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Foucauldian necrologies: ‘gay’ ‘politics’? politically gay?

The key to the personal poetic attitude of a philosopher is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, in his philosophical life, his ethos.¹

the function of any diagnosis concerning the nature of the present . . . does not consist in a simple characterization of what we are but, instead – by following lines of fragility in the present – in managing to grasp why and how that-which-is might no longer be that-which-is. In this sense, any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, i.e. possible transformation.²

In the three years since Michel Foucault’s death, many exegetically minded intellectuals have feasted upon his corpse/corpus. In fact, much of the recent writing on Foucault tends to resemble nothing so much as the bidding in an unadvertised anatomical auction whose outcome will determine the ‘legitimate’ possession of certain prized organs. And very often in this posthumous intellectual haggling the pièce de résistance, the veritable heart of the matter, has proved to be – once again – the question of Foucault’s ‘politics’.

Of course, during his life Foucault was often queried, challenged, despaired, and denied because of his politics. In one of his last interviews he good-humouredly recalled:

I think I have in fact been situated in most of the squares on the political checkerboard, one after another and sometimes simultaneously: as anarchist, leftist, ostentatious or disguised Marxist, nihilist, explicit or secret anti-Marxist, technocrat in the service of Gaullism, new liberal, etc. An American professor complained that a crypto-Marxist like me was invited to the USA, and I was denounced by the press in Eastern European countries for being an accomplice of the dissidents.³

While perhaps in this quote Foucault was enjoying his role as enfant...
terrible a little too much, it suggests nevertheless that in both his writings and his life Foucault was able to bring into question the very meaning of this term, 'the political', which so many guard jealously as their own particular province.

It is hardly surprising to find, then, that Foucault's death gave birth to a new round of remonstrations and recriminations concerning his 'politics'. To take just one notable example: in writing Foucault's obituary, Edward Said found it appropriate to deliver his assessment of Foucault's final years by criticizing what he perceived as Foucault's lamentable lack in this regard: 'It was noticeable that he was more committed to exploring, if not indulging his appetite for travel, for different kinds of pleasure (symbolized by his frequent sojourns in California), for less and less frequent political positions.' Here Said couches his 'political' disapproval morosistically by establishing an implicit opposition between Foucault's Californian 'indulgence' of his 'appetite' for 'different kinds of pleasure' and a more proper 'political' attitude which produces frequent 'positions'. Although Said had consistently been a critic of Foucault's political strategies while Foucault was alive — see, for example, his essay 'Traveling theory' — the terms of his post-mortem objection to what he calls Foucault's 'overdetermined shift from the political to the personal' naively resuscitate an opposition which has been consistently challenged 'politically' (both in theory and in practice) for the last twenty years. Thus it seems more than ironic that Said's 'politically correct' moral seriousness continues to haunt Foucault even in his death, since it was precisely the opposition between 'politics' and 'pleasure' — and, more globally, between 'the political' and 'the personal' — that Foucault took great pains to challenge in his life.

While Foucault's unwillingness to enounce specific criteria for struggle has often been attacked by those who would make 'politics' the centre of social change — for example, Habermas and Poulantzas — his theoretical reticence was tactically designed to call into question that which has been historically designated as 'the political'. As Foucault remarked: 'I have especially wanted to question politics, to bring to light in the political field, as in the field of historical and philosophical interrogation, some problems that had not been recognized there before.' Sadly, this interrogatory attitude has caused great consternation for many who would prefer to establish a determinate — if not 'scientific' — basis for social change. As one recent commentator has complained: "Who" (after the loss of the subject) does the resisting, and "what" (after the demolition of substance) are the grounds for resistance? Certainly, Foucault's approach does lead one to question precisely the agency and the arena of political intervention. Yet, considering the current disarray of 'radical' politics in the West, perhaps these are the questions that most need to be asked and are, therefore, not simply signs of a hopeless negativity but rather of a necessary tactical reappraisal of the methods and objects of struggle.

In one of the most cogent articles to appear on this subject since Foucault's death, Keith Gandal attempts to defend Foucault against charges of 'nihilism' and 'despair' by outlining the concrete effects — in his
work with the Prisons Information Group (GIP) – of Foucault’s theoretical and practical positions. Surveying a range of Foucault’s writings and activities, Gandal suggests that, ‘for Foucault, Truth did not reside in a set of ideas about the way things should be, but in a practice that talked about problems in a manner that opened up new possibilities for action.’ By juxtaposing Foucault’s writings on politics to his role as a participant in the GIP, Gandal demonstrates that Foucault’s ceaseless questionings represented not an escape from political responsibility but rather a strategic engagement with and transformation of the political sphere. Thus Gandal concludes:

Foucault was concerned above all with the effects of his thinking and political activity. Whereas the consideration of effects led Critical Theorists into an ethic of non-participation, it led Foucault into a tactical hyper-activism. He pursued struggles where the situation was ‘intolerable’, but also where an alteration of power relations was possible. And he carried his strategic outlook into his writings: he wanted his historical analyses to serve as maps or toolkits that might be useful to people in negotiating current problems or struggles; he held back from articulating his values because he considered the potential effects of such a maneuver on political activity. In short, he was willing to question all the traditional ways of being political, including playing the role of the intellectual on the basis of tactical considerations.

While Gandal astutely perceives the links that Foucault constructed between his intellectual and social engagements, his analysis unfortunately reproduces the implicit assumption that ‘political activity’ only takes place outside the complex dynamics of ‘personal life’. Certainly, Foucault’s work in support of a variety of specific resistances (e.g. Polish Solidarity, antiracism, radical trade-unionism, and prisoners’ self-determination) demonstrates a skilled tactical assessment and activity on a diverse set of social terrains. Yet, by focusing on Foucault’s participation in a discrete set of social actions (GIP) and neglecting to consider his larger (‘political’? ‘personal’?) experience, Gandal unnecessarily restricts his consideration of Foucault’s ‘political activity’. Since he excludes Foucault’s work on sexuality from his purview and fails to recognize its relation to Foucault’s own experience of struggle as a gay man, Gandal implicitly continues to perpetuate those very notions of ‘traditional ways of being political’ which Foucault lived so hard to dispel.

My point here is not to fault Gandal for his oversight but rather to suggest that even in the most sensitive of accounts of Foucault’s activities the subject of his sexual identity and its relation to his role as a radical writer and activist remains curiously unexplored. Except for snide comments – like those of Said above – or euphemistic sidestepping – like George Steiner’s recent remarks in the New Yorker – there is almost no acknowledgement of Foucault’s gay identity in current academic discussions of his projects. While it is not my intention to make Foucault into a ‘gay thinker’ or to suggest that his work was entirely motivated by his

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particular erotic preferences or practices, it does seem important to recognize that Foucault was relatively open as a gay man, that he conducted interviews on the subject, and that the consideration of these aspects of his life and writings can lead to a significant reassessment of his 'political' project. For example, if we consider Foucault's genealogical work on 'normalization' from the perspective that he himself embodied one of the categories which he sought to explicate, does it change our understanding of his writing on sexuality as a political intervention? Do his comments on the importance of developing within the gay movement an 'art of life' help to elucidate his emphasis on 'ethics' and 'aesthetics' in his later writings? And does his focus on the radical potential of personal and sexual exploration in his interviews with the gay press expand the purview of what might be called his 'political' practices? Questions such as these lead me to believe that, until we include Foucault's public discussions of gay experience within the broader frame which includes his conception of political, intellectual, moral, ethical, aesthetic, historical, and epistemological struggle, we shall fail to discern the fullness of his suggestions and strategies for social change.

* * *

In an article entitled 'The subject and power', Foucault reflected upon his recent theoretical activity and situated it within 'a series of oppositions which have developed over the last few years: oppositions to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live'. By connecting his work as a writer to those who resist what – in the first volume of The History of Sexuality – he labels 'bio-power', Foucault explicitly indicates that his intellectual endeavour is meant to contest a 'form of power [which] applies itself to immediate everyday life, which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him.' Because this self-characterization describes his interventions rather abstractly – for example, identifying the enactments of Western 'subjectivity' as a 'field of resistance' – it necessarily challenges his readers to conceptualize for themselves exactly how 'struggles' inhere in 'immediate everyday life'. Unfortunately, this lack of specificity has permitted most commentators on his writings to look only 'within' his texts for clues as to how to concretize his analysis and, hence, to fail to perceive that much of his work was exactly such an enactment. Surely, for a gay man to write on the emergence and transformation of specific discourses of 'sexuality' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – one prime instance being that of 'the homosexual' – and through this to interrogate 'the political significance of the problem of sex' must itself be considered a 'political' act. If we approach both Foucault's writings and his interviews in the light of the epigraphs that he provides for this essay, we can begin to understand the advantages offered.
by rereading Foucault’s ‘sexual politics’ (to use a feminist phrasing) with his particular authorial positioning in mind. Thus, in addressing Foucault’s reflections on the challenges posed by and to the gay movement in the West as an example of how he conceived of ‘the political’ as a part of his own ‘immediate everyday’ experience, we can begin to discern how the interplay of power and resistance constituted both a determining and a creative moment in his intellectual activity.

The importance of considering Foucault’s assessments of gay politics as an elaboration of the critical nexus between thought and action is underscored by the uniqueness of his approach to the ‘problem’. Perhaps the most distinctive factor in Foucault’s discussions of homosexuality, in part owing to the fact that they took place primarily in the (non-academic) gay press, was the intimacy he adopted in relation to his topic. Unlike his interviews in other contexts – in which he consistently refused to use his role as a famous intellectual discussing the implications of his academic endeavours to propound what Said calls ‘political positions’ – Foucault’s forthright attitude in gay publications clearly exemplifies his willingness to use his intellectual activity strategically in the struggles of which he was a part. Since the inclusive relation to his audience established by a gay (con)text provided Foucault with a different relation of ‘authority’ to his subject, it enabled him to make more explicit connections between his individual historical researches and the historical conditions from which they arose. In other words, his public discussions with other members of the gay community provide detailed elaborations of what he meant when he wrote in *Discipline and Punish* that his histories are ‘histories of the present’. To take just one example, Foucault’s lectures at The Barracks (a now defunct gay bathhouse in San Francisco) during the late 1970s must be seen as one concrete attempt to (re)situate his work on sexuality within the sexual field itself. Speaking as a member of the gay community who was also an intellectual, Foucault offered his opinions on the historical and tactical situation of the gay movement in order to deploy the knowledge which he elsewhere frames academically in those concrete fields of power that define everyday life for gay men and women.

In his interviews within the gay community, Foucault repeatedly assesses the significance of gay experience\textsuperscript{15} as a space of possibility, of creativity, not just as a ‘sexual’ identity but as a ‘way of life’.

I should like to say ‘it is necessary to work increasingly at being gay’, to place oneself in a dimension where the sexual choices that one makes are present and have their effects on the ensemble of our life. I should like to say also that sexual choices must be at the same time creators of ways of life. To be gay signifies that these choices diffuse themselves across the entire life; it is also a certain manner of refusing the modes of life offered; it is to make a sexual choice the impetus for a change of existence.\textsuperscript{16}

By defining ‘being gay’ as a process which one must enter into rather than a state in which one exists, Foucault extrapolates from his characterization – in *La Volonté de Savoir* – of ‘sexuality’ as a dynamic instantiation of
power/knowledge to articulate a positive, 'creative' position which is underdeveloped elsewhere in his work – that is, the position of 'resistance'. Using a rhetoric of 'choice' which does not occur in his more theoretical texts, Foucault advocates an embrace of sexual possibilities which extend beyond particular sexual practices (in the narrow sense of who puts what where when) to an understanding of the 'sexual' as a confluence of diverse practices which open up new possibilities for resistance (‘de refuser les modes de vie proposées’). And these possibilities, according to Foucault, can only be understood as moments in a process (‘On ne peut jamais se stabiliser dans une position, il faut définir, selon les moments, l’usage qu’on en fait’) which creates the historical ‘present’ through concrete enactments of power.

Given this understanding of the dynamic quality of ‘being gay’, it is hardly surprising that Foucault advocates an experimental attitude towards sexual experience as an appropriate ethic for 'the gay movement'. In an elaboration reminiscent of the feminist dictum of the late 1960s, 'the personal is political', Foucault calls for the politicizing of the content of individual experience in order to define this as the locus of historical creativity.

... what the gay movement needs now is much more the art of life than a science or scientific knowledge (or pseudo-scientific knowledge) of what sexuality is. Sexuality is a part of our behavior. It's a part of our world freedom. Sexuality is something we create ourselves – it is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality; it’s a possibility for creative life. 17

In assessing the gay movement's needs by contrasting the 'art of life' to a 'science ... of what sexuality is', Foucault urges the reintroduction into sexual politics of an aesthetic strategy. While, of course, historically 'style' has been one of the primary ways in which gay men have signified both their existence and their 'difference', Foucault's suggestion seems to go beyond the formal self-invention which characterizes attitudes such as 'camp' and 'drag' to propose a radical reimagining which would open up 'new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation'. Although his deployment here of a discourse of liberation ('freedom', 'we create ourselves') might appear to depart from the more 'pessimistic' appraisals evoked by his work on madness and the prison, and, indeed, by his famous rejection of the 'repressive hypothesis' in La Volonté de savoir, it provides a much-needed complement to explicate the workings of power and resistance outlined there.

What Foucault introduces into the discussion by way of 'aesthetics' is the affirmation that 'to resist is not simply a negation but a creative process'. 18 This characterization of resistance as 'creation' over and against 'negation' situates Foucault's political activity outside the more traditional leftist conceptions which seek 'revolution' as a radical disruption of/with the
present. Instead he offers a more continuous notion of change which never escapes the fields of power, never longs for the freedom promised by rupture, but rather seeks spaces of creative possibility within the present. The politics of the self thus becomes central to Foucault’s project precisely because it offers a multiplicity of points of entry into ‘the political’ and thereby opens up a plurality of spaces for radical creativity. In this sense, he urges the reclaiming of ‘gay asceticism’ not as a denial or rejection but rather as an affirmation of the possibilities for self-creation, as a movement towards the ‘art of life’.

Asceticism as a renunciation of pleasure has got a bad name. But being ascetic is different: it’s the way you work at yourself in order to change you or to make yourself appear, which fortunately it never does. Isn’t that what our problem is today? We’ve said goodbye to a certain form of asceticism. It’s now up to us to step forward into a gay asceticism, which would involve us working on ourselves and inventing – I don’t mean discovering – an as yet uncertain way of being. What we ought to be working towards, I feel, is not so much the liberation of our desires, but making ourselves infinitely more open to enjoyment.19

The political advantages of gay asceticism seem to lie, for Foucault, in the tactical reappropriation of an affirmative relation to one’s ‘self’ through which one can move towards embodying new relations to enjoyment and pleasure. Rather than a politics of ‘liberation’ that seeks to emancipate those latent ‘desires’ which define the ‘truth’ of one’s sexuality – as, for example, in Marcuse’s advocacy of ‘hedonism’ – Foucault challenges the gay community to see homosexuality as

a historic opportunity to open up potential relationships and emotions, not so much by means of specific qualities which gay people possess, but for the reason that their position ‘off center’, in a certain way, together with the diagonal lines they can draw through social structures allows people to see these possibilities.20

It seems hardly coincidental, then, that Foucault’s call for a new asceticism as a means towards ‘working on ourselves and inventing... an as yet uncertain way of being’ in many ways prefigures his work in L’Usage des plaisirs and Le Souci de soi. In these texts, as he examines the ‘techniques of the self’ articulated in classical Greek (fourth-century BCE) and Graeco-Roman (second-century CE) culture respectively, he undertakes to describe the ‘problematics’ and the practices whereby ‘men [sic] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their lives into an œuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.21 While recent commentators have often seen this undertaking – what Maria Daraki calls Foucault’s ‘journey to Greece’ – as a departure from or deviation in his earlier thought, it might just as well be interpreted in the light of his writings on gay politics as a necessary analytical move
which enables him to link his personal, political, and theoretical projects. In an interview with Dreyfus and Rabinow in 1983, Foucault gave a partial acknowledgement of these connections as a way of explaining his shift to the pre-Christian era:

My idea is that it's not at all necessary to relate ethical problems to scientific knowledge. Among the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated, but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what's going on now — and to change it. . . . For centuries we have been convinced that between our ethics, our personal ethics, our everyday life, and the great political and social and economic structures, there were analytical relations, and that we couldn't change anything, for instance, in our sex life or our family life, without ruining our economy, our democracy, and so on. I think we have to get rid of this idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures.¹²

That Foucault intends his investigation of Greek and Roman civilization as a lever with which to prise open the 'necessary links' underlying normative structurings of social/personal experience seems evident. In both L'Usage des plaisirs and Le Souci de soi he investigates the ways in which earlier Western cultures made certain practices and relations 'problematic' so that he could establish 'a tool for analyzing what's going on now — and to change it'. Given his interest in deploying his intellectual activity as a 'tool' for change, how are we then to understand his explicit efforts in his most recent books to consider the ways in which these cultures problematized 'sexual' relations both between men and between men and boys?

While many have attacked Foucault's interpretation of Greek and Graeco-Roman texts on a variety of methodological grounds,²³ few have sought to consider the link between his historical concerns and his contemporary interests. If, however, instead of approaching Foucault's recent writings primarily as 'objective' historiographies of the ancient world, we come to them as elements of a political 'fiction',²⁴ we find not a series of misreadings but rather an examination of the possibilities for creating our daily experience as a domain of ethical practice. For example, if we accept that Foucault interprets Greek texts on the male love of young boys and adolescents not to show the extent of Greek 'tolerance' but rather to suggest that they constructed around these same-sex relationships a sexual ethics which valorized the love of boys only by 'stylizing it and hence by giving it shape and form',²⁵ we can begin to discern the outline of a contemporary sexual ethics which could valorize other forms of pleasure. Similarly, when he concludes, 'For [the Greeks], reflection on sexual behavior as a moral domain was not a means of internalizing, justifying, or formalizing general interdictions imposed on everyone; rather, it was a means of developing . . . an aesthetics of existence, the purposeful art of freedom perceived as a power game',²⁶ he is not just commenting upon a
society which ceased to exist over 2,000 years ago, but more directly suggesting the possibility for a new political strategy in the present.

The implications of Foucault's historical speculations for contemporary political strategizing are illuminated by his reflections on the ways in which gay 'relationships' can become such a 'means of developing ... an aesthetics of existence'. Rejecting a politics of 'identity' which characterized the gay movement in the late sixties and early seventies, Foucault suggests that, rather than turn inward — in a process ratified by psychologization — to affirm the 'truth' of one's desires, gay men and women should take their desires as a starting-point for articulating new modes of interaction.

we must be aware of ... the tendency to reduce being gay to the questions: 'Who am I?' and 'What is the secret of my desire?' Might it not be better if we asked ourselves what sort of relationships we can set up, invent, multiply or modify through our homosexuality? The problem is not trying to find out the truth of one's sexuality within oneself, but rather, nowadays, trying to use our sexuality to achieve a variety of different types of relationships. And this is why homosexuality is probably not a form of desire but something to be desired. We must therefore insist on becoming truly gay, rather than persisting in defining ourselves as such. 27

To make one's life an arena of self-creativity — of the creation of one's 'self' — is to literalize the notion of an 'aesthetics of existence', and it is precisely this literalization which Foucault advocates. Through the creation of new ways of relating both to oneself and to others, Foucault perceives that homosexuality moves beyond questioning the ontology of desire towards embodying new technologies of pleasure. Such a creative activity might, then, enable those 'becoming' gay men and women to enter into a conscious relation to these new technologies and thereby give rise to a range of ethical and 'aesthetic' reflections on 'the political significance of the problem of sex'.

While arguing that the possibilities for creating such new technologies are vast, Foucault focuses primarily on the case of S/M in order to demonstrate the aesthetic and ethical dimensions revealed by the removal of distinctions between 'politics' and 'pleasure'. In this regard, S/M has also been the subject of much recent discussion among North American feminists precisely because it problematizes the relations between sexual practices and larger social configurations of power and domination. 28 Beginning from Gayle Rubin's insistence on the need to interrogate standards for the 'acceptability' of different sexual practices, Foucault notes:

I think that S/M . . . is the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously. The idea that S/M is related to a deep violence, that S/M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression is stupid. We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; that they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body — through the eroticization of
the body. I think it’s a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure. The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure, and the idea that sexual pleasure is the root of all our possible pleasure – I think that’s something quite wrong. . . . The possibility of using our bodies as a possible source of very numerous pleasures is something that’s very important.\textsuperscript{29}

This characterization of S/M underscores the creative aspect of a technology of pleasure which introduces an explicit aesthetics into the realm of desire. Predicated on the enactment of 'roles' and 'scenes' which mobilize the desires of its participants into a 'desexualized' field of pleasure, S/M adapts what Foucault elsewhere calls 'games of truth' (jeux de vérité) into an organizing principle for new relations to one's own body and the bodies of others. Of course, Foucault does not characterize these new possibilities of pleasure as inherently 'political' or 'resistant'. Instead, he places them at the core of a new problematization of desire which indicates the ways in which 'a homosexual movement could adopt the objective of posing the question of the place in a given society which sexual choice, sexual behavior and the effects of sexual relations between people could have with regard to the individual.'\textsuperscript{30}

In outlining the field of enquiry appropriate for 'a homosexual movement' as precisely those practices which seem – or, more accurately, have been historically constituted as – most 'personal', Foucault implies that this questioning constitutes a new relation to 'the political'. As soon as we understand that those practices which delimit the intimate relations of individuals (both to their own bodies and desires and to the bodies and desires of others) are themselves subject to and the subjects of social and historical transformations, 'politics' can no longer be relegated solely to the level of institutions. This insight, derived from the political struggles arising in the West during the 1960s and 1970s, points for Foucault to the recognition that the processes of political creation must be diffused across the entirety of everyday life.

Since the 19th Century great political institutions and great political parties have confiscated the process of political creation; that is, they have tried to give political creation the form of a political program in order to take over power. I think that what happened in the '60s and early '70s is something to be preserved. One of the things that I think should be preserved, however, is the fact that there has been political innovation, political creation, and political experimentation outside the great political parties, and outside the normal or ordinary program. It's a fact that people's everyday lives have changed from the early '60s to now, and certainly within my own life. And surely, that is not due to political parties but is the result of many movements. These social movements have really changed our whole lives, our mentality, our attitudes, and the mentalities and attitudes of other people – people who do not belong to these movements. And that is something important and
positive. I repeat, it is not the normal and old political organizations that have led to this examination.¹¹

By juxtaposing the ‘political programs’ of ‘great political institutions and great political parties’ to the concrete changes which have been realized in the minute recesses of daily existence, Foucault indicates the necessity of reconceptualizing ‘the political’ so that it includes what is most ‘mundane’. Certainly, in this context, those changes which most affected his own life must be connected to the larger struggles in ‘opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live’ with which he aligns his intellectual endeavours above. As this assessment indicates, the diversity of particular contestations of power gives rise to a plurality of ‘movements’ whose contiguity and/or disjunction must be articulated in order to realize even greater changes in ‘our whole lives, our mentality, our attitudes’.

The implications of this political ‘reimagination’ for gay men and lesbians – far from being merely ‘academic’ – are both necessary and profound. In the USA many recent struggles to legitimate a diversity of same-sex relationships have challenged the normative practices embedded in legal, familial, medical, psychiatric, sexual, educational, and military structures. For example, the attempts in San Francisco to obtain the passage of legislation which would recognize the rights of individuals to define their ‘domestic partners’ outside marriage (such that these partners would then be eligible for many of the benefits formerly accorded only to an individual’s ‘spouse’) resulted in the public contestation of the grounds for state recognition of individual relationships.³² Similarly, the ongoing opposition in Massachusetts to the decision supported by that state’s governor to restrict placement of children in foster care to those homes which had heterosexual couples as their core has led to a vocal challenge to the legal instantiation of the ‘nuclear family’ as the normative household.³³ Other struggles, such as those of gay parents to retain the right to their children, or the rights of lesbians to bear children through artificial insemination, continue to challenge notions of ‘legitimate’ human relationships as they are ‘authorized’ through the institutions and interactions that structure daily life. Deriving from the efforts of individuals to create new possibilities for pleasure, for love, for living, these struggles demonstrate a continuity between ‘the personal’ and ‘the political’ that belies Said’s simplistic opposition quoted above and challenges us to undertake a new ‘problematization’ of these terms.

Sadly, no discussion of contemporary gay politics or of Foucault’s role in it can be complete without, at least, the mention of AIDS. This disease which claimed the life of the brilliant French thinker and activist has demanded a vigilant and creative attitude towards imagining and engendering a new ‘art of life’ in the gay community which is at the same time a new politics of existence. At almost every level of experience, AIDS has forced the critical re-evaluation and rearticulation of the most basic
relations to the self and to others. As the mysterious disease has mercilessly stalked the gay community, we have been forced to recognize the myriad nexuses of power/knowledge through which our lives unfold — not just abstractly or intellectually but as strategic elements in a literal battle between life and death. 'Sexual politics' and 'sexual ethics' become intertwined when questions of responsibility and choice explicitly frame the daily practices of millions. 'Safe sex' thus represents not just a list of activities that reduce the risk of HIV infection but also a demand for a new attitude towards and engagement with the life context of which they are a part. As the purview of the medical or 'public health' gaze shifts from 'high-risk' populations (gay men, IV drug users, certain Caribbean and African peoples, etc.) to 'high-risk' activities, we as individuals are collectively challenged to rearticulate the ethical and political implications of our most intimate relations. Under the mark of death, we are everywhere impelled to create new relations to life. For, even as the death toll has mounted and the sense of loss become increasingly intolerable, new creative and imaginative possibilities are emerging.

Sexual practices which once seemed the very essence of gay male experience have been virtually abandoned in favour of the deployment of new 'safe sex' techniques. The eroticization of 'phone sex', J/O groups and clubs, video parties, sex toys, condoms, and so on, has contributed to a more general 'desexualization of pleasure' that evokes new understandings of what it means to 'become' gay. In addition, the development of a number of 'self-help' organizations designed not only to promote these new sexual techniques but also to address and to transform collectively the sense of loss and limitation that they evoke has given rise to a serious reconsideration of 'sexuality's' epistemological context. Hence the gay community's response to the insufficiencies of medical knowledge and institutions in the face of this 'incurable' illness has led not only to the large-scale opposition to power asymmetries between doctors and 'patients' but also to the very conceptualization of the 'medical' per se. While community health organizations such as the Shanti Project in San Francisco and the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York have created new modes of treatment, new forms of support, and new approaches to death and dying, the needs of people living with AIDS have forced the engagement with a new politics and ethics of life. In the face of such overwhelming mortality, 'health' has taken on a critical dimension that disrupts the scientific paradigms of Western medicine, giving rise to the legitimation of 'holistic' approaches to healing literally grounded in the quest for an 'art of life'. How uncanny it is, then, that, just as Foucault called for this creative attitude to be realized at the centre of a gay movement, so it should be his own death that would lead to the founding of the first organization to confront AIDS in the land of his birth.

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NOTES

4 Edward Said, 'Michel Foucault', *Raritan*, 4, 2 (1984), p. 9. Earlier in the article Said refers in a similar manner to 'the vicissitudes of Foucault's own sexual identity' as he tangentially and condescendingly situates the 'basis' for the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* in the 'vicissitudes' of Foucault's experience as a gay man (p. 5). As I shall argue below, by tacitly affirming 'the personal' and 'the political' as 'separate spheres' — to use the famous nineteenth-century description of the 'natural' opposition between the loci for male and female activity — Said's implicit dismissal of the 'politics of the personal' seriously undermines his ability to appreciate the extent to which Foucault's writings on sexuality self-consciously 'problematized' the terrain of 'the political'.
6 Foucault's characterization of this challenge emerges most clearly in his largely unexamined interviews in the gay press which will be discussed at length below.
8 Foucault, 'Politics and ethics: an interview', p. 375.
10 Keith Gandal, 'Michel Foucault: intellectual work and politics', *Telos*, 67 (Spring 1986), p. 123.
11 Ibid., pp. 122-3.
12 In a review of the second volume of *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, Steiner comments: 'Certain enforced secrecy and evasions veiled his personal existence. This obsessive inquirer into disease and sexuality — into the mind's constructs of Eros and into the effects of such constructs on the body politic and on the individual flesh — was done to death by the most hideous and symbolically charged of current diseases' (*The New Yorker*, 17 March 1986, p. 105). This cryptic reference to Foucault's death from AIDS illustrates how tentatively Foucault's sexuality continues to be treated even by someone who in another context was one of the first to disseminate Foucault's discussions of gay sexuality to an American audience. (The interview 'Sexual choice, sexual act' referred to in note 30 appeared in the ground-breaking volume of *Salmagundi*, 'Homosexuality: sacrilege, vision, politics', which Steiner edited.)
13 Michel Foucault 'The subject and power', in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Semiotics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 211.
14 Ibid., p. 212.
15 My use here — as one reader of this essay phrased it — of so 'un-Foucauldian' a word as 'experience' deserves a note of explanation. While I am aware that it is
‘horribly contaminated by its constant mystification as origin, source of knowledge, etc.’, I also feel that these historical connotations illustrate why it is a crucial (semiotic) ground for rearticulating the relation between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ without mystification. In an essay entitled ‘Semiotics and experience’, collected in her book Alice Doesn’t (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), Teresa De Lauretis argues for the importance of recouping ‘experience’ as a category for feminist theory and practice. Defining ‘experience’ as ‘a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed’, she succinctly notes:

subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is an effect of that interaction – which I call experience; and thus it is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one’s personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world.

By attending to ‘experience’ not as the realm of ‘authentic being’ but as a complex nexus of relational practices/processes within and between ‘social beings’, De Lauretis suggests a means for reclaiming ‘experience’ for feminism’s ‘personal politics’. In this light, then, my use of ‘gay experience’ similarly attempts to capture the dynamic sense of Foucault’s description of ‘becoming gay’, in much the same way as his own use of ‘experience’ in the second and third volumes of the History of Sexuality seeks to evoke the dynamic ‘technologies of the self’ developed in Greek and Graeco-Roman culture.

16 Interview conducted by J. P. Joecker, M. Ouerc, and A. Sanzio, Masques, 13 (Spring 1982), p. 24 (my translation).
17 Interview with Bob Gallego and Alexander Wilson, ‘Sex, power, and the politics of identity’, Body Politic, 7 August 1984, p. 27. I should like to thank Jeffrey Weeks for bringing this interview to my attention.
18 Ibid., p. 29.
20 Ibid.
23 See, for example, Maria Daraki, ‘Michel Foucault’s journey to Greece’, Telos, 67 (Spring 1986), pp. 87–110.

I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or ‘manufactures’ something that does not as yet exist, that is ‘fictions’ it. One ‘fictions’ history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one ‘fictions’ a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth. (my italics)
25 Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 245.
26 Ibid., pp. 252–3.
27 Foucault, 'Friendship as a lifestyle'.
28 Much has been written on S/M within the women's community over the past several years, with heated debate occurring in publications such as *Off Our Backs* and *Plexus*. For a sampler of the polemics, see the essays in Carole S. Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, Mass.: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), and in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (eds), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).
29 Foucault, 'Sex, power, and the politics of identity', pp. 27–8.
31 Foucault, 'Sex, power, and the politics of identity', p. 58.
32 For a summary of the history of this legislation, as well as an assessment of its current status, see *Coming Up* (January 1987).
33 See the ongoing coverage of this issue in *Gay Community News*. 