

Queer Strategies of Gay History: Boswell's "Weapons," Foucault's *Expérience*

Abstract: This essay revisits the genealogy of Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité*, and calls for a reassessment of its later volumes as politically engaged *expériences* in historiography. Recontextualising their work within the Essentialist–Social Constructionist debate that took place among historians and theorists of sexuality in the 1980s, I show that the relations between John Boswell, the most prominent “essentialist,” and Michel Foucault, the most prominent “constructionist,” were much more amicable and complex than commentators have previously claimed. Boswell served as a “guide” for the last three volumes of Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité*. By uncovering the considerable influence which Boswell's supposedly “essentialising” concept of “gay” had on Foucault's later writings and politics, I demonstrate that Foucault was not committed to the historicisation of sexual concepts, but rather to the transformation, through historiography, of present-day relations. This process, at once historiographical, intellectual, subjective, and political, is what Foucault calls *expérience*.

Keywords: Michel Foucault; John Boswell; history of sexuality; experience; social constructionism

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Mon problème n'est pas de satisfaire les historiens professionnels. Mon problème est de faire moi-même, et d'inviter les autres à faire avec moi, à travers un contenu historique déterminé, une expérience de ce que nous sommes, de ce qui est non seulement notre passé mais aussi notre présent, une expérience de notre modernité telle que nous en sortions transformés. Ce qui signifie qu'au bout du livre nous puissions établir des rapports nouveaux avec ce qui est en question : que moi qui ai écrit ce livre et ceux qui l'ont lu aient à la folie, à son statut contemporain et à son histoire dans le monde moderne un autre rapport.¹

(The problem isn't that of humoring the professional historians. Rather, I aim at having an experience myself — by passing through a determinate historical content — an experience of what we are today, of what is not only our past but also our present. And I invite others to share the experience. That is, an experience of our modernity that might permit us to emerge from it transformed. Which means that at the conclusion of the book we can establish new relationships with what was at issue; for instance, madness, its constitution, its history in the modern world.)²

In this interview, Foucault frames his texts as interventions in the field of his contemporary political discourse (“le monde moderne”), in spite of — or rather, because of — their historical subject matter. There is therefore an explicit relationship, for Foucault, of his historical works to the political context within which they appear, and although he takes *L'Histoire de la folie* (*The History of Madness*) as an example in this passage, he understands it to apply to all of his works. This present-day function of his texts is not, however, programmatic. The “autre rapport” (new relationship) which he and his readers arrive at by the end of *L'Histoire de la folie* was not predefined, according to him, when he set out to write it.³ Hence his polysemic use of the word *expérience*, at once an “expérience limite”⁴ (limit-experience)⁵ after Bataille, and an “experiment” in the more scientific sense. By *expérience limite*, Foucault understands something which “a pour fonction d'arracher le sujet à lui-même, de faire en sorte qu'il ne soit plus lui-même ou qu'il soit porté à son anéantissement ou à sa dissolution”⁶ (has the task of tearing the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely other than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, or its dissociation);⁷ as Bataille calls it, “la mise en question (à l'épreuve), dans la

fièvre et l'angoisse, de ce que l'homme sait du fait d'être"⁸ (the putting into question (to the test), in fever and anguish, of that which man knows of being).⁹

In his “philosophical life”¹⁰ of Foucault, James Miller takes the “quest” for an *expérience limite* to be the organising principle of Foucault’s life, and argues that such an understanding “suggests a new way of looking at his major texts and assessing their significance.”¹¹ However, as Martin Jay has argued, Miller’s definition of *expérience limite* underplays the degree of self-narrativising which Foucault himself understands *expérience limite* to involve. “For not only did he affirm a proactive notion of experience — the ‘task of “tearing” the subject from itself’ — but he also endorsed a reactive one: experience as a *post facto* reconstruction of that action.”¹² Foucault’s understanding of *expérience* is thus doubled up twice: first he uses it to mean both an intellectual-scientific experiment and *expérience limite*, and second, he uses *expérience limite* to mean both the act of “arracher le sujet à lui-même” (tearing the subject from itself) and the subsequent narrativisation of this act.

This reflexive aspect of Foucault’s concept of *expérience limite* differentiates it from Bataille’s version. Bataille contrasts *expérience limite* with “l’expérience confessionnelle” (*confessional* experience) and instead argues that *expérience limite* is “une expérience nue, libre d’attaches, même d’origine”¹³ (an experience laid bare, free of ties, even of an origin).¹⁴ As Jay has shown, Foucault’s *expérience limite* is fundamentally “paradoxical ... for experiences did not simply *happen* ... but were written *après coup*, after the fact.”¹⁵ Foucault’s *expérience limite* is thus its own origin, it cannot be accessed directly like Bataille’s, but is rather mediated into being by its own retrospective writing.¹⁶

These meanings of *expérience (limite* — immediate and otherwise — and scientific) must be kept in play in order to situate the “modifications”¹⁷ of volumes 2–4 of the *Histoire de la sexualité (History of Sexuality)* as a political intervention. Both the *expérience limite* which the reader and writer undertake, and the intellectual “experiment” which Foucault is conducting

with these modifications constitute the text's political work. I am therefore arguing against Mark Poster's defence of the later volumes, which emphasises their intellectual rigour over their affective valence. Poster finds that the attribution of "the failings of the books to Foucault's inability to maintain a distance from a topic that was close to his own homosexuality" is "partially valid."¹⁸ Not only does this criticism imply that Foucault was, in some way, less personally attached to the topics of prisons or of psychiatry than to sexuality, contrary to Foucault's own claims,¹⁹ and that a heterosexual person would somehow have been less closely tied to sexuality than Foucault was (perhaps heterosexuality is less "sexual" than homosexuality?); its assumption that "distance" from the object of study constitutes a virtue directly contradicts Foucault's words about the purpose of his writing.

Indeed, while Poster pushes back against the accusation of a lack of "distance" in his essay by describing the later volumes of the *Histoire de la sexualité* as "a critical history"²⁰ that "opens up a new level of understanding"²¹ at the analytical level, said insistence on "distance" elides the *Histoire's* highly personal purpose as an *expérience limite*. If Foucault is aiming for an *expérience limite* in combination with the intellectual experiment he is conducting, this process, which requires "le maximum d'intensité et, en même temps, d'impossibilité"²² (the maximum amount of intensity and impossibility at the same time),²³ cannot be achieved by maintaining the "distance" of institutional academic writing²⁴ which Poster seeks to uncover in the *Histoire*. There is a fundamentally affective dimension to the later volumes which is linked not only to Foucault's general pursuit of an *expérience limite*, but also to his engagement with gay history.

Specifically, Foucault attributes his turn towards "les formes dans lesquelles les individus peuvent et doivent se reconnaître comme sujets de [la] sexualité"²⁵ (the forms within which individuals are able, are obliged, to recognize themselves as subjects of ... sexuality)²⁶ to his reading of John Boswell's 1980 book of medieval history, *Christianity, Social Tolerance,*

and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (hereafter *CSTH*). Foucault's surprising interest in the self-fashioning subject was, by his own account, sparked at least in part by his reading of Boswell's book. However, if a line of influence can be drawn between Boswell and Foucault, it is not without raising certain questions.

As Carolyn Dinshaw points out, “the two mutually exclusive positions” of “mimetic identification with the past [and] blanket alterism ... have come to be associated with Boswell and Foucault” respectively.²⁷ Even the Foucault of the *Histoire*'s later volumes appears, at first glance, rather distant from a Boswell who speaks so freely of “gay people” and “gay subcultures.”²⁸ This difference in theoretical frameworks would not be too problematic if Foucault simply used *CSTH* as a secondary source for the interpretation of Roman laws, as his explicit citations of Boswell suggest.²⁹ Rather, Foucault asserts in an interview that “Boswell's book has provided me with a guide for what to look for in the meaning people attached to their sexual behavior.”³⁰

It is thus clear from Foucault's interviews that the reading of Boswell played a significant role in the “modifications” of the *Histoire*'s later volumes. In order to clarify that which is at stake in Foucault's reading of Boswell, we must examine the *Histoire de la sexualité* not as merely a theoretical or historical undertaking, but as an *expérience* in the dual sense which Foucault uses — a fundamentally political project that demands a personal and affective investment on the part of both reader and writer. In this respect, the later volumes reveal themselves to be much closer to *CSTH* than past readings have suggested.

This essay therefore follows closely in the footsteps of Dinshaw, who shows in her introduction to *Getting Medieval* that “[a] reckoning with the traces of Boswell in Foucault will expand our understanding of each historian as well as of the various possible social and political uses of their work.”³¹ Boswell’s book “was an instant mainstream success upon its publication”, but was also “immediately scrutinized and vigorously opposed”³² by academics exhibiting a diverse range of political affiliations. Among its most strident opponents were members of New York’s Gay Academic Union, who had published a pamphlet-sized collection of essays, *Homosexuality, Intolerance, and Christianity: A Critical Examination of John Boswell’s Work*, within a year of *CSTH*’s appearance. John Lauritsen’s closing essay provides a helpfully direct summary of what he then saw as the political failings of Boswell’s project:

Boswell’s attempt to whitewash the crimes of the Christian Church are not innocuous wish-fulfillment fantasies. They undercut a basic argument for gay liberation: that our oppression is not due to a spontaneous revulsion on the part of the majority population (“healthy sensibility of the people”, as the Nazis put it), but rather to a particular theological tradition; that our oppression is rooted in superstition; that the Judeo-Christian taboo on Male Love is the core of the problem.³³

Lauritsen’s opposition to *CSTH* was thus not rooted in Boswell’s “anachronistic” use of the phrase “gay people,” or in other scholarly missteps, but rather in what Lauritsen saw as the book’s fundamental political aim: the rehabilitation of the Church. Lauritsen’s criticism here was somewhat overstated. While the specific examples of “whitewashing” which he highlighted in *CSTH* are not unsubstantiated, it is hardly the case that Boswell supported the “spontaneous revulsion” viewpoint, as his highly historicising analysis of the “later medieval fascination with order and uniformity,”³⁴ as opposed to the 11th and 12th centuries’ “extraordinary efflorescence of gay subculture”³⁵ makes clear. However, the point remains that Boswell was, in Lauritsen’s view, “both deluded and deluding with regard to religion.”³⁶ The Gay Academic Union’s pamphlet thus painted him as a Christian assimilationist working to

promote the “conservative agenda of ‘the gay community.’”³⁷ The pamphlet’s emphatic tone, exemplified here by Lauristen, serves to illustrate the seriousness and certainty with which Boswell was identified as a conservative figure.

It is not insignificant that the 1981 pamphlet focused so insistently, in order to make this accusation, on Boswell’s “anachronism,” betrayed not only by “the almost obsessive use of the terms ‘gay’ and ‘gay people,’” but also by “the whole cast of mind” of *CSTH*.³⁸ At a fundamental level, the pamphlet is a microcosm of the wider “Essentialist–Social Constructionist debate”³⁹ that reveals the political concerns at stake in said debate.⁴⁰ Boswell was often cast into the role of the “essentialist” side of this conflict by people, such as the pamphlet’s authors, who wished to refute it. Significantly, they often did so by opposing Boswell to Foucault, who was made to stand for “social constructionism,” despite Foucault’s claims that Boswell was his “guide,” and Boswell’s own praise for “Foucault’s extraordinary genius.”⁴¹ David M. Halperin, writing in 1990, and then “the central defender of the Foucauldian legacy,”⁴² provides us with a straightforward example of such a use of Boswell:

The dangers of taking our sexual categories for granted are well illustrated by the work of John Boswell who, arguing correctly that many societies have contained individuals capable of deriving sexual pleasure from contact with members of their own sex, claims on that basis that homosexuality is universal.⁴³

More than an improper engagement with the differences between past and present, the essentialist viewpoint, as its critics understood it, is rooted in an uncritical relation to, or a “taking for granted” of “our sexual categories.” Boswell was seen as guilty of naturalising the “régime victorien”⁴⁴ (Victorian regime)⁴⁵ of the contemporary West. The question of whether homosexuality was invented in 1892,⁴⁶ in 1870,⁴⁷ in 1869,⁴⁸ or is simply “universal” was more than a point of scholarly-historical dispute. It involved making a fundamental claim about the

nature of homosexuality itself, and such a claim went on to form the basis for an assertion (stated or otherwise) of what to do with homosexuality in the political arena.

It is therefore clear at this point that Boswell's intervention in the realm of gay history was as politically charged as any other, and that it was received as such within a year of its publication, and in the decades that followed. His transhistorical use of the term "gay people" implies a stability of the category which works not only backwards, but, most importantly, forwards. Rather than an opening for tactical reformulations and free self-definition, *CSTH* situated itself as a claim for legitimacy which is irreversibly linked to an assertion of constancy.

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We can therefore begin to see the different "social and political uses," in Dinshaw's words, to which Boswell and Foucault's histories have been put by their readers. Not only were the two opposed to one another, Foucault was often directly cited as an authority in rebuttals to Boswell.⁴⁹ Within the political conflict which was played out through the "Essentialist–Social Constructionist debate," readers generally understood *CSTH* and the *Histoire de la sexualité* to be standing for opposite political projects. The question thus remains of what use Foucault made of *CSTH*, since, unlike many of his readers, he did not consider himself opposed to Boswell's views, but rather used *CSTH* as a "guide" when writing the *Histoire*'s later volumes.

The examination of Foucault's remarks on Boswell in letters and interviews reveals him to be not only a peculiar reader of *CSTH* in terms of its intellectual interpretation (and, in some ways, in disagreement with those who position themselves as his allies against Boswell), but also a very personally involved one. The outline of *CSTH*'s impact on Foucault reveals what is at stake in the later volumes of the *Histoire* as a personal, political *expérience*. It also

shows how Foucault's reading of *CSTH* uncovers a radical potential which he began to put into play with the *Histoire*.

In a 1982 interview with *Masques*, Foucault outlines his reading of *CSTH*, and, specifically, of Boswell's methodology as laid out in his book's first chapter. Foucault's reading reveals itself to have a very different emphasis from Boswell's critics, and sheds valuable light on the relationship of *CSTH* to the *Histoire*'s later volumes.

Boswell commence par un long chapitre dans lequel il justifie sa démarche, pourquoi il prend les gays et la culture gay comme fil directeur de son histoire. Et, en même temps, il est absolument convaincu que l'homosexualité n'est pas une constante transhistorique. Son idée est la suivante: si des hommes ont entre eux des rapports sexuels ... ce n'est pas seulement par tolérance des autres vis-à-vis de telle ou telle forme d'acte sexuel; cela implique forcément une culture; c'est-à-dire des modes d'expression, des valorisations, etc., donc, la reconnaissance par les sujets eux-mêmes de ce que ces rapports ont de spécifique. On peut, en effet, admettre cette idée dès lors qu'il ne s'agit pas d'une catégorie sexuelle ou anthropologique constante, mais d'un phénomène culturel qui se transforme dans le temps tout en se maintenant dans sa formulation générale: rapport entre individus du même sexe qui entraîne un mode de vie où la conscience d'être singulier parmi les autres est présente.⁵⁰

(Boswell begins with a long chapter in which he justifies his trajectory, why he takes gays and gay culture as the guiding thread of his history. At the same time he is absolutely convinced that homosexuality is not a transhistorical constant. His idea is the following: if men have sexual relations among themselves ... it is not only because of the tolerance of others vis-à-vis a certain form of sexual act; it implies necessarily a culture, that is to say, modes of expression, valorizations, etc., and thus the recognition by the subjects themselves of the specific nature of these relations. One can admit this idea as long as it doesn't imply a constant sexual or anthropomorphic category, but a cultural phenomenon that changes in time while maintaining itself in its general formulation: a relation between individuals of the same sex that entails a mode of life in which the consciousness of being singular among others is present.)⁵¹

It is evident from this passage that Foucault's Boswell is very different from the Boswell of Foucauldians. Foucault outright denies that Boswell considers homosexuality a "constante transhistorique" (transhistorical constant). As creative as Foucault's own *expérience* of Boswell was, the emphasis on self-recognition which he describes constitutes an accurate

reading of *CSTH*'s introduction. For Boswell, "'gay' ... refers to persons who are conscious of erotic inclination towards their own gender as a distinguishing characteristic."⁵² It is clear from this definition that Foucault is taking Boswell at his word when he emphasises "la reconnaissance par les sujets eux-mêmes de ce que ces rapports ont de spécifique" (the recognition by the subjects themselves of the specific nature of these relations). The specific insight which Foucault accurately identified in the book of his American counterpart is this notion of self-recognition, which initiated a break with the methods of *La volonté de savoir* (*The Will to Knowledge*). Its methodological and political consequences are highly significant: it invites us to let subjects and communities speak for themselves, in a major departure from his analysis of the biopolitical incitation to the discourse of self in the first volume.

As an aside, I would like to acknowledge the nature of my own writing as an *expérience* of the *Histoire de la sexualité* as transformative, as well as an *expérience* of *CSTH*'s transformative potential as Foucault uncovered it, and an *expérience* of Dinshaw's response to both historians. Indeed, few critics acknowledge the originality of Foucault's engagement with Boswell, with the exception of Dinshaw, whose suggestive glimpse into Foucault's engagement with Boswell in *Getting Medieval* first awakened me to our "need to reckon with the influence Boswell's work exerted on the direction of Foucault's late work."⁵³ There is something queer about the glimpse Foucault gives in this interview (at least, in my *expérience* of it), and in the archival material Dinshaw reviews, of his process of reading Boswell. Foucault's *expérience* of *CSTH* shatters the binary that opposes him to the Yale historian in the broad accounts of gay history's early years. Where Foucault's description of sexuality's generation by "bio-pouvoir"⁵⁴ might be portrayed by Foucauldians as inaugurating the future of critical studies of sexuality, Foucault's own intellectual future is to be found in none other than Boswell's seemingly regressive theorisation of "gay." In returning to this queer juncture, when more years separate me from *Getting Medieval* than separated Dinshaw from *CSTH*, my

expérience of Dinshaw's writing across the queerness of time⁵⁵ is what led me to this essay and to the elaboration to *expérience*'s relation to reading.

I have thus shown how Foucault's reading of Boswell can be identified as a major source for his approach in volumes 2-4 of the *Histoire*, and their newfound focus on the "homme de désir"⁵⁶ (desiring man).⁵⁷ That is not to say, however, that Foucault's shift in focus and method can be solely attributed to his reading the American historian. As Frédéric Gros notes,⁵⁸ while Foucault's 19th February 1975 lecture at the Collège de France⁵⁹ seems to present research that fits within the scope of the second volume of the *Histoire* as sketched out on the back cover of *La volonté de savoir*, his research notes from the years 1976-1977, and some of the lectures in the years that follow already indicate a decisive shift in focus towards what later became volume 4. *Les aveux de la chair* (*The Confessions of the Flesh*), while it was only published very recently, was completed before volumes 2 and 3, and *Le souci de soi* (*The Care of the Self*) is the only volume in which Foucault cites Boswell.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the *Histoire*'s three later volumes form a cohesive whole which makes the break with *La volonté de savoir* even more stark, and this cohesive whole was, if Foucault's words, written and spoken, are to be believed, directly informed by his reading of *CSTH*.

Another major influence on Foucault's interest in the concept of "gay" was no doubt his *expériences* in the gay communities of New York and San Francisco. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Foucault's social, sexual, and drug-related experiences in the United States brought him into contact with gay communities that were much more assertive in their self-definition than could be found in France at the time.⁶¹ It seems likely that in Boswell's definition of "gay," Foucault saw a reflection of their contemporary gay community in America. Such presentist identification, however problematised, itself constitutes a perceptive reading of *CSTH*. As Dinshaw remarks, "the gay relationships in Boswell's gay history resemble those of urban gay males in the United States" at the time of *CSTH*'s writing.⁶²

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Only now that we have established the precise nature of Foucault's reading of Boswell can we begin to unravel the political differences in the respective *expériences* that their works constitute. If Foucault's engagement with *CSTH* is both more theoretically consequential and more accurate than critics such as Mathew Kuefler⁶³ have suggested, is the commonplace perception of their political opposition to one another misplaced? Or does Foucault's theoretical and political divergence instead occur at a later point in his analytical development than is generally assumed?

Of fundamental importance to this question is the relationship of Boswell's work to Christianity. More than a general assertion of the legitimacy of gay people, gay lifestyles, and gay communities, *CSTH* specifically argues "that Christianity had not always been (nor need remain) antagonistic in its attitudes towards homosexual behavior."⁶⁴ In this respect, the political relevance of Boswell's work is at its most obvious. As a "deeply religious" Christian,⁶⁵ his interpretation of scripture in Chapter 4 of *CSTH* automatically operates not only as a work of historical scholarship, but also as an intervention within the discourse which governed his religious community.

The exegetical passages of *CSTH* have proved the subject of fierce debate. They were the target of blistering criticism from Warren Johansson in the Gay Academic Union pamphlet,⁶⁶ but also set themselves in stark opposition to contemporary "heterosexist" exegesis from more right-wing theologians, as surveyed by Dale B. Martin.⁶⁷ Because Chapter 4 makes claims not only about the historical reception of the scriptural passages it surveys, but also

about their meaning, it constitutes a critical moment in the political argumentation of *CSTH*. It is within this context that Boswell's use of the terms "gay" and "homosexual" is to be understood. Boswell makes the claims he does about homosexuality specifically so that he can assert that "it is ... quite clear that nothing in the Bible would have categorically precluded homosexual relations among early Christians."⁶⁸ His "transhistorical" vocabulary is necessary in order to make claims that not only describe the practices of early Christians, but also constitute a political intervention within contemporary Christianity.

This instrumentalisation of his historical vocabulary to make implicit claims about the present-day condition of Christianity continues throughout Boswell's book. *CSTH* reveals itself to not only be a text about what early and medieval Christians did, but about that which Christians and Christianity can do and become. His claim in *CSTH* that "[t]his book is not intended as support or criticism of any particular contemporary point of view — scientific or moral — regarding homosexuality,"⁶⁹ is little more than a fiction. This is apparent, both in the book's contents, and in Boswell's own assertion that "I often think of myself as a weapons-maker: that is, I'm trying to produce the knowledge that people can then use in social struggles."⁷⁰ It is from this self-conscious interventionist understanding of his historical work that Boswell's concept of "gay" emerges. Indeed, the specificity of the contemporary "social struggles" which Boswell saw himself as providing "weapons" for is reflected by the narrow focus of his otherwise expansive work. For *CSTH* focuses almost exclusively on men, eliding, as E. Ann Matter points out, "the experiences of medieval lesbians."⁷¹ In this respect, Foucault's own masculine focus in the later volumes of the *Histoire* repeats the erasures performed by Boswell's definition of "gay." In those later volumes, while men are afforded the potential for self-definition which "gay" names for Foucault, women remain the "docile bodies" described in *La volonté de savoir*.⁷²

If we understand that the goal of *CSTH* is to argue that “it is possible to change ecclesiastical attitudes towards gay people and their sexuality because their objections to homosexuality are not biblical, they are not consistent, they are not part of Jesus’ teaching; and they are not even fundamentally Christian,”⁷³ the book’s insistence on continuous sexual categories across history emerges as a sensible argumentative choice, rather than a strange methodological misstep. Because Boswell is fighting to reform an institution which derives its sense of identity from its long history, it is within this framework of the *longue durée* that he must make his case for tolerance. The self-recognition definition of “gay” which he uses in *CSTH* is merely an argumentative and political tool, and one he discarded when it no longer served.⁷⁴

Foucault’s engagement with Boswell’s definition of “gay” thus emerges as more rigorous, thorough, and enthusiastic, because, unlike Boswell, he uses this notion of self-recognition as the starting point for his investigation. Boswell’s “weapons-maker” approach to the politics of historical writing is here starkly opposed to Foucault’s own method of *expérience*. The examination of *CSTH* as well as Boswell’s lectures and writing surrounding it reveals that he was self-consciously enacting a certain political program, and that he devised his method to suit this program. The same cannot be said of Foucault, who states that “quand je commence un livre, non seulement je ne sais pas ce que je penserai à la fin, mais je ne sais pas très clairement quelle méthode j’emploierai”⁷⁵ (when I begin a project, not only do I not know what I’ll think at its conclusion, I do not clearly know which method I will employ either).⁷⁶

A particularly naïve interpretation of *expérience* as Foucault defines it in the Trombadori interview could lead us to suppose that it was precisely the strangeness of Boswell’s notion of “gay” that attracted Foucault, in his quest to “ne plus penser la même chose qu’auparavant”⁷⁷ (stop thinking the same thing as before).⁷⁸ As amusing as the notion of a

Foucault restlessly seeking out ideological opponents of his in order to agree with them might be, it is clear that his engagement with self-recognition was more serious and complex than a mere fascination with alterity. If “[o]ne can hear the Foucault of *The Uses of Pleasure*”⁷⁹ in his explanation of Boswell’s notion of “gay,” it is not because Foucault is projecting his own ideas onto Boswell, but rather because Boswell’s ideas are being taken up by Foucault with great sincerity.

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In order to grapple properly with Foucault’s reasons for adopting self-recognition as his new focus, a close engagement with the explanation that prefaces *L’usage des plaisirs* (*The Use of Pleasure*) is necessary.

Je devais choisir: ou bien maintenir le plan établi, en l’accompagnant d’un rapide examen historique de ce thème du désir. Ou bien réorganiser toute l’étude autour de la lente formation, pendant l’Antiquité, d’une herméneutique de soi. C’est pour ce dernier parti que j’ai opté, en réfléchissant qu’après tout, ce à quoi je suis tenu — ce à quoi j’ai voulu me tenir pendant des années —, c’est une entreprise pour dégager quelques-uns des éléments qui pourraient servir à une histoire de la vérité”⁸⁰

(I had to choose: either stick to the plan I had set, supplementing it with a brief historical survey of the theme of desire, or reorganize the whole study around the slow formation, in antiquity, of a hermeneutics of the self. I opted for the latter, reasoning that, after all, what I have held to, what I have tried to maintain for many years, is the effort to isolate some of the elements that might be useful for a history of truth.)⁸¹

Here, the seasoned reader of Foucault should be given pause. How is a newfound focus on the “herméneutique de soi” closer to an “histoire de la vérité” than the task Foucault began with *La volonté de savoir*? Was that previous volume not concerned first and foremost with

truth-producing contexts such as “confession,”⁸² “science,”⁸³ or “bio-politique?”⁸⁴ The explanation that follows is a reframing of Foucault’s major works in terms of individual self-recognition:

À travers quels jeux de vérité l’homme se donne-t-il à penser son être propre quand il se perçoit comme fou, quand il se regarde comme malade, quand il se réfléchit comme être vivant, parlant et travaillant, quand il se juge et se punit à titre de criminel?⁸⁵

(What are the games of truth by which man proposes to think his own nature when he perceives himself to be mad; when he considers himself to be ill; when he conceives of himself as living, speaking, laboring being; when he judges and punishes himself as a criminal?)⁸⁶

Such a summary of Foucault’s career in terms of “l’homme”’s relationship to himself would probably constitute a gross mischaracterisation if it had been written by anybody else. Indeed, here Foucault seems to refer to “l’homme” as the stable, transhistorical object of the social sciences, precisely the same concept which he had set out to disprove two decades earlier in *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*).⁸⁷ This passage of *L’usage des plaisirs* closely resembles the work of *post facto* structuring which Foucault maps out in the Trombadori interview: “Mon travail terminé, je peux, par une sorte de regard rétrospectif, extraire de l’expérience que je viens de faire une réflexion méthodologique qui dégage la méthode que le livre aurait dû suivre”⁸⁸ (Once a work is finished, I can, through a sort of hindsight, deduce a methodology from the completed experience).⁸⁹ However, whereas in the interview he is situating this retrospective construction of a “méthode” in the context of individual books, the introduction of *L’usage des plaisirs* recharacterises the main body of Foucault’s work in terms of the individual, self-recognising subject.⁹⁰

It is here that the full weight of the notion of *expérience limite* becomes apparent. After writing of the “homme de désir”⁹¹ (desiring man)⁹² as subjected, in his self-determination, to an “appareillage à produire sur le sexe des discours, toujours davantage de discours,

susceptibles de fonctionner et de prendre effet dans son économie même”⁹³ (apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy),⁹⁴ Foucault decides to re-empower this self-recognising subject. This decision can be directly traced to the *expérience limite* of engaging with Boswell’s concept of “gay,” that “tore” the writing subject (Foucault) from himself. This *expérience limite* is then folded into the dually experiential and experimental writing of the *Histoire*’s later volumes. Foucault clearly alludes to this process in the introduction of *L’usage des plaisirs*: “On croyait s’éloigner et on se retrouve à la verticale de soi-même. Le voyage rajeunit les choses, et il vieillit le rapport à soit.”⁹⁵ (Sure of having traveled far, one finds that one is looking down on oneself from above. The journey rejuvenates things, and ages the relationship with oneself.)⁹⁶ Having been “torn from himself” into this new frame of reference, his past self appears to him aged just as the objects of his study are rejuvenated within his newly acquired framework.

The introduction to *L’usage des plaisirs* echoes the final paragraphs of the introduction to *L’archéologie du savoir* (*Archaeology of Knowledge*). In that earlier work, Foucault claims the right to change his mind, and describes writing as the task of preparing “le labyrinthe où m’aventurer, déplacer mon propos, lui trouver des surplombs qui résument et déforment son parcours, où me perdre et apparaître finalement à des yeux que je n’aurai jamais plus à rencontrer.”⁹⁷ (a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again.)⁹⁸ This early formulation of the idea of losing oneself through writing occurs, like *L’usage des plaisirs*, at a moment which is both retrospective and transformative. It is thus in line with Foucault’s definition of *expérience* as both a transformation one undergoes and the post-hoc invention of that transformation. These two fleeting, yet decisive passages from *L’archéologie du savoir* and *L’usage des plaisirs* constitute the closest Foucault ever comes to

discussing his concept of *expérience* in writing. This is perfectly consistent with the definition he gives of *expérience* in the Trombadori interview. Not only does Foucault not adopt a prescriptive attitude towards himself by setting out to write books making a certain argument, or following a certain method,⁹⁹ he does not want to prescribe how his books are to be read either. This is made clear from the account he gives Trombadori of the *Histoire de la Folie*'s reception: the book came to be received as a “manifeste de l’antipsychiatrie”¹⁰⁰ (manifesto of anti-psychiatry)¹⁰¹ despite having been written before antipsychiatry existed in Europe, because it works as a “transformation du rapport ... que nous avons à la folie”¹⁰² (transformation of the relation ... which we ourselves have with madness).¹⁰³ Foucault clearly does not consider *expérience* a philosophical theory which ought to be set down on paper, but rather something which is carried out in part through writing in the way he does, and through research activities such as his reading of Boswell.

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We can thus see Boswell’s notion of gay self-recognition informing the intellectual experimentation of the *Histoire*'s later volumes, as well as Foucault’s own exploration of new frames of investigation that led him to re-write his past work into this new context. This does not, however, account for the complete *expérience* that the later volumes constitute, because, as Foucault points out, “cette expérience, enfin, doit pouvoir être liée jusqu’à un certain point à une pratique collective”¹⁰⁴ (this experience must be linkable, to a certain extent, to a collective practice).¹⁰⁵ *Expérience* occurs, for Foucault, in a political context.

However, the *pratique collective* to which the *expérience* must be linked is not a straightforward “use” of Foucault’s writing such as the one Boswell suggests with his

“weapons-maker” approach to the politics of his work. Because the *pratique collective* is one which emerges from the sharing of the *expérience* with others, the *pratique* and the writing cannot have a purely instrumental relationship to one another. Foucault’s books are not “weapons” that “people can then use in social struggles.” The *expérience* of thinking anew and the political *pratique collective* are inextricable from one another, and this is clearly expressed by Foucault when he discusses his understanding of Boswell’s concept of “gay” in the contemporary context.

When asked by Joecker et al. about an exhortation he made a year earlier that we should “nous acharner à devenir homosexuels”¹⁰⁶ (persistently work at becoming homosexuals),¹⁰⁷

Foucault takes the opportunity to correct himself:

Je voulais dire “il faut s’acharner à être gay,” se placer dans une dimension où les choix sexuels que l’on fait sont présents et ont leurs effets sur l’ensemble de notre vie. Je voulais dire aussi que ces choix sexuels doivent être en même temps créateurs de modes de vie. Être gay signifie que ces choix se diffusent à travers toute la vie, c’est aussi une certaine manière de refuser les modes de vie proposés, c’est faire du choix sexuel l’opérateur d’un changement d’existence.¹⁰⁸

(I meant that “one should persistently work at being gay,” put oneself in a dimension where the sexual choices that one makes are present and have their effects over the whole of our life. I also meant that these sexual choices must at the same time be create of ways of life. To be gay means that these choices spread across a whole life; it’s also a certain way of refusing existing life styles; making sexual choice the operator of a change of existence.)¹⁰⁹

With this gesture, Foucault effectively finishes turning Boswell’s concept of “gay” inside-out. In *CSTH*, Boswell uses “gay” to describe a fixed category of people whose integration into existing society he pursues through the demand for “tolerance,” and develops the notion of “self-recognition” to establish this category within the history of the West, and specifically of Christianity. Foucault uses said “self-recognition” to redefine “gay” as a creative process of becoming, an agonistic “acharnement” by which subjects are constantly “tearing”

themselves from themselves in order to become anew and create new “modes de vie.” Foucault thus finds in Boswell a more precise articulation for the claim he made in the de Ceccaty et al. interview that “Le programme doit être vide.”¹¹⁰ (The program must be open.)¹¹¹

One reviewer of *Les aveux de la chair* notes that, like its two predecessors, the *Histoire*'s fourth volume “gives no explicit direction for how to interpret or work with the text.”¹¹² Foucault's concept of *expérience* both explains why this is the case (his work is not prescriptive, but rather acts as an open *expérience*), and serves as such a guide. Moreover, it is clear from his use of *CSTH* that he did not take Boswell's book as a “weapon,” in the way which Boswell himself envisioned his readers doing, but rather treated it as its own *expérience*, an *expérience* which shaped not only his writing of the *Histoire*, but the political goals of the final years of his life. Not only did Foucault emerge transformed from the *expérience* of reading *CSTH* and writing the *Histoire*'s later volumes, so did Boswell's own concept of “gay,” which had been the *expérience*'s original “guide.” This transformation is manifest not only in the substance of the later volumes, but also in Foucault's own shift in vocabulary, from *homosexuel* in the de Ceccaty et al. interview to “gay” in Joecker et al.:

N'être pas gay, c'est dire: “Comment vais-je pouvoir limiter les effets de mon choix sexuel de telle manière que ma vie ne soit en rien changée?”

Je dirai, il faut user de sa sexualité pour découvrir, inventer de nouvelles relations. Être gay, c'est être en devenir et, pour répondre à votre question, j'ajouterais qu'il ne faut pas être homosexuel mais s'acharner à être gay.¹¹³

(Not to be gay is to say: “How am I going to be able to limit the effects of my sexual choice in such a way that my life doesn't change in any way?”

I would say that one must use sexuality to discover or invent new relations. To be gay is to be in a state of becoming. To respond to your question, I would add that it is not necessary to be homosexual but it is necessary to persistently work at being gay.)¹¹⁴

Homosexuel appears in this interview to take on a fixity, or to have a limited definition which “gay” does not possess. The distinction Foucault is elaborating could potentially imply

that one can be *homosexuel* without being “gay.” In this respect, it is significant that he opposes “gay” to “pas gay.” The closest synonym for the English “straight” in French is the word *hétéro*, which makes for a more natural opposite to *homo*(*sexuel*) than to the Francophone use of “gay.” Foucault’s sense of “gay,” unlike the *homosexuel*, is not a stable category or “espèce”¹¹⁵ (“species”),¹¹⁶ but rather an *expérience* by and through which “de nouvelles relations” (“new relations”) are created and lived. The *expérience* Foucault made of Boswell’s book is what led him to develop and/or to arrive at this “gay” concept (according to the *expérience*’s paradoxical temporality) through his final volumes.

In his “fan letter” to Boswell’s editor, Foucault’s “rough English”¹¹⁷ accidentally hints at this transformative *expérience* of reading, when he writes that *CSTH* “makes appear unexplored phenomenons.”¹¹⁸ Foucault is here literally translating the French phrase “fait apparaître,” which would usually be translated as “unveils” or “uncovers.” The French phrase instead emphasises the writer’s active role in creating *CSTH*’s gay “phenomenons,” and hints at the reader’s own potential participation, which, in Foucault’s own case, turned out to be a very significant contribution indeed. The Foucault of 1980-1984 invites us, explicitly in his interviews, and implicitly through the experiential and experimental form of his books, to “make appear” *de nouvelles relations*, through the *pratique collective* of a gay *expérience*.

NOTES

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¹ Duccio Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 44.

² Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 33-34.

³ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 42.

⁴ Trombadori, 43.

⁵ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 31.

⁶ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 43.

⁷ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 31. Translation modified.

⁸ Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 16.

⁹ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 4. Translation modified.

¹⁰ Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 9.

¹¹ Miller, 32.

¹² Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience,” 158. Jay later adapted this essay in his *Songs of Experience*, 361-400. Jay’s critique of Miller is omitted from this later version.

¹³ Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure*, 15. Italics in quotations are always in the original.

¹⁴ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 3.

¹⁵ Jay, “The Limits of Limit-Experience,” 158.

¹⁶ In addition to the works cited above, Foucault’s concept of *expérience* has been the object of a few different studies, with quite different emphases from mine. Timothy O’Leary, *Foucault and Fiction* explores the concept in relation to literary theory. For a philosophically focused exploration of *expérience* which departs somewhat from my own views, see Luca Paltrinieri, *L'expérience du concept*. For a useful and concise definition of *expérience*, see Driss Bellahcène, *Michel Foucault, ou l’ouverture de l’histoire à la vérité*, 21.

¹⁷ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II*, 9.

¹⁸ Poster, “Foucault and the Tyranny of Greece,” 207.

¹⁹ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 46.

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- ²⁰ Poster, “Foucault and the Tyranny of Greece,” 209.
- ²¹ Poster, 219.
- ²² Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 43.
- ²³ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 31.
- ²⁴ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 43.
- ²⁵ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II*, 11.
- ²⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 4.
- ²⁷ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 34.
- ²⁸ Boswell, *CSTH*, 16.
- ²⁹ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité III*, 102, 252.
- ³⁰ James O’Higgins, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” 11. The interview was conducted in French, and translated into English by O’Higgins for publication.
- ³¹ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 34.
- ³² Dinshaw, 23.
- ³³ Lauristen, “*Culpa Ecclesiae*.”
- ³⁴ Boswell, *CSTH*, 270.
- ³⁵ Boswell, 265.
- ³⁶ Lauristen, “Preface (2003).”
- ³⁷ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 23.
- ³⁸ Warren Johansson, “*Ex Parte Themis*.”
- ³⁹ Mathew Kuefler, “The Boswell Thesis,” 9.
- ⁴⁰ On the “Essentialist–Social Constructionist” controversy, see Edward Stein, *Forms of Desire*, Lee Behlman, “From Ancient to Victorian Cultural Studies: Assessing Foucault,” and Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*. On Boswell’s place in the debate, see Kuefler, “The Boswell Thesis,” and Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 22-34. While most of the examples I quote are fairly

close in time to Boswell and Foucault's publications, the framing of Boswell as the ultimate Essentialist, and Foucault as the leader of the Constructionists persists in some recent accounts of, and interventions in the debate. See, for example: Ari Friedlander, "Introduction: Desiring History and Historicizing Desire," Kyle Harper, "Culture, Nature, and History," Karl Whittington, "Queer," Jeffrey Weeks, "Queer(y)ing the 'Modern Homosexual'," Francisco J. Vázquez García, "Presentación," Robert E. Shore-Goss, "Gay and Lesbian Theologies," Maurizio P. Faggioni, "L'atteggiamento e la prassi della Chiesa in epoca medievale e moderna sull'omosessualità," Bryant T. Ragan Jr. and Jeffrey Merrick, "Trends and Issues in Gay and Lesbian History," H. G. Cocks, "Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality," and Thierry Eloi, "La sexualité de l'homme romain antique."

⁴¹ Boswell, "Good Sex at Home in Ancient Rome."

⁴² Behlman, "From Ancient to Victorian Cultural Studies," 561.

⁴³ Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 46.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*, 9.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 3.

⁴⁶ Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 15.

⁴⁷ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*, 59.

⁴⁸ Johansson, "Ex Parte Themis."

⁴⁹ See, for example, Kenneth Arrowsmith (Walter Kendrick), "Toujours gai? Pas du tout!"

⁵⁰ J. P. Joecker, M. Overd, and A. Sanzio, "Entretien avec M. Foucault," 291-292.

⁵¹ Foucault, "History and Homosexuality," 367-368.

⁵² Boswell, *CSTH*, 44.

⁵³ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 33.

⁵⁴ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*, 184.

⁵⁵ See Dinshaw, *How Soon Is Now?*.

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- ⁵⁶ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II*, 14.
- ⁵⁷ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 7. Translation modified.
- ⁵⁸ Gros, “Avertissement,” v.
- ⁵⁹ Foucault, *Les anormaux*, 155-186.
- ⁶⁰ Gros, “Avertissement,” vi-vii.
- ⁶¹ Didier Éribon, *Michel Foucault*, 509-514.
- ⁶² Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 30.
- ⁶³ Kuefler, “The Boswell Thesis,” 9-10.
- ⁶⁴ Bernard Schlager, “Reading *CSTH* as a Call to Action,” 74.
- ⁶⁵ Ralph Hexter, “John Boswell, 1945-1994,” 260.
- ⁶⁶ Johansson, “*Ex Parte Themis*.”
- ⁶⁷ Martin, “Heterosexism and the Interpretation of Romans 1:18-32.”
- ⁶⁸ Boswell, *CSTH*, 92.
- ⁶⁹ Boswell, xv.
- ⁷⁰ Boswell, *Rediscovering Gay History*, 5.
- ⁷¹ Matter, “Review,” 117. On Boswell’s erasure of women in his historical work, see also Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 10-13, and Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 31.
- ⁷² Foucault’s failure to account for either gendered oppression or the agency of women has been discussed in various ways in the rich body of feminist Foucault studies. For example: Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism*, especially 32-38, and Caroline Ramazanoglu, ed., *Up Against Foucault*. McNay’s book, which focuses on the notion of the self in *L’usage des plaisirs* and *Le souci de soi*, is of particular relevance to my essay.
- ⁷³ Boswell, “The Church and the Homosexual.”
- ⁷⁴ Boswell, “Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories,” 34-36.
- ⁷⁵ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 42.

⁷⁶ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 28. Translation modified.

⁷⁷ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 42.

⁷⁸ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 27. Translation modified.

⁷⁹ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 34.

⁸⁰ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II*, 13.

⁸¹ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 6.

⁸² Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*, 27.

⁸³ Foucault, 72.

⁸⁴ Foucault, 183.

⁸⁵ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II*, 13-14.

⁸⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 7.

⁸⁷ See Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, especially 398.

⁸⁸ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 42.

⁸⁹ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 28. Translation modified.

⁹⁰ Insofar as the introduction to *L'usage des plaisirs* presents philosophy as a continuous labour of self-modification, it effectively suggests that the focal shift of the *Histoire*'s later volumes is not a rupture with Foucault's philosophical project up to that point, but a continuation of it. For such an interpretation of Foucault's works as philosophically coherent, see Sverre Raffnsøe, Morten S. Thaning, and Marius Gudmand-Høyer, “Philosophical Practice as Self-modification.” In his extraordinarily lucid *Michel Foucault, ou l'ouverture de l'histoire à la vérité*, Bellahcène describes Foucault's oeuvre as “continuité dans la discontinuité” (continuity in discontinuity), and argues that “avec Foucault, c'est l'idée d'une méthode immuable et universellement applicable qui est mise en question” (with Foucault, the idea of an immutable and universally applicable method is what is put into question) (40). A case for coherence which focuses more specifically on the history of sexuality can be found in Daniel Boyarin and

Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Introduction: Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: The Fourth Volume*, or, a Field Left Fallow for Others to Till.”

⁹¹ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II*, 14.

⁹² Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 7. Translation modified.

⁹³ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*, 33.

⁹⁴ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 23.

⁹⁵ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité II*, 19.

⁹⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 11.

⁹⁷ Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, 28.

⁹⁸ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 19.

⁹⁹ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 41-42.

¹⁰⁰ Trombadori, 45.

¹⁰¹ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 35.

¹⁰² Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 45.

¹⁰³ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Trombadori, “Entretien avec Michel Foucault,” 46.

¹⁰⁵ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 39.

¹⁰⁶ R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet, and L. Le Bitoux, “De l’amitié comme mode de vie,” 163.

¹⁰⁷ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 308. Translation modified.

¹⁰⁸ Joecker, Overd, and Sanzio, “Entretien avec M. Foucault,” 295.

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, “History and Homosexuality,” 369-370. Translation modified.

¹¹⁰ De Ceccaty, Danet, Le Bitoux, “De l’amitié comme mode de vie,” 167.

¹¹¹ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 312.

¹¹² Nancy Luxon, “Review: *Les Aveux de la chair*. Vol. 4 of *L’Histoire de la sexualité*.”

¹¹³ Joecker, Overd, and Sanzio, “Etretien avec M. Foucault,” 295. Considering that this interview was conducted orally, the text’s transcription of “je dirai” in the future tense, rather than “je dirais” in the conditional, is certainly a mistake (the two forms of the verb are homophonic). Hochroth and Johnston translate the phrase in the conditional.

¹¹⁴ Foucault, “History and Homosexuality,” 370. Translation modified.

¹¹⁵ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I*, 59.

¹¹⁶ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 43.

¹¹⁷ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 32.

¹¹⁸ Foucault, Letter to Douglas Mitchell.

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