

REVIEW ESSAY

Foucault on Drugs: The Personal, the Ethical and the Political in *Foucault in California*

Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California [A True Story – Wherein the Great French Philosopher Drops Acid in the Valley of Death]*, foreword by Heather Dundas. (Berkeley, California: Heyday, 2019). 144 pp, ISBN 9781597144636 (hardback).

INTRODUCTION: FOUCAULT, LSD AND WADE'S MEMOIR

Foucault's 'LSD story' is popular among anyone who knows a thing or two about the French philosopher. Foucault dropped a tab of acid, the story goes, with Simeon Wade, an assistant professor at Claremont Graduate School, and Michael Stoneman, a pianist and Wade's partner, at the Zabriskie Point of Death Valley in California in May 1975. The three 'authoritative' biographies of Foucault (and the implications of writing a biography of Foucault are discussed below) – Didier Eribon's 1989 *Michel Foucault*, David Macey's 1993 *The Lives of Michel Foucault* and, especially, James Miller's 1993 *The Passion of Michel Foucault* – all refer to this LSD episode:

[French author and friend of Foucault's] Claude Mauriac reports a conversation he had with Foucault in 1975: "LSD, cocaine, opium, he tried them all, except of course, heroin, but mightn't he even try that in his present dizzy state?"¹

California, in the shape of two gay academics, also offered LSD, which Foucault now took for the first time. The occasion was almost ceremonial, and had as its setting the desert, and as its background accompaniment a tape of Stockhausen. Rumours abound about the acid trip; this is one of the Foucault stories that everyone seems to know. [...] In November 1975, Foucault spoke nostalgically to Mauriac of 'an unforgettable evening on LSD, in carefully prepared doses, in the desert night, with delicious music, nice people, and some chartreuse'.²

¹ Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (1991), 315.

² David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (1993), 339-340.

And so it was that Michel Foucault, “militant and professor at the College de France,” found himself, improbably enough, perched on the edge of a cliff in the middle of a desert in the spring of 1975, stoned on LSD.³

The LSD episode is also mentioned in the April-May 1975 entry of Daniel Defert’s chronology of Foucault’s life:

Discovers the hedonistic culture developed by Californians around drugs, takes LSD at Zabriskie Point in Death Valley: “Drugs: a break with this physics of power, work, consumption, localization (letter).⁴

Out of the three biographies, it is Miller who gives the longest account of this California experience. This is not surprising since Miller’s biography is known for drawing heavily on Foucault’s personal experiences, particularly his interest in ‘limit-experiences’⁵, as the interpretative key to the philosopher’s work. While Eribon and Macey refer to Foucault’s LSD experience in passing, Miller dedicates a whole chapter, titled “The Will to Know”, to this episode; a colourful chapter peppered with his own reflections on homosexuality and S/M practices. The reason why Miller had so much information on Foucault’s California trip is that he could base his account on a by-then “unpublished 121-page typescript by Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California*.”⁶ Miller also met and interviewed Wade in 1989 and clarified details in subsequent phone calls. Based on this information – as well as conversations with Foucault’s partner Daniel Defert, and Leo Bersani, with whom Foucault dined when he returned to San Francisco after the acid trip – Miller argues that he could conclude that this was, as he claims Foucault called it, “the greatest experience in his life – an epiphany.”⁷ Miller claims, grandiosely, that this episode was so pivotal that “[a]s a result of these experiences, Foucault’s thought would take a dramatic new turn, transforming, in paradoxical and surprising ways, his continuing effort to illuminate what Nietzsche had called ‘the riddle which man must solve’ – the riddle of his own singular being.”⁸

This California story was recently revived once more, and was featured quite prominently in various news websites and other popular outlets, because Wade’s memoir was published in early 2019. Wade died in October 2017, aged seventy-seven. What prompted the publication of *Foucault in California* was the effort of Heather Dundas, a PhD candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Southern California. In her foreword to the memoir, Dundas recalls how she found it unbelievable that “a philosopher of Foucault’s standing would have had the time to take a trip with two strangers, and even harder to believe that he would, at age forty-nine, agree to experiment

³ James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1993), 246.

⁴ Daniel Defert, “Chronology,” in *A Companion to Foucault*, ed. Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, Jana Sawicki (2013), 58.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Interview with Michel Foucault,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion (2000), 241-257.

⁶ Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 437n.1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁸ *Ibid.*

with psychedelic drugs with these strangers.”⁹ Foucault would have been, in fact, forty-eight (not forty-nine; he is an October-born and this episode dates to May 1975), and even cursory knowledge of Foucault’s life would suggest that this story might be true. Dundas confesses that she “hated Foucault, who seemed to embody all the privilege and arrogance of the theory movement.”¹⁰ Upon hearing about Wade’s unpublished manuscript, Dundas contacted Wade and eventually developed a friendship with him. Despite mentioning the manuscript, photographs of the encounter and letters he exchanged with Foucault, Wade could not retrieve these materials, and Dundas found little evidence to support his story, forcing her to suspect that “Wade was just an old, lonely guy who told tall tales about his one brush with celebrity.”¹¹ Until, that is, she came across a [photo](#) in a 1981 edition of *Time* magazine showing Wade, Stoneman and Foucault together. Then, one day, Wade showed Dundas the manuscript, copyrighted in 1990, and allowed her to photocopy it. Wade claims that Foucault had read the *Foucault in California* manuscript and approved its publication, but – surprisingly, given the certainty that such a story would sell – Wade said that no publishing house accepted to publish it.

Foucault in California admittedly makes for entertaining reading, irrespective of how true its contents are. The manuscript is filled with somewhat humorous dialogue, such as the following account of when Wade proposes the trip to Foucault:

“We have prepared something special for you to take in the desert,” I interjected.

“What’s that?” Foucault asked wide-eyed.

“We brought along a powerful elixir, a kind of philosopher’s stone Michael happened upon. We thought you might enjoy a visionary quest in Death Valley.”

The landscape alone is liable to have something of a magical effect upon you. It is a kind of Shangri-la, protected from microwave radiation and other forms of pollution.

“I would like that,” Foucault responded without the slightest hesitation. “I can hardly wait to get started.”¹²

Or when Foucault nonchalantly accepts to consume some marijuana and recounts the ‘Chomsky hash’ story:

“Would you care to smoke some marijuana? One of Simeon’s students gave us a joint, which you are welcome to,” Mike added.

“Yes, I would like a joint,” Foucault affirmed.

“Have you ever smoked grass before?” I inquired.

“I have been smoking it for years, particularly when I was in North Africa, where they have marvelous hashish.”

⁹ Heather Dundas, “Foreword,” vii.

¹⁰ Dundas, “Foreword,” viii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹² Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California*, 31-32.

“And do you smoke grass in Paris?” I persisted.

“Grass is very hard to come by in Paris, but I smoke hash whenever I can get a hold of some.

We have been in good supply recently, thanks to Noam Chomsky.”

“How did that happen?” I asked.

“I appeared with Chomsky on TV in Amsterdam, and after the show the sponsors of the program asked me what kind of remuneration I would like. I told them that I would like some hashish, and happily they complied with my wish with a large block of the stuff. My students and I refer to it as the Chomsky hash, not because Chomsky himself had anything to do with it but because he occasioned it.”¹³

There seems to be little doubt that most of the episodes described in *Foucault in California* did indeed happen. Nor is it doubted that the Death Valley experience was a positive one for Foucault, perhaps even a meaningful one. The key question, though, is *how central* this experience in itself was in determining the direction of Foucault’s work, particularly its shifts in the late 1970s and 80s. As is argued towards the end of this essay, the reason (or, at least, a more real one) behind Foucault’s shift in research, especially his abandoning of the original *The History of Sexuality* plan, is a more sober and academic one, despite Wade’s (and, following him, Miller’s) claim that this LSD experience was *the* determining cause.

This essay I) gives an overview of the story that is dramatically recounted in *Foucault in California*, and then engages with Wade’s memoir from three different perspectives: II) by looking at what Foucault himself said and wrote on drugs and his experiences with them, in order to situate what Foucault may have experienced during this California episode within his broader outlook on drug use; III) by reviewing what has been made of this LSD story (and supposed revelations about his sexuality) in Foucault’s biographies; and IV) by evaluating Wade’s claims about the singular importance of this trip with regard to Foucault’s eventual research trajectory. The essay concludes by proposing perhaps better ways of interpreting Foucault’s California story in light of his views on the ethics and politics of the self-transformation.

I) THE STORY: FOUCAULT IN CALIFORNIA

The story starts when Wade is informed that Foucault will be giving a number of seminars at the University of California in Berkeley in the spring of 1975. Wade was a great admirer of Foucault:

Michel Foucault was my hero, and at last there was a possibility of meeting him. He was already considered one of the most prominent French intellectuals of the twentieth century. I regarded Michel Foucault as nothing less than the greatest thinker of our time,

¹³ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 23-24.

perhaps of all time. To compare him to any other is like lighting a candle in the sunshine.¹⁴

At the time, Wade was an assistant professor at Claremont Graduate School running a European Studies Program, and he took this visit as an opportunity to invite Foucault to Claremont. Apart from the opportunity to meet the philosopher in person, Wade thought that this visit would “help to consolidate our little avant-garde outpost in one of the most reactionary regions of California.”¹⁵ He sent a letter to Foucault, inviting him to Claremont, and Wade recalls that Foucault “replied succinctly that he would very much like to visit us but that since he did not know his schedule or his responsibilities at Berkeley he would have to wait until his arrival in California before making any travel plans. He requested that I write to him at Berkeley.”¹⁶ And Wade did, suggesting a trip to Death Valley and a “projected schedule of seminars, lectures, and parties.”¹⁷ Foucault did not reply. But this did not deter Wade, who went to Foucault’s lecture at Irvine in May 1975 to try to lure the philosopher to Claremont. Foucault apologised for not replying and said that due to the many engagements he had during this California trip, he did not think that he would be able to make it to Claremont this time round. After some more persuasion from Wade, Foucault asked him to call him again at his Berkeley office. Wade, of course, did so, and this time he was rewarded with a confirmation from Foucault. The subsequent chapters of *Foucault in California* are an account of the Death Valley trip, as well as moments that Wade and Stoneman shared with Foucault throughout those days. Of course, all this is written from Wade’s point of view, and it is not possible to verify several of the details of these descriptions. Thus, unless specified otherwise, what follows is based on Wade’s account.

Wade and Stoneman pick up Foucault from the airport and discuss the climate, differences between California and Paris, work, and music as they drive him to their house. There, Foucault expresses his liking of Stoneman’s paintings and Wade’s photography affixed on the walls, reveals his love of dogs, and tells Stoneman that, while he does not do yoga, he does gymnastics to stay in shape.¹⁸ They relish in cocktails, with Foucault revealing that he found the Tequila Sunrise to be “delicious, rather exotic, and the salt is a great idea,”¹⁹ but his favourite was a Bloody Mary. They drink, eat (Foucault “always ate sparingly”²⁰), consume marijuana, discuss books (Foucault expresses his admiration for books such as Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society*, Deleuze’s *Proust and Signs*, and R. D. Laing’s *Knots*),²¹ literature and poetry. The conversations also reveal the

¹⁴ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ See *ibid.*, 27-28.

importance Foucault gave to music in his life, and how fondly he spoke of the French composer Pierre Boulez and his work.²²

After breakfast at dawn, Wade proposes the plan of taking LSD in Death Valley to Foucault, which he agrees to. Their conversations flow; in one moment they discuss drugs and in another they turn to contemporary cinema, with Foucault also mentioning his involvement in the making of the Pierre Rivière film. Revealingly, or perhaps symptomatic of certain quarters of academe, instances of discussing someone's work often also include gossip: "Godard is a political bitch!";²³ "Oh, that Artaud was such a snob."²⁴ However, such off-guard conversation also reveals moments of Foucault speaking highly of figures he admired or considered as an influence on him: "Genet and I are very close;"²⁵ "Merleau-Ponty was much more influential for my generation than Sartre. He was a rigorous scholar that we all could admire;"²⁶ "Gramsci was much more important to me when I was younger and in the Communist Party;"²⁷ "Althusser has been for me a teacher and a guide."²⁸

Wade describes the surroundings they drove through, the small desert towns, the remote villages, picnicking overlooking Panamint Valley on a hot day ("It was 115 degrees Fahrenheit"²⁹). By mid-afternoon, they stop over in a resort, where Foucault naps. As they prepare "the magical potion,"³⁰ Foucault expresses hesitation and asks to take half of the prepared dose rather than the full amount. After some persuasion from Wade, Foucault agrees to ingest the full dose: "Following instructions, he wet the tip of his finger, then pressed down the substance against his bottom teeth and gulped audibly."³¹ As the effect of the drug starts to kick in, they "help it along with grass and liqueur,"³² talk about art (particularly Magritte), music ("Music is our theology,"³³ Foucault announces at one point), and past loves. At the peak of the high, they reach Zabriskie Point: "Foucault smiled and made a sweeping gaze of the heavens. 'The sky has exploded and the stars are raining down upon me. I know this is not true, but it is the Truth,'" Wade has Foucault saying; "'I am very happy,' he told us, tears streaming from his eyes."³⁴

They return home, nap, have breakfast after a few hours and return to Zabriskie Point during daytime and take pictures together. They return to Claremont for Foucault to

²² See Michel Foucault, "Pierre Boulez, Passing through the Screen," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion (1998), 241-244.

²³ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

deliver a talk “about the nature of power in contemporary society”³⁵ in the midst of the LSD ‘afterglow’. In the evening after the lecture, Foucault attends a party that is organised for him at Wade’s place: “He was consistently courteous, even with overzealous interlocutors.”³⁶ Wade recounts how the attendees ask Foucault all sorts of questions on women’s liberation and the gay movement, Sartre and Camus, the study of literature, and his impressions of California. Despite Foucault’s willingness to entertain interlocutors, students and professors alike, with frankness, Wade remarks that: “At that moment I realized just how much Michel hated the spotlight.”³⁷ As he is leaving the party, Foucault encounters David, a friend of Wade who lived in a mountain cabin. Foucault agrees to take a hike to Bear Canyon to visit David’s cabin on a subsequent occasion.

Wade writes that “[t]he next morning”³⁸ they go on a hike to meet David and a group of Wade’s friends, “four of whom lived in cabins throughout the canyon, composing a kind of Taoist commune.”³⁹ Foucault relishes in conversations with these men, and responds to their questions with graciousness and openness. These dialogues, as recounted by Wade, include references to a wide range of thinkers and theorists: Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Braudel, Marx, Gramsci, Althusser, Nietzsche. However, these dialogues also present a ‘more private’ Foucault engaging in theory-free dialogue about his own experiences and outlook on life. He answers point-blank questions by a young man on how to deal with feeling lost in life (“You are not really trying unless you are lost. That is a good sign. I was lost as a young man too”⁴⁰), and on whether he is happy (“I am happy with my life, not so much with myself”⁴¹). The memoir ends with a transcript of a discussion Foucault had with students in the Founders Room at Claremont, and concluding chapters in which Wade describes driving Foucault to the airport and stopping mid-way at a coffee shop for some parting conversations and, Wade tells us, “[a]s Foucault hugged and kissed us goodbye he metamorphosed successively into the Deleuzian becomings: child, woman, marmoset, leopard, crystal, orchid, water lily, stammerer, nomad, stranger, intense music, and finally, his ultimate dream, imperceptible.”⁴²

II) DRUGS IN FOUCAULT’S WORK

This California episode was not a chance encounter that Foucault had with drugs. As various references in his works show, Foucault thought that there was an ethics and

³⁵ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 67. This should be the discussion in the Founders Room, replicated at the end of *Foucault in California*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 74. Despite Wade’s presentation of this hike as happening a day after the party, it might actually be the case that it happened in a subsequent visit by Foucault, as explained below.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 129.

politics of drug use, particularly in the relation that he saw between drugs, pleasure and death. It is recorded that Foucault made recreational use of some drugs, which he himself mentions in several interviews, and which is discussed in his biographies. This section gives an account of some of these references and episodes from Foucault's works and life in order to situate the Death Valley story within his broader outlook on drugs.

In "Theatrum Philosophicum" – a 1970 review of Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense* in which Foucault famously proposed that "perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian"⁴³ – Foucault cryptically wrote:

We can easily see how LSD inverts the relationships of ill humor, stupidity, and thought: it no sooner eliminates the supremacy of categories than it tears away the ground of its indifference and disintegrates the gloomy dumbshow of stupidity [...]. Opium produces other effects: [...] Opium ensures a weightless immobility, the stupor of a butterfly that differs from catatonic rigidity [...]. Drugs – if we can speak of them generally – have nothing at all to do with truth and falsity; only to fortune-tellers do they reveal a world "more truthful than the real."⁴⁴

Jon Simons interprets this passage as implying that, for Foucault, "[d]rugs have the potential to enable one to think in ways other than one's habits of thought, by unifying and differentiating experiences in unusual ways."⁴⁵ There are ample other references to drugs that Foucault makes throughout his life, particularly in late interviews.

In a 1983 interview, Foucault talks about the politics of contemporary life, particularly what he sees as the "'perverse effects' of the social security system in France."⁴⁶ He refers to various spheres of life that have become 'over-medicalized,'⁴⁷ such as education, sexuality and imprisonment. For Foucault, this triumph of medicalization is supported by the belief that its logic is key to dealing with problems in the most efficient and economical way, even if these problems belong to other registers of life than medicine. He claims that such concerns have posed "the question of what life is worth and the way in which one can confront death,"⁴⁸ and the consequence of this is to establish a right to suicide, that is, "a recognized right for everybody to kill himself when he wishes in decent conditions."⁴⁹ It is in this context that Foucault proposes, with an unclear degree of seriousness, that: "If I won a few billion francs in the national lottery, I'd set up an institute where people who wanted to die could come and spend a weekend, a week or a month, enjoying themselves as far as possible, *perhaps with the help of drugs*, and then disappear, as if by obliteration."⁵⁰

⁴³ Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion (1998), 343.

⁴⁴ Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," 363. In a published note to this paragraph, the author of the books being reviewed, Deleuze, writes: "What will people think of us?" Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," 368n.16.

⁴⁵ Jon Simons, *Foucault & the Political* (1995), 96.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, "Social Security," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (1990), 159.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, [emphasis added].

In a 1979 short text on suicide, "The Simplest of Pleasures", Foucault once again invokes the idea of planning one's death, this time imagining it as being accompanied by sex and pleasure: "suicide festivals or orgies are just two of the possible methods"⁵¹ of doing this, he writes. He refers to Japanese places of anonymous sex as "places without maps or calendars"⁵² and imagines such places, similar to the institute he imagined setting up if he won the lottery, as places where one can go "with anonymous partners to look for an opportunity to die free of all stereotypes. There you'd have an indeterminate amount of time – seconds, weeks, months perhaps – until the moment presents itself with a compelling clearness."⁵³

Foucault also talks about the relation between suicide and drug use in a 1983 interview with Charles Ruas on *Death and the Labyrinth*, Foucault's 1963 book on Raymond Roussel. What drew Foucault to Roussel's avant-garde writings, among other reasons, was their mutual interest with the finitude of language and the sovereignty of the subject. Foucault would have also been interested in Roussel's marginalised profile as a homosexual who was also hospitalized in a mental asylum. One could also add that Roussel and Foucault were united by their fascination with anonymity and death. Foucault's reflections on Roussel's death echo his sentiments on the self-obliteration that may follow, perhaps aided by drugs, through choosing one's own death. Roussel died of a drug overdose; whether this was accidental or planned (as Foucault seems to imply) is unclear. What is clear is that, for Foucault, the manner of Roussel's death is a meaningful one, particularly in view of his manner of living. When asked about Roussel's drug use, Foucault says that this "is a subject which interests me greatly, but one which I've had to put aside – the study of the culture of drugs or drugs as culture in the West from the beginning of the nineteenth century. No doubt it started much earlier, but it would come up to the present, it's so closely tied to the artistic life of the West."⁵⁴ On various occasions, Foucault referred to the *culture* of drug use as precisely that; a culture (or a counter or sub-culture), a form of life, a style of existence. In another interview, Foucault speaks on how practices of drug use can harbour a creative potential of "inventing new possibilities."⁵⁵ For Foucault, this invention also involves contesting the privileged role of sexual pleasure as the sole site of bodily pleasure: "The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure is the root of *all* our possible pleasure. I think *that's* something quite wrong."⁵⁶ He expresses his frustration at "the fact that the problem of drugs is always envisaged as a problem of freedom and prohibition. I think that drugs must become a part of our

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, "The Simplest of Pleasures," in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (1996), 296.

⁵²Ibid., 297.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth* (2004), 185.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984* (1996), 384.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 384 [emphasis in original].

culture."⁵⁷ He elaborates further on the idea of a culture of drug use and pleasure in this way:

We have to study drugs. We have to experience drugs. We have to do *good* drugs, which can produce very intense pleasure. I think this puritanism about drugs, which implies that you can either be for drugs or against drugs, is mistaken. Drugs have now become a part of our culture. Just as there is bad music and good music, there are bad drugs and good drugs."⁵⁸

In a 1983 interview with Stephen Riggins,⁵⁹ Foucault again evokes the idea of a cultural ethos, also in relation to drug use, pleasure and silence (perhaps as opposed to the non-silence of confession⁶⁰). Foucault refers to an encounter he had with the filmmaker Daniel Schmidt with whom he developed a friendship that originated in silence. After discovering that they had nothing to tell each other, Foucault says, "[w]e drank, we smoked hash, we had dinner. And I don't think we spoke more than twenty minutes during those ten hours. From that moment a rather long friendship started."⁶¹ Foucault goes on to say that 'our culture' does not have a culture of silence in the same way that "we don't have a culture of suicide either."⁶² In this same interview, Foucault makes two further references to drugs, one explicit and another less so. While speaking about his difficulty in experiencing pleasure, Foucault draws a link between pleasure and death:

It's not as simple as that (Laughs) to enjoy one's self. And – I must say that's my dream – I would like and I hope I'll die of an overdose (Laughs) of pleasure of any kind. Because I think it's really difficult and I always have the feeling that I do not feel the pleasure, the complete total pleasure and, for me, it's related to death. [...] Because I think that the kind of pleasure I would consider as *the* real pleasure would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn't survive it. I would die.⁶³

Here, Foucault refers to an accident from his own life, once again linking pleasure with death, and with drugs, despite not explicitly disclosing it in this anecdote.⁶⁴ Elaborating further on his reference to a pleasure so deep that it kills, he recounts this episode:

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," 384 [emphasis in original].

⁵⁹ This interview is referred to with at least three different titles in the different collections in which it is featured, these being Michel Foucault, "The Minimalist Self," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (1990), 3-16; Michel Foucault, "An Ethics of Pleasure," in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (1996), 371-381; Michel Foucault, "An Interview by Stephen Riggins," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 121-133.

⁶⁰ For more on the references to silence in Foucault's work, see Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* (2009), 193-197, and Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (2005), 157-174.

⁶¹ Foucault, "An Ethics of Pleasure," 371.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 378 [emphasis in original].

⁶⁴ For more on this point, see Sanjay K. Gautam, *Foucault and the Kamasutra: The Courtesan, the Dandy, and the Birth of Ars Erotica as Theater in India* (2016), 20-49.

I'll give you a clearer and simpler example. Once I was struck by a car in the street. I was walking. And for maybe two seconds I had the impression that I was dying and it was really a very, very intense pleasure. The weather was wonderful. It was 7 o'clock on a summer day. The sun was coming down. The sky was very wonderful and blue and so on. It was, it still is now, one of my best memories. (Laughs).⁶⁵

According to Miller, what Foucault does not reveal in this interview is that before his walk, Foucault "had been smoking opium."⁶⁶ [James] Miller writes that D. A. Miller, a professor of English at Berkeley with whom Foucault had spoken about this accident, told him the following: "he'd been walking across the street outside of his Paris apartment. He had been hit by a car. And he thought he was going to die. He compared it to a drug experience: it was a euphoric, ecstatic moment. He had a sense that he was leaving his body, that he was outside his own body."⁶⁷ In the interview, Foucault neglected the part on him possibly being on drugs during this accident from July 1978,⁶⁸ and focused only on the pleasure derived from this experience. However, in perhaps a moment of 'free association', immediately after his comment on this car accident, Foucault goes on: "There is also the fact that some drugs are really important for me because they are the mediation to those incredibly intense joys that I am looking for and that I am not able to experience, to afford myself." For Foucault, the triad of *drugs-pleasure-death* was tightly-knit in such a way that the sense in which he spoke of drugs in relation to death echoes the manner in which he spoke of sex in relation to death (for example, the suicide houses accompanied by sex and/or drugs) which, in turn, echoes the way in which he links sex and drugs.

The close connection Foucault drew between sex and drugs can also be seen in his widely-recorded fascination with the bathhouses in San Francisco. In a piece from Wade's memoir, a quotation which Miller had referred to in his biography, Foucault is asked about the California gay scene by Wade and Stoneman, and says:

Yes, I have been to the baths. One night at the baths I met an attractive young man who told me that he and many others go to the baths a few times a week, frequently under the influence of uppers and amyl. Such a way of life is extraordinary to me, unbelievable. These men live for casual sex and drugs. Incredible! There are no such places in France.⁶⁹

Wade also recounts how Foucault compared their LSD experience with sex: "The only thing I can compare this experience to in my life is sex with a stranger. Contact with a strange body affords an experience of the Truth similar to what I am experiencing now."⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Foucault, "An Ethics of Pleasure," 378.

⁶⁶ Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 306. In his biography, Eribon too refers to this episode and writes: "And Foucault told Paul Veyne that he was under the influence of opium when he was hit by a car in July 1978, on the Rue de Vaugirard in front of the building where he lived." Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 315.

⁶⁷ Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 350.

⁶⁸ Macey mentions this car accident but does not say anything on whether Foucault was high at this time. What he writes is that "[t]he pleasure may have been intense, but Foucault spent the next year suffering from bad headaches and bouts of nausea." Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 131.

⁶⁹ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 42-43.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

Much has been made of these anecdotes on Foucault, and in as much as he did not particularly enjoy publicising his life, he did not shy away from openly speaking about them. There is a sense in which it is tempting to trace a continuity between Foucault's works and his life. While Foucault's own ideas can be used to argue against the view that an author's life functions as the key to interpret an author's work, one could also fruitfully turn to the spirit of Foucault's later work to argue for an important ethico-political relation between his life and his work. The next section turns to engage with this question, using the Death Valley story as a case in point.

III) AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FRAGMENTS: FOUCAULT ON IDENTITY AND CONFESSING SEXUALITY

One way to react to Foucault's California story is to treat it as an instance of prying into the personal life of an individual. In fact, despite Miller's protestations that he wanted to read Foucault's life *in terms of* his work, Miller's biography of Foucault has often been subjected to this critique. David M. Halperin, for example, famously denounces Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault* in this way:

[Miller's] account of Foucault's personal and intellectual evolution is not just unFoucauldian. It is anti-Foucauldian. It purports to "explain" Foucault's thought by tracing its origin to the "truth" of his psychosexual being, thereby combining authoritative historical/biographical knowledge with the power of normalizing judgment in a single gesture whose effect is to strengthen the very disciplinary controls that Foucault's whole life was dedicated to resisting.⁷¹

It is not an easy feat to write a biography of Foucault. In fact, the three main book-length biographies of Foucault all reflect on this difficulty in similar terms, that is, by expressing wariness on how tenable it is to write Foucault's biography:

Consider, for example, the dilemma of trying to write a narrative account of someone who questioned, repeatedly and systematically, the value of old-fashioned ideas about the "author"; someone who raised the gravest of doubts about the character of personal identity as such; someone who, as a matter of temperament, distrusted prying questions and naked honesty.⁷²

Writing a biography of Michel Foucault may seem paradoxical. Did he not, on numerous occasions, challenge the notion of the author, thereby dismissing the very possibility of a biographical study?⁷³

⁷¹ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995), 145. A 1993 issue of the journal *Salmagundi* dedicates a whole section to articles on Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, and features articles by Miller, Lynn Hunt, Alasdair Macintyre, Richard Rorty and David Halperin. See *Salmagundi* 97 (Winter 1993), 30-99. For more on the debate/polemic between Miller and Halperin, see Jonathan Tran, *Foucault and Theology* (2011), 67-92.

⁷² Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 6.

⁷³ Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, ix.

Some posthumous subjects are less cooperative than others and Foucault, who shared Nietzsche's scorn for 'all the learned dust of biography', is rather more recalcitrant than Shaw. Alive, he would have rejected the advances of any biographer; in death he still struggles to escape them.⁷⁴

Such hesitance on the part of these biographers can be sympathised with, considering Foucault's famous assertions on the topic: "I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same;"⁷⁵ "Anyway, my personal life is not at all interesting. [...] As far as my personal life is uninteresting, it is not worthwhile making a secret of it. (Laughs.) By the same token, it may not be worthwhile publicizing it."⁷⁶ These assertions, however, do not mean that Foucault paid no regard to the relation between one's personal life and one's own thought; on the contrary, as he writes, "[e]ach of my works is a part of my own biography;"⁷⁷ "I haven't written a single book that was not inspired, at least in part, by a direct personal experience;"⁷⁸ he also referred to his theoretical works as "a few fragments of autobiography."⁷⁹ The meaning of these statements emerges clearly, for example, in an episode from Wade's memoir. Reacting to Wade's question on whether there was ever a specific event that gave him crucial insight that determined his work, Foucault says:

"Yes!" he responded. "When I enrolled at the École normale the headmaster demanded to learn if there was anything unusual about me. When I informed him of my homosexuality, he replied with horrified expression that such behavior was not normal and certainly unacceptable to the reputation of the school. He then had me confined, for my own good, he said. He told me that I must be reformed, that I would be confined, examined, and treated by an array of authorities – doctors, teachers, psychologist, psychiatrists, etc. At this instant I recognized in a flash how the system works. I perceived the fundamental impulse of our society: *normalization*."⁸⁰

This way in which Foucault connects his work with his life, however, contrasts with the way in which Wade and, following him, Miller greatly emphasise the significance of a statement Foucault is said to have uttered while high: 'Tonight I have achieved a fresh perspective on myself. I now understand my sexuality. It all seems to start with my sister.'⁸¹ In his biography, Miller picks up on this point in an endnote and claims that Wade's inclusion of this phrase gives further credence to his memoir since even other accounts had indicated that "Foucault was struck by something, apparently sexual, about his relationship to his sister: both Bersani and Defert have also told me that a personal

⁷⁴ Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, xi.

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002), 19.

⁷⁶ Foucault, "An Ethics of Pleasure," 381.

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (1988), 11.

⁷⁸ Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault," 244.

⁷⁹ Michel Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (1990), 156.

⁸⁰ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 58-59 [emphasis in original].

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

revelation about his relation with his sister was crucial for Foucault."⁸² Miller goes on to speculate, dubiously, on this episode and the impact of this 'revelation' on Foucault's subsequent work: "Circumstantial evidence [...] suggests that the epiphany may have involved a memory of incestuous fantasies, and the guilt that accompanied these fantasies. Before his acid trip, the central focus of Foucault's critical remarks on sexuality had been the prohibitions surrounding masturbation; after it, the emphasis shifted – to the incest taboo."⁸³ Moreover, in his biography, Eribon refers to an episode concerning Foucault and his sister in childhood, and recounts how the young Foucault, a few months shy of his fourth birthday, had to be prematurely admitted to Lycée Henri-IV (which his sister attended) after his mother told the teacher that "he did not want to be separated from his sister."⁸⁴ Miller refers to this episode in the same footnote that contains his speculations on Foucault's feelings toward his sister, imposing an added layer of possible interpretation.

While not much can be said on the meaning of Foucault's utterance on his sister, one can regard his supposed remark – "I now understand my sexuality" – with scepticism in light of his own critical views on the relation between sexuality and truth in *The Will to Knowledge* and the later lectures, particularly on adopting a confessional and hermeneutic attitude of decipherment toward one's sexual self. Furthermore, as Foucault writes in his introduction to the Herculine Barbin book: "Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?"⁸⁵, suggesting that an excessive concern with the truth of one's sexuality is both unnecessary and potentially dangerous. This point echoes Halperin's contention with Miller's approach to Foucault's biography. While Halperin criticises Eribon for reducing Foucault's personal life to silence, he chastises Miller for over-particularising and psychologising Foucault's life:

If Eribon's mistake is to reduce Foucault's personal life to the merely *private*, neglecting the connections between Foucault's thought and his experiences of sexual, social, and political subjection, Miller's mistake is exactly symmetrical and opposite: it is to seek in the details of Foucault's childhood experiences, fantasy life, sexual preoccupations, and artistic tastes the key to understanding his books, which Miller treats as a series of encrypted autobiographies. What both approaches miss is the specifically *political* character of Foucault's evolving practices of personal life, of his ongoing struggle against the modern "technologies of the subject" whose origins he traced and whose operations he described in book after book.⁸⁶

⁸² Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 438n.1.

⁸³ Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 438-439n.16. Stuart Elden contests this claim, writing "that this is at best doubtful is confirmed by the *Les Anormaux* course, where both masturbation and incest are discussed as part of a complementary analysis [...] before Foucault ever set foot in California." Stuart Elden, "The Problem of Confession: The Productive Failure of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*," *Journal for Cultural Research* 9:1 (2005), 36.

⁸⁴ Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 6.

⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* (2013), vii [emphasis in original].

⁸⁶ Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 153 [emphasis in original]. For a review essay on Miller's and Eribon's biographies of Foucault, see Jacques Lezra, "Foucault's Perfection," *Contemporary Literature* 35:3 (1994), 593-623. For a

Foucault in California presents us with the opportunity to think and re-think the relation between Foucault's life and Foucault's work. While both his life and his work have been the object of so many studies, the inter-relation between the two – between his *logos* and *bios* – remains a difficult but radiant terrain to be treaded cautiously.⁸⁷ Ultimately, as Miller himself confesses, “given the lack of further details, nothing much can be said with any confidence about this aspect of Foucault's epiphany, which must therefore remain an enigma.”⁸⁸

IV) THE CALIFORNIA TRIP: DATES AND IMPORTANCE

Before considering the importance of this story in relation to the trajectory of Foucault's work post-1975, there is a further point to be clarified about the dates of this California story, as presented in Wade's memoir. There is a hint of the date of this encounter, though Wade's account is misleading in this regard. Wade recalls telling Foucault: “We will spend Memorial Day weekend in Death Valley.”⁸⁹ Indeed, the whole Foucault in California episode is presented as happening during the ‘Memorial Day weekend’, including in the blurb on the back cover of the book. However, this seems to be incorrect. Memorial Day in 1975 fell on Monday 26 May yet, in her foreword, Dundas quotes a letter from Foucault to Wade dated Wednesday 14 May 1975, in which Foucault referred to the Death Valley weekend as “a great experience, one of the most important in my life.”⁹⁰ Thus, it cannot be the case that, in the 14 May letter, Foucault could have referred to the Death Valley trip which, according to Wade, happened later in the Memorial Day weekend. It turns out that the Memorial Day visit was in fact a separate visit. Foucault visited Wade twice in May 1975: the first visit, in which the Death Valley trip happened, was in the weekend of 10 to 11 May 1975, while the second visit was two weeks later during the Memorial Day weekend.⁹¹ A letter from Foucault to Wade, dated 30 May 1975, seems to indicate that by this time Foucault was back in Paris. Therefore, the ‘Memorial Day weekend’ framing to

review essay on Miller's, Eribon's and Macey's biographies of Foucault, see Luther H. Martin, “The discourse of (Michel Foucault's) life: A review essay,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 7:1 (1995), 57-69.

⁸⁷ Paul Veyne is one scholar who presents an interesting biographical account of Foucault read in relation to his ethos. See Paul Veyne, “The Final Foucault and His Ethics,” *Critical Inquiry* 20:1 (1993), 1-9, and Paul Veyne, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character* (2010).

⁸⁸ Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 439n.16.

⁸⁹ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 15.

⁹⁰ Dundas, “Foreword,” xvi. For further information on the Foucault-Wade letters, see James Penner, “Blowing the Philosopher's Fuses: Michel Foucault's LSD Trip in the Valley of Death,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 17, 2019, and Andrew Marzoni, “Foucault in the Valley of Death,” *The Baffler* 46 (July 2019).

⁹¹ In an interview with Wade conducted by Dundas in May 2017 and published in the online magazine *Boom California* in September 2017, Wade does indicate – despite the unclear phrasing – that there were two visits by Foucault within the space of two weeks in 1975: “Foucault visited us again. Shortly after his second visit, which was two weeks after this, where we stayed up in the mountains [...]. After he left the second time, I sat down and wrote an account of the experience, called *Death Valley Trip*.” Simeon Wade and Heather Dundas, “Michel Foucault in Death Valley: A Boom interview with Simeon Wade,” *Boom California*, September 10, 2017.

the whole ‘Death Valley trip’ story is not fully accurate and is somewhat misleading.⁹² Other instances show that Wade was not particularly accurate when it came to dates. Besides Wade’s repeated claims in *Foucault in California* that the Death Valley trip happened in the Memorial Day weekend (and not in a previous visit), in a 2017 interview which unearthed some photographs from the Death Valley trip, Wade and the interviewer (Dundas) erroneously refer to the Death Valley trip as happening in June (rather than May) 1975.

Wade is also mistaken in the dates he gives in *Chez Foucault*, a 1978 Foucault ‘fanzine’ that he edited in 1978, containing information on Foucault’s life, works and ideas, as well as sporadic quotations given without a context.⁹³ These same quotations, in fact, turn out to be pieces of dialogue from *Foucault in California*. In the fanzine, these quotations are erroneously dated “May, 1976” (instead of 1975), as is a transcription of a “Dialogue on Power” which Foucault had with a group of students. This dialogue on power happened in the Founders Room at Claremont, most probably during the first visit to Wade right after the Death Valley trip. In *Foucault in California*, this dialogue is presented at the very end of the California trip, suggesting that it occurred after the Bear Canyon mountain trip. However, in an interview, Wade suggests that the mountain visit happened during Foucault’s *second* visit.⁹⁴ In the memoir, Wade describes around four consecutive days, and this indicates that he possibly peppered the narrative of *Foucault in California* with details from both California trips, especially since he wrote the memoir after the second visit. This adds to the difficulty of establishing the precise timeline of what exactly happened and when in the May 1975 visits.

Matters of dates aside, there are also points to be made with regard to how instrumental Wade presents the Death Valley experience to the eventual trajectory of Foucault’s work. As a narrator, Wade reveals how he was very self-conscious (“I was being a chatterbox”) and full of curiosity and fascination (“There was so much I wanted to know from him and about him;” “Do you remember your dreams, Michel?”)⁹⁵ in Foucault’s presence. Wade often describes how Foucault reacted in response to his behaviour. For example, when Wade promises to remain silent for a while, Foucault “appeared visibly relieved;”⁹⁶ or when Wade writes that upon telling Foucault that “there are so many of us here who love you. You must sense that we are so grateful for your work and the enlightenment you have brought to us,”⁹⁷ Foucault “was taken aback and

⁹² Thanks to Heather Dundas, Stuart Elden and Andrew Marzoni for their clarifications on this matter.

⁹³ *Chez Foucault* can be accessed [here](#).

⁹⁴ “Foucault visited us again. Shortly after his second visit, which was two weeks after this, where we stayed up in the mountains – it was a mountain experience.” Wade and Dundas, “Michel Foucault in Death Valley: A Boom interview with Simeon Wade.” The second visit is alluded to in the last chapter of *Foucault in California* when, in the airport, Wade describes Foucault saying, “Instead of stopping off in New York on my way back to Paris, I could come here for two days. I would like to spend time with David in the mountains.” Wade, *Foucault in California*, 126.

⁹⁵ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 39.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

looked at me in disbelief. But he thanked me modestly.”⁹⁸ In various episodes, Wade comes across as swaying towards the confessional by wanting to know everything on Foucault, on what he thought, how he lived and conducted himself. To an extent, this might explain why Wade made *so much* of every piece of information that Foucault revealed about himself and perhaps read a bit too much into the significance of this encounter. While it seems undoubtable that Foucault cherished Wade’s friendship, the latter seemed to also relish in the brush with fame and glory brought about by his interaction with the former. For example, when Foucault remarks, somewhat teasingly, that the club in which Wade and Stoneman met will be very famous, Wade muses “[i]f only because we have tripped with Michel Foucault,” or when Foucault asked whether he should tell others about the trip, Wade replied, “I would hope so,”⁹⁹ suggesting that the plan to persuade Foucault to consume LSD with them was part of Wade’s wish to create a lasting association with Foucault.

Contesting Wade’s desire for ‘grandeur by association’ is, however, less important than correcting certain misconceptions on how significant this California episode in itself was in influencing the direction of Foucault’s later work. Wade presents the Death Valley trip as singularly important in determining Foucault’s eventual plans for *The History of Sexuality*:

As it turned out, my formula might be considered something of a delusion of grandeur. The Death Valley trip did not change the world, but it transformed Michel Foucault, who said it was the greatest experience of his life. When he got back to Paris, he wrote to Mike and me that he had to begin anew. The Death Valley trip had changed him completely. He stated that upon his return he threw the completed second volume of *The History of Sexuality* into the fire and eradicated the entire prospectus of books he had meant to publish in the projected seven-volume series. He planned to start over.

The results of that new beginning can be seen in the last three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, which were written after the Death Valley trip. They crown his body of work like the *Ethics* caps the corpus of Aristotle. Foucault’s final message to us is the supreme value of the “aesthetics of existence.” He teaches us to elude the ruinous codes of the Disciplined Society and to make our lives into works of art.

I believe the Death Valley trip was instrumental in making Foucault’s *Ethics* possible, as well as determining its substance.¹⁰⁰

Firstly, it is true that Foucault spoke fondly with friends of the LSD experience he shared with Wade and Stoneman, and it is not being doubted that the event did happen and that it was a pleasant one for Foucault. It is also true that Foucault scrapped his original plan for *The History of Sexuality*. However, various replies can be given to Wade’s supposition. It is less true, if not outright untrue, that the California trip was a decisive influence on

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 66.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 9-10. The original plan was that *The History of Sexuality* would be a six-volume series and not, as Wade claims, seven.

Foucault's work. As reported by Wade himself, when he asked Foucault on the part of the trip that he enjoyed the most, Foucault mentioned the Taoist commune: "I asked him what he had enjoyed most since we returned from our trip through the looking glass. 'The morning in the mountains,' he answered. 'I loved the hike with the young men in Bear Canyon.'"¹⁰¹ Moreover, Wade reproduces this dialogue which, according to him, happened at the peak of their drug experience in which Foucault remarks that the effect of the acid trip on him was more experiential rather than conceptual:

"Do you think this event will affect your work?" I asked.

"Definitely," he replied.

"Have you had any philosophical insights tonight?" I inquired.

"Not really. I have not spent these hours reflecting on concepts. It has not been a philosophical experience for me, but something else entirely."¹⁰²

Macey, moreover, sheds doubt on how seriously the whole California story in general should be taken, let alone speculation on how instrumental it was for shifting the direction of Foucault's work: "Reports from those who claim that he told them that it changed his life should probably be treated with some scepticism; the insights granted by LSD tend to be short-lived and illusory rather than real."¹⁰³

There is one further reply – and it is the strongest one – that can be presented in response to Wade's account of the importance of this story. In an interview, Wade claims that it is thanks to the Death Valley trip that Foucault became illuminated of the importance of, for example, Jeremy Bentham in modern politics. As Stuart Elden clarifies, this statement is manifestly wrong since *Surveiller et punir*, in which Foucault discusses Bentham at length, was published in February 1975, three months before Foucault's California visit.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, as Elden has shown, various reasons for Foucault's change in research direction following the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* have been proposed, with these explanations having different degrees of plausibility. Some point to Foucault's disappointment with the lukewarm reception of the first volume; others refer to his dissatisfaction with life in Paris, the teaching format at the Collège de France, and contractual issues with Gallimard; another reason for his emphasis on early Christianity in the late 1970s and early 1980s is said to be his migration from the Bibliothèque Nationale to the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir at the Dominicans.¹⁰⁵ Miller's proposal, based on his reading of Wade's memoir, that it was the California episode that prompted Foucault's research shift is doubted by Elden, who writes that:

¹⁰¹ Wade, *Foucault in California*, 125.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰³ Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 339.

¹⁰⁴ See Simeon Wade and Heather Dundas, "Michel Foucault in Death Valley: A Boom interview with Simeon Wade."

¹⁰⁵ See Elden, "The Problem of Confession," 35.

[T]he dates are all wrong. Foucault finished the manuscript of *La Volonté de savoir* in August 1976, some 15 months after the acid trip in Death Valley. In that time he had given the lectures that comprise «*Il faut défendre la société*», which deal extensively with issues to be treated in the originally proposed Volume VI. As Miller himself notes, it is in the spring of 1978 when Foucault returned to the Collège de France after his sabbatical that the real problems start to be apparent.

If anything, contrary to Wade's supposition, in 1978 Foucault turned not to a consideration of the aesthetics of existence, but to the study of governmentality. It is later, that is, when drafting *Les Aveux de la chair*, that Foucault was compelled to further study classical antiquity since he was unhappy with this material which featured as an introduction to this volume on Christianity. Of course, this material eventually became the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. This explanation, presented by Elden in painstaking detail, is a far more complex and accurate one than the lightning bolt of inspiration that Wade presumes Foucault experienced in the Death Valley.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION: ON FOUCAULT'S ETHOS

Reflections on Foucault's life have resulted in reactions that span an entire spectrum – from worried critics who decry that “[t]o take Foucault seriously is to learn what kind of fire scholars play with when following him to critique and recommend changes in practice,”¹⁰⁷ to sympathetic readers who feel that “[a]s far as I'm concerned, the guy was a fucking saint.”¹⁰⁸ To arrive at such judgements, readers refer to the same information: Foucault's personal, philosophical and political outlooks. The publication of Wade's *Foucault in California* crystallises similarly eclectic reactions, ranging from outrage at his irresponsibility and unexemplary character to supporters who admire the link between Foucault's intellectual prowess and his experimental way of life.

This essay positions itself cautiously. On the one hand, it does not give too much weight to speculations on what Foucault's California story *really* meant for him and sheds serious doubt on the instrumentality of this singular event in shifting Foucault's research. On the other hand, I believe that it is not incorrect to *read into* aspects of Foucault's personal life, and this is also inspired by Foucault's own remarks on the relation between his work and his life. My concern is with how this is done, insofar as it must avoid over-psychologising or romanticising Foucault's life. As he said in an interview, “[t]hose things that matter to me in a personal way, or which are important to me just as they are, I don't feel any inclination to analyse.”¹⁰⁹ We readers would do well to keep in mind Foucault's views on identity, confession and hermeneutics of the self when attempting such interpretations. We would also do well to be wary of how over-enthusiastic uses of

¹⁰⁶ For a detailed exposition and analysis of the shifts in Foucault's plans for *The History of Sexuality*, see Stuart Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (2016).

¹⁰⁷ Steven A. Gelb, “‘Be Cruel!’ Dare We Take Foucault Seriously?,” *Mental Retardation* 38:4 (2000), 369-372.

¹⁰⁸ Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth*, 184.

philosophers' lives can function to consolidate cults of personality and academic superstardom, whereby philosophers' lives are reduced to commodities devoid of their potential critical power. If there is something to be cherished in the portrayal of Foucault in *Foucault in California*, assuming Wade's account is anything to go by, it is his ethos. Wade presents various episodes which colour Foucault's ethos as an academic and intellectual: his intellectual generosity and his generosity of spirit; the way in which he responds fully and openly to questions irrespective of who is asking; his words of encouragement on academic and life matters to students; his avoidance of limelight; his shyness and humility. While Foucault was a 'dandy flaneur', ample episodes described in *Foucault in California* and beyond show how he deeply felt and embodied the responsibility that comes with being a critical intellectual.

Foucault's LSD story must be read in various contexts: in relation to his outlook on sex and pleasure; in light of his views on friendship; in view of his comments on drugs in interviews and other sources; in connection with his ideas on aesthetics of existence, self-fashioning and the politics of our selves. The drug use in the California story, trivial as some may take it to be, can be read as a practice of the self on Foucault's part. Such a practice can also be seen as congruent with his understanding of philosophy as askesis that does not aim at self-renunciation but instead is an experience of self-transformation, aesthetics of existence, and spirituality, by which he meant "the subject's attainment of a certain mode of being and the transformations that the subject must carry out on itself to attain this mode of being."¹¹⁰ Finally, Foucault's California trip can be seen to also possess traces of parrhesia. In his final lectures, Foucault characterised Socratic parrhesia as manifesting symphony of discourse and action; the harmony between *logos* and *bios*. Parrhesia as an ethical notion is a question of the way one lives – it is an attitude, an ethos, the style of one's living. In other words, parrhesia is the care of the self that manifests the relationship between one's words and deeds whereby one's free speech is authenticated by one's mode of living. Quoting Seneca, Foucault speaks of the practice of Stoic parrhesia in similar terms, whereby that which is said must be complemented with the way in which one conducts oneself: "This is the essential point [...]: let us say what we think and think what we say; let speech harmonize with conduct."¹¹¹ This attitude of parrhesia, which links the ethical with the political, is symptomatic of parrhesia, and marks the manner in which Foucault carried himself as a philosopher, teacher, public intellectual and friend. It is this attitude which shines forth in this exchange between Wade and Foucault on the links between ethics and politics, between the personal and the political; and it is this attitude which should take centre stage in the story described in *Foucault in California*:

"I do not conceal my personal life or convictions from my students, and I make every attempt to connect my life with my teaching."

¹¹⁰ Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997), 294. On the topic of spirituality, particularly political spirituality, in Foucault's work, see Ladelle McWhorter, "Foucault's Political Spirituality," *Philosophy Today* 47, supplement (2003), 39-44.

¹¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France 1981-1982* (2005), 406.

“Yes,” Foucault responded, “it is the only way.”

“I would call it Greek,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, “it is Greek.”¹¹²

References

- Defert, Daniel, “Chronology,” in *A Companion to Foucault*, ed. Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, Jana Sawicki, 11-83. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
- Dundas, Heather, “Foreword,” in *Foucault in California [A True Story – Wherein the Great French Philosopher Drops Acid in the Valley of Death]*, vii-xviii. California: Heyday, 2019.
- Elden, Stuart, “The Problem of Confession: The Productive Failure of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 9:1 (2005), 23-41.
- Elden, Stuart, *Foucault’s Last Decade*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. [dx.doi.org/10.1080/1479758042000331925](https://doi.org/10.1080/1479758042000331925).
- Eribon, Didier, *Michel Foucault* [1989], translated by Betsy Wing. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.
- Foucault, Michel, “Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, 9-15. London: Tavistock Publications, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel, “The Minimalist Self,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, 3-16. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, “Practicing Criticism,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, 152-156. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, “Social Security,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, 159-177. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel, “An Ethics of Pleasure,” in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, 371-381. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996.
- Foucault, Michel, “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, 382-390. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996.
- Foucault, Michel, “The Simplest of Pleasures,” in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, 295-297. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996.
- Foucault, Michel, “An Interview by Stephen Riggins,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 121-133. New York: The New Press, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 281-301. New York: The New Press, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel, “Pierre Boulez, Passing through the Screen,” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion, 241-244. New York: The New Press, 1998.

¹¹² Wade, *Foucault in California*, 125-126.

- Foucault, Michel, "Theatrum Philosophicum," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion, 343-368. New York: The New Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel, "Interview with Michel Foucault," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, 239-297. New York: The New Press, 2000.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1969], translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Foucault, Michel, *Death and the Labyrinth*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France 1981-1982*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* [1978], trans. Richard McDougall. New York: Vintage Books, 2013.
- Gautam, Sanjay K., *Foucault and the Kamasutra: The Courtesan, the Dandy, and the Birth of Ars Erotica as Theater in India*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Gelb, Steven A., "'Be Cruel!' Dare We Take Foucault Seriously?," *Mental Retardation* 38:4 (2000), 369-372. [doi.org/10.1352/0047-6765\(2000\)038<0369:BCDWTF>2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1352/0047-6765(2000)038<0369:BCDWTF>2.0.CO;2).
- Halperin, David M., *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Lezra, Jacques, "Foucault's Perfection," *Contemporary Literature* 35:3 (1994), 593-623. [jstor.org/stable/1208698](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208698).
- Macey, David, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*. London: Hutchinson, 1993.
- Martin, Luther H., "The discourse of (Michel Foucault's) life: A review essay," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 7:1 (1995), 57-69. [jstor.org/stable/23555529](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23555529).
- Marzoni, Andrew, "Foucault in the Valley of Death," *The Baffler* 46 (July 2019), thebaffler.com/salvos/foucault-in-the-valley-of-death-marzoni.
- McWhorter, Ladelle, "Foucault's Political Spirituality," *Philosophy Today* 47, supplement (2003), 39-44. [10.5840/philtoday200347Supplement6](https://www.philtoday.com/2003/47/Supplement6).
- Miller, James, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. London: Harper Collins, 1993.
- Oksala, Johanna, *Foucault on Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Penner, James, "Blowing the Philosopher's Fuses: Michel Foucault's LSD Trip in the Valley of Death," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 17, 2019, lareviewofbooks.org/article/blowing-the-philosophers-fuses-michel-foucaults-bsd-trip-in-the-valley-of-death.
- Simons, Jon, *Foucault & the Political*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Taylor, Chloë, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Tran, Jonathan, *Foucault and Theology*. London: T&T Clark International, 2011.
- Veyne, Paul, "The Final Foucault and His Ethics," *Critical Inquiry* 20:1 (1993), 1-9.
- Veyne, Paul, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character* [2008], trans. Janet Lloyd. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.
- Wade, Simeon and Heather Dundas, "Michel Foucault in Death Valley: A Boom interview with Simeon Wade," *Boom California*, September 10, 2017, boomcalifornia.com/2017/09/10/michel-foucault-in-death-valley-a-boom-interview-with-simeon-wade.

Wade, Simeon, *Foucault in California [A True Story – Wherein the Great French Philosopher Drops Acid in the Valley of Death]*. California: Heyday, 2019.

Author Info

Kurt Borg
University of Malta
Malta
kurt.borg@um.edu.mt

Kurt Borg completed a PhD in Philosophy at Staffordshire University, with a thesis on the ethics and politics of narrating trauma in institutional contexts, drawing particularly on the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. He obtained a BA and MA in Philosophy from the University of Malta, the latter with a dissertation on the relation between Foucault's work on power and ethics. He lectures at the University of Malta on Foucault, ethics, medical sociology and philosophy of disability. He published articles and book chapters on Foucault, Butler, trauma theory, and disability studies. An interview he co-conducted with Judith Butler was published in *CounterText* (2017).