Queer Theory and Foucault's "Self" as Reflexive Activity

by

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ABSTRACT

By developing a Foucauldian understanding of the self, queer theorists may remodel conceptions of selfhood such that forms of questioning identity, the body, coalitions, and recognition, which have presently arrived at an impasse, are opened to new lines of analysis. Foucault's use of "self" seems to reintroduce a model of selfhood that appears transhistorical, universal, disembodied, autopoietic, and associated with interiority—a model of selfhood Foucault would likely attempt to transgress. However, against several critics, this thesis argues that while the self appears problematic in Foucault's writings, his analysis of ethics may be less problematically read. "Self" functions in these works to denote embodied, reflexive actions, which are both socially mediated and practiced. As such, the model of the self which Foucault establishes eludes the various traps laid out above, and opens a new path for confronting some key problems facing queer theory today.
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Introduction

This thesis argues that Michel Foucault's figure of the self as reflexive, embodied activity provides queer theory with model of selfhood which is consistent with its critique of internality and essentialism and which may productively shift debates concerning recognition and group formation. Judith Butler’s critique of internal essence displaces models of the self identified by Charles Taylor, allowing her to study subjectivity without focusing on selfhood. The word “self” may be contrasted to “subject.” The subject is both subject to power and subject of an action. ¹ This duality suggests that the subject is embedded in and constituted by power relations but is capable of acting. In contrast, models of the self have traditionally depended upon an understanding of internality, and this internal space is conceived of as the location for an essence which defines the self. This essence, in turn, has been taken as our identity, something deep within ourselves. “Self,” as Charles Taylor analyses, is “related to, one might say constituted by, a certain sense .. of inwardness” (Sources of the Self 111). Taylor traces this conception of the self to Augustine and claims that Descartes provides a “radical twist” (143) to Augustine by locating the source of morality within the self. In Descartes, the self is a thinking thing, whose thought, which exists dissociated from the world and from others, gives proof to the existence of itself, God, and the world. When Descartes asks “mais qu’est-ce donc que je suis?” (“Méditation seconde”), he understands the self as something that must be known and known ahistorically. Unlike the subject, the self is not viewed as a social product. The internal space of Descartes’ self is independent

¹ Foucault also adds that one can be subject to identity (“The Subject and Power” 331).
of and clearly bounded from its environment. It is within this space where its thoughts are located, and these thoughts define its essence.

Because of the relationship between the concepts of internal essence and the self, it is understandable that Judith Butler’s texts, critiquing essentialism, largely avoid discussing the self. Butler argues that sex is performative. This displaces the analysis of sexual identity from an internal core to actions and suggests that these actions are not the expression of an essence. Butler is also concerned by the homogenization and normalization involved in the affirmation of identity categories to which people identify as their internal essence. Other authors, such as Diana Fuss and David Halperin, who have been associated with Butler under the term “queer theory,” have similarly problematized models of internality, displacing analyses of the self. These authors argue that the narrative of “coming out” contributes to a notion of identity as essential and stable - something to be affirmed that is deeply contained within the self.² For example, Diana Fuss performs a deconstruction of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, demonstrating the mutual interrelation of the terms. This project makes the relationality of selfhood overt. Fuss’s text overlaps with Butler’s works in that Fuss makes explicit the ways that the self cannot possess a

² See Sedgwick Epistemology of the Closet 67-90; Butler “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”; Fuss Essentially Speaking 99-100. Scott Bravmann also analyzes the ways in which social constructionist histories of the making of the modern homosexual borrow this narrative of “coming out.” He argues that these histories problematically place the past as a time where same-sex love was both hidden and amorphous against the present where, through a historical development, a unified and stable homosexual identity has been affirmed.

In contrast to the ways that coming out has been discussed in this literature, historically, some narratives around “coming out” did not understand identity as essential or internal. For example, the writings of the Gay Liberation Front of the 1970s, published in Out of the Closets: Voices of the Gay Liberation, extensively use the language of “coming out,” while problematizing this model of identity. In this way, the model of identity associated with coming out in queer theory appears to some extent as a straw man or rather a historically specific model of coming out which is not necessary. It seems that American identity politics in the 1970s changed from a radical, Marxist form which understood
bounded, definable, or solid essence. David Halperin’s arguments also coincide with Butler’s: he insists that sexual identity is something to be created not discovered within. Halperin argues for a gay and lesbian politics of non-identity, a politics which creates a gay and lesbian ethos.

Butler, Fuss, and Halperin’s critique of essence and internality challenges understandings of the self as possessing an internal essence. Through these critiques, queer theorists have turned away from discussions of selfhood to subjectivity. However, to focus merely on subjectivity, I will show, misses a range of experiences and practices relevant to the study of sexuality. These experiences and activities may be considered through developing an alternate model of the self, which takes into account this critique of internal essence.

Michel Foucault’s late works, published after 1980, develop such a model of the self; however, in comparison to the volumes of literature in queer theory which draw upon Foucault’s middle works, his late writing, (ironically interested, professedly, in the history of sexuality) are largely ignored. Foucault’s middle texts, *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History Of Sexuality*, have shaped queer theory. These texts write of the ways in which the affirmation of sexual identity is embedded in power relations and contributes to normalization. Foucault provides a genealogy of sexuality, develops an analysis of disciplinary and bio-power, and reconceptualizes resistance. He also concerns himself with the ways in which subjectivity is produced in relations of power. These ideas have all been central in identity in a more constructionist way to a radical identity politics, which often essentialized identities. For an example of this argument, see Amber Musser’s discussion of *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. 
But during the final years of his life, Foucault analyzed ethics, which he defined as the ways in which the self relates to itself. This period of his thought produced *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, *Fearless Speech*, the second two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, and several interviews, which are published in *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume One*. In contrast to the form of subjectivity implied in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*, the subject of these later texts overtly possesses the capacity for some form of self-transformation. Given Foucault’s detailed genealogies of subjectivity and his deep critique of essentialism, how are we to understand the figure of the self which appears in these late works? Authors such as Butler have not considered this question and have largely ignored Foucault’s late texts. This thesis will attempt to fill the resulting gap, opening a discussion of ethics, as defined by Foucault, in queer theory. I will argue that Michel Foucault’s discussion of selfhood provides queer theory with a much needed model of the self which opens alternate modes of questioning than those which are currently rehearsed.

Many may be skeptical of using the form of analysis Foucault developed following 1980 in the future of queer theory. In fact, the self in Foucault’s texts does appear problematic: it seems transhistorical, universal, disembodied, autopoietic, and associated with interiority. However, the figure of the self may be less problematically read. “Self” functions in the late works to denote embodied, reflexive actions, which are both socially mediated and practiced. The figure “self” is then consistent with Foucault’s critique of essentialism and ready for use in queer theory. In fact, the inclusion of the analysis of self in this field could open alternate modes of

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1 See Spargo.
questioning embodiment, queer groups, recognition, and identity categories. These concerns are central to queer theory but their discussion has reached an impasse. My analysis of Foucault's self will not solve debates on these subjects but will open the discussion to include alternate concerns and to account for a variety of experiences and practices that are not presently theorized in the current debates. My aim is to open an axis of analysis for future research on sexuality.

While attending to these questions in queer theory, this thesis also engages with other Foucault scholarship, responding to the insufficient elaboration of the form of the self in his late work. Virtually every author engaged in conversations surrounding Foucault's ethics agrees that "the self" is important to Foucault's late writings. However, discussions of the form of this self are insufficient: many critics, such as Arnold Davidson, Paul Veyne, David Halperin, and Tim O'Leary take the figure as unproblematic, while others such as Mark Poster and Lois McNay simplify the figure.

Arnold Davidson and Paul Veyne exemplify the first trend of authors who identify the importance of the self without explaining what it is. Davidson argues that Foucault's late work is important to philosophy because it deepens and expands the study of ethics in its suggestion that ethics consists of the ways that the self relates to itself. However, Davidson mystifies Foucault's figure of the self. He claims that the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* describes the practice of the care of the self as one in which the self is dilated beyond itself, achieving "cosmic consciousness" and perceiving the human world "from above" ("Ethics as Ascetics" 129-30). This is, according to Davidson, "one of the most distinctive features of that care of the self"
studied by Foucault” (121). In comparison to Davidson’s mysticism, Paul Veyne draws on myth. I quote him at length to demonstrate not only the dynamism with which he introduces the concept of the self but also the gaps of his discussion. He writes:

Greek⁴ ethics is quite dead, and Foucault judged it as undesirable as it would be impossible to resuscitate this ethics; but he considered one of its elements, namely, the idea of a work of the self on the self, to be capable of reacquiring a contemporary meaning, in the manner of one of those pagan temple columns that one occasionally sees reutilized in more recent structures. We can guess at what might emerge from this diagnosis: the self, taking itself as a work to be accomplished, could sustain an ethics that is no longer supported by either tradition or reason; as an artist of itself, the self would enjoy that autonomy that modernity can no longer do without. ‘Everything has disappeared,’ said Medea, “but I have one thing left: myself.’ Finally, if the self frees us from the idea that between morality and society, or what we call by those names, there is an analytic or necessary link, then it is no longer necessary to wait for the revolution to begin to realize ourselves: the self is the new strategic possibility. (231)

Veyne and Davidson agree that the self is a key figure to Foucault’s late work. The care of the self concerns ethics, politics, and aesthetics.

However both authors leave a slew of questions unanswered. Davidson begs the questions: how can the self be universal? How is the self capable of dilating itself to reach a cosmic existence? What is the cosmic? Is the contemporary homosexual (whom Davidson discusses) also connected to cosmic consciousness? Veyne’s essay forms alternate concerns: how can the self take itself as a work of art? What is the autonomy it enjoys, and how is this autonomy produced? Does Foucault’s analysis suggest that the self is ahistorical? In fact, from Veyne’s description of Foucault’s work, it is easy to read Foucault’s turn to the self as a movement from his more

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⁴ In this discussion of Foucault, Veyne, following much of Foucault’s own writings, generalizes Ancient Greek ethics. I will return to the question of Foucault’s historical specificity later in this thesis.
radical writings to liberal individualism, which insists that the individual has autonomy and that the practice of this autonomy consists of freedom.

As I will show, this reading is inconsistent with the body of Foucault’s work; nonetheless such a reading is surprisingly common. For example, Mark Poster, exemplifying the second group of critics who simplify the late Foucault, argues that Foucault does not sufficiently define “self” but that the term appears “neutral” and “ahistorical”: a “synonym for ‘individual’” (212). Poster’s reading collapses Foucault’s late work into a form of liberalism and is symptomatic of many critics, such as Lois McNay or Maria Daraki, who read late Foucault as individualistic and who often dismiss him on this account. As I will demonstrate, this reading overlooks many key elements of the self which Foucault discusses and is therefore incomplete.

In contrast to those who adapt the figure of the self in Foucault or those who read the self as an individual, Timothy O’Leary recognizes a potential problem with Foucault’s “self” but dismisses the problem too quickly. He argues that readers of Foucault are tempted to give the self “ontological precedence” (119) such that it precedes its aesthetic relation to itself and has existence apart from the reflexive activity Foucault discusses. However, O’Leary claims that this problem is due to its English translation: “self” is a translation of “soi,” but these two words are quite different. As O’Leary argues, unlike “self,” “soi” is not a noun. English translations of “soi” misleadingly suggests that the self is an entity. While O’Leary’s reassuring argument suggests that Foucault’s use of “soi” does not imply that he believes that there exists a self, which is one entity or one thing, it does not consider how Foucault uses “soi” in contrast to “sujet.” That is to say, it does not consider the meanings
"soi" is given in the text, whether the word is a reflexive pronoun or not. In addition, although O’Leary is helpful in his discussion of the translation of Foucault, he does not consider how some of Foucault’s late texts and lectures, which were originally written or spoken in English, do use “self” as a noun, preceded by an article. As a result, the potential problem with the self that O’Leary identifies cannot be easily assuaged by identifying problems with translation.

It is in this context that I will provide a reading of Foucault’s late works to demonstrate that the self may be understood alongside his critique of essentialism and analysis of subjectivity. I will argue that the self consists of reflexive, embodied, and socially mediated practices. This will open Foucault’s analysis of ethics to the future study of sexuality and sexual politics.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first outlines current problems in contemporary queer theory and argues that Foucault’s late works are largely overlooked yet relevant to these concerns. The second chapter argues that while Foucault’s late writings depart from his earlier texts in that he becomes interested in relationships of the self to itself, this late writing must be understood in the context of his previous analyses of subjectivity. In fact, not only is “self” central to Foucault’s late works, but this figure is important to Foucault’s own understanding of his previous writings. After explaining the reasons that the self in Foucault has troubled many writers, the third chapter argues that the concept may be less problematically read. I show that Foucault only uses the term “self” within phrases that establish reflexive relationships through socially mediated and practiced actions. I develop a performative understanding of “self,” where the practices that constitute this self are

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5 See, for an example, Foucault’s “Sexuality and Solitude.”
embodied and social. This leads to my concluding chapter, which applies this reading of self in Foucault to reframe current problematizations in queer theory. By considering reflexive relations, queer theorists can reconceive of identity in productive ways, such that, for example, coalition formation and embodiment can be discussed differently.
Chapter One – Queer Theory and the Self

Within studies of queer sexuality, Foucault’s late works on ethics appear disregarded, especially in comparison to the quantity of references in this field to the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* and, to a lesser extent, *Discipline and Punish*. This chapter will outline developments in queer theory to argue that a closer analysis of the concept of the self in Foucault’s late writings could be useful to this field. The problem in queer theory is not so much that theorists fail to draw on the late Foucault but rather that, given their critique of essentialism and internality, it becomes unclear of how to conceive of the self. Foucault developed such an analysis of the self in his discussion of ethics, and therefore this work may prove useful to the future of queer theory, opening new lines of analysis in the field. This chapter begins by discussing Judith Butler’s treatment of the late Foucault, then argues that the self is problematic in queer theory. This relates to three other key questions in the field: (1) How can we conceptualize embodiment? (2) Are there queer groups? (3) Is the recognition of queer subjects desirable? My final chapter will return to these questions, to argue that Foucault’s concept of the self complicates these analyses, opening new forms of questioning. Foucault’s late work is not a panacea to current problems in queer theory, but rather the analysis of ethics may open alternate questions presently disregarded.

These texts have nonetheless not figured largely in queer theory. For example, while Judith Butler draws extensively on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, she has not engaged with his late works in great detail. This is especially notable in two ways. First, since Butler’s *Gender*
Trouble and Bodies that Matter have faced similar criticisms to Foucault's middle books, upon which she draws, one may expect Butler to consider Foucault's response to these criticisms. For example, Martha Nussbaum claims that Butler offers nothing to feminism (41). Butler, she argues, leaves little or no room for social change, describing women as "prisoners of ... structures of power" (37). According to Nussbaum, Butler's theories have led many "to adopt a stance that looks very much like quietism and retreat" (37). Seyla Benhabib is also critical. She argues that Butler does away with concepts of agency, autonomy, and intentionality, which are essential, she claims, to explain "psychic, intellectual, or other sources of creativity and resistance" (110). For Benhabib, it is unclear how one can be constituted by discourse without "being determined by it" (110). These responses repeat similar critical engagements with Foucault which argue that he is deterministic or apolitical, and to which he replies by providing a nuanced understanding of power and by analyzing the ways that the self relates to itself. Considering that Butler faces similar criticisms to Foucault and has drawn extensively on Foucault, her avoidance of Foucault's late works is undoubtedly purposeful. Her subsequent writings such as The Psychic Life of Power and Undoing Gender deepen her analysis of subjectivity and agency, yet she still does not comment extensively on Foucault's late texts.

6 For an example, see Walzer 55-63. Walzer argues that Foucault is "not a good revolutionary" (55) because, while he problematizes sovereignty and class, he takes society as a "social whole" (57). There is no centre towards or from which power can be contested, and this power structure simultaneously permeates the entire social body. Given this analysis, Walzer concludes that Foucault "desensitizes his readers to the importance of politics" (63). But politics, Walzer concludes, matters.

7 She does, however, draw on "The Subject and Power". Nonetheless, she offers no discussion on "The Ethics of the Concern of Self as a Practice of Freedom", the two last volumes of The History of Sexuality, nor "A Genealogy of Ethics". While she does comment on "What is Critique?" she does not offer a reading of "What is Enlightenment?" where the question of the self becomes more central, especially with Foucault's extended discussion of the dandy.
Secondly, Butler’s silence becomes ever more audible as one begins to analyze Butler’s early discussions of gender parody and later deliberations over the contestation of norms as examples of the transgressive practices Foucault upholds in his late texts. Butler seems to argue something quite similar to Foucault’s late works, and yet she does not explicitly draw on this literature. This is curious. Take, for instance, the conclusion to Gender Trouble, where Butler argues that “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (138). She argues that gender is produced through a ritualistic repetition of acts, gestures, and desires that constitute the “illusion of an interior and organizing gender core” (136). As a result, gender can be undone by revealing its contingency, through parodic performances of gender. Such a practice can be read as a Foucauldian practice of the self, which takes on a testing relationship to the self, and attempts to free the self from itself. As in Foucault’s texts, Butler’s arguments suggest that new forms of subjectivity are desirable. While Butler does not name this gender parody a practice of freedom, her writings seem to imply that there is something liberating and resistant to gender parody: such parody can destabilize the normative and regulatory gender binary and its related organization of desire.

In contrast, in Undoing Gender, the language of freedom begins to enter Butler’s discourse, yet she still does not comment or draw on Foucault’s late work. Butler argues that the normative aspiration of her work “has to do with the ability to live and breathe and move and would no doubt belong somewhere in what is called a philosophy of freedom” (Undoing Gender 31). She elaborates to argue that the contestation of norms is good not merely because it allows for multiplicity. Instead,
this contestation is critical to making life livable for some; increasing the possibilities of gender is “not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread” (29). In short, without drawing on Foucault’s late works and without using these terms, Butler appears to argue that an ethical practice of the self which contests the norms through which we are recognized consists in a practice of freedom. Is it possible that Foucault’s conceptualization of the self in his late writings turns Butler away from them? Butler is skeptical of models of autonomous selves. Perhaps she sees in Foucault’s late work a reemergence of the autonomous self into his discourse. Perhaps she finds Foucault’s critique of essentialism inconsistent with his notion of the self.

In distinction to Butler, other queer theorists such as David Halperin have explicitly drawn upon Foucault’s late work. Halperin’s *Saint Foucault*, however, does not engage with Foucault’s understanding of “self,” although the self and the personal permeate throughout Halperin’s own writing. At the same time, Halperin’s use of selfhood and the personal pulls against his critique of essentialism. His writings therefore provide a good example of how the self is problematic in queer theory. Halperin emphasizes the self in his response to liberal theorists who denounce Foucault as apolitical. He claims that these theorists foreclose the field of sexuality from politics. In contrast, he writes that Foucault’s work opens the “possibility of a queer politics” (122). This queer politics focalizes around Foucault’s late work: it is a “modern practice of the self” (101). It is a “process of self-constitution and self-transformation” and is “anchored in the perilous and shifting sands of non-identity, positionality, discursive reversibility, and collective self-invention” (122). Anticipating critique, Halperin clarifies that this process of self-invention is not “a
luxury or pastime for lesbians and gay men; it is a necessity” (81). Halperin claims that the self is a strategic location for criticism, but not because it represents a deep truth. Instead, it is a decisive location for resistance because it is the “point of entry of the personal into history, because it is the place where the personal encounters its own history – both past and future” (81). The self is a location for and of criticism because the self is historically constituted, but not determined. It is through work on oneself that one can enter into the future, bringing about transformation. The self is central to Halperin’s queer politics.

The “personal” also appears largely in Saint Foucault. Halperin does not bracket what liberal theorists may consider “personal”; he discusses his sexuality, his identification with Foucault, and the difficulties he has faced as a queer university professor. The first chapter, “Saint Foucault,” discusses Halperin’s own response to attacks on Foucault. He writes: “Foucault and his posthumous vicissitudes have gradually come to embody for me a political truth of my own personal, professional, and scholarly vulnerability” (8). For example, he explains how upon reading James Miller’s biography of Foucault, he wished to protest against “Miller’s tendency to vaporize the political meaning of Foucault’s sexual practices by presenting them not as techniques of resistance but as symptoms of personal pathology, thereby reducing the significance of Foucault’s struggle from an exemplary to a highly idiosyncratic one” (10). However, Halperin argues that he had no position from which to contest Miller’s reading because, with Foucault, Halperin’s sexuality could also function to authorize his dismissal. Halperin concludes:

I could not figure out a way of writing about the politics of writing about a gay life without enmeshing myself in that politics to my own disadvantage,
thereby suffering in my own person precisely the political disqualifications that Miller's biography seemed calculated to inflict on Foucault. (10-11)

Halperin's discussion dramatizes a wider predicament facing lesbians and gay men of how to speak from a homosexual subject position and be taken seriously without being disqualified as a particular partisan to certain ideas: "it's not just a matter of being publicly or visibly out; it's a matter of being able to devise and to preserve a positive, undemonized connection between my gayness and my scholarly or critical authority" (8).

**Saint Foucault** may be read as a practice of the self in that Halperin identifies the limits of his own subject position and attempts to work on this position or work on himself such that he may be taken seriously. He identifies the limits of his speaking position, but nonetheless speaks in order to contest those norms which deny him recognition as a subject with epistemological authority. Halperin's text exemplifies how the boundary between the personal and the political functions to dismiss those concerns which face lesbians and gay men as particularistic thus irrelevant to the larger socio-political body. Infusing his argument with the self and the personal, he challenges this boundary and simultaneously attempts to build a speaking position for the queer academic. His work, as a practice of the self, demonstrates the political import of this practice.

While Halperin draws on the self and the personal, his text does not engage with the meaning of these terms. Halperin claims that practices of the self are anchored in non-identity in that they do not express the self but create the self; however, his writing reads as the expression of a self: he describes his personal
experiences as a gay male academic. It is unclear how a self may express itself without positing an essence: how does Halperin understand his identification as gay? Halperin’s treatment of the self is insufficient in the context of queer theory because of this field’s assessment of internality and essentialism. While the self is important to queer theory (as his text exemplifies), queer theory also participates in the critique of internality and essentialism. Yet this begs the question: how can the self be conceptualized along with a queer analysis of internal essence?

In order to flesh out the tension between the self and internality and essentialism, it is important to understand queer theory’s critique of these terms. In this vein, Diana Fuss’s introduction to *Inside/Out* is an important text. Her writing deconstructs the hetero/homo binary, which she treats as categories of identification, and she maps this duality on a similarly fluctuating opposition: inside/out. In order for heterosexuality to appear as compulsory, Fuss argues, it must present itself as an internal necessity. However, this internality makes no sense without there being an outside: homosexuality. In this sense, while heterosexuality posits itself as prior, it is dependent on the necessary exclusion of homosexuality. This means that homosexuality is not external to heterosexuality, but internal to it, in its very foundation. Even more, Fuss highlights how the historical production of homosexuality (its outing) simultaneously concealed homosexuality such that it must beouted. Thus, the play between inside and outside becomes even more knotted. Coming out is both a process of becoming eccentric and thus existing on the outside, but simultaneously entering within a hetero/homo binary. Coming out is both to join the inside and the outside, all the while reproducing another outside: the closet.
The play between inside and outside also maps onto Fuss' discussion of the relation between self and other. Fuss draws on Lacanian theory to insist that identity is relational: identity is “constituted in reference to an exterior or outside that defines the subject’s own interior boundaries and corporeal surfaces” (1-2). The subject is foundationally dependent on its “outside,” and it covers over this dependency in order to protect itself against the recognition of its lack. Fuss’s analysis demonstrates how borders both between the subject and the object, self and other, and the homo and hetero are “notoriously unstable” (3). Sexual identity, she writes, is “rarely secure” (3). In fact most of us, she concludes, are both “inside and outside at the same time” (5). This deconstruction demonstrates the relationality of subjectivity and selfhood. This has implications to conceptions of the self. It suggests that the self cannot be conceived as a bounded container for an essence which exists inside of it.

Similar reconceptualizations of the self are prevalent in many other writings of queer theory. For example, Judith Butler’s “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” published in *Undoing Gender*, traces an ecstatic understanding of the self as that which is beside itself. Butler clarifies that she is not theorizing a relational view of the self because “the term ‘relationality’ sutures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe, a rupture that is constitutive of identity itself” (19). Instead, she is interested in how we are undone by each other. Her analysis begins by examining the experience of grief, whereby the self is deeply affected by the loss of

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8 Fuss primarily uses the term “self” in its opposition to “other” and “subject” in opposition to “object.” However, at times her discussion aligns the terms such that it is clear that she is interested in the ways that both the subject and the self form boundaries between their own interiority and their outside. Because of this interest, just as Fuss argues that the boundaries between self and other and subject and object are mired by complications, so is the distinction between self and subject. The conclusions Fuss reaches for one seem to carry over to the other.
another such that it no longer knows who it is. This experience of grief "exposes the constitutive sociality of the self" (19). Similarly, in the experience of sexuality, "one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel" (19). While we may claim to possess a certain sexuality, in this very experience, we are undone, we are possessed by another or we are dispossessed. As a result, the concept of "possessing" a sexuality becomes ambiguous because in the very experience of this sexuality we are dispossessed of ourselves; we experience ourselves through and with another. We are not within ourselves but besides ourselves. This analysis plays with conceptions of the self as a space of internality and suggests that there is no essence that exists within ourselves. While Fuss's and Butler's articles present different models of the self and sexuality, both share a deep commitment to re-imagining selfhood; Fuss's analysis highlights the self's constitutive abject, and Butler examines the sociality of the self. Both of them critique models of internal essence and demonstrate the need to theorize a model of the self which does not possess an internal essence.

This critique of internal essence is entangled with forms of questioning identity, the body, community and coalitions, and recognition. I will now sketch these modes of questioning, highlighting their relationship to the critique of internal essence and demonstrating how they have arrived at an impasse. My final chapter will return to these issues to demonstrate how Foucault's conception of self provides an alternate way to conceive of internality. This then opens these discussions to include different concerns that may be productive in future research.

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9 This text stands out in Butler's work since she discusses the self through the essay, but not the subject. The difference, however, between "self" and "subject" in her writing is unclear.
The critique of internal essence brings a form of questioning the persistence of identity. How are we to understand the continuity of identity without assuming that it exists deeply within us? Many authors present their own sexuality as something that remains somewhat constant. Halperin, for example, continually identifies himself as a gay male throughout his work. How is this stability produced? Diana Fuss also maintains identity categories. She chooses to name her edited collection *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Butler too performs a continuous sexuality, enacting, she writes, lesbian sexuality since the age of sixteen (*Gender Trouble* xix). How can we account for this propensity for continuity without returning to models of internal essence?

Butler has attempted to answer this question. She argues that while identity is the product of performativity, it is not superficial. Butler explains that the performance of sexuality "is not a performance from which I can take radical distance, for this is deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play, and this 'I' does not play its lesbianism as a role" ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" 18). Butler provides an analysis which suggests that this "deep-seat" is different from the notions of internality that she rejects. The performance of sexuality may be "deep-seated" in that it is through this performance that the subject comes into being. The subject then becomes attached to the repeated performance because this performance consists in its being. This performance is never complete. A gender identity will never be fully produced, but must be repeated incessantly because all it consists of is that performance. The repetition of this performance is necessary to the persistence of the
subject. Butler's concerns exemplify a mode of questioning the persistence of identity without positing an internal essence.

This way of questioning identity also relates to a form of theorizing the body. In fact, as Ed Cohen explains, beginning with John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the body has been used to explain the continuity of identity. Identity, he writes, has evoked "the sameness of human across time" (77). The body is the ground of this continuity, as self-transformation is located in a congealed idealization: "the same organized Body" (77). In contrast, with the critique of essential internality, authors come to question how to think of the body without positing it as an essence or an unchanging ground, without suggesting that it is the location for or substance of internal depth. Butler argues that the body is materialized through performativity. It comes to being through the same actions which produce subjectivity. Many, however, are critical of Butler's account of embodiment. Ed Cohen writes that "by attempting to move gender out of the 'depths' of bodies, Butler collapses bodies onto the 'surface' of discourse reiterating the classic Cartesian mapping of mind onto/over body" (83). As a result, Cohen argues that Butler forecloses the analysis of somatic practices and experience.

But embodiment must be considered by queer theorists such that its specificity is held into account. Some queer theorists have faced difficulties by discounting the experience of embodiment in the play that sometimes follows from the rejection of identity as an internal essence. Judith Halberstam's "F2M: The Making of Female Masculinity" is a classic example. She argues that with the fragmentation of sexual identity, "the specificity of the transsexual disappears" (126). As a result, she claims
"we are all transsexuals" (126). This text is criticized for ignoring the experience of transsexuals. In response, Halberstam has complicated her argument, and in *Female Masculinity* she states that "there are transsexuals, and we are not all transsexuals; gender is not fluid, and gender variance is not the same wherever we may find it. Specificity is all" (173). One way to account for this specificity is to consider the experience of embodiment. Yet if we wish to take seriously the critique of internal essence, how can we account for and give weight to embodiment? The body can not be understood as a container or idealized ground which possesses the essence of the self within. Therefore, a model of the self as thoroughly embodied, but not possessing an internal essence is needed.

Another central form of questioning which follows from the critique of internal essence asks how political coalitions can be formed with an non-essential understanding of identity. Queer theory repeats identity politics’ critique of liberalism on identity politics itself. Just as identity politics argues that liberalism’s imagined, “common” polity is exclusionary, queer theory contends that the identity groups which are continually invoked through identity politics are similarly problematic in their assumed homogeneity. This critique, however, begs the question: what, if anything, constitutes gay and lesbian communities? How can we speak of groups? Queer theory’s critique of identity politics may be understood as a rash form of individualism, which insists on the individual over and above any group formation. In turn, this critique may be interpreted as a return to liberalism, where individuals are conceived as separate entities, to be given rights directly from the state, no matter their possible affiliation with a group. In contrast to such individualism, it is

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10 For an example, see *Namaste* 183-188.
important to recall queer theory's critique of internal depth. The problematization of
the collective is related to queer theory's problematization of the self. In fact, since
the embodied self is often used as a metaphor for a collective, \textsuperscript{11} we can ask: if the self
cannot be understood as possessing a deep essence, how can a collective be imagined
such that it too has no internal essence? The model of self in Foucault raises alternate
lines of analysis relating to this question, which may prove fruitful to the discussion
of queer collectivities.

Even more questions follow from the critique of internal essence. For
example, how can we understand recognition as a good without assuming that there
exists an internal essence that must be recognized for its welfare? Many queer
theorists retain a Hegelian understanding of recognition, which insists that
recognition is necessary to the establishment of subjectivity and well-being.\textsuperscript{12} Judith
Butler's work is a key proponent of such argumentation. While she draws on Hegel's
model of recognition, she argues that his discussion misses other important factors.
Butler is concerned with the ways that norms of recognition also function to
differentiate beings, allowing only some to be recognized as human. In addition, she
argues that the norms through which we are recognized can make recognition lead to
an unlivable rather than livable life. As a result, Butler acknowledges that there are
"advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that
which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social
norms" \textit{(Undoing Gender 3).} If I have a critical relationship to the norms through

\textsuperscript{11} See Douglas 124-9.
\textsuperscript{12} See Taylor's \textit{Multiculturalism} 25-64.
which I am recognizable, I may wish to become unintelligible so that I cannot be recognized. This is not an easy project.

While this discussion of recognition appears sensible, there is a tension between two competing claims in Butler’s discourse. One the one hand, Butler argues that the self is constituted through its recognition by another. At the same time, she claims that some individuals may find the norms through which they are recognized unbearable, and therefore they may wish to remain unintelligible. Given the first statement, it is unclear how this latter self, which refuses recognition, is formed. In addition, it seems tempting to argue that the contestation of norms should attempt to construct new forms of understanding, which would foster more inclusive practices of recognition. But what exists apart from this recognition? What is it that must be recognized if not an internal essence? Again, the discussion of self as developed by Foucault opens alternate lines of analysis related to this question.

There is a final worry following the critique of internal depth: does this critique foster the denigration of those who wish to identify as lesbian or gay? For some, the problems associated with staking and guarding a defined identity are less harmful than the practice of calling an internal essence into question. As a result, queer theory is experienced as an unwanted attack on selves who have worked hard to establish and proclaim a sexual identity. In fact, the categories “gay” and “lesbian” are undoubtedly useful fictions, especially in the context of human rights discourse, but even to call them fictions and to question their borders and production may be read as a violence to these categories and those who live by them, a violence performed by those enjoying the privilege to question these categories from a position
of expert authority. In this context, it is important to remember that the calling into question of categories of both sexuality and gender is not primarily a disengaged theoretical project, supported by a given philosophy but rather a project emanating from the recognition that identity categories exclude many who may reasonably purport and expect to be included within these categories.

Yet if a goal of queer theory has been to include differences under its common name, “queer,” this same category is sometimes taken to produce exclusions of its own. For example, Linda Garber argues that queer theory has separated a young generation of theory-savvy “queers,” from an older generation of lesbians. To the extent that these groups criticize each other, rather than drawing out mutual knowledges, Garber accurately reads this division as unfortunate. Thus, an analysis and appreciation of the emotional attachment to identity categories is necessary. But how may this be discussed without positing an internal essence, without positing an inwardness which is the space of this attachment?

The discussion of selfhood in Foucault’s work opens alternate ways of interrogating such questions. This may prove useful to future analyses of queer sexuality, which, for the moment, have not widely considered Foucault’s late work. Before adopting Foucault’s model of the self, it is important to understand the context within which Foucault develops the figure. This will be the work conducted in the following chapter.
Chapter Two – Self as a Location for and of Critique

The concept of "self" is central to Foucault’s works, most especially to his later texts such as the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* and essays such as “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” and “What is Enlightenment?”. While the concept primarily appears in these late works, “the self” is also important in Foucault’s own meditations on his earlier thought. Before discussing in the next chapter the ways in which the figure of the self appears problematic in Foucault’s work, this chapter will argue that the figure of the self is necessary to Foucault’s late conceptualization of critique, ethics, and freedom. It is important to understand the relation Foucault builds between critique, ethics, and freedom, and the emphasis he places on the self before the axis of analysis he describes in this work is used in queer theory. To this goal, I will here detail Foucault’s critical ontology of ourselves and his understanding of the care of the self as a practice of freedom. In addition, I will explain the distinctions and similarities Foucault draws between his own work and that of Kant, Baudelaire, and Sartre, in order to highlight particular aspects of his theory in relation to his conceptualization of the self. Finally, I will discuss Foucault’s work on the self in the context of his previous writings, notably *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*. This will lead to my third chapter on how the self is problematic in Foucault.

“What is Enlightenment?”
I begin my discussion of Foucault with an analysis of his essay “What is Enlightenment?”\(^\text{13}\). I have chosen this text as a point of entry because it can be read as Foucault’s elaboration of his own understanding of his work and because this essay highlights the importance of “self” in Foucault as a location of and for critique.

While “What is Enlightenment?” deals with many concerns, I read the essay as a response to criticisms Foucault faced in reaction to *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* from various philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas, who argue that Foucault is anti-Enlightenment. Habermas claims that Foucault’s total critique leaves him without any grounds for criticism; without Enlightenment ideals, Foucault can neither make any judgments nor suggest any direction for change. Foucault’s re-reading of Kant’s essay allows him to claim that one need not be for or against the Enlightenment because he defines the Enlightenment as a critical attitude rather than as a set of values. In addition, the essay points to Foucault’s re-articulation of power and freedom - also subject to criticism at the time.\(^\text{14}\) If the introduction of the self in this essay and, by extension, in his late period is problematic, the difficulty extends to suggest that Foucault was unable to answer his critics by providing a model of power which allows for freedom and by outlining a viable form of critique.

\(^\text{13}\) There are several versions of the “What is Enlightenment?” text, where Foucault reads his own thought in relation to Kant’s essay “Was ist Aufklärung?”. Foucault first publicly discussed the essay in his 1978 lecture to the Société Française de Philosophie and later repeated similar themes in a lecture at the Collège de France in 1983. The 1978 lecture has been transcribed and translated into English and is published as “What is Critique?”. Also in 1983, Foucault suggested that he should meet with Herbert Dreyfus, Paul Rabinow, Richard Rorty, and Charles Taylor for a conference on Kant’s essay. This conference never materialized. However, finally, in Berkeley later that same year, Foucault gave an unexpected lecture, in French, on “Was ist Aufklärung?”. This essay differs from the first lecture in its extended discussion of Baudelaire (Macey 461-2). It has also been transcribed and published in English. My following discussion will ground itself in this last version of the lecture.

\(^\text{14}\) See, for example, Taylor “Foucault on Freedom and Truth” 69-99; Walzer 51-67.
Perhaps to the surprise of many of his critics, Foucault draws on Kant in this essay and even aligns his own practice of critique with Kant’s. "What is Enlightenment?" reads the Enlightenment as a critical ethos and begins by analyzing Kant’s "Was ist Aufklärung?". Rather than concentrating on Kant’s understanding of Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” (Kant 1), Foucault focuses on the way that Kant’s essay relates to its present moment, understanding it as a break, as an “exit” (“What is Enlightenment?” 305). For example, Kant writes that “the way is being opened for men to proceed freely in this direction [of Enlightenment] and that the obstacles to general Enlightenment – to their release from their self-imposed immaturity – are gradually diminishing” (Kant 3). In this passage, the present is different from the past, and the present is heroized: in Kant’s essay, the present Enlightenment is unambiguously good.

Foucault’s reading of Kant introduces the notion of “self” and its importance to Enlightenment, although this aspect of Enlightenment becomes clearer in his treatment of Baudelaire. Foucault explains that Kant understands man¹⁵ himself as “responsible for his immature status” (306). Enlightenment, as a process of maturing, is an “act of courage to be accomplished personally” (306). It is a change in men’s relation with one another, and a change man “will bring about in himself” (306). Men are agents of the process. Thus, while Foucault understands Kantian Enlightenment as a political and social process, it is simultaneously personal in that it takes place through the act of individual men, and it brings about a change in the individual man.

¹⁵ I have retained the male pronoun, attentive to the gendering in the text, which cannot be bandaged or assuaged through an interventionist change in language.
The self gains greater importance in Foucault’s discussion of Baudelaire. Following his analysis of Kant, Foucault argues that in Baudelaire, modernity becomes the “will to ‘heroize’ the present” (310). Like Kant, Baudelaire reads modernity as a specific relation to the present: modernity is to relate to the present as difference and to value this difference. This difference is understood as a break from the past. The celebration of the present is ironic in that while the appraisal esteems the present, it simultaneously attempts to “imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping in it what it is” (311). This attitude of modernity fashions, Foucault writes, a “mode of relationship that must be established with oneself” (311). Modernity styles a reflexive relation, and the self is a segment of the present which is grasped, tested, and invented.

In fact, Foucault and Baudelaire give the self priority as that in the present to be understood and reinvented. This is exemplified in Baudelaire’s figure of the dandy and Foucault’s discussion of this type. The dandy takes himself as an object of “complex and difficult elaboration” (311). He does not attempt to recover an authentic self but rather aims to reinvent himself. This re-creation is an enactment of modernity which does not “liberate man in his own being” but “compels him to face the task of producing himself” (312). Foucault’s reading of Baudelaire and Kant emphasizes the Enlightenment as an attitude that permanently critiques its contemporary historical era. It questions “man’s relation to the present, man’s historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject” (312). The self figures in Foucault’s readings as that to be recreated through modernity or the attitude of Enlightenment.
It is precisely this same attitude or ethos that should permeate, Foucault then proceeds to argue, critical work. Although the last section of “What is Enlightenment?” is written as a prescription for critical thought, it may also be read as Foucault’s own understanding of his writings. In this last section, Foucault details what he understands as a “critical ontology of ourselves” (319).

The critical ontology of ourselves is the enactment of the Enlightenment attitude or the ethos of modernity Foucault has just described. It is a form of critique, performed with a specific relation to the present. This form of critique, like Baudelaire’s attitude of modernity, is two-fold (although these two aspects are inevitably interrelated): the present must be tested - first understood and secondly pushed through. The first process grasps what “we are” (319) through local, historical analyses of our limits. It analyzes what is given as “universal, necessary, obligatory” and looks for the place of the “singular, contingent” (315). Following Baudelaire who reads modernity as that which is “le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent” (Baudelaire 69), this form of criticism analyzes its present to understand that which is different and contingent. Next, the critical ontology of ourselves experiments with the possibility of going beyond these limits. It takes a “limit-attitude” towards the present, testing for places where change is possible.

The appearance of the term “ontology” seems surprising in the context of Foucault’s writings because of the word’s associations with ahistorical reasoning that posits immutability. However, the phrase “historical ontology” attempts to break these associations and takes a stance on being, subsuming being under history and claiming that being is always becoming. A historical ontology of ourselves is a study
of the ways in which we have come into being, through history. This form of ontology insists that we always exist within given historical formations, and Foucault clarifies that he does not wish to study "formal structures with universal value" (315). As being is conceived historically, being also turns out to be mutable; historical ontology comes to concern itself with becoming as opposed to being. The critical ontology of ourselves studies the ways in which we have come into being and the ways in which we may become otherwise. For this reason, Foucault continually clarifies that this form of critique is a "historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond" (316). This testing attitude is critical to Foucault’s use of the term.

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16 It is possible that by using the word "ontology," Foucault enters his work in conversation with Heidegger. Foucault did claim that this writer was "‘an overwhelming influence,’ ‘the essential philosopher’" who determined his "entire philosophical development" (qtd. in Schwartz 163). Finding continuity between the late Heidegger and Foucault, Stuart Elden argues that the phrase "historical ontology" is "almost synonymous with genealogy" (196). In contrast to the Heidegger of Being and Time, who attempts "an ontology of history" (194), the later Heidegger writes a "history of ontology" (194); he historicizes his Kantian, ahistorical analyses and follows Nietzsche, writing as a "historical ontologist" (194). This means that rather than attempting to grasp Being, which is the basis of all beings in history (including history), the question of Being becomes posed historically. David Owen also reads genealogy as synonymous with historical ontology, naming the eight chapter of Maturity and Modernity “Genealogy as Historical Ontology.” Owen, unfortunately, does not explain what the phrase "historical ontology" may mean.

17 David Owen writes that "Kant’s critical philosophy is, for Nietzsche, an exemplary instance of these presuppositions in which a distinction between a realm of being, the ‘real’ world, and a realm of becoming, the ‘apparent’ world, is legitimated by reference to a transcendental ego, that is, a non-contingent, non-empirical ‘I’ analytically separable from its contingent, empirical manifestations in thought, actions and emotions" (Maturity and Modernity 19). Similarly to Nietzsche, Foucault also rejects, as I will show, this transcendental ego. Therefore, it appears reasonable to claim, as I do, that Foucault’s historical ontology concerns itself with becoming as opposed to being.

18 Ian Hacking's Historical Ontology borrows the phrase “historical ontology” from Foucault, as Hacking is interested in the ways in which objects have come into being historically. Hacking identifies his hesitance to speak of ontology because of the difficulty of explaining "what a study of being in general would be" (1), but claims that since he is interested in the ways that types of objects “come into being,” it is “convenient” to speak of ontology (1). Hacking is concerned by the relation between what is and our conceptions of what exists or the relation between practices of naming and the things that we name. His study of historical ontology considers the ways in which things come into being through these historically and spatially specific practices of naming. But unlike Foucault, Hacking lacks "political ambition and the engagement in struggle" (5). As a result, while his historical ontology studies the ways in which objects are produced and therefore forms of becoming, he is less concerned with transgression. Therefore, in contrast to the past which is a location for becoming, the present becomes a space for being, and Hacking’s “historical ontology” posits a form of being as oppose to becoming. In comparison, Foucault’s use of “historical ontology” insists on past
“ontology.” The critical ontology of ourselves must consist of a “historical analysis of
the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond
them” (319). In this sense, it is not being that is at issue in Foucault’s historical
ontology of ourselves so much as becoming; being is always contingent and
changeable, hence always becoming. While becoming is the interest of Foucault’s
genealogies, the question of being remains, but is displaced. “Being” is a product of
epistemes rather than an underlying condition of all beings. To study being is to
investigate the ways in which we have understood being (through archaeological
study), within various power dynamics (through genealogical investigation). Thus,
being is a historical product and an epistemological category - that is, a concept
defined by various epistemes. Foucault’s ontological investigation will not consider
an ahistorical being upon which beings are dependent. Instead, it will be interested in
the ways we have become, through history, and the ways we have understood
ourselves as being.

In this description of the critical ontology of ourselves, self figures as a
location both for and of critique. Foucault describes the critical ontology of ourselves
as “work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings” (316). The term
“ourselves” is that which is acting and that which is being acted upon; it is both
subject and object of critique. Thus, this form of criticism is not transcendental; we
or “ourselves” are not outside that which is critiqued but instead thoroughly
immanent, such that the knowing “we” is itself subject to criticism.

transformation and present transgression. In this way, the historical ontology concern themselves with
becoming as no being is stabilized.
Foucault details this form of immanent criticism in his discussion of archaeology and genealogy. He explains that the critical ontology of ourselves is “genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method” (“What is Enlightenment?” 315). Since Foucault’s own writings combine the methods of genealogy and archaeology, the form of criticism he describes in “What is Enlightenment?” may be read as Foucault’s reflexive understanding of his own work.

The critical ontology of ourselves is archaeological: rather than attempting to find universal structures of truth, it searches for instances in discourse which articulate particular knowledges. It is also genealogical: it studies the past not as a seamless unity of development, but as a series of struggles and resulting silences. Through historical genealogy, essence is dissipated. The genealogist does not find a “timeless and essential secret” behind things, but rather quite the opposite: “the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 78). With this secret, a genealogist uncovers the contingency of what we are, and therefore the possibility of “no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think” (“What is Enlightenment?” 315-16). While the critical ontology of ourselves is a form of immanent criticism, the difference exposed through genealogy produces a distance between the knowing subject and itself, as its own way of being is made strange through the work of knowing. In addition, genealogy is studied along three axes of analysis: relations of “control over things, relations of action upon others, relations with oneself” (318).

Foucault names the study and practice of the relation with oneself “ethics.” This analysis distinguishes ethics from morality. Morality consists of rules of actions
or a code which forbids certain conduct. In contrast, ethics consists of the relationship agents have with themselves in order to constitute themselves as moral. Foucault classifies four aspects of ethics or relations to the self: (1) ethical substance, (2) mode of subjection, (3) activity, and (4) telos. The ethical substance is that part of our selves which is relevant to ethics or morality. The mode of subjection is the ways we are incited to perform, consider, or reject a moral code. The activity is the action we perform to become ethical subjects. Finally the telos is the end towards which we direct our ethical activity or our relationship to ourselves. Unlike morality, which is most often concerned with the conduct of an actor in relation to others or the responsibility of a subject to an other, ethics highlights the reflexive relations actors have with themselves. As a result, using Foucault’s terminology, the phrase “ethical relationship” does not denote a relationship which is somehow “good,” but rather merely a relationship between an actor and him or herself.

Foucault develops this study of ethics in his analysis of Ancient Greece. He claims that he is especially interested in the Ancient Greeks because of the intensity of the ethical relations in that period.\textsuperscript{19} His reading of Ancient Greek writings has been criticized by many authors as incorrect especially in his tendency to gloss over differences over wide periods of time.\textsuperscript{20} These are valid criticisms that must be taken seriously; however, in the context of this discussion, they are besides the point. Foucault’s analyses of Ancient Greece are of interest here because of their focus on ethics or reflexive relations. Foucault claims that some forms of Christian morality,
which insist on the refusal of the self, have hindered the analysis of the variety of ethical relationships. For example, Christianity problematizes sexuality as a series of interdictions. In contrast, in texts of the first centuries, authors focused on an “attention that should be brought to bear on oneself” (The History of Sexuality, Volume III 41). This mode of questioning sexuality was related, according to Foucault, to a whole culture characterized by the “cultivation of the self” where “relations of oneself to oneself were intensified and valorized” (The History of Sexuality, Volume III 43).

Foucault’s description of Ancient Greece posits the possibility that selves can act on themselves. In “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault explains this possibility by describing “practical systems”; that is, “forms of rationality,” which organize ways of acting, but which allow for the freedom to act within these systems “reacting to what others do, modifying the rules of the game, up to a certain point” (“What is Enlightenment?” 317). The description of practical systems, which clearly allows for change, contrasts with Foucault’s previous understandings of power as outlined in texts such as Discipline and Punish where power structures appear definite and stable. Allowing for a self-governing subject, “What is Enlightenment?” depends on a nuanced understanding of power as developed in Foucault’s “The Subject and Power” and assumed in the second two volumes of The History of Sexuality: power exists only to the extent that there is freedom. Power acts indirectly on actors. It governs their conduct. It produces a range of possibilities that may be enacted or even contested. Foucault contrasts power relations with relations of domination, where a field for possible action is closed, leaving the actor no choice. In contrast, practical
systems or relations of governmentality are made up of a technological aspect which conducts actions and a strategic aspect which allows for the variation of the system itself. Freedom becomes possible in the chance for reversal or in the instability of practical systems. In turn, this freedom is actualized or practiced through ethical relations – relationships with the self. Thus, while the self figures as an axis of analysis in the critical ontology of ourselves, Foucault also points out that taking a limit attitude towards the self is a practice of freedom.

Foucault details this argument in “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom” and “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” where he reads ethical practices of self-governance as practices of freedom. Without suggesting that his contemporaries should practice the same care of the self as was practiced in different ways in Ancient Greece, Foucault is inspired by these understandings and practices of ethics. Through reflexive relationships, Foucault argues, we can take on a testing relationship to our selves, understanding the historical production of subjectivities, finding how subjectivity could be otherwise, and creating ourselves differently. This creative practice is a practice of freedom. Thus, in “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom” Foucault asks “what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [réfléchie] practice of freedom?” (284). He argues that “freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection” (284). A testing relationship to the self, that is, a relation informed by reflection, is a practice of freedom. This practice

Many authors, such as Thomas Osbourne, Andrew Barry, Colin Gordon, Peter Miller, Graham Burchell, and Nikolas Rose, have drawn on the body of Foucault’s works to discuss governmentality. Governmentality refers to the ways in which we are governed in relations of power, knowledge, and ethics. In this context, Foucault is often used to criticize neo-liberalism.
exists in an agonistic relationship to power: “a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation” (“The Subject and Power” 342). We take on or are created as a form of subjectivity, which enables us simultaneously to contest this very subjectivity through our relationship with ourselves. Freedom is then defined as a practice of contestation, which is creative.

However, as Wendy Brown discusses, progressive politics has become skeptical of any talk of freedom. Brown explains that freedom has been eschewed both on the basis of poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial reformulations of the subject and on the grounds that the pursuit of freedom “has shown itself to be easily appropriated in liberal regimes for the most cynical and unemancipatory political ends” (States of Injury 5). However, Brown argues that endowing the Right with a monopoly over the deployment of “freedom,” is dangerous. She claims that the consequences of retreating from a politics of freedom “are traumatic for democratic thinking and projects” (26). In fact, Brown suggests that this retreat bears characteristics of Nietzsche’s account of ressentiment. With Brown’s analysis, Foucault’s late discussion of freedom, which builds on his work on resistance, need not be quickly rejected as a de-radicalized return to liberalism, but must be analyzed more carefully.

Brown’s discussion of freedom also assists to clarify Foucault’s. First, Brown explains the problem with conceiving freedom as an ideal rather than a practice. Her discussion helps to understand how and why Foucault speaks of practices of freedom rather than freedom itself. Brown insists that “freedom is neither a philosophical
absolute nor a tangible entity but a relational and contextual practice that takes shape in opposition to whatever is locally and ideologically conceived as unfreedom” (States of Injury 6). Freedom is therefore “local, historical, and contextual” (6). To speak of freedom only makes sense alongside a discussion of unfreedom; it requires analyses of fields of power, where power is understood not only as something bad or destructive but as productive as well. Freedom exists within these power relations. Foucault’s discussion of practices of freedom signals his insistence that freedom is put into play within given power relations, such that freedom is not an ideal but rather a contextual practice. Freedom, he argues, is intransitive (“The Subject and Power” 343); it does not pass beyond its contextual relation with power.

Second, Brown also discusses the relationship between practices of freedom and refusing oneself, which is central to Foucault’s analysis. She argues that ideals of freedom often entail the dream of an emancipated world without domination. She describes “blacks who imagine a world without whites, feminists who conjure a world either without men or without sex, or teenagers who fantasize a world without parents” (7). These images miss the ways in which the various social categories, “blacks,” “women,” and “teenagers” are formed within relations of power, such that emancipation necessitates a working through and a working on these very categories. Political groups who, for example, long for a world without men but maintain the category of women graft oppression into their ideal community in that the category “woman” is produced within relations of power. This analysis demonstrates the import of Foucault’s practice of freedom, which focuses on one’s self. It helps to explain how Foucault may argue for practices of self as practices of freedom without
assuming that there is an aspect of the self which must be liberated. Practices of freedom do not bring the liberation of something forced into silence. Instead, these practices contest forms of domination.

Finally, Brown explains the problems with the institutionalization of freedom and its protection through legal provisions. This also helps us to appreciate Foucault’s work. Brown writes that “when institutionalized, freedom premised upon an already vanquished enemy keeps alive, in the manner of a melancholic logic, a threat that works as domination in the form of an absorbing ghostly battle with the past” (8). For example, legislation that seeks to protect women, insuring their “freedom” through legal institutions, maintains the social category “women” as those who need protection. With this understanding, we can value Foucault’s practices of freedom in that they do not turn to institutions for their security. He writes that we should not demand that politics “restore the ‘rights’ of the individual… the individual is the product of power. What is needed is to ‘de-individualize’ by means of multiplication and displacement” (“Preface to Anti-Oedipus” 109). The practices of the self which Foucault describes such as homosexuality, which I will discuss in the next chapter, are instances of de-individualization. They occur within a complex political imaginary, which does not limit itself to an analysis of the state. Likewise, freedom, Brown states, “depends upon a formulation of the political that is richer, more complicated, and also perhaps more fragile than that circumscribed by institutions, procedures, and political representation” (9).

The critical ethos Foucault describes in “What is Enlightenment?”, which works to produce critical ontologies of ourselves, is a practice of freedom that
consists in taking a reflexive, testing relationship to the self. The essay suggests that Foucault’s work, that is, his critical ontologies of ourselves, are ethical, reflective practices of the care of the self, which in turn are practices of freedom. This self here is critical; it is that which acts on itself in practices of freedom and critical thought.

*Aesthetics and the Care of the Self*

Foucault also describes the testing relationship to the self that he hails as an aesthetic practice. From this, Lois McNay concludes that Foucault holds a Romantic, expressivist understanding of the self. This self, writes McNay, takes itself as a work of art in order to “escape the homogenizing tendencies of modern culture” (160). It draws into itself to escape modern culture, without understanding that the individualism it enacts is part of this culture. Indeed, the Romantic philosopher Schiller, for example, argued that eighteenth century Europe was barbarous in its materialism and egotism and that it lacked the practice of freedom. Faced with this decay, Schiller saw in art the promise of the good and the practice of freedom (Cooper 124). While this appears similar to Foucault’s understanding of aesthetics and freedom, McNay’s reading overlooks a key element Foucault repeats incessantly: self-creation is not the expression of a true self. Foucault’s understanding of self is different to depth models of internal essence common to Romanticism’s understanding of the self. I will elaborate on this point further, but wish to first analyze the ways in which Foucault understands the practice of the self as aesthetic to provide an alternate reading to McNay’s.

By drawing on aesthetics, Foucault differentiates the model of self-creation he upholds from the form of self-surveillance fostered by disciplinary power. Through
disciplinary power, according to Foucault, subjects come to regulate their own conduct, according to social norms that are established through, amongst other arenas, the social sciences. This self-regulation takes place through a nexus of power/knowledge relations. In contrast, Foucault suggests that we take an aesthetic relationship towards our selves. In as much as the aesthetic is independent from other realms of meaning, notably those of the (social) sciences, Foucault’s interest in aesthetics suggests that an aesthetic practice of self-creation may occur apart from relations of power/knowledge which are maintained and produced in the (social) sciences and their related institutions of power such as the hospital, asylum, and prison. Aesthetic self-creation may then be understood as a revolt against disciplinary power and its forms of individualization.\(^2\)

This understanding of aesthetics helps to explain Foucault’s interest in Baudelaire’s dandy. Richard Wolin is especially skeptical of Foucault’s appeal to the dandy, reading the care of the self as a flippant and elitist dandyism. However, dandyism is not simply flippant. Andrew Bowie explains that, since Kant, a key idea in the development of aesthetic theory is that “what makes an object beautiful has nothing to do with its usefulness or its exchange value” (4). This analysis makes sense in relation to Baudelaire’s figure of the dandy. The dandy does not adhere to the disciplinary value of usefulness. Baudelaire writes that the dandy “n’a pas d’autre profession que l’élégance” (Baudelaire 91). The dandy also denigrates both love that

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\(^2\) Deborah Cook goes so far as to argue that the subjectivity which Foucault heralds is “in some measure, free to create itself outside of the power/knowledge apparatus” (6). Rather than generalizing that the care of the self is outside of a power/knowledge apparatus (this would, of course, conflict with Foucault’s insistence that we can never step outside relations of power/knowledge), I would clarify that the care of the self occurs in an alternate field of power relations than those found in disciplines such as psychology and criminology.
is enacted merely for its use value and art that is suppose to have a value other than itself. In this way, the dandy’s aesthetic self-creation provides Foucault with an example of self-formation, which does not have as its aim the creation of docile and productive bodies.

The figure of the dandy also highlights how Foucault is interested in aesthetic creation rather than aesthetic reception. He suggests that we relate to ourselves in a similar way to how artists relate to their creations. He asks, for example, that we “create ourselves as a work of art” (“On the Genealogy of Ethics” 262). In this vein, Timothy O’Leary argues that Foucault’s use of aesthetics suggests that, just as the artist faces “his or her material,” the self should be taken as a task to be worked on (14).

At the same time, Foucault’s discussion of aesthetics also relates to beauty. In fact, Foucault’s emphasis on aesthetic creation implies the production of a certain form: that which is continually re-created. This may be understood as an account of beauty, especially when the form is set beside Baudelaire’s definition of modern beauty. Baudelaire argues that beauty consists of two parts: the immutable, eternal, and the changeable, and the fleeting and historically contingent – that is, the modern. The dandy admires the latter instance of beauty, appreciating that which is transient, and the dandy’s own identity comes to reflect this fleetingness. For Baudelaire, the beautiful is “toujours le produit d’un art” (100). As a result, natural man, as he is, is horrible; he must be created. This creation produces beauty; it does not express the self or mimetically represent beauty. Like the splendor Baudelaire’s dandy embodies,
the beauty according to which the Foucauldian self creates itself is that which is transient.

Foucault’s understanding of the aesthetics of the self also draws on Nietzsche. Nietzsche analyzes how the death of God is “the murder of man himself” (qtd. in Macey 89) such that man becomes something to be created. The question “what is man?” ends with the answer: “des Ubermensch” (qtd. in Macey 89). Foucault points specifically to Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* as inspiration for his own writing. In this text, Nietzsche argues that “one thing is needful – To ‘give style’ to one’s character – a great and rare art!” (*The Gay Science* 232). This claim appears in the fourth book of this text, which begins with a resolution: “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful” (223). As becomes clear in the development of the book, “what is necessary in things” is that they are created and that they can change. The passages that follow the resolution therefore describe that which is beautiful as that which is created. This is especially true in the case of human beings. Nietzsche writes that a higher, more virile age is approaching through the practices of human beings who are “bent on seeking in all things what in them must be overcome” (228). Nietzsche celebrates strong individuals, who “through long practice and daily work” (232) survey their selves, working on their nature to fit their strengths and weaknesses “into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye” (232). Treating that which is created as beautiful, Nietzsche’s beauty is similar to Baudelaire’s understanding of the production of beauty and to Foucault’s chosen aesthetic good, which promotes continual creative production.
Thus, Foucault uses aesthetics to highlight the type of relationship the self should foster with itself. Since this relation is a constant working, the product which is inevitably formed will continuously be worked on, and hence will continually change. As a result, through this aesthetic practice, a specific aesthetic good is produced, which defines a particular beauty: that which is not permanent. Foucault claims that he does not define in which way we should create ourselves, arguing that such prescription is not the role of a philosopher. However, throughout his writings, as “What is Enlightenment?” exemplifies, Foucault privileges a certain relationship to the self, which consists in a constant, creative, testing relationship to itself, that continually highlights the contingencies of selfhood. The resulting self is one that remains transient, and its aesthetic self-creation is a practice of freedom.

Inauthenticity, Identity, and the Self

While Foucault draws inspiration from Nietzsche’s self-overcoming, he also describes the type of self-creation he hails by distinguishing his position from Sartre’s. I will dwell on the disparity between Sartre and Foucault in order to emphasize the importance of Foucault’s rejection of authenticity, and to move into the eventual discussion of how the concept of the self is problematic in Foucault. This discussion also responds to Lois McNay, as it demonstrates how Foucault’s understanding of self-creation is neither expressivist nor Romantic.

Both Foucault and Sartre are influenced by Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God and insist that this affects conceptions of the human. Sartre concludes from the death of God that man is free and thus responsible, but unlike Foucault, he retains a concept of an authentic self. In *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*, Sartre
explains the consequences of the idea that “l’existence précède l’essence” (Sartre 26). He claims that “l’homme existe d’abord, se rencontre, surgit dans le monde, et qu’il se définit après” (29). There is no human nature, Sartre deduces, because there is no God to conceive of it. This means that “l’homme n’est rien d’autre que ce qu’il se fait” (30). Man projects himself towards a future; he is a project and is fully responsible for whom he becomes. Sartre also uses an aesthetic metaphor for this creation: like in art, he explains, we are creators and inventors. This necessity of choice is what makes man, according to Sartre, more dignified than, say, a rock. Nonetheless, man experiences this liberty as a condemnation, because he did not create himself, but once he is projected into the world, he is responsible for all that he does and all that he becomes.  

Sartre uses this argument to claim that existentialism is a form of humanism. In contrast to a type of humanism that takes man as the end or as the utmost value, such as in the philosophy of Auguste Comte, existential humanism insists that man is always outside of himself or going beyond himself. It is in projecting himself outside of himself that he exists; that is, it is in the pursuit of transcendence that he creates himself.

Sartre’s insistence on self-creation appears similar to Foucault’s arguments; however, an important distinction is made in the authors’ understanding of authenticity and in their divergent theories of transgression and transcendence. While

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23 Sartre uses the word “homme” and my discussions of his text in English use “man,” in the insistence that his philosophy cannot be made more inclusive by changing the language, but that his philosophy is gendered. See Lloyd’s chapter on Sartre.

24 One may ask to whom man is responsible, if there is no God. Sartre argues that “en se choisissant il [l’homme] choisit tous les hommes” (31). In choosing himself, man affirms certain values and defines a good that is universal: “rien ne peut être bon pour nous sans l’être pour tous” (32). As a result, man is responsible to mankind.
Sartre insists that existence precedes essence, he maintains a form of authenticity and a notion of “mauvaise foi”; individuals who attempt to deny their freedom have bad faith. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that man is dual; he is made up of free consciousness or transcendence, which results from his nothingness, and facticity, which is linked to the body. Man is free and transcends himself through his own choice. He is inauthentic when he does not recognize his dual nature. Sartre begins with a concept of man, and then builds a theory from there. His notion of selfhood as that which acts freely and that which can and must transcend itself is grounded in the cogito. In fact, Sartre exclaims that the only true point of departure is the cogito (Sartre 57). He accords an invaluable importance to subjectivity, over and above objectivity, as that which is capable of transcendence. Therefore, while Sartre insists on self-transcendence, he maintains a conception of an authentic subject, from which his philosophy follows. In fact authenticity, for him, is the recognition of man’s essential condition.

Unlike Sartre, Foucault insists in “What is Enlightenment?” that his is not humanist theory. Foucault attempts to study the construction of subjectivity. While he agrees with Sartre that subjectivity has no essence, his method of arriving at this conclusion (genealogical) is entirely different from Sartre’s dependence on the cogito. In fact, Foucault’s genealogies problematize Sartre’s insistence on subjectivity in opposition to objectivity. Foucault, in contrast to Sartre, does not believe that there is something authentic that is expressed in self-creation.

Foucault’s critique of subjectivity and authenticity is especially clear in *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. In *Discipline and

\[25\] See Anderson 14-26.
Punish, Foucault argues that “discipline ‘makes’ individuals” (170). This understanding of subjectivity is unlike Sartre’s. Foucault analyzes the history of punishment to claim that in the eighteenth century, disciplinary power (power that works directly on the bodies of its subjects so that they become both productive and docile) begins to outweigh other forms of power. Foucault uses the model of the panopticon, Bentham’s ideal prison, as a metaphor for the disciplinary society, where prisoners, who feel constantly surveyed, internalize the gaze of the guard and become self-surveilling. This self-surveillance consists of a “soul.” Foucault writes:

The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A ‘soul’ inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body. (30)

Through the disciplinary punishment of the body, the soul is born. The analysis throughout this book insists on the importance of the body. Disciplinary power works directly on bodies, by organizing space, time, and actions. For example, Foucault analyzes how this form of power developed, he claims, through the military training of the army. In contrast to Sartre who understands man as subject, who is capable of transcendence, Foucault insists on the forces acting upon bodies, which create subjectivity.

Discipline and Punish is also important since it participates in Foucault’s critique of sovereignty. Throughout the book, Foucault contrasts judicial sovereign power (power where sovereigns stand outside of the field over which they exercise control) to disciplinary power (power which is not possessed by one individual over an other, but that is capillary and diffuse). Foucault also relates power to forms of
knowledge and claims that the knowing subject does not stand outside of the field that is analyzed. Foucault insists that "it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge" (28). Foucault decentres the sovereign subject of power relations, government, and knowledge. This critique of sovereignty expands to a problematization of the sovereign subject itself. In this way, Foucault's subject of disciplinary power diverges from the autonomous subject in Sartre, who is sovereign over himself.

Similar themes are expanded upon in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* where again the subject and identification are constituted through power relations. This text grounds Foucault's subsequent claims for creativity as opposed to liberation. The study begins by doubting the repressive hypothesis, that is, the idea that sexuality is repressed, confined or silenced. Instead, Foucault argues that sexuality is spoken about incessantly. In fact, it is often put into discourse as repressed: "what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret" (35). Foucault explains that we remain keen to put sexuality in discourse while speaking of it as repressed because of an eagerness to "speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasure" (7). Foucault's analysis challenges the notion that to speak about sexuality is liberating. Instead, the proliferation of discourse on sexuality and the "incitement to speak about it" (18) participates in the production of
forms of individuality that tie the self to itself or that classify and normalize subjectivity, in relations of power-knowledge. In fact, the discourse surrounding sexuality is the discourse par excellence which produces forms of individuality:

Causality in the subject, the unconscious of the subject, the truth of the subject in the other who knows, the knowledge he holds unbeknown to him, all this found an opportunity to deploy itself in the discourse of sex. Not, however, by reason of some natural property inherent in sex itself, but by virtue of the tactics of power immanent in this discourse. (70)

Foucault concludes that we must “not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power” (157). Rather “the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (157). Thus, rather than understanding subjectivity as that aspect of man which allows for (and requires) his self-transcendence, in this text, Foucault reads subjectification as inseparable from power-knowledge relations. In addition, his understanding of the body is not denigrated as in Sartre’s, but rather upheld. 26

*The History of Sexuality, Volume I* also develops the critique in *Discipline and Punish* of sovereignty. Foucault’s description of power in the former text posits a decentered form of subjectivity, which again clearly differentiates his position from Sartre’s. Foucault claims that in “political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king” (89). As a result, power is always understood in the model of “right and violence, law and illegality, freedom and will, and especially the state and sovereignty” (89). In contrast, Foucault argues that power is not “ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus” (89). For example, through the gaze of various sciences, Foucault argues
that pleasure and power incite each other in “perpetual spirals” (45). By this, Foucault means that over-seeing or controlling pleasure comes itself to be pleasurable, and, simultaneously, that the attempt to escape this power comes to be pleasurable. In this way, power does not act as a set of laws, but it extends “the various forms of sexuality, pursuing them according to lines of indefinite penetration” (47). In addition, power, Foucault claims, is “nonsubjective” (94): it does not necessarily result from the “choice or decision of an individual subject” (95). Even more, Foucault insists that there is no “binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations” (94). This does not imply that resistance is impossible, but rather that resistance is “never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). Multiple “points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network” (95). These resistances are local, and it is through their “strategic codification” (96) that revolution becomes possible. As an example, Foucault explains how, in the nineteenth century, discourse on sexuality produced the category of the homosexual. While this was an effect of power-knowledge relations, at the same time, this category made “possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturality’ be acknowledged” (101). Here, resistance is implicated in power-knowledge relations such that the revolting subject is not transcendent to the field in which s/he exists. Instead, resistance is immanent, and it is this immanence, in fact, that enables resistance. As the head of the king is cut off, so is the subject’s. The resulting concept of subjectivity is one that is constituted in power relations. This is

26 See Genevieve Lloyd’s Man of Reason.
vastly different from Sartre’s subject who is self-defining and capable of
transcendence.

This concept of subjectivity also helps to understand the importance Foucault
places on self-creation in his later works such as “What is Enlightenment?” and “The
Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom”. He has established that we
have been created through power-knowledge relations; therefore, the contestation of
these relations will necessarily implicate the refusal of ourselves. This refusal is not
the expression of an authenticity that has been repressed, nor does it take the form of
a transcendence of ourselves. Instead, the refusal occurs, at least in “What is
Enlightenment?”, through adopting a critical ethos towards ourselves, understanding
the processes through which we have been created and the contingencies of our own
existence. *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* help to
explain the importance of ethical practices of the self in later Foucault, and they aid to
distinguish Foucault’s self-transgression from Sartre’s self-transcendence. While
Foucault insists that the ethical practices of the self are practices of freedom, he
simultaneously dislodges analyses of the self as possessing an internal essence. The
critical ontology of ourselves studies the ways in which selves have been produced,
through various relations of power-knowledge. Genealogy demonstrates the
inessentiality behind things, including the self. The apparent depth or internality it
possesses is a product of power.

While Foucault’s valorization of self-creation is similar to existential
philosophy, this self-creation differs from existentialism in its point of departure
(genealogy rather than the cogito) and its insistence on immanent transgression in
contrast to transcendence. “Self” figures largely in Foucault’s late work. It is important in his reconceptualization of power, freedom, and critique. This self does not have an authentic, internal essence, which must be liberated through practices of freedom. Instead, practices of freedom are defined by reflexive relations to the self, which take a testing relationship to this self.

However, my discussion of *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* also announces the problems associated with the concept of “self” in later Foucault. It does seem to follow from these texts that individuals who wish to contest power should or must take a critical attitude towards themselves and fashion themselves creatively. However, following *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*, the agency of the acting self and the very being of this self is unclear. While Foucault’s model of subjectivity in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* differs starkly from Sartre’s, Foucault’s concept of the self, which creates itself as a practice of freedom, seems similar to Sartre’s understanding of man, whose only essence is his possibility to transcend himself. Sartre maintains a model of authenticity, claiming that those who deny their freedom and responsibility are inauthentic. While Foucault wishes to claim that he maintains neither a model of authenticity nor an a priori model of subjectivity, his preferred attitude towards the self, the critical ethos he describes, is akin to Sartre’s authenticity. Although Foucault does not speak of a necessity for self-creation, like Sartre, he insists on the possibility of forming one’s self. With this analysis, we may speculate that Foucault’s late work is, contrary to his own reading, humanist: it is unclear whether the critical attitude Foucault describes, with the importance placed
upon the self in this ethos, reintroduces a model of humanism akin to Sartre's. Both can be read as forms of humanism which are centered around a concept of a self-transcending or self-transgressing individual. The problems associated with Foucault's use of "the self" will be elaborated in the next chapter.
Chapter Three – Self as Reflexive Activity

Problematic Selves

Does Foucault’s use of “self” reintroduce a model of selfhood that he simultaneously wishes to transgress? Charles Taylor argues that self is constituted by a sense of inwardness. If Foucault’s discussion of “self” is consistent with his critique of internal essence, the space of inwardness posited by the term “self” must be understood differently such that it is not the location of an internal essence. In this context, selfhood in Foucault’s works must be closely examined. While Foucault insists that we take a limit attitude towards our selves and problematize selfhood, one may suspect that this project reinstates internal depth through its practice. Where is a critical ontology of ourselves conducted if not in a self, with a deep essence? What is enacting the critical ethos? I will argue that without a careful analysis of the use of “self” in Foucault, it is unclear whether Foucault’s critique of authenticity and essentialism does enough to separate his conception of self-creation from other articulations of self-creation, such as Sartre’s, because it harbors an understanding of selfhood. Since the term “self” is so prominent in Foucault’s discussion on ethics, freedom, and critique, as discussed in the second chapter, the criticism of self extends generally to problematize this work; it suggests that Foucault is unable to provide an alternative to the docile bodies of disciplinary power, and that Foucault reverts to a model of autonomy that is inconsistent with his critique of humanism. These queries must be responded to before Foucault’s late work may be productively used in queer theory. The concerns are especially serious to queer theorists because of the field’s
suspicion of essentialism and internality. If Foucault’s analysis of ethics implies the return to a model of deep selfhood, then queer theorists may not wish to draw on his late work.

Foucault’s celebration of ethical relations is buttressed upon his rejection of essentialism. In fact, without this refutation, one may read Foucault’s critical ethos as a way in which we are governed in advanced liberalism. This importance of the rejection of essentialism is highlighted in Nikolas Rose’s *Powers of Freedom*, a genealogy of freedom. I will explain this argument, so as to clarify the stakes involved in Foucault’s conception of the self. Rose’s text attempts to understand how specific ideals of freedom have come into existence. He wishes “to clarify the lines of power, truth and ethics that are in play” within these ideals (10). He also aims to explain how certain understandings of freedom have grounded governmental action. His argument demonstrates that we are “governed through our freedom” (62). This is not to say that freedom is fake, but rather to understand how freedom is produced. Rose’s genealogy traces the formation of freedom from the growth of modern capitalism to the establishment of the welfare state and finally to what he calls advanced liberalism. In all these periods, freedom consists of a way in which we are governed.

In Rose’s analysis of advanced liberalism, the stakes of Foucault’s refusal of authenticity become clear. Under advanced liberalism, argues Rose, freedom comes to be understood as individuals’ own capacity to shape or create themselves, through consumption and psychological technologies. Here, one realizes oneself and produces one’s identity through choice. This practice consists of freedom, and it is different
from Foucault’s understanding of freedom in its insistence on essentialism. For example, the Californian cult of the self is a manifestation of the type of governmentality Rose discusses, and when Foucault is asked whether his project of taking oneself as a work of art draws on his Californian contemporaries, Foucault insists that his refusal of the notion of being true to oneself is enough to distinguish his idea. Rose agrees. He concludes his discussion of freedom by hailing Foucault’s critical ethos. According to Rose, Foucault’s critical ethos would ask “if there were ways of practicing freedom that did not fix us through a hermeneutics of identity ... but were open, inventive and questioning. ... It would help us to calculate the costs of being what we have become; hence it might allow us to invent ways of becoming other than what we are” (97). Rose insists that this work on ourselves would understand the construction of freedom and would mock the “shallowness of what we take to be freedom” (97). Therefore, Rose differentiates his analysis of freedom under late liberalism from Foucault’s description of freedom by drawing on Foucault’s critique of essential depth. However, both practices of freedom are similar in as much as both take the self as a project to be worked on.

In fact, it is hard to distinguish how the self that cares for itself is different from the self-surveying subject Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*. The practices of these two selves differ, but since the self in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* is formed through practices that reproduce power relations, and since this self appears similar to the self which practices freedom in the later texts, the practices of freedom, which are practices of this self, may simultaneously reproduce existing power relations. In *The*
"History of Sexuality, Volume One," the concept of the self is introduced as that which regulates itself through specific practices, such as the confession of the self. Foucault writes that with the rise of the bourgeoisie, a "political ordering of life" was formed through "an affirmation of self" (The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 123). This affirmation turned to the body to ensure its "cultivation" as strong and healthy, or in a word, productive (125). In this passage, it seems as though the affirmation of the self enacts or reproduces disciplinary power, and this affirmation appears as a form of concern or care of the self. Disciplinary power is not meant to be understood as simply negative; however, since Foucault ends The History of Sexuality by imagining a "rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality" and methods to "counter the grips of power" (157), power relations take on a negative characterization. In this context then, the practices of caring for oneself are not instances of freedom. As a result, one may wish to ask how the care of the self, which is described in the later works and which appears similar to self-discipline, may consist of a practice of freedom.

Likewise, in the history of punishment, the disciplinary subject appears similar to the self-creating self. Foucault argues that the soul is that which surveys itself and the body: the soul is the "effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (Discipline and Punish 30). The soul serves to reinforce disciplinary power. Problematically, the self which cares for itself in Foucault's later works is similar to this disciplinary soul. In Discipline and Punish, lines of vision are lines of power. The body of the condemned is seen, and the gaze of
Similarly, Foucault reads the ancient care of the self as "une certaine forme d'attention, de regard" (L’herméneutique du sujet 12). Both the relationship between the soul and itself and the self and itself are constituted by an attention or a look. Even more, both the disciplinary soul and the ancient self produce themselves according to external models. The disciplinary soul surveys itself according to the norms established through the social sciences. The self also constructs itself through practices that are not "invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" ("Ethics of the Concern for Self" 291). The similarities between the disciplinary soul (whose self-creation seems unrelated to freedom) and the self (whose self-creation is a practice of freedom) leave the reader unsure of how to distinguish between the self and the soul yet convinced that a distinction must be drawn.

A second problem with Foucault's understanding of self is that it appears universal. While Foucault begins his analysis of the self in his study of Ancient Greece, he then jumps to his contemporary France and the United States. Most often, he is careful to accentuate historical specificity. For example, in "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," when Foucault is asked "should the concept of the care of the self in the classical sense by updated to confront .. modern thought?", he responds:

Nothing is more foreign to me than the idea that, at a certain moment, philosophy went astray and forgot something, that somewhere in its history there is a principle, a foundation that must be rediscovered. (294-295)

See Jay and Shapiro for an interesting discussion of power and its relation to vision in Foucault.
In addition, when asked whether the care of the self could be used in contemporary politics, he replies that he would like to “come back to more contemporary questions,” but for the moment he does not want to “reply to questions” he has not studied (294). Foucault does not wish to revitalize a Hellenistic experience of the self. Indeed, as Phil Bevis, Michèle Cohen, and Gavin Kendall argue in “Archaeologizing Genealogy: Michel Foucault and the Economy of Austerity,” the goal of archaeology is not to universalize a past experience. Instead, archaeology functions within larger genealogies and is relevant to the present in that it open up “new possibilities for the present insofar as that present is rendered strange” (Bevis et al. 176).

While Foucault does not universalize an ancient understanding of the self, he nonetheless seems interested in a specific experience of selfhood, which may be understood as especially Western and contemporary. In this way, Foucault may seem to be contradicting himself in that his method of genealogy suggests that there are no essences to be found across time, but this method simultaneously analyzes a form of self throughout history which may appear transhistorical. Arnold Davidson defends Foucault on this point. He argues that Foucault’s reconceptualization of ethics “does not depend on any modern understanding of subjectivity. Writing this history of ethics is part of writing a history of the self” (“Ethics as Ascetics” 133). Davidson’s reading, while persuasive, repeats a problem in Foucault that universalizes the reflexive self. For example, in texts such as “Friendship as a Way of Life” and “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act,” Foucault suggests that through homosexuality, individuals should create a “multiplicity of relationships” and pleasures (135). They should take a creative attitude towards themselves. This practice is quite similar to

28 “a certain form of attention, of sight” (my translation)
Foucault’s elaboration of the Greek practice of the care of the self: both selves are selves that can take themselves as creative projects. Hence, without suggesting that his contemporaries practice exactly the same care for themselves as the Greeks he studies, Foucault implies that, across history and through space, there exists a self that can take itself as a creative project. Davidson’s argument, which suggests that the history of the self’s relation to itself is a history of the self similarly universalizes a specific experience of selfhood, which is centered around reflexivity. Foucault’s genealogical methodology seems to posit a transhistorical form of the self. In “What is Enlightenment?” he explains that a “historical ontology of ourselves” must inquire into three axes of analysis: “relations of control over things, relations of action upon others, relations with oneself” (318). This suggests that one can have relations with oneself - that there is such a self - throughout history. However, many authors read this reflexivity as characteristic of modernity. For example, Anthony Giddens claims in Modernity and Self-Identity that under modernity, self-identity becomes a “reflexively organized endeavor” (5). He argues that society has become open, allowing for a plurality of lifestyles. As a result, subjects must organize themselves, taking their selves and their bodies as creative projects. In this context, Foucault’s self appears problematic in that it universalizes a historically specific experience of selfhood: the reflexive self.

Foucault’s self also appears problematic in its isolation, and in this way, his self seems similar to the isolated self as in Descartes. Lois McNay is especially critical of this aspect of Foucault’s work. She claims that Foucault is unable to provide a “fully worked-through alternative to either Enlightenment rationality or to
an indiscriminate postmodern celebration of difference” because he does not consider how the self is “embedded in and formed through types of social interaction” (163-4). McNay explains that one cannot distinguish a radical “exploration of identity” from an “arbitrary stylization of life,” unless one considers the relationship between one’s actions and the social context (165).

McNay does not claim that the care of the self is individualistic but rather that Foucault’s understanding of the self is wanting. This distinction deserves elaboration. In Foucault’s first lecture collected in *L’herméneutique du sujet*, Foucault explains that the care of the self seems problematically individualistic to Christian culture (which insists on the renunciation of the self) and to contemporary versions of this culture (which insist on the self’s obligation to others). Foucault argues that, reading the practice of the self with these suppositions, one can easily conclude that the care of the self is merely “une sorte de dandysme moral” (14) or “l’expression un peu mélancolique et triste d’un repli de l’individu, incapable de faire tenir ... une morale collective” (14). Departing from these two possible readings, Foucault insists that the care of the self is instead an intensification of relations to the self. This is not what is problematic to McNay. Instead, McNay is interested in the way that this self seems to be given or made, apart from its relationships with others. For example, while Foucault specifies that the care of the self “implies complex relationship with others,” he also states that the “the care of the self is ethically prior (to the care of others) in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior” (“Ethics of the Concern for Self” 287). Here, Foucault seems to imply that the self relates to itself before it relates

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29 This argument is indebted to Habermas.
to others; this is especially surprising given his deeply historical and relational understandings of subjectivity. Understandably then, it is this sort of claim that McNay criticizes.

Fourth, Foucault's self also appears problematic in that he seems to endow the self with the capacity for autopoesis. The voluntarism implied by this proposition is unaccounted for. For example, Foucault defines an ascetic practice as "an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being" ("Ethics of the Concern for Self" 282). This seems to suggest that selves have the capacity to change themselves through chosen practices. Charles Taylor, in fact, is suspicious that the change Foucault prescribes is possible. Taylor doubts that individuals have the capacity to come to understand their selves as entities which are not to be known or which are not deeply ingrained ("Foucault on Freedom" 99). In addition, although Foucault distinguishes between relations of domination and relations of power, he does not detail the conditions under which individuals may have varying abilities to create themselves. Rosemary Hennessy, in response to Judith Butler's works, suggests that self-creation is a reinscription of the "bourgeois subject's fetishized identity" (154). This implies that bourgeois subjects do not consider how they have been produced through material relations. These very relations, Hennessy claims, allow some with financial means to understand their selves as a voluntary performance and to take themselves as though

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30 A sort of moral dandyism or the somewhat melancholic and sad expression of an individual, incapable of holding a collective morality.
they were a project of self-creation. In response, Foucault does claim that the self can relate to itself within all relations of power because subjects always have the capacity for flight, suicide, revolt, or resistance. However, I contend that there are different extents to which such action is possible, and Foucault does not elaborate these conditions. This argument suggests that although Foucault speaks of the self as though it were universal, this self is in fact a bourgeois individual.

Indeed, when Foucault draws on the figure of the dandy, he begs the question of the material privilege associated with taking a limit-attitude towards oneself. In “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault discusses the dandy without acknowledging the material conditions for his existence. He writes that “modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself” (“What Enlightenment?” 312). However, this modern man is also someone who benefits from wealth; in fact, the creative attitude towards himself which he practices is made possible by the material wealth that he benefits from. The dandy, explains Baudelaire, “n’a pas d’autre occupation que de courir à la piste du bonheur” (Baudelaire 91). The dandy does not desire money for its own sake; however, “un crédit indéfini pourrait lui suffire” (92). Baudelaire is clear that only those with sufficient money and time can transform the fantasy of making themselves beautiful into a veritable action; Foucault does not consider this material analysis. In brief, from both the perspective of Taylor’s historical argument and Hennessy’s materialism, it is unclear how and when the self in Foucault’s writings can have the capacity to relate to itself as Foucault suggests. The seemingly

31 Inspired by Foucault’s work, queer theorists (see Seidman 13 for an example) are often criticized for failing to understand the material and institutional frameworks which produce subjectivity. I am
unbounded capacity for self-transformation appears to re-inscribe the sovereign subject that Foucault had critiqued in his earlier work.

In fact, as a fifth criticism, it is also unclear why the self would desire to take a limit-attitude towards itself. In his description of the critical ethos, Foucault appears to universalize desire for freedom as he understands it. He does not account for this desire. He writes, for example, that “maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. ... We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries” ("The Subject and Power" 336). If practices of freedom are always incited by given power relations, Foucault’s discussion here of a universal “we,” which is nonetheless historically specific, suggests that “we” are all produced and existing within similar power relations such that freedom consists in this shared project. This may not be the case. In addition, it is unclear why we “have to” engage in the practices of freedom that Foucault describes. It seems as though Foucault is positing a universal desire for freedom as he understands it. Foucault speaks of the “recalcitrance of the will” ("The Subject and Power" 221-22). But what happens when we are formed through power, such that the contestation of this power threatens our very existence? Wendy Brown identifies this problem in Foucault’s work. Brown claims that a feature of liberal-bureaucracy is “politicized identity’s desire” for the foreclosure of “its own freedom, its impulse to inscribe in the law and in other political registers its historical and present pain rather than to conjure an imagined future of power to make itself” (Brown “Wounded Attachments” 213). In union with Brown, Judith Butler argues in *The Psychic Life of Power* that Foucault does not suggesting here that the problem in queer theory relates back to the work of Foucault.
sufficiently account for the psychic process of subjectification. She claims that subjects have a passionate attachment to their subjection because it is through subjection that they are created. Similar to Brown, Butler interrogates the desire for self-detachment. Foucault’s discussions of freedom may seem to suggest that while Foucault rejects individualism, he also maintains a model of freedom which assumes that individuals desire their own self-affirmation against power. This is to conceive, against Foucault’s own theories, power as a force which intrudes on an individual’s liberty. By not considering the wavering desire for freedom, Foucault’s self, which practices freedom, seems to import liberal individualism to his discussion.

Sixth, Foucault’s self appears falsely universalized in yet another important way. In The History of Sexuality, Volume II, Foucault explains how the authors such as Aristotle and Xenophon relate the care of the self to virility: “La maîtrise de soi est une manière d’être homme par rapport à soi-même ... C’est une façon, en somme, d’être actif, par rapport à soi-même” (112). Caring for the self is a way of being a man, and therefore the self implied in the “care of the self” is specifically masculine. In addition, Foucault elaborates how the practice of the care of the self is also limited to free men. This self, in its active virility, is defined through the abjection of slavery and femininity. In this Ancient world, the self who cares for himself is a particular, not a universal, and is grounded upon inequality. How does this carry over to Foucault’s suggestions for his present time? This understanding of masculinity is historically situated, such that a contemporary practice may, in some contexts, be more open. However, when Foucault posits a contemporary, creative self, it is

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32 “The mastery of self is a manner of being a man in relation to one’s self ... It’s a way, in short, of being active in relation to one’s self” (my translation)
unclear whether this self, unlike the ancient self which is defined in opposition, could
be inclusive. Is this contemporary self implicitly defined against others? Is it
implicitly gendered in some way?

This question relates to the materiality of the self and introduces my seventh
and final criticism of Foucault. In texts such as Discipline and Punish, Foucault
insists on the embodiment of the subject and endows the body with a form of priority.
Forces act upon the body, he insists. For example, disciplinary power works directly
on bodies, creating "subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (Discipline and
Punish 138). Through power enacted on the body, subjects are constituted and
regulated. Foucault even understands the soul in relation to the body. The soul,
Foucault argues, is a "factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body" (30).
This soul is more "profound" than man himself. It is the "effect and instrument of
political anatomy" (30). This analysis decentres the autonomous, thinking subject and
places it with a field of power relations that act upon matter. Foucault’s insistence on
the body is very Nietzschean. In The Gay Science, Nietzsche argues that
"consciousness is the last and latest development of the organic and hence what is
most unfinished and unstrong" (84). Rather than taking consciousness as the essence
of man, as that which is "abiding, eternal, ultimate, and most original in him" (85),
Nietzsche emphasizes the body by claiming that today we face the "task of
incorporating knowledge" (85). In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche writes that
"behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an
unknown sage – whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body" (The
Portable Nietzsche 146). In Nietzsche, the self is the body; it is that which "does not
say ‘I,’” but, more significantly, “does ‘I’” (146). Foucault’s emphasis on the body is carried through *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, where, without necessarily positing the body as before or outside power, the body and its pleasures become a site for resistance: “the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures” (157). In contrast, the critical ethos Foucault describes is not obviously embodied. Therefore in the move to his later work, Foucault appears to move from a Nietzschean understanding of subjectivity, which gives priority to the body, to a Kantian sovereign subject, who is an autonomous thinker.

In short, criticisms of Foucault’s self suggest that while Foucault claims to move away from universal and transcendental theories of the subject, in his late works, he posits a self that appears falsely universal – a self that can be related to the inwardness Foucault attempts to transgress. The self appears problematic in Foucault’s texts for the following reasons: (1) self is associated with interiority and similar to the self-surveying subject; (2) self seems transhistorical; (3) self seems to exist in a vacuum of social relationships; (4) self has unfettered capacities to will its own transformation; (5) self seems to have a universal desire for freedom; (6) while self appears universal, it is simultaneously gendered or defined through abjection; (7) self appears disembodied. These apparent problems must be dealt with if Foucault’s late work is to substantively open up a new line of analysis in queer theory.

*What is Self in Foucault?*
Before beginning my analysis of Foucault’s late writings, I wish to establish a proviso with which to approach the analysis. I am wary that by asking what self is in Foucault’s works, I am, contra Foucault, insisting that self is an object that must be known. I am asking “what is self?”, instead of “how can self be formed?”. Therefore, in approaching the question, I will not assume that there is a true, deep essence of selfhood which I must bring out, through my reading. Instead, I wish to ask how “self” is created or produced through Foucault’s writings. I wish to understand how “self” functions rather than what “self” is. This means that I will not elaborate how Foucault understands the self in the world, but rather how “self” functions in his texts. With this proviso, I can best approach the question of “self,” since I am reading the texts, I believe, within their own game.

Using this methodology, my reading of late Foucault focuses on the places in which the term “self” appears. This reading quickly finds that the word is almost exclusively used in phrases that establish reflexive relationships. “Self” functions in Foucault’s work to describe reflexive relationships. For example, in his lecture of January 13, 1982, collected in *L’herméneutique du sujet*, Foucault explains how the care of self requires self-knowledge - not a form of knowledge where “tu dois connaître ce que tu es, tes capacités, ton âme, tes passions, si tu es mortel ou immortel, etc. Ce n’est absolument pas cela” (52). Instead, one has to ask “[Quel est] ce rapport, qu’est-ce qui est désigné par ce pronom réfléchi heauton, qu’est-ce que c’est que cet élément qui est le même du côté du sujet et du côté de l’objet?”

33 “you must know what you are, your capacities, your soul, your passions, if you are mortal or immortal, etc. It is absolutely not this” (my translation).
Foucault emphasizes that it is self in reflexive relationship, not the self itself which is important. He understands Socrates' question “what is the self?” as “une interrogation méthologique sur ce qui signifie, ce qui est désigné par la forme réfléchie du verbe ‘s’occuper de soi-même’” (Foucault HS 53). The reflexive form of the verb is of interest rather than its object or subject.

This use of reflexive verbs, whose practice instantiates self-relations, carries throughout Foucault's works. For example, in “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume Two,” Foucault explains that “the project of a The History of Sexuality was linked to a desire on my part to analyze more closely the third of the axes that constitute any matrix of experience: the modality of relation to the self” (emphasis added). Here, Foucault posits the existence of a relation to self – not of a separate self. Later in this preface, he speaks of a “model for relations to the self’ (204), “forms of relation to the self,” “forms and effects of the relation to the self” (204), “a certain mode of relation to the self” (205). In this text, “self” does not appear unless it is in a relationship. In “Technologies of the Self,” the word functions quite similarly. This time, “self” is not always found in the phrase “relations to the self,” but rather “technologies of the self” (Ethics 224), “hermeneutics of the self” (224), “care of the self” (226), “concern for self” (230), “knowledge of oneself” (231) “a new experience of the self” (232), “self-examination” (237) “contemplation of self” (236), “renunciation of the self” (249), etc. These phrases are repeated throughout the essay. Each of them defines a certain form of a relation to self, which

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34 “[What is] this relation, who is designated by the reflexive pronoun ‘heauton’, what is this element that is the same as a subject and object?” (my translation)
35 “a methodological interrogation on what is signified, what is designated by the reflexive form of the verb “to care for one’s self” (my translation)
is performed in a given action. Some of the phrases, such as “contemplation of self,” suggest that the self is a thing which exists apart from the act, using this example, of contemplation. However, it is possible that what is contemplated or renounced is not a thing but rather a reflexive activity through which self is produced.

Even in Foucault’s most Nietzschean moments, “self” is still placed within a reflexive relationship: “we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (“On the Genealogy of Ethics” 262). Foucault’s interest in the aesthetics of self does not emphasize the creation of the self as a beautiful object, but rather focuses on the relationship artists have with their work. Like the artist, the relationship one has to oneself must be one of “differentiation, of creation, of innovation” (“Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity” 166). The “ourselves” figure here as that which is both acting and acted upon. “Ourselves” is constituted by this reflexive activity.

A similar analysis can be made of Foucault’s use of “ourselves” in his discussion of the critical ethos. In as much as “we” must take this critical ethos, “we” are constituted by taking a specific reflexive relationship: the testing-relation Foucault describes. As Foucault writes in “Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations,” there is no “we” which exists prior to action, but merely action which produces a “we.” The communal selves that are posited in “What is Enlightenment?” appear in a specific relationship to themselves, and this relationship is enacted in a given activity: critique. In this activity, the subject and object are the same. Therefore, like Foucault’s other uses of selfhood, self implied by the phrase “critical ontology of ourselves” is that which is instantiated in a reflexive activity.
From this analysis, Foucault’s self may be said to be performative in that it is constituted by action. In this sense, Foucault’s self can be read in relation to Nietzsche. Nietzsche is critical of the Kantian universal subject. He asks what presuppositions allow one to claim, as Kant claims, that there exists a priori, synthetic judgment. Nietzsche’s answer is the transcendental subject, which exists apart from its manifestation in action. For Nietzsche, the belief in such a subject derives from grammars which separate the subject and predicate, giving existence to a subject apart from its action. In discussing Nietzsche’s critique of Kant, David Owen offers an example which clearly demonstrates Nietzsche’s argument. In the phrase “lightning flashes,” lightning is given independence from its manifestation “flashes”; however, lightning has no being apart from its manifestation of flashing. In this sense, the separation between the subject and predicate is misleading. Similarly, Foucault’s use of the word “self” most often places selfhood within a relationship that is instantiated in an action. Following Nietzsche, we can claim that Foucault’s insistence on describing certain activities signals that self has no existence apart from these manifestations.

This reading of selfhood in Foucault is different from claims that the subject is performative in that it implies that self is performative in a specific way. That is, self is not constituted by any form of acting; rather, selfhood is created in a specific form of action which is reflexive. In discussions of performativity, such as Judith Butler’s at the conclusion of Gender Trouble, a subject is said to be performative if the subject of the verb is produced through an action, even if the subject is not the object of the verb. In this sense, performative theories of subjectivity imply that verbs
can affect the subject (or even constitute it), no matter the apparent object of the action. In the case of Foucault’s use of selfhood, the object of the verb is not incidental. Instead, some form of the object and subject of the verb must be aligned but need not remain the same.\(^{36}\)

But how are we to comprehend reflexivity? A reflexive practice may be understood as an activity where something oscillates between two defined forms of being: subject and object.\(^{37}\) The problem with this analysis is that it assumes that there is a substance that can oscillate between forms of being, which are somehow stable and independent of each other. This substance allows for the subject of the reflexive activity and the object of this same activity to align without remaining identical. The substance may be the body or the self, both which serve as a constant ground that coalesces various practices.\(^{38}\) This analysis is problematic because it suggests that the body or the self is a substance that is unchanging. An alternate understanding of reflexivity is therefore necessary, which can model reflexivity while maintaining a performative understanding of the self.

Such an alternative is opened up when the space and time of action is considered. Reflexive actions, as any other form of action, take place at given times and places, of various durations and scales. A reflexive action is an action which acts

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\(^{36}\) Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and Invisible* suggests that such an alignment is impossible. His argument concerns reflection which attempts to return to its source but can never because of the temporality of thought. The coming back will never recapture what first occurred: “precisely because it is reflection, re-turn, re-conquest, or re-covery, it cannot flatter itself that it would simply coincide with a constitutive principle already at work in the spectacle of the world . . . To reflect is not to coincide with the flux from its source unto its last ramifications; it is to disengage from the things, perceptions, world, and perception of the world” (341). Similarly, the object of a reflexive activity may never perfectly coincide with the subject because of the temporality of action.

\(^{37}\) This is the reading suggested in Robert Strozier’s *Foucault, Subjectivity, and Identity* 142, but Strozier’s argument is problematic because it places Foucault’s own analysis within the structures of the doubles that Foucault discusses in *The Order of Things*. 
upon another action which exists close to the first, both temporally and spatially. These actions touch each other or exist beside each other, weaving within each other and affecting each other. The two actions are neither identical nor separate. They are entangled or knotted together. For example, the act of writing an autobiography involves two actions which are close to each other and interweave with each other: the act of writing and the act of constituting. A model of non-performative reflexivity would explain autobiography as a reflexive process by reading the sentence “I am writing about myself” as follows: a substance (be it a body, or self) is alternating between two ways of being, subject (the “I” that is writing) and object (the “myself” which is written about). In contrast, a performative understanding of reflexivity understands the sentence “I am writing about myself” as a phrase which points to two actions that are knotted together. If we understand the subject as that which acts and is constituted by action, then the subject of a verb is instantiated by that verb. In reflexive activity, the subject acts upon itself – but this “itself” is activity, too. In this case, an action is acting upon another action which exists close to it, both spatially and temporally. The actions tangle in each other, turn through each other, and by doing so, create an “inside” or “self.” Returning to the example, the sentence “I am writing about myself” can be reversed such that we understand this “myself” as that which is constituting the “I”: “a description is giving meaning to, producing a way to understand, or constituting a subject.” Thus the sentence “I am writing about myself” points to a concurrent action, which occurs close to the first action: the action of constituting or giving meaning to an “I”. These two actions weave into each other such that they become knotted together. This entanglement produces an internal

38 See Ed Cohen’s discussion of the history of “identity” and Locke (77).
space which is different to the internality that Foucault criticizes. This inside constitutes the self. \(^{39}\)

It is not obvious that this inside should be conceived of as self. Yet this alignment is found in Foucault’s discourse. For example, in a lecture collected in *L’herméneutique du sujet*, Foucault describes how the care of self

implique que l’on convertisse son regard, et qu’on le reporte de l’extérieur, sur ... j’aillais dire ‘l’intérieur’. Laissons ce mot (dont vous pensez bien qu’il pose tout un tas de problèmes) de côté, et disons simplement qu’il faut qu’on convertisse son regard, de l’extérieur, des autres, du monde, etc., vers : ‘soi-même.’ \(^{40}\)

In this passage, Foucault argues that through the care of the self, one’s attention is turned towards one’s self. This “soi-même” takes the place of the “intérieur,” which Foucault mentions to then disavow. Nonetheless, the “soi-même” is contrasted to the exterior, others, the world, etc. In this way, “soi-même” takes the place of what is usually associated with the inside and may be said to constitute a new inside, in as much as the inside is that which opposes the outside. This inside is neither a space that exists in and of itself nor does it constitute the immutable truth of the subject. Instead, the inside consists of reflexive activity. The inside is that space where actions are close together; it is that space of reflexive activity. It is the space of the self.

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\(^{39}\) Deleuze, in “Les Plissements, ou le Dedans de la Pensée,” reads the Foucauldian subject as formed through a turning, which instantiates an “inside.” Similarly, Butler argues in *The Psychic Life of Power* that while power appears external to the subject, restricting it, power simultaneously produces the subject and exists within the subject. Power is therefore “relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, a turning back upon oneself or even a turning on oneself” (*Psychic Life* 3). This process of turning is that which “fabricates the distinction between interior and exterior life” (19). Building on their analyses, my interest in self as opposed to subject highlights a distinct form of turning or knotting. Whereas for Deleuze and Butler, power on the outside (which somehow exists before there is an “inside) turns to create a within, in the case of self, actions turn into each other, creating a within.

\(^{40}\) “implies that we convert our look, and that we bring it from the exterior to ... I was going to say ‘interior’. Let us leave this word (that you must well think poses a whole load of problems) to the side, and say simply that we must convert our regard of the exterior, of others, of the world, etc, towards ‘one’s self”’ (my translation).
As a result, self in Foucault is not a substance but a form of activity. Forms need not be universal as is the case, for example, of Platonic forms. To this analysis, Ian Hacking provides a useful explanation. He reads Foucault as an extreme nominalist. This suggests that forms do not have an existence independent of their various manifestations. For example, in “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume Two,” Foucault describes the historicity of thought and experience. He claims that “thought has a historicity which is proper to it. That it should have this historicity does not mean it is deprived of all universal form but, rather, that the putting into play of these universal forms is itself historical” ("Preface" 201). If I read “the putting into play” as a coming to being, this passage suggests that universal forms exist only in historical manifestations. This suggestion reframes what is generally meant by universal. The universal becomes but a name that we apply to various manifestations, and names only have meaning within a specific context. “Self” may be understood as a form in this way, and this form is a reflexive relationship, instantiated in a reflexive activity.

However, if self is a form, what does Foucault mean when he claims that ethics must concern itself with the ethical substance of relations to the self? This is precisely the question of this investigation: what is the self which is being acted upon in ethical relations? Because I have read self as the product of reflexive activity, the ethical substances that constitute it are likewise various reflexive actions.

A final concern remains: if the self is nothing but reflexive activity, how are various activities held together without positing the existence of a self which is independent from the practices? I wish to suggest that various practices of the self...
appear continuous because of narrative and the discursivity of action. A narrative structures contingent actions into a unity that appears continuous. All actions may be interpreted and are therefore discursive. This interpretation may place actions within a narrative structure which creates the fiction of continuity.

Such narratives of continuity, no matter how fictitious, are necessary so that ethical practices of freedom may be identified. Although it may be tempting to understand these practices of freedom as events which break from the past and from temporal continuity, this discontinuity or freedom only makes sense in relation to the context in which it appears. A practice of freedom may only be identified when thought turns back on actions and reflects on them. This process necessarily produces a narrative in that it forms a relation between current thought and prior action. Freedom is only meaningful within such a narrative. As actions are brought into discourse or made discursive and given meaning, they may be placed within a narrative, such that various reflexive activities appear continuous. Some of the activities are practices of freedom which utilize the discontinuity of action and other activities are not practices of freedom in that they attempt to stabilize action.

With this reading, I am now in the position to return to the opening criticisms of "self" in Foucault, to revise how some of the problems are alleviated. I have established seven criticisms of Foucault’s use of "self": (1) self is associated with interiority; (2) self seems transhistorical; (3) self seems to exist in a vacuum of social relationships; (4) self has unfettered capacities to will its own transformation; (5) self seems to have a universal desire for freedom; (6) while the self appears universal, it is simultaneously gendered or defined through abjection; (7) self appears disembodied.
The reading of self as a performative constituted by reflexive activity responds to the first three, fifth, and sixth critique. First, my reading of self refutes the criticism that Foucault returns to models of interiority or depth because the two forms of interiority are different. Foucault's primary critique of psychological depth is not interiority in itself, but rather the ways in which this interiority is framed and constructed in relations of power/knowledge. Through these relations, interiority becomes reified and normalized; the interior is taken as the truth of a person, which is immutable. In contrast, the interiority produced through reflexive relationships of ethical practices of the self is quite different. Most notably, the practices do not involve the formation of an immutable, normalized identity. The interiority is continually created and recreated because its existence is only instantiated through reflexive activity. "Self" does not signal Foucault's return to that which he criticizes; it implies a wholly different understanding of interiority than the forms of interiority he evaluates.

Second, the introduction of "self" into Foucault's texts does not so much announce the existence of a thing, the self, but rather the existence of a relationship, which is instantiated in reflexive activity. This means that the reflexive relationships Foucault describes never terminate, and in as much as self has no existence apart from these relationships, self is not static. In this case, Foucault's work on self is not positing the existence of a universal, transhistorical self, but rather of a certain form of relationship and activity, which is universal. However, these relationships and activities change across time and space; it is only their form which is universal, and,

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41 For example, Foucault is critical of the practice of confession in psychoanalysis whereby subjects create an identity that they take as their truth, and this identity is mediated through the expert,
drawing on Hacking’s description of Foucault as an extreme nominalist, we may understand this universality as being nothing but a name. Foucault is interested in writing the history of reflexive practices, in bringing out the differences between various reflexive actions. He focuses on the ethical substance, mode of subjection, activity, and telos of these activities as aspects of reflexivity which change through time. Self is only created in this form of relationship; it only exists within specific historical contexts.

As a counterargument, one may claim that my reading of Foucault’s self as reflexive activity universalizes a specific experience of selfhood: the reflexive self. This is, indeed, the argument I made above concerning Arnold Davidson. However, having determined that “self” is not a determinant thing in Foucault’s writings, I am now in the position to argue that his history of selfhood as a history of reflexivity is less problematic than it first appeared. Foucault does not assume that there exists an object, the self, which exists through time and which always consists of the same reflexive activity. Instead, his genealogies argue that various reflexive practices occur, are understood, and are given meaning in different ways through time. Foucault names these practices instances of the production of the self. This naming demonstrates one way in which his work is situated. Historiographers or genealogists write in the language of their own time and choose topics that concern their present. Foucault’s naming reflexive activity “self” is necessarily framed by the cultural and social context in which he writes. Nonetheless neither “self” nor “reflexivity” are normalizing gaze of the psychoanalyst.
foundational in his writings. Instead, the two are categories for historical inquiry, which are useful to writing genealogy. 42

Next, in response to the fifth critique, which suggested that Foucault universalizes a desire for freedom, I can now argue that because self is merely that which is constituted by reflexive activity, desire is not posited within the self. In this way, it makes no sense to argue that Foucault universalizes a desire for freedom because to do so would be to posit the self as a thing which possesses desires. In fact, although Foucault prioritizes ethical practices of freedom, there is little in his writings to suggest that he universalizes a desire for freedom. Instead, his language is normative. For example, he writes that we “have to create ourselves as a work of art” (“Genealogy of Ethics” 262) He explains that “perhaps it would be better” if we did not ask “who am I?” (“Friendship as a Way of Life” 135). He claims that the role of a philosopher is to question domination, to argue that we ought to make freedom our foundation. 43 This implies that there does not already exist a universal desire for freedom. Thus, while Foucault prefers ethical activities which are practices of freedom, he does not universalize this preference.

Finally, in relation to the sixth critique, my reading also suggests that “self” need not be gendered. It is true that Foucault’s understanding of self prioritizes

42 Joan W. Scott’s “‘Experience’” has helped me to frame this argument. She contends that it is tempting not to discuss experience “given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject” (37). Nonetheless, given that “experience is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives . . . it seems futile to argue for its expulsion” (37). Thus, rather than avoiding discussions of experience, the category must be called into question through its historicization. It is in this style that Foucault discusses “self” and “reflexivity.”

43 One may ask, as many such as Habermas have asked, on what grounds Foucault asserts these claims. This question may be problematic in that it assumes that critique should conduct itself with predetermined or normative values or grounds. As a result, both Judith Butler, in “What is Critique?”, and Paul Veyne, in “The Final Foucault and His Ethics,” argue that through Foucault’s critique norms are called into question and foundations or grounds become strategic.
activity over passivity, and that in as much as femininity is related to passivity and masculinity to activity, the reflexive relationships Foucault describes are masculine. However, a woman may appropriate ethical practices of self, undoing the relationship between femininity and passivity. This is nonetheless to take activity as a good, and feminists may wish to qualify in what ways and which circumstances this is the case. Even more, in my discussion, “self” is not defined through the abjection of some, but rather in a practice of doing. But this suggests that those who do not take themselves as a reflexive project (those who are not active on themselves) are excluded from selfhood. I do not know if this is as exclusionary as it may seem: the practice of ethics in Foucault is not always critical; it is not always an instantiation of a limit attitude. Instead, in some cases, the ways in which we relate to ourselves function to reify subjectivity, to perform a given subjectivity, or to produce disciplinary subjects. This suggests that “self” may be inclusive of all subjects, although the practices which enact it and thus the forms of selfhood may vary extensively.

In brief, my analysis of self as a reflexive activity in Foucault responds to some of the criticisms I explained above; however, not all the problems are effaced. I have merely displaced some concerns, and now the question becomes: how is reflexive activity also troublesome in some of the same ways that selfhood appeared problematic?

The notion of reflexive activity remains troubling in two ways. First, just as the self appeared problematic in that it exists apart from or prior to its relations with others, reflexive activity seems troubling in that it may appear to exist in a social vacuum. Moreover, just as self seemed primarily to be a thinking thing, which is
unrelated to its material body and to means of production, reflexive activity may seem troubling in that it is (1) disembodied and (2) disengaged from material relations. Once again, these concerns must be addressed before Foucault’s late work opens lines of analyses in queer theory.

**Homosexuality as a Practice of the Self**

In order to respond to these concerns, I wish now to elaborate one activity that Foucault investigates which produce self: homosexuality. Other activities such as parrhesia (truth telling) and critique could also be described to a similar end, but I have chosen to concentrate on homosexuality because my reading concerns itself with developments in the study of sexuality. My discussion of homosexuality in Foucault demonstrates how reflexive activity is neither asocial nor disembodied nor practiced in a vacuum of material relations. This will conclude the analysis necessary such that Foucault’s late work may come to open lines of study in queer theory.

Foucault presents homosexuality as an occasion for a practice of self or a specific reflexive relationship that is creative. Foucault reads homosexuality as a mode of being, or an ethos, and he uses aesthetic metaphors to describe homosexuality, which invoke his description of the care of self. For example, he writes, “one could perhaps say there is a ‘gay style,’ or at least that there is an ongoing attempt to recreate a certain style of existence, a form of existence or art of living, which might be called ‘gay’” (“Sexual Choice, Sexual Act” 146). To be gay, in this case, is not to “identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life” (“Friendship as a Way
of Life” 138). Homosexuality is a form of askesis, where one works on oneself to transform oneself. It is a form of becoming similar to the becoming Nietzsche describes, which Foucault draws upon. In this way, Foucault either asks us to not understand homosexuality as an identity or to reframe our understanding of identity such that it is conceived as something that is produced through actions or way of life. It is by acting and by forming a relation to the self that homosexuality as a way of being is produced.

This description of homosexuality qualifies Foucault’s suggestions for gay and lesbian politics. His insistence on creativity contrasts with those who understand the project of gay and lesbian politics as a movement of liberation; instead of attempting to liberate homosexuality, Foucault pushes through the foundational role of identity. He acknowledges that identity has been useful; however, he claims that identity may dangerously become an “ethical universal rule” (“Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity” 166). Thus, identity is only useful if it is a game, if the project is not to uncover identity nor to conform to an identity but to create identity. Otherwise, it limits us. Just as Foucault argues that ethical practices of self constitute a practice of freedom, he argues that the creation of homosexuality is “part of our world freedom” (“Sex, Power” 163). In this model, the practice of gay and lesbian politics consists in the practice of a reflexive activity, through which one relates to oneself in

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44 Foucault’s discussion of homosexuality depends upon a broadened definition of sexuality, which identifies the many cultural, economic, and social practices that are related to sexuality.
45 This understanding of homosexuality has been influential to queer theory.
46 Simultaneously, while Foucault insists on the creative potential of homosexuality, he wishes to differentiate his theory from those which romanticize sexuality as a creative force. He acknowledges that readers may understand him as arguing that sexuality “has become one of the most creative sources of our society and our being” (“Sex, Power” 164). Nonetheless, Foucault clarifies that his view is in fact the opposite. Sexuality is not the secret of cultural life; instead, we need to formulate a
a creative way. Therefore, the practice of homosexuality and its accompanying politics consist in practices of self.

While this practice is a reflexive activity, it cannot be isolated from its social and cultural context. In fact, even as Foucault describes the practice of homosexuality as a practice of self, he simultaneously argues that this practice requires the development of a “multiplicity of relationships” (“Friendship as a Way of Life” 136). He wishes to replace the question “who am I?” with the query “what relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?” (136). In this way, Foucault argues that the problem of homosexuality is related to the problem of friendship. He postulates that homosexuality amongst men became a problem in the eighteenth century as homosocial friendships were disallowed, and he correspondingly becomes interested in Hellenistic models of friendship. In addition, Foucault claims that his contemporary world lacks a variety of meaningful relations: marriage and family relations are the only relations given institutional recognition. In this context, homosexuality is an occasion for the experimentation with new sorts of cultural life so that sexuality can be more widely experienced. It is this cultural or this homosexual ethos, not the homosexual sexual act itself, which is, according to Foucault, most alarming to many.

While Foucault insists on the creation of a homosexual ethos, he does not programmatically insist that this is the only project facing gay and lesbian politics. For example, he recognizes that gay rights are important, but not sufficient. He argues that it is not enough to allow or permit homosexual relationships to enter social and cultural formations; rather, new formations must be created.

One may ask whether heterosexuality may similarly be a practice of freedom. While this is possible, it seems that at this time, the practice of homosexuality consists in an ethical practice of the self, which is a practice of freedom, because through the reflexive relation, action is transformed. That is, within a contemporary culture where heterosexuality is compulsory or assumed, actions are most often assumed to be heterosexual. Homosexuality acts upon these actions to change their meaning.

This citation demonstrates Foucault’s meager treatment of gender. The assumption that a variety of relations will be formed through homosexuality suggests that one can define homosexuality apart from these relations. This practice of creating relations therefore depends on a solid sexual binary, with which homosexuality can be easily defined. Foucault is also not attentive to possible differences between lesbians and gay men. When asked of varying experiences between individuals of different sexes, Foucault laughs. He claims that the distinction between the experience of gay male and lesbian sexuality “doesn’t seem convincing”
relations. Gay culture can develop “ways of relating, types of existence, types of values, types of exchanges between individuals which are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural forms” (“The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will” 159-60). Therefore, while creative homosexuality defines for Foucault a practice of self, this practice is thoroughly social. The reflexive relationship instantiated in the homosexual ethos does not occur in a social void but through practices with others.

Finally, homosexuality as a practice of self is also embodied. This is most obvious in Foucault’s discussion of physical, sexual relations. Foucault argues that heterosexuality is practiced through a whole series of codes and practices, such as courtship, which surround and anticipate the sexual act. In contrast, Foucault claims that with homosexuality, where homosexual relationships are disallowed, a culture surrounding courtship is not developed. Instead, the sexual act itself becomes of interest. This explains why, he suggests, authors such as Cocteau, Genet and Burroughs write “so elegantly” about the sexual act itself: “the homosexual imagination is for the most part concerned with reminiscing about the act rather than anticipating it” (“Sexual Choice” 150). Because of the position of homosexuality, Foucault claims that imaginative energy has intensified the act of sex.51

("Sexual Choice, Sexual Act" 145). In addition, Foucault’s discussion of sexuality elides any discussion of its important relationship to race. See Stoler.

50 Foucault clarifies that these relations will be available not only to those who identify as gay. This does not contradict the claim that homosexuality is a practice of freedom, as opposed to most instances of heterosexuality. It suggests, rather, that heterosexual relations could build on and draw on the relations developed through gay culture.

51 It is in this context that Foucault reads sadomasochism (S&M). See “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act.”
In brief, I have analyzed homosexuality as a reflexive practice to argue that although this practice instantiate self, it is neither asocial nor disembodied. With this discussion, my reading of self as an instance of performative activity responds to the seven criticisms of the self. I am now in the position to return to queer theory, to demonstrate how my analysis of self helps to open significant lines of study in this field.

52 While homosexuality may be an example of a practice of self which is both embodied and socially mediated, the form of inductive reasoning which then generalizes that all reflexive relations are also embodied and social is problematic. However, since reflexive activity is understood as the intermingling of two actions which are close to each other both spatially and temporally, it seems reasonable to claim that all reflexive activities are both socially practiced and embodied in as much as all actions are both these things. Self is produced in the space between these actions and therefore its production is both embodied and socially mediated.
Conclusion – Reflexive Activity and Queer Theory

My second chapter argued that the concept of the self is problematic in queer theory given its critique of internal essence. This critique is also relevant to current problematizations in queer theory surrounding embodiment, recognition, and group formation. I now wish to argue that my reading of reflexive relations in Foucault provides a way in which queer theorists may conceive of selfhood while remaining attentive to embodiment and without positing a deep-seated essence. In addition, the focus on reflexive practices helps to clarify that queer theory need not endorse the condemnation of those who identify within sexual categories. Even more, it suggests that selfhood is not only developed through recognition, and therefore provides an alternate set of questions concerning the politics of recognition. Finally, reflexive relations indicate an axis of analysis through which queer groups may be defined. I will explain these various applications of Foucault’s work in turn. I do not wish to suggest that Foucault helps to resolve diverse debates. I maintain more simply that his late work opens future lines of inquiry by offering alternate forms of questioning.

My performative reading of reflexive relations in Foucault allows those interested in sexuality to discuss the ways in which selves relate to themselves without positing an internal essence to these selves. A space of inwardness may be analyzed by researchers, without essentializing and without suggesting that this space is asocial. This allows for an alternate understanding of queer selves: a queer self may be constituted by reflexive, embodied activities which relate to previous actions in a specific way: they neither reify them nor assume that there exists an entity which is present apart from their performance. A continuous practice of such a reflexive
activity may define a continuity of self but not a deep-seated essence, because this would give precedence to a self/subject/identity over the reflexive activity.

The thesis that queerness is a reflexive activity can be extended to posit a general reading of sexuality and identity. This displaces both the analysis of identity as an internal essence and identity as the product of performativity, as described by Butler. Instead, identity becomes a product of a reflexive activity: identification. Through identification, two actions (I identify with X and X gives coherence or meaning) occur which are close to each other. These activities constitute a reflexive activity which instantiates self. We may understand the categories lesbian, straight, bisexual, or gay as different practices of identification or as different practices of the self, which are found with the enactment of various reflexive relations. This would allow us to continue using these terms without reifying or homogenizing identity.

With this analysis, we can then speak of the ways that those who identify as a specific sexual identity simultaneously must produce themselves. Lesbian and gay selves may be formed through reflexive activities which understand past activities in a certain light and relate to these activities to produce a coherence throughout them. Of course, the production of different sexualities through reflexive relations varies depending on the actions performed. For example, the production of a lesbian self will require different practices of creativity than the production of a straight self. However, to assume that the production of a straight self requires no creativity is to naturalize heterosexuality. Instead, this identity category, like other sexual identity categories, must be produced through reflexive relations, which instantiate self. This clarifies that queer theorists need not criticize those who identify as a given sexual
identity. By drawing on Foucault’s late work, queer theorists may study the ways that gay men and lesbians must develop a critical ethos; they must create ways of being in the world and forms of subjectivity, even if they identify as a given sexual identity.

The analysis of reflexive relations also allows for alternate questioning surrounding recognition. Reflexive relations are social, and the production of the self occurs within a social field. Yet, the concept of the self which emerges here is not simply one whose identity is conferred through the process of recognition. The analysis of reflexivity and development of reflexive activities may suggest an axis along which another form of identity politics, less concerned with recognition, is developed. This is neither to say that recognition is not important, nor that subjectivity is not formed, at least to some extent, through the process of recognition. Instead, my analysis of Foucault suggests that along with subjectivity, we may also consider self, which is formed through the practice of various reflexive relations. We may then conceive of another form of politics, which does not replace the politics of recognition, but which exists alongside these politics.

Elizabeth Grosz is skeptical of models of identity politics, such as Butler’s, which take recognition as their primary aim. Grosz begins to sketch an alternative politics, although she does not speak of the self yet highlights the importance of reflexive activity. In “A Politics of Imperceptibility,” Grosz argues that Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, Drucilla Cornell, and Sara Murphy remain locked within a Hegelian model which insists that the subject is always formed through the recognition of another subject. She argues that multiculturalism and anti-racist thought must build new concepts, “concepts with a less invested, and with
perhaps a wider range than those afforded by the regime of recognition” (463). In disagreement with a paper by Murphy and Cornell, Grosz elaborates on the problems she associates with recognition. Murphy and Cornell argue that a politics of recognition does not have to work towards having minority cultures recognized by majority cultures. This would only reaffirm the domination of the majority. Instead, minority cultures could recognize each other. Grosz, however, asks why recognition remains necessary in their model. She contends that a politics which understands itself as a struggle for recognition is “fundamentally servile” as it insists that one is governed by the other. Following this criticism, Grosz discusses how the Nietzschean subject is not formed through recognition. Instead, it is based on its “capacity to act and be acted upon, to do rather than to be, to act rather than to identify” (466). In the place of identity, Nietzsche, who is a huge influence on Foucault, discusses wills and forces. Grosz argues that forces are the “inhuman which both makes the human possible and which at the same time positions the human within a world where force works in spite of and around the human, within and as the human” (467). Forces are constantly becoming. They are specific, yet they share a common charge, which allows them to compete with each other (468). Forces do not have “intentions, goals, purposes” (469). Instead, they merely seek out “expansion and magnification” (469). Forces act through subjects, and the subject is a mode of action or a surface for event (468).

With this reading, the subject and recognition are displaced, and we can begin to conceive of politics differently. Oppression now becomes less to do with the lack of recognition and more to do with the actions that one engenders. As a result,
political struggles may be understood as, Grosz explains, “struggles for practice” (468). We can then imagine a “politics of imperceptibility,” a politics which focuses on acts not identities, a politics which intensifies various forces and leaves its trace everywhere. As an example, Grosz explains that feminist postcolonial theory may be understood as a politics of imperceptibility. The goal, she claims, of this theory is not to liberate women, but rather to “render more mobile, fluid and transformable the means by which the female subject is produced and represented” (471). This is a struggle not to be recognized and valued as such but rather to transform and to act. This form of politics is not “a politics of visibility, or recognition and of self-validation” (471). Instead, it is

a process of self-marking that constitutes oneself in the very model of that which oppresses and opposes the subject [forces]. The imperceptible is that which the inhuman musters, that which the human can sometimes liberate from its own orbit but not control or name as its own. (471)

Although this analysis may appear quite abstract, it is especially relevant to queer theory to the extent that queer theory, like this politics of imperceptibility, problematizes the primacy of internal essence. While Grosz does not emphasize reflexivity in her model of politics, her description of this politics as a process of “self-marking” suggests that the form of politics she describes is one which accentuates the development of reflexive practices. This analysis merely sketches possible future research. A closer discussion of the relationship between the process of recognition and reflexive relations is required. My aim is merely to open the possibility and interest in such a discussion.

Similarly, the analysis of reflexivity can complicate our understanding of queer groups or coalitions. This relates to another central problematization of queer
theory: how can political coalitions be formed without homogenizing and reifying identity? Through the study of reflexive relations, rather than insisting that members of a group possess a common identity, we may argue that a group is formed by the practice of shared reflexive activities. This could complicate our analysis of alliances developed in identity politics (which use identity as a foundation, but must produce this identity through reflexive relations) and could aid in the analysis and formation of alliances which are not grounded in an essential, internal identity. While Judith Butler does not foreground reflexive relations, her analysis of queer politics in “Critically Queer” does suggest that reflexive relations are, in fact, at issue. Butler argues that the critique of identity politics should not be understood as signaling the failure of these politics but rather their possibility. Through identity politics, identity categories are tested and expanded. The deconstruction of identity categories, such as “queer” ought not, she writes “paralyze the use of such terms, but, ideally, … extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought” (Bodies that Matter 229). Butler explains how the critique of the queer subject “is crucial to the continuing democratisation of queer politics” (227). The critique or the deconstruction of these identity categories are therefore crucial political activities. These practices are simultaneously reflexive activities – they may in fact, be

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53 For example, the practice of consciousness raising in second wave feminism may be read as an interesting practice of the self which formulates identity. In its use amongst American, gay and lesbian radicals in the late 1960s, this practice was self-consciously described as a practice of identity creation, rather than identity affirmation. See Allen Young 29-30 as an exemplary primary text. Queerupt is another good example of a group not grounded in identity claims, and therefore practicing alternate reflexive activities. Queerupt is a queer, anarchist alliance which holds yearly festivals in Europe, North America, and Australia. On their website, they describe their goal as follows: “To find an alternative, both political and artistic/creative, to what we are supposed to see as a symbol of our
conducted by performing a critical ontology of ourselves. In the sort of open politics Butler describes, alliances are always looking back on themselves, to understand their foreclosures. This is a reflexive practice. It requires that action turn back upon itself to understand, create, and re-create activity differently. Such a reflexive activity could become and is a large part of queer politics. The study of the relationship between the practice of shared reflexive activities and group formation may open fruitful ways of conceiving queer coalitions and communities.

Queer theory has much to gain by returning to Foucault and studying reflexive activity. Having established that the entry of “the self” into Foucault’s late works does not signal his return to a model of an autonomous, disembodied, and sovereign subject, I hope to have opened a possible, productive path for future research in this field.
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