair, jeans, belts, and tees, boots and sunglasses, jackets and caps—to mention only sartorial conventions. A manifest order of things, but maybe *merely* a manifest order: clone culture understood its replicatory activity as such, “performed” it we might now say, and often made fun of itself; *The Butch Manual*, a 1982 handbook for climbing the supposed ladder of sexual desirability in the Castro, deftly mocked the leatherboy ideals glowering from the pages of *Drummer* magazine.<sup>5</sup> One could multiply instances of this playful division, this connoisseurship of replication; its icons need, I hope, no introduction—disco hits, The Village People, Tom of Finland. In the Castro and SoMa, Foucault encountered the diverse forms of what he was pleased to call the “laboratory of sexual experimentation”—his phrase in a famous interview in

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<sup>4</sup> “An Interview: Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” *The Advocate*, 7 August 1984, 28 (the interview was conducted in 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Clark Henley, *The Butch Manual* (San Francisco, 1982). Foucault regarded Western Christianized sexuality—it supposedly asserts an indissociable relation between “sex” and “truth”—as what he once called “the *reverse* of the performative speech act” (my emphasis); in the libidinalized sexuality inherited by the Western tradition from the era of Augustine, “the affirmation [of a sexual truth] destroys in the speaking subject the reality which made the same affirmation true” (Richard Sennett and Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude,” *London Review of Books*, 21 May – 3 June 1981, 3). Strictly speaking, then, the gay sex of clone culture in the Castro—insofar as it deflected, evaded, or transformed the supposed sex/truth paradigm of Western libidinalized sexuality—should be seen as a reversal of the reversal of a performative speech act. The concrete historical context and determination of such a complex discursive devolution needs to be clarified—as I will try to do here.

March, 1982.<sup>6</sup> In particular, he cited the erotic inventions of the leatherclones and gay S&M—what he called the “new possibilities of pleasure” one could attain in sexclubs like the Mineshaft in New York or the Barracks or Black & Blue south of Market<sup>7</sup>: “new pleasures,” he said, indeed, “*beyond ‘sex’*.”<sup>8</sup>

This story has been told already by Foucault’s biographers—delicately by Didier, a bit portentously by James Miller. I don’t wish to dwell on Foucault’s personal experience, which I know nothing about, but to remark the significance Foucault gave it in conceiving—reconceiving—his theoretical notion of the historicity of sex.<sup>9</sup> If I can coin a phrase, Foucault came to advocate a “Clio-analysis of the subject” quite distinct from a *psycho*-analysis of the subject. In this ethical project, the horizons of the self’s care are not so much its original trauma and its inevitable death as its aesthetic becoming—a becoming situated, however, in paradoxical deflections in the social relations of human being.

Let me tread some familiar ground for a moment. Foucault’s training in psychopathology, inflected by his later inquiries in modern typologies of madness, illness, and crime, prepared him to consider sex—whatever it is as an impulse of nature—as “something spoken.” Discursively constituted sexuality must be repetitive—repetition. In the Greco-Roman world, repetition relayed social-sexual “roles”—notably the active and passive roles that ordered

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<sup>6</sup> “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” *Homosexuality: Sacrilege, Vision, Politics, Salmagundi* 58-59 (Fall, 1982-Winter, 1983), 19-20. This important and influential special issue contained the first truly “Foucauldian” historical study—beyond Foucault’s own—of a segment of the discursive-social history of homosexuality: George Chauncey, Jr., “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance” (pp. 114-46).

<sup>7</sup> “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” 43.

<sup>8</sup> “Michel Foucault: à bas la dictature du sexe!,” *L’Express* 1333, 24 January 1977, 56-57, quoted in Miller, *Passion*, 291.

<sup>9</sup> “From Miller’s account,” Alexander Nehamas has commented, “we may conclude that sadomasochism was a kind of blessing in Foucault’s life. It provided the occasion to experience relations of power as a source of delight” (“Subject and Object,” *The New Republic*, 15 February 1993, 35). Nehamas rightly says that Foucault “applied his own historicism to himself” (*ibid.*, 35).

pederasty as well as heterosexual intercourse, conjugal or not. In modern nation-states, by the end of the nineteenth century repetition relayed sexual “identities”—notably the “homosexuality” first named in 1869. For Foucault, repetition doesn’t derive, as it had for Freud, from the miserable satisfaction continually afforded by the neurotic symptom—from the continuing repressed defense against sexual trauma. Repetition devolves from the iterative structure of discourse. Thus it must be limited by the intelligibility of discourse and by the recognizability (or unrecognizability) of self and world *in* discourse; at some contingent threshold, an “unthinkable” might happen. True to his roots in phenomenological and existential psychiatry and to his readings of Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot, Foucault imagined the “limit experience” that “tears the subject out of itself” in a “space of untamed exteriority”—a dissociation and even a disappearance of the “unity of the excessively determined subject,” as Blanchot put it—the subject constituted in knowing “les choses dites,” things named, classified, and significant.<sup>10</sup> In one sense, a limit-experience is a punctual happening, in which the apophantically constituted world for the correlated subject falls away. In this sense Foucault and his two gay companions characterized their acid trip in Death Valley in 1975,<sup>11</sup> and in this sense Foucault embraced the sensual ordeals and thrills of gay S&M as he described it. As he told a French gay mag in 78, in S&M “there is an exceptional possibility to

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Michel Foucault tel que je l’imagine* (Paris, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> The acid trip reminded Foucault of his near-death experience when hit by a car in 19\*\*. His banality in describing these intense happenings might in itself be taken to show their discursive unthinkability. Of the car accident, Foucault said it was “. . . a very, very intense pleasure, a marvellous time. It was getting on about seven o’clock, a summer evening. The sun was beginning to set. The sky was magnificent, blue” (“Michel Foucault: An Interview with Stephen Riggins,” *Ethos* 1, no. 2 [1983]; the interview was conducted in June, 1982).

desubjectify oneself, to desubjugate oneself.”<sup>12</sup> But a limit-experience can also have persistence, a relay as a paradoxical repetition, a *para-doxon*, beside and around the frame of stated belief—a kind of Nietzschean primary falsification, if you like, itself founding “truth”; a suspension of disbelief; an “openness,” a “receptivity.” In Foucault’s metapsychology, it’s an access of corporeal *savoir* without discursive *connaissance*—some kind of reflexive awareness of one’s self and body as what Judith Butler calls the “nexus of the re-direction of power” experienced nonapophantically as pure force, as *impact*. As an on-going “mode of living,” it might be a “happy limbo of nonidentity”—Foucault’s phrase in his 1980 dossier of the case of Alexina Barbin, the provincial French boy born in 1838 and sexed as girl who spent her youth in passionate amours and panting embraces under the bedclothes with other girls before being legally reclassified as a male in 1860.<sup>13</sup> Living in the limit-limbo might somehow permit what Foucault called a “limit-attitude”—that “*permanent* creation of ourselves” he wanted beyond the obsolescence of gayness, its wearing-out in its repetition and regularization of identity—a “gay becoming.”

Now if a limit-experience can sustain a “becoming,” we must ask about what I’d call its replicatory constitution—its historicity. If it is not, precisely *not*, the iterative repetition-structure of *discourse* that relays nonapophantic possibilities of pleasure-awareness from moment to moment, place to place, and person to person in the continuous displacement of “the same”—what does? The unclassifiable sex life of Alexina Barbin was a suggestive example for Foucault, but it could not be definitive in theory. Though Alexina’s organismic

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<sup>12</sup> “Le gai savoir,” *Mec* 5, June 1988, 36 (the interview was conducted in 1978).

constitution stayed “the same” in his reversal of herself (she never had surgery), it was a fatal dislocation: he killed herself because he could no longer enjoy her erotic feelings in a “happy limbo of nonidentity” but only in the regulated intercourse of a legal male and “hermaphrodite.” This sad tale is surely not a compelling model for a “gay becoming.” However new, the emergences of hermaphroditism and sexual inversion ultimately fixed erotic pleasures for repetition in discipline and under government: “Hermaphrodite,” “Invert.” By contrast, a *permanent* reversal or inversion, the “permanent creation of ourselves” Foucault sought for a post-gay culture, must have a different history: continuous reversal of the reversal, and continuous reversal of the reversal of the reversal . . .

Foucault found the model for this history in gay S&M. In his interviews he reverted several times to what struck him most forcefully about leathersex: as groups of men explored different techniques for stimulating each other, a top or “master” in one scene could become a bottom or “slave” in another scene; and a bottom in this scene could be a top in yet another; and so on, indefinitely—all in one night in one place.<sup>14</sup> (All this could be enhanced by drugs, mostly amyl nitrate—the very chemical that Foucault once acidly noted had been used by Charcot to intoxicate and erogenize female “hysterics” so that the alleged sexual origin of their manias of body, expression, and speech might show forth.<sup>15</sup>) To be sure, there’s quite a stretch in Foucault’s picture of the world-historical portent of the ways the guys got it on at the Barracks. Foucault traded heavily on the iconography of leathersex—its own conventional discourse. He thought that the

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<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York, 1980), xiii.

<sup>14</sup> See especially “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” *Dits et écrits*, IV, 742-43.

<sup>15</sup> “The Confession of the Flesh,” *Power/Knowledge*, 218.

fixed corporeal and social relationality of Master and Slave, however dialectical its representation in consciousness, was upended in the spontaneity of the sexual subculture that sensuously enacted this very representation as its erotic imagery and technique: this culture, he urged, strategically represented the relations of power in the pleasures of bodies—power bottom-up as much as top-down.

Some respondents to Foucault's meditations on gay S&M, including some of his companions at the time, express doubt that the glamorous Derrido-Deleuzo-Foucauldian theory of "self-shattering sexuality" should be applied to the Castro/Folsom scene—maybe to *any* erotic scene or sexual culture.<sup>16</sup> To situate Foucault's interpretations as relaying an historical ideology, James Miller cited contemporary documents that affirmed the unique etiquette of leathersex and advanced a perspective essentially like Foucault's—Geoff Mains' 1984 book *Urban Aborigines* and Larry Townshend's *Leatherman's Handbook* above all. Recent historical sociology and cultural studies have reinforced what one could have thought all along: late 70s "clone culture" and leathersex can readily be understood as disciplines in the *earlier* Foucauldian sense; it's harder to see them sociologically as the spontaneity or becoming that the later Foucault found in them. To be sure, the analytic models of historical sociology and cultural studies—especially when dealing with sexuality—remain more indebted to the earlier historicist than to the later ethicist writings of Foucault. But our own distance from the form of life that struck Foucault would press us to ask him

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<sup>16</sup> James Miller quotes Leo Bersani: "There was something explosive about his fascination. I mean the scene was fun—but it wasn't *that* much fun! . . . I felt there was some sort of European version of glamorizing certain things, or of aestheticizing them" (Interview with James Miller, November, 1989, quoted by Miller, *Passion*, 261).

how one might really construe it to manifest the crucial passage from the historicity of stereotyped repetition to the historicity of permanent reversal.

Now Foucault had not only a philosophical interpretation of clone culture and the leather scene. He also had an *historical* interpretation. Unfortunately he didn't live to write it up fully, and we have to piece it together from remarks in his interviews and elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> For Foucault, the Castro/Folsom scene culminated a long history of male and female same-sex sociability in the West.<sup>18</sup> For Foucault, this history consisted chiefly in unanticipated effects—unintended and unpredicted intersections in which conjunctions of same-sex erotic sociability emerged as an unlooked-for and undesired *by-product* of conceptual and social normalization—indeed, I would say, in its *back-firing*. This process was framed throughout by what Foucault usually called monosexuality—the

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<sup>17</sup> It was deliberately *not* presented in the three volumes of the *History of Sexuality* published between 1976 and 1984. Of the two later volumes (both released in 1984), Foucault acknowledged that “rather than placing myself at the threshold of the formation of sexuality [in late medieval Europe], I tried to analyze the formation of a certain mode of relation to the self in the experience of the flesh” in a much earlier (i.e., a Roman, late antique, and early Christian) history (“Preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow [New York, 1984]), 338-39 (this text was replaced by another in the preface that was published in Volume II). At one level, then, Volumes II and III of the *History of Sexuality* did not deal with the history of homosexuality addressed—in the form of its nineteenth-century categorical production—in Volume I. Still, at another level Foucault might have seen the contemporary history of gay S/M sex as the fulfillment and definitive reversal *not only* of a long preceding history of same-sex erotic sociability *but also* as the fulfillment and definitive reversal of the distinctive Christian (or Christianized) doctrine of sex as “libidinal” (in a Christian “erection model”) rather than “relational” (in a pagan “penetration model”)—as the problem of one’s relation to one’s self and its unwilled sexual impulses (i.e., libido) and the “permanent hermeneutics of oneself” that governing this part of the self’s body would require (Sennett and Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude,” 3, 5-6). As Miller has emphasized, Foucault seems to have appreciated the nonorgasmic, nonerectile, and even nongenital or more or less “de-sexualized” (and to this extent, perhaps, “delibidinalized”) qualities of gay S&M. For this reason a full analysis of the historicity of gay sex of the 1980s, as Foucault might have construed it, would have to see it as a contingent conjunction of the devolution of same-sex erotic sociability *and* the devolution of a libidinalization of sensual pleasure (the latter chiefly applied to heterosexual activity and imagination). For simplicity and clarity, I emphasize the first strand here.

<sup>18</sup> To be sure, we need to relate this feature of Foucault’s presentation to his view that, as Jacques-Alain Miller put it in his sharp exchange with Foucault, “the history of sexuality [in Foucault’s sense of the term] culminates in psychoanalysis” (“Confession of the Flesh,” *Power/Knowledge*, 219). For Foucault, “‘sex’”—that is to say, “the history of procedures that set sex and truth in relation—culminates in psychoanalysis.

fundamental division of gender in which men and women live much of their lives apart from the other sex and largely interact amongst people of their own sex. Most simply put, *homosexuality* is one—only one—of the unintended consequences of *monosexuality*. In Foucault's basic equation, then, homosexuality as a *back-firing of erotic normalization in gender distinction* is the concrete ground—the historical substance—of homosexuality regarded notionally in its ideal Foucauldian aesthetics as the *continuous reversal of the repetition of the same*.<sup>19</sup> As Foucault's readers haven't always seen how this might work—how the Foucauldian sociology and the Foucauldian theory of sex might hang together and not cancel each other out—I'd like to pursue it a bit more.

In Volume One of the *History of Sexuality* Foucault addressed only one short segment of this history—the fifty years from 1850 to 1900 when “homosexuality” and “inversion” were categorically defined by sexual medicine and the law. As I've already mentioned, the term “homosexuality” first appeared in 1869. Thus David Halperin titled his arch-Foucauldian book of 1990 *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*; it deals, quite properly within its purview, with homoeroticism lived under the classification set out in the 1870s and 80s. But if we want to be true to Foucault's deeper, wider historical purview, modern homoeroticism might better be called *Five Hundred Years of Solitude*. The gay clone culture devolved in the 1970s really began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with what Foucault once called “the loss of friendship”—the disappearance, he thought, of romantic and eroticized friendship-love between men, sometimes

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<sup>19</sup> In the laboratory of modern sexualities, homosexuality is, as Foucault memorably described gay S&M in particular, a “falsification”: “Le gai savoir,” 34. “Physical practices like fist-fucking are practices that one can call devirilizing, or desexualizing. They are in fact extraordinary falsifications of pleasure . . .” Foucault meant “falsification” in its Nietzschean sense—truth as an

represented in the Renaissance to have the kind of spiritual intensity found in late-medieval traditions of heterosexual courtly love. Foucault didn't flesh out his observation on the "loss of friendship"; it's still an outstanding project for social and cultural history. But we can safely suppose, consistent with Foucault's analysis of the main forms of political rationality from 1600 to 1900, (well set out in his Tanner Lectures at Stanford in 1979, "Towards a Critique of 'Political Reason'"), that modern nations began to order their territories and populations such that *the state itself* claimed to produce and to protect the care and love which an individual man might have extended interpersonally to another man—care and love now abstracted and totalized in the pastoral, rational, liberal state. Friendship as such increasingly became an obsolete relationality, a defunct rationality; indeed, friendship in its own particular power as "love," in its partiality and prejudice and privilege, might undermine the new norms of evenhanded pastoralism, pure *raison d'état*, or studied neutrality in liberal governing. Naturally the Parisian or Prussian or English ministers and lawmakers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not explicitly set themselves *against* male romantic friendship; rather, it was socially devolved in a new political economy. Or so we might expand Foucault's sketch.

As George Haggerty suggests in his book *Men in Love*, by the eighteenth century romantic friendship attracted moral and political suspicion, though it persisted in highly refined expressions; we can read Horace Walpole or William Beckford to show that male loves in the late 1700s and early 1800s were considerably governed by a discourse *of* nation and state even though they were

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effect of a "primary and always reconstituted falsification, which establishes the distinction between the true and the false" (M. Foucault, *Résumé des cours, 1970-1982* [Paris, 1989], 13-14).

not, not yet, the object of medical intervention or legal classification *in* the discourse of the state. By 1850 or 1860 (if I skate over several recursions), when a man waxed sentimental for his friend, felt passionate love for a male ideal, or affirmed his erotic happiness or sexual excitement in the presence of an attractive companion—well, by then the “loss of friendship” was so far advanced that other constructs could fill the emerging vacuum—“contrary sexual feeling,” “homosexuality,” “inversion,” all encoding a prohibition of the erotic love that would not have much concerned an earlier observer of male friendships. The new categories variously derived from the casuistry of sodomy, the sexing of infants, the policing of masturbation, and the anatomy of hermaphroditism—and all involved unintended effects in the sense I’ve sketched, as did the intersections between them—when Sodomy met Hermaphroditism, for example. I’ve mentioned the case of Alexina Barbin. “Paradoxically protected” by the closed society in which she grew up, she’d happily had what seems to have been pretty hot love with her schoolgirl friends. But when he was designated to be male (thus finding her past as a “hermaphrodite”) she found himself backed into a corner—if she continued his *same-sex* pleasures she’d be a sodomite and if he continued her *cross-gender* amours he’d be a rapist or other sexual criminal. By the same token, the prohibition of same-sex love installed in the categories of “homosexuality” and “inversion” had their own unforeseen back-fires from 1870 into the early twentieth century. In Volume One of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault got this history tangled up. Notably, he attributed the origin of the term “homosexuality” to Carl Westphal—an establishment psychiatrist concerned in 1870 to reverse “contrary sexual feeling” among men confined to asylums with erotic depressions and manias. The term was actually invented by

Karl-Maria Kertbeny—a maverick jurist concerned to find certain sodomites not legally responsible for their acts. But Foucault’s historical confusion, cleared up in later statements, helped reveal the basic historical process at work, and the back-fire-effects of “homosexuality” were fully clear to him: the pathologization of same-sex erotic longing as inversion at the same time opened a door to its protection as homosexuality. In the next generation, theories of sexuality—Magnus Hirschfeld’s and Sigmund Freud’s around 1900—walked right through this door. Both theorists pathologized and protected all at once.

We can fast-forward from all this—again skating over many recursions—to clone culture in the “gay ghetto” of the 1970s. In the same interview in which he identified the gay ghetto as the sexual laboratory, Foucault suggested that the proscribed homosexuality at work for the past hundred years—a backfire-effect of the still-earlier “loss of friendship”—had made the ghetto possible. As he explained, “Homosexuals were not allowed to elaborate a system of courtship because the cultural expression necessary for such an elaboration was denied them. The wink on the street, the split-second decision to get it on, the speed with which homosexual relations [can now be] consummated: all these are products of an interdiction. When sexual encounters become extremely easy and numerous, as with homosexuality nowadays, complications are only introduced after the fact.” By “complications,” Foucault meant love: “For a homosexual, the best moment of love is likely to be when the lover leaves in the taxi. It is when the act is over and the boy is gone that one begins to dream about the warmth of his body, the duality of his smile, the tone of his voice. . . . This is due to very concrete and practical considerations and says nothing about the intrinsic nature of homosexuality.” I’ll return to the image of friendship-love emerging on the

other side of the consummations of gay sex; it's one of the deepest motifs of Foucault's desire in his speaking about sexuality (and, of course, in his speaking about—and maybe practice of—philosophy itself). But in the here-and-now of the gay ghetto as Foucault saw it, where sexual encounters are easy and numerous, “a whole new art of sexual practice develops which tries to explore all the internal possibilities of sexual conduct”—that is, conduct *without* romantic friendship or, more exactly, conduct which replicates courtship and love *in* the order of homosexuality as “gay.” “You find emerging in places like San Francisco and New York what might be called laboratories of sexual experimentation. You might look upon this,” he concluded, “you might look upon this as the counterpart of the medieval courts where strict rules of proprietary courtship were defined.”<sup>20</sup> Following Georges Duby, Foucault thought medieval courtly love had itself been an unintended effect, the “turbulent surplus,” of the feudal order in which younger sons and lesser knights were excluded from sexual and economic alliance with high-born women.<sup>21</sup> This wasn't just a throw-away analogy. If you've kept track of the precipitation of reversals in the many-centuries-long history I've quickly outlined, you'll find that the “laboratory” of the Castro or Folsom must be a backfire-effect of an archaic social relation in its fifth or sixth or seventh recursion or carried to the fifth, sixth, or seventh power, a backfire of a backfire of a backfire of a backfire of a backfire . . . “I don't venture to employ the word ‘dialectics’,” Foucault said in 1982, referring to the historical constitution of gay

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<sup>20</sup> “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” 329-30.

<sup>21</sup> “The Confession of the Flesh,” *Power/Knowledge*, 201-2.

S&M, “but it’s not far from that.”<sup>22</sup> It’s dialectics utterly shorn of any progress or *Aufhebung*—the historical dislocation of all functional systems of conceptual and sexual exchange. Schematically: the feudal system of exogamous high-born marriage-alliance, “where strict rules of proprietary courtship were defined,” backfired in courtly love, in which unmarried young knights of the house worshipped unattainable lordly ladies; . . . which backfired in comradeship-in-arms, the eroticized fellowship of knights thrust off the estate in militant nation- and empire-building; . . . which backfired in romantic friendship, a loving male chivalry without arms, at home, and among marriageable women, but partly outside any state; . . . which backfired in the pastoralism and liberalism of the nation-state, doing abstractly and anonymously for all its citizens what a friend would do for his friend; . . . which backfired—from the point of view of a citizen’s fellowship—in “homosexuality,” barring the love of a man for a man (or even a woman for a woman) as inimical to the state functioning in its abstract totality and for itself; . . . which backfired in the proliferation of abstract and anonymous male homosexual interaction, *sub rosa* and *without* the prejudices of romantic friendship; . . . which backfires—at last, and in Foucault’s moment of observation in the laboratory—in experiments with “all the internal possibilities of [homo]sexual conduct”—a gamut subsisting as the entire extended devolution from late medieval “proprietary courtship” to the “casual sex” of the 1970s. Pheww! No wonder the Barracks seemed to be a gay “becoming”! Its seeming originality realized all the recursions and reversals that actually constituted it historically—a seeming spontaneity in consciousness and sensuous awareness, that shattering newness which had been no less intense and consuming, no less

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<sup>22</sup> “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” *Dits et écrits*, IV, 740.

an end or a limit, among the courtly lovers of Provence than it would be among their unexpected heirs, the gay leathermen along Folsom. The extraordinary pleasure attending this replication was constituted in the unstoppable devolution of social relationality and the inevitable obsolescence of discourse in the absolutely unforeseeable conjugations of historical change.

If we ask, in conclusion, what Foucault might have hoped the obsolescence of gay sex could produce, it would be—it would have to be—the end of the five hundreds of solitude precipitated from the “loss of friendship” in which that gay sexuality had been conjugated in history. In the early 80s, Foucault conceived a *post-gay* friendship as a reversal within a gay sexual culture ordered to forbid intergenerational eroticism.<sup>23</sup> Superficially, then, his new friendship might look rather like the erotic coupling of pederastic lovers in ancient Greece—an ideal easily mocked.<sup>24</sup> But as Foucault knew, since the mid eighteenth century, if not before, modern male homoeroticism often identified itself in the total *unavailability* of the historicity of ancient pederasty—a relationality embedded in a political economy that was not merely obsolescent but *absolutely defunct*. By virtue of its specific historicity as I’ve reconstructed it, a contemporary post-gay

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<sup>23</sup> “Certainly, as a fifty-year-old gay man, when I read certain publications produced by and for gays I find that I am not being taken into account at all, that I don’t belong somehow. . . . I can’t help observing that there is a tendency among articulate gays to think of the major issues and questions of life-style as involving typically people in their twenties” (“Sexual Act, Sexual Choice,” 332). The important interview “On Friendship as a Mode of Living” begins with the two young interviewers remarking that Foucault is fifty and their readers are in their twenties!

<sup>24</sup> Cf. “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will”: “I have a passion for the Hellenistic and Roman world before Christianity. Let’s take, for example, the relations of friendship. . . .” Still, Foucault knew that Greek pederasty had “diminished and narrowed” in the Roman empire; the “great condemnation of homosexuality [dated] to the Middle Ages, between the eighth and twelfth centuries”: “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” *Masques* 13 (Spring, 1982) = *Dits et écrits*, IV, 286-95, esp. 291. One might seek to link this ancient history with the early modern and modern history of homoeroticism rooted by Foucault in late-medieval courtship and chivalric comradeship. But the historical recursions in question—located somewhere in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—remain obscure in Foucault’s own discussions of the matter. In a vast Indo-European and Western history, the Castro is a recursion of Dorian pederasty—indeed, it is ultimately a

erotic friendship can't really be a *reversion to pederasty* even though it might be an immensely devolved *recursion of it*. The new friendship would be difficult work, Foucault told the readers of *Gai Pied* in 81. Unlike ancient Greek lovers, today "two men of considerably different age—what code will they be able to communicate in? They must deal with each other without anything which assures them of the meaning of their movement toward each other. They must invent a relation from A to Z, a friendship—that's to say, the sum of everything which is able to give them pleasure together."<sup>25</sup> In the twenty years since Foucault's death, the unexpected sustainability of this "amorous fusion" might actually have devolved from the unanticipated emergence of "new pleasures *beyond sex*"—but *not* the pleasures that Foucault expected or desired in the Castro in 1975 or 80. "Beyond sex" in the most literal sense: entirely unforeseen in 1975, "safe sex" appeared in the Castro in 1982, following the incursion of the HIV virus in the summer of 81. Safe sex, phonesex, cybersex, barebacking: the continuing unexpected recursions of safe sex in the last twenty years—sex now unexpectedly *unsafe*—are well known; a Foucauldian story might be and has been told about all of this. I have the impression that today, twenty years later, a young man can't enter into romance with an older man without at least partly taking him as a person with whom sex is barred—who represents the sexual danger persisting from the 70s and early 80s. And I have the impression that an *older* man today, symmetrically, can't enter a romance with a younger without partly taking *him* as a person with whom sex is *also* barred—who represents a

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recursion of Inner Asian initiatory shamanism. As a strictly historical devolution this genealogy of homosexuality, of course, can throughout be distinguished from a "transhistorical constant."

<sup>25</sup> See "De l'amitié comme mode de vie," *Gai Pied* 25 (April, 1981), 38 = *Dits et écrits*, IV, 163; cf. "Des caresses d'hommes considérées comme un art," *Libération* 323 (1 June 1982), 27 = *Dits et*

sexual danger *newly* emergent, *post-safe-sex*, among many young men who *didn't* live through the 70s and 80s. (This is not to speak of the fact that both men, younger and older, are forbidden to have an erotic friendship, though perhaps not symmetrically: the younger is barred by the conventions of sexual sociability, both gay and straight, in which men or women “of a certain age” can no longer be regarded as desirable or appropriate sexual-erotic partners; and the older is barred by official legal-medical regulations and emergent national-social norms that police both hetero- and homosexual “harassment,” “predation,” or “sexual abuse” of younger people.) Thus both parties in Foucault’s new friendship have to try to found their mutual security, pleasure, and happiness on grounds other than strictly sexual in the sense specifically constituted in the Castro in 1975—a new and particular system of reflection on, and renunciation of, possibilities of pleasure; a new and particular erotic relationality. Foucault couldn’t have foreseen—didn’t foresee—this particular moral and social conjugation. But like many others today, it seems to illustrate his last history.

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*écrits*, IV, 315-17. Around and outside “sex,” this “homosexual ascesis” must “invent—I don’t mean discover—a way of being that’s still improbable”: “De l’amitié comme mode de vie,” 164.