

## Queer monsters: Foucault, 'hermaphroditism', and disability studies

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I would like to begin by telling a deceptively simple story. As with all simple narratives, a significant amount of excision and reduction – of emotion, of ideological complexity, of historicity, of subjective specificity – has taken place in order to render this series of intellectually digestible, ostensibly factic pronouncements. In presenting this tight narrative, I am deliberately mimicking the logic enacted by the disciplinary agents – doctors, priests, judges – whose diagnoses and pronouncements forcibly shaped and constrained the existential possibilities of the being about to be narrated; I engage in this mimicry in order to accentuate the vast disjunct that separates these official logics from those alternative, minoritarian logics at work in the autobiographical record left by this same being.

I present to you, then, nothing but the “facts” (whose truth-value we must, of course, bracket): in 1838, Alexina Herculine Barbin was born into poverty in Saint-Jean-d’Angély, France. At birth, she was designated as female. She received an Ursuline convent school education thanks to a charitable scholarship. In 1856, she left the convent to begin training to become a teacher. Upon completion of this training in 1857, she gained a post as an assistant teacher at a girls’ school. It was while in this post that she fell in love with Sara, a fellow teacher. She began experiencing sharp abdominal pains. A doctor was sent to the school to examine Barbin, and upon this examination it was discovered that s/he possessed a sex-atypical corporeal configuration. The doctor argued that Barbin should, on account of this atypicality, be forced to leave the all-female realm of the school. She did not do so. In 1860, however, Barbin confessed the details of her situation to the Catholic bishop of the La Rochelle diocese, where the school was located. After this initial hearing of Barbin’s account, he advised her to flee the school and become a nun. He also ordered another medical examination, this time performed by one Dr. Chesnet. This medical examination heralded a decisive verdict: Barbin was not a woman, but a malformed man, replete with partially descended testicles in a divided (thus, labial-appearing) scrotum as well as possessed of sperm-producing capacity. Upon receipt of Chesnet’s report, the bishop rescinded his initial advice and set about creating the circumstances that

would enable a gender transition for Barbin, allowing the newly-ordained male Barbin to assume a properly male station in life. This transition was also geographical – Barbin moved to Paris, and embarked upon a life of poverty due to his poor training in the prototypically male professions, and being unable to fruitfully utilise his pedagogical training. In 1868, Barbin was found dead in his rooms in the rue de l'École-de-Médecine. He had committed suicide by inhaling gas from his stove. His memoirs were left near his bed. These memoirs were published in a French medical journal in 1874 under the title “La question médico-légale de l'identité dans les rapports avec les vices de conformation des organes sexuels” (“The Medico-Legal Issue of Identity in Relation to Irregular Formation of the Sexual Organs”), framed by and published at the behest of French medical doctor and forensic scientist Auguste Ambrose Tardieu. This journal was unearthed by Michel Foucault in the mid-1970s, presumably while he was doing research for the proposed multi-volume *History of Sexuality*. The first volume of *The History of Sexuality* appeared in 1976. Foucault's re-edition of Barbin's memoirs appeared in 1978, with a preface by Foucault himself and a dossier including a timeline, newspaper reports on Barbin's case, the medical reports filed by both Dr. Chesnet and one E. Goujon, the doctor who performed Barbin's autopsy, as well as a short story inspired by Barbin's life, entitled “Scandal at the Convent”, written by German psychiatrist and author Oskar Panizza in 1893. All of this was collected under the title *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite*.<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is the narrative that provides the framework for the organizing questions of this essay, which run, somewhat schematically, as follows: What motivated Foucault's curatorial decision to include such a tense constellation of text alongside these memoirs? What can we make of the pronounced narrative differences between the ‘facts’ of the medical accounts of Barbin's case and h/er own? Why is this narrative disjunct of note – historiographically, conceptually, and politically? On what grounds, and for what reasons, did Foucault grant such importance to these memoirs and, more broadly, to the phenomenon, both discursive and material, of hermaphroditism?<sup>2</sup> How do we engage in a reparative reading practice that situates this interest in hermaphroditism in relationship to

1 M. Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century French Hermaphrodite* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

2 While, in contemporary parlance, the preferred nomenclature for conditions of ambiguous or indeterminate sex is ‘intersex’ or ‘disorders of sex development,’ I have opted to utilise the problematic term ‘hermaphrodite’ to index these conditions, insofar as it is historically accurate with reference to Barbin's case and is the term Foucault utilised in his mentions of persons with intersex conditions.

the rest of Foucault's oeuvre, specifically as pertaining to his figuration of governmentality, biopower, askeis, and technologies of the self? Finally, how does an engagement with Barbin's memoirs, as filtered through the specificities of Foucault's re-publication, work to clarify and complicate contemporary issues in intersex, queer, and disability studies?

## 1. Two Foucaults? Disciplinary power, governmentality, and technologies of the self

There is a distinct discursive polyphony contained between the covers of *Herculine Barbin*, characterised by what I consider to be a fundamental tension between the minoritarian and resistant narrative voice of Barbin, who repeatedly and complexly disidentifies with the proclamations made on and about h/er person, and the discourse utilised by institutions fully invested in reducing and taming the affront to the logic of sex, gender, and social organisation precipitated by the multiple resistances enacted by Barbin.

To read Barbin's memoirs as a document of resistance, however, entails relying on conceptual tools drawn from what has been called the "later Foucault" – the Foucault of Volumes Two and Three of *The History of Sexuality*, *The Use of Pleasure*,<sup>3</sup> and *The Care of the Self*;<sup>4</sup> the Foucault who, in an unlikely extension of his thought around disciplinary power, biopolitics, and governmentality, turned toward Greco-Roman antiquity to investigate what he called technologies of the self. These techniques are thought of by Foucault as ascetic practices of self-fashioning that entail putting knowledge to work, as it were, in the active negotiation and transformation of the self. These technologies of the self entail a relation to truth, knowledge, and the act of knowing that is radically different from the all-too-familiar Enlightenment-era epistemology that hinges on a *non-relation* between truth and subjectivity. Foucault, in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, refers to the formation of this modern episteme as the "Cartesian moment" – although he is very careful to make clear that it does not begin with, nor is it solely attributable to, Descartes alone – and goes on to describe this moment as follows:

"I think the modern age of the history of truth begins when knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth. That is to say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and

<sup>3</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 2: *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 3: *The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage, 1988).

have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject".<sup>5</sup>

Within this epistemological formation, the subject is conceptualised as both sovereign and static. The task of knowledge is one of conquest, acquisition, possession, and accumulation, but these endeavors remain external to the constitution of the subject herself. There is a deep and unhealable rift between being and knowing here, a decisively modern dyadic formulation of epistemology and ontology. Counterposed to this, for Foucault, would be a set of practical knowledges that refuse the presupposition of a division between knowledge and subjectivity, and are instead simultaneously ontological, epistemological, and ethical (or, more succinctly, ethico-onto-epistemological). It is in his examination of Stoic, Epicurean, and Cynic knowledge-practices that Foucault finds a framework for thinking the profound interweaving of these registers, so violently rent apart from the "Cartesian moment" onward.

For Foucault, ancient technologies of the self function as an ethics (understood as a deliberate style of life that one enacts in order to mold and mutate one's character) capable of "working as a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure".<sup>6</sup> In what is perhaps the most well known Foucauldian definition of these technologies of the self, he construes them as:

"techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on".<sup>7</sup>

Insofar as these technologies of the self work in a manner non-determined (or, at least, not fully determined) by the institutions and apparatus of disciplinary power, they become the site wherein one may act out possibilities of freedom, autonomy, and becoming in a socio-historical milieu always already forcibly shaped by normalizing biopolitical forces. This is not to say that technologies of the self are necessarily, or always, liberating or resistant. It is important to remember that these technologies may also be thought as instances of internalised

5 M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1981-82 (New York: Picador, 2005), p. 17.

6 M. Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress', *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth: Volume 1 of The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 254.

7 M. Foucault, 'About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth,' *Political Theory*, 21:22 (1993): pp. 198-227, p. 203.

oppression wherein one intentionally fabricates a style of life fully compatible with normalizing demands, a phenomena easily witnessed in instances as diverse as the valorisation of marriage amongst gays and lesbians, the extreme dieting of women and girls, and the generalisation of conspicuous consumption. The central point is that these technologies of the self illuminate the productive (rather than repressive) function of power by illustrating its capillary, micro-level operations.

It is, perhaps, easier to think of the disciplinary, normalizing functions of certain technologies of self, particularly given Foucault's assertion that they are inextricably interwoven with technologies of domination in the formation of a complex that he terms "governmentality" Governmentality is conceptualised by Foucault as a sort of contact point "where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination".<sup>8</sup> The subject, in this formulation, is the site of an enfolding wherein forces of domination, conflict, normalisation, and biopolitical regulation ferment unpredictably with autonomic processes wherein we struggle to establish, as Gilles Deleuze writes in *Foucault*, "a relation of veracity with our being".<sup>9</sup> Our selves are constituted, in other words, through a terse and unpredictable interaction of technologies of domination and technologies of the self, forces of oppression and more or less successful attempts at transformation and metamorphosis wherein we realise an always present potential to become something other than what technologies of domination attempt to make of us. While there is, of course, no sovereign subject here, there is a certain kind of autonomy, a certain practice wherein one can exercise a conditional and conditioned freedom. This is where, in a Foucauldian framework, the capacity for resistance is located – in the same intimate folds where the capillary operations of domination also dwell.

An exclusive focus on operations of domination and normalisation when utilizing a Foucauldian framework often results in a firmly social constructivist account of a given phenomena, wherein the subject(s) so affected are figured as determined, done over, and at least temporarily fixed in terms of corporeal meaning and subjective intelligibility. The widespread utilisation of this method of analysis is, of course, the precipitating factor for reductive readings of the political effectiveness of Foucault's central concepts. To gloss this sort of reading: Foucault's work is posited as less than useful for thinking about resistance, agency, and intentionality in the service of social and political transformation on

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, 'About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,' p. 203.

<sup>9</sup> G. Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 104.

account of his treatment of the subject as solely an effect of power, lacking autonomy and unable, even when thinking or acting self-reflexively, to counter, contest, or move beyond this determination.

This mode of analysis overstates Foucault's consideration of subjective construction. It is not that the subject radically lacks autonomy, but that the conditional and contingent ground of autonomy does not lie with the subject herself. Rather it lies in a tense and constantly mutating field of power relations. What this means is that the subject, while fully capable of engaging in the work of autopoietic self-constitution, is simultaneously receiving, navigating, and being molded by subjective determinations that come from without. So the subject is not the sovereign author of herself – this much is true. Rather, she is, in this Foucauldian understanding, both produced and producer. It is not that agential autonomy is impossible in this framework, only that, as Amy Allen writes in *The Politics of Our Selves*, his conception of “autonomy – both in the sense of the capacity for critical reflection and in the sense of the capacity for deliberate self-transformation – [is] always bound up with power”.<sup>10</sup>

With this understanding of subjective constitution – which hinges on an interwoven coupling of autopoietic production of self, through technologies of self, with the capillary experience of disciplinary, normalizing power – we can move beyond this illusory rift between understanding the subject as power effect and understanding the subject as capable of resistance and transformation. This means attending to accounts of disciplining and normalizing with an attunement to both extant and possible resistances, lines of flight, metamorphoses, and transformations. It also means attending to accounts of autonomy, agency, and resistance with an attunement to the ways in which technologies of domination both subtend and trouble efforts to enact technologies of the self.

What this approach necessitates, then, is a refusal of the common division of Foucault's oeuvre into an “early” Foucault concerned with constructing a genealogy of the subject as power effect and a “late” Foucault (perhaps under the influence of Deleuze) concerned with radical politics, askeisis, subjective and social transformation, and *le souci de soi*. As Foucault's own account of what he means by governmentality makes clear, these two lines of inquiry are irrevocably yoked together, with each component running the risk of languishing in philosophical and political ineffectivity without the other.

Two Foucaults, then? No. A doubled, enfolded Foucault committed to examining what we can think of as the exteriority that dwells within the subject alongside the inventive, novel interiority that the subject projects outwards.

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10 A. Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 47.

## 2. Monstrosity or disability? Situating intersex issues

When we take a strict constructivist approach to Barbin's memoirs, what we are actually examining are some of the conditions under which intersex conditions were transformed from monstrosities to disabilities; when we approach the memoirs with a simultaneous focus on the protestations and alternative logics of sex offered by Barbin, the analysis illuminates some of the ways in which this transition was resisted, as well as the grounds on which that resistance was situated. This focus – simultaneously constructivist and attentive to resistant potentialities – is one way of putting a Foucauldian framework that merges the ostensible structuralist focus of an “early Foucault” with the radical political engagements of a “late Foucault”

To begin, I'd like to inquire after what Foucault means when he deploys the term “monstrosity”. If we look to the lecture series delivered in 1974–1975 at the Collège de France, published under the title *Abnormal*, we see that, first and foremost, monstrosity is characterised by mixity. Foucault offers a veritable laundry list of these modes of mixity by way of example, and it is instructive to examine this list to see both what corporealities may have been included beneath the big tent of monstrosity, as well as how he periodises the tenure of this particular *episteme* of the natural and the monstrous:

“From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century the monster is essentially a mixture. It is the mixture of two realms, the animal and the human: the man with the head of an ox, the man with a bird's feet – monsters. It is the blending, the mixture of two species: the pig with a sheep's head is a monster. It is the mixture of two individuals: the person who has two heads and one body or two bodies and one head is a monster. It is the mixture of two sexes: the person who is both male and female is a monster. It is a mixture of life and death: the fetus born with a morphology that means it will not be able to live but that nonetheless survives for some minutes or days is a monster. Finally, it is a mixture of forms: the person who has neither arms nor legs, like a snake, is a monster”<sup>11</sup>

A mélange of figures appear in this list, some of which we recognise as modern instantiations of disabled bodies – infants born with congenital defects, conjoined twins, intersex individuals – others that may refer to newly taxonomised animal life, or beings present in myth alone. They are united by only one facet – mixity, an irreducible estrangement from the purity of composition meant to constitute and maintain the boundaries between sexes, species, and life and death. For it is not only that these beings are mixed, but also that they are mixed in such a way as to confound and transgress the categories of being that give the

11 M. Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-75* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 63.

law (conceived in various registers – civil, canon, divine) its meaning. Thus, it is not just that monstrosities are seen as transgressions of nature, products of a divine playfulness or, more sinisterly, portents of divine wrath visited upon a community. Rather, as Foucault writes, “there is monstrosity only when the confusion comes up against, overturns, or disturbs civil, canon, or religious law.”<sup>12</sup> Confronted with monstrosity, “law must either question its own foundations, or its practice, or fall silent, or abdicate, or appeal to another reference system, or again invent a casuistry”.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Herculine Barbin, the casuistry that is invented entails denying that anything other than two discrete and dimorphic sexes exist, and subsequently calling forth the medical establishment to determine the “true sex” of Barbin. The only other option available would entail a radical revisioning of the operational understandings of sex that so thoroughly shape social organisation and subjective intelligibility. In opting to eradicate the phenomenon of “true hermaphroditism” and placing in its stead two varieties of sexed mixity – “male pseudohermaphroditism” and “female pseudohermaphroditism”<sup>14</sup> - intersex conditions are transformed from monstrosities in to disabilities. They are no longer an affront, a transgression, or a confounding limit-instance. Instead, they are invitations to diagnosis, experimental subjects on which the medical apparatus may machinate and elaborate its account of the constitution of sex difference in a way that all too often denies the autonomic capacities of intersex persons, exhorting them to, as Foucault writes, “wake up from your illusory pleasures; strip off your disguises and recall that every one of you has a sex, a true sex”.<sup>15</sup> This exhortation is, of course, not only confronted by intersex persons, but also by “genderqueers”, transgendered persons, and many gays and lesbians as well. It is this demand to discover our ‘true sex’ that gives intersex an intelligible position within the law while relegating the enactment of something like an intersex subjectivity to the status of impossibility.

Foucault writes that “disability may well be something that upsets the natural order, but disability is not monstrosity because it has a place in civil or canon law. The disabled person may not conform to nature, but the law in some way provides for him.”<sup>16</sup> For intersex persons, the providence of law works to offer a choice that feels more like a conscription or a sentence: here is your diagnosis –

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12 M. Foucault, *Abnormal*, p. 63.

13 M. Foucault, *Abnormal*, p. 64.

14 For a thorough account of the development of the diagnosis of ‘pseudohermaphroditism’ and the gradual eradication of ‘true hermaphroditism,’ see the ‘The Age of Gonads’ in Alice Domurat Dreger’s *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 139-166.

15 M. Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, p. x.

16 M. Foucault, *Abnormal*, p. 64.



you may choose one of two paths. Each will entail extensive surgical and chemical reconfiguration; a choice is necessary if you want to access the rights that attend the privileges of sexed and sexual normalcy.

I will argue that it is precisely this choice that Barbin resents and resists. In so doing, s/he refuses a system of corporeal intelligibility that is radically intolerant of mixity and abnormality. S/he refuses to be understood as disabled and, in h/er own way, insists on a right to monstrosity, a right to transgression, a right to determine h/er self-hood, a right to difference, opacity, and singularity. In this insistence, s/he enacts a prefigurative politics that resonates deeply with contemporary disability and queer activism that seek to disrupt, transgress, and unfix the politically loaded *epistemes* that divide corporealities and behaviors into dyads of normal and abnormal in order to more effectively invent casuistries that allow technologies of normalisation to be inflicted upon beings of difference.

### 3. Re-membling Herculine: Towards a Queer Crip<sup>17</sup> History of the Present

I'd like to embark on a re-reading of *Herculine Barbin* with the doubled, enfolded Foucauldian framework in mind, focusing specifically on Barbin's resistance to the doctrine of "true sex". While there have been a small handful of essays concerned specifically with the resistances extant in these memoirs,<sup>18</sup> it is most often referred to as evidencing the force of sexed, gendered, and sexual normativity at an historical moment shaped by the ascendancy of a positivist, biomedical discourse on dyadic "true sex". Given that I lack the space, here, for a full literature review, I would like instead to look at a paradigmatic and influential example of this use of Barbin's memoirs. It appears in the introductory chapter to medical historian and patient rights advocate Alice Dreger's important tome *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, working as a prelude of sorts to Dreger's history of the development of intersex diagnoses. This history is itself a history of modern understandings of biological sex, parsed through the

<sup>17</sup> 'Crip' is short for cripple, and is utilised by proponents of the rights of the disabled as a reclaimed word. This use transforms the meaning of 'crip' from pejorative to an identity designation that names a prideful, resistant, non-normatively embodied collective.

<sup>18</sup> See Ladelle McWhorter's excellent 'Counterattack: An Ethics of Style' in her book *Bodies & Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 193-227 and William E. Connolly's 'Voices from the Whirlwind' in *The Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment*, eds. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (Minneapolis: MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 197-225.

analysis of limit-cases, beings located on the outskirts of conventional intelligibilities of sex. Dreger situates Barbin's case in a field of two other roughly contemporaneous cases from the late 1800s to provide a picture of the hotly contested field on which struggles over theories that sought to provide definitive accounts of sex constitution took place. As Dreger writes, Barbin lived at a time when "it was not only the hermaphrodite's body that lay ensconced in ambiguity, but the medical and scientific concepts of the male and the female as well", a time when "sex itself was still open to doubt".<sup>19</sup>

Thus, we are encouraged to read *Herculine Barbin* as a parable of modern understandings of sex, a microcosmic repository of the struggle and eventual consolidation of modern truth-regimes of sex. Indeed, it's all there: the development of gonadal determinations of sex, the concomitant erasure of what was called "true hermaphroditism", the evidentiary utilisation of Barbin's desire for women as proof of maleness, the priestly struggle over whether to quarantine Barbin in the nunnery or facilitate the complicated and not-yet-codified realities of public gender transition. This has been the tendency in much of the literature in intersex studies, and in utilizing the story as a parable of this sort, scholars are taking a cue from Foucault himself, who writes in his preface to the volume that he would be

"tempted to call the story banal were it not for two or three things that give it a particular intensity. The date, first of all. The years from around 1860 to 1870 were precisely one of those periods when investigations of sexual identity were carried out with the most intensity, in an attempt not only to establish the true sex of hermaphrodites but also to identify, classify, and characterize the different types of perversions".<sup>20</sup>

We are invited, then, to conjecture this text as minor and unexceptional were it historically situated otherwise. What is of interest is the fact that Barbin and the institutional interlocutors attempting to establish the truth of Barbin-as-subject are located in a moment wherein the biopolitical regulation of sex and sexuality is intensifying. We can trace the contours of these burgeoning regulations onto the texts presented, and are invited by Foucault himself to do so.

This is, of course, a necessary starting point for the analysis, but a more robust engagement is essential if we are to move beyond understanding intersex diagnoses as mere evidence of the biopolitical regulation of sex or, perhaps concomitantly, as tragic by-products of the consolidation of dimorphic understandings of "true sex" If we are to understand, in a full sense, the importance of

19 A. Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, p. 16.

20 M. Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, p. xii.

these case studies (for Barbin's is not the only one) in Foucault's oeuvre<sup>21</sup> we must focus on the important fact that this memoir is, in addition to being a parable of the ascendancy of sex dimorphism, also one of the only documents from this period that charts the experience of intersex diagnosis from below. That is, it is a relatively unmediated experiential account from a radically de-authorised subject wherein the process of this de-authorisation is documented. While I agree with Dreger's assertion that "the absence of documents like Barbin's memoirs cannot justify the far too sweeping conclusions – about scientific and social concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality – that have been drawn by some recent scholars simply from the singular case of Barbin",<sup>22</sup> I do think that focusing on the *singularity of h/er words* offers a way out of reading h/er experience as that of a mere power effect, one of the many casualties precipitated by the biopolitical regulation of sex. In other words, we need to read the protestation, resistant alternative modes of being that are worked out in the text – the technologies of the self at work – alongside our tally of the effectivity of disciplinary technologies of normalisation.

To parse the resistant moments of this memoir, it is important to bear in mind its position in relation to Foucault's proposed genealogy of modern Western power/knowledge networks at work in the regulation of sex, sexuality, and corporeality. In his brief prefatory notes to the dossier (replete with multiple medical reports, news articles, and a thinly veiled work of fiction based on said memoirs), Foucault writes that he intends to keep the published subsidiary documentation of the case to a minimum, as "the question of strange destinies like her own, which have raised so many problems for medicine and law, especially since the sixteenth century, will be dealt with in the volume of *The History of Sexuality* that will be devoted to hermaphrodites."<sup>23</sup> This volume (along with many of the other volumes Foucault initially proposed) never saw the light of day, as these initial plans for the series took a significant turn with his decision to return to the Greeks initiated in the second and third completed volumes. However, Foucault's biographer Didier Eribon provides commentary on the relation of this memoir to that initial proposition, discussing Foucault's intention that, at the moment of publication, Foucault intended this volume (along with the autobiography of parricidist Pierre Rivière) as companion texts to *The History of Sexuality*, forming part of a series entitled *Parallel Lives* (one that, like the original conception of *The History of Sexuality* series, was later abandoned).

21 See M. Foucault's *I, Pierre Riviere, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and My Brother* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

22 A. Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, p. 23.

23 M. Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, p. 119.

These texts, in Foucault's conception, were selected precisely for what Foucault understood as the "infamous" nature of the authors. What Foucault sought to expose through the *Parallel Lives* series was, as Françoise Proust puts it, not "figures of revolt (heroic or otherwise) against injustice or figures of combat against oppression" but instead "figures of ordinary and anonymous resistance which are brought, despite themselves, to a visible or non-visible confrontation with power".<sup>24</sup> Through the re-publication and dissemination of these memoirs, Foucault hoped to illuminate these every day, anonymous characters, familiar in their mundanity, who – in unwilling confrontations with power/knowledge regimes – nevertheless manifested resistance in milieu wherein their agentic capacities were extraordinarily minimal, forcibly and violently curtailed by the forces of governmentality.

Barbin is thought, by Foucault, as something other than a spectacular, iconised subject of heroic resistance or a bleakly victimised persona; rather, h/e/r life is molded by a set of continuous quotidian confrontations with institutional apparatuses whose logic s/he – sometimes subtly, sometimes vociferously – contests. Much of this contestation occurs in and through the writing of these memoirs. This act of writing resistance to disciplinary regimes can be thought of as an instance of counter-memory, one plugged immediately in to what Foucault understood as integral to the construction of what he called *histories of the present*.

Which begs the following questions: what is a history of the present? How is it constructed? What motivates a shift from more traditional historiographical methods? Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, discusses his motivation for devising this alternative historiographical method, writing that he would

"like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing a history of the present".<sup>25</sup>

In asserting the difference between "writing a history of the past in terms of the present" and writing a "history of the present", Foucault estranges his work from charges of revisionism, and the concomitant associations of this charge – misrepresentation, misrecognition, anachronism, politically motivated obfuscation of historical truths, and intellectual dishonesty, among others. To engage in the task of writing a history of the past in terms of the present is to invest in an epistemological field shaped by linear, teleological (as in Hegelian) understandings of history. It is to tarry with questions of historical continuity and objective ac-

24 F. Proust, 'The line of resistance', *Hyppatia*, 15:4 (2000), p. 27.

25 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1995), pp. 30-31.

curacy, to concern oneself with the cultivation of an intellectual posture shaped by an emphasis on disinterestedness and anonymity in the service of providing a fuller retrospective account of how the present has come to exist.

A history of the present is concerned with radically different aims. To write a history of the present is to work with a past that is not merely artifactual, unified, sedimented, and thus not objectively knowable and explainable in terms of a fully given, understood, and transparent present. Rather, as Michael Roth summarises pithily in his important essay on the concept, one writes a history of the present "in order to make that present into a past",<sup>26</sup> this occurs through uncovering ignored or devalorised pasts that work to "rupture the present into a future that will leave the very function of history behind it."<sup>27</sup> Thus, histories of the present work to undo the tendency to cognize history as that to which a person or people clings tightly to provide coherent, legible, and reductively sensible understandings of the present. If a history of the present works to rupture that present in order to make metamorphosis and change (rather than linearised understandings of "progress") possible, then it becomes necessary to concern oneself with the relationship between historical *a priori* and lines of flight – that is, the relationship between the power/knowledge regimes that give forceful shape, structure, and legibility to an historical moment and those parallel lives shaped by efforts to rework and exceed those regimes, those efforts to make sense otherwise. To uncover those traces is to undertake a genealogical endeavor concerned with producing counter-memories that rupture the sutures of hegemonic historical accounts.

As indicated above, Barbin's memoirs are often put to work in the service of illuminating the historical *a priori* of sex intelligibility, but only rarely move beyond that illumination. Given Foucault's endeavors to construct histories of the present, this mode of deployment is only part of the story. What is missing is an account of Herculine's resistance – mundane or ineffective as it may have been. What is missing is an account of what made Herculine's life truly parallel to, and not congruent with, the power/knowledge regimes s/he found h/er subject to.<sup>28</sup>

26 M. S. Roth, 'Foucault's "history of the present"', *History and Theory*, 20: 1 (1981), pp. 32-46, p. 44.

27 M. S. Roth, 'Foucault's "history of the present"' p. 44.

28 As far as my usage of h/er, I'd prefer that it remains. I prefer it to the convention of 'him/herself' because that usage implies abstraction, being typically utilised to index a general audience composed of mixed genders. H/er retains a certain singularity of reference, while preserving a gendered ambiguity that nevertheless indexes Herculine's experience of being raised as female.

The memoirs are fragmented, missing the portion of the narrative that falls between Barbin's account of h/er upbringing and the final pages articulating h/er contemporary existential difficulties, ostensibly lost as it was shuttled from one doctor to another following Herculine's death. On account of this gap in the narrative, the text that Foucault had published at his behest seems to fall neatly into two narrative modalities. The first, more lengthy portion of the text, reads as a nostalgic account of Barbin's upbringing in the female milieus of convent and boarding schools, and includes a rather veiled account of h/er passionately engaged, secretive relationship with h/er lover Sara. The latter portion of the memoir, occurring after this long, detailed account of Barbin's life up to and including gender reassignment and movement to Paris, reads as a text that hovers undecidedly on the line between castigation and lament. For this reason, as Foucault recounts, the doctor who performed the autopsy on Herculine's body – and who initially had possession of the memoirs – considered them unimportant on these grounds and published, alongside the autopsy report, only the more straightforwardly autobiographical material.<sup>29</sup>

Foucault's restoration of the latter portion of the memoirs works against the wholesale elision of the critique extant in the text. It is in this portion of the memoir that Barbin most vociferously resists the ideological and material impositions made on h/er person in the service of gender assignation, as well as the confessional apparatus that enabled these impositions to occur. While s/he *castigates* medical and juridical authority, as well as the Victorian logics of sexual difference undergirding and consolidated through the treatment s/he received, h/er *lament* emanates from h/er at least partially consensual agreement to place h/erself squarely in the hands of authorities – religious and lay – that would ostensibly work in h/er best interests to discern a path of action that would relieve h/er guilty conscience regarding h/er illicit relationship with Sara and perhaps resolve some of h/er sense of existential misplacement.

These two factors – guilt regarding h/er affair with Sara and a sense of existential misplacement – are indissolubly linked as motivations that precede Herculine's offering of h/er story to, first, a prelate and then, at the suggestion of the prelate, a doctor. Just prior to these dual confessions, Herculine had been visited by a doctor at the girls' school where s/he worked, following intense abdominal pain (more than likely a result of complications elicited by Barbin's partially descended gonads). This visiting doctor, while not forthcoming regarding the details of his investigation to anyone but the school's director, Madame P., recommended that Barbin be sent away from the school at once. This recommendation was summarily refused by the director of the school, who was not only fond

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29 Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, p. 119.

of Barbin, but also concerned to avoid any possible scandal, and thus ignored this recommendation and kept Barbin on in the capacity of instructor.

Although Barbin was not, at this point, familiar with the medical details of h/er case, s/he was able to intuit that, corporeally, there were a series of abnormalities that troubled h/er relationship to dyadic sex difference. A quick reference to h/er account of this medical investigation makes clear that it was impossible that Barbin would *not* have understood h/erself as a mis-fit with regard to sex typicality:

“He wanted to examine me. As it is known, a doctor enjoys certain privileges with a sick person that nobody dreams of contesting. During this operation, I heard him sighing, as if he were not satisfied with what he had found. Madame P. was there, waiting for a word.

I too was waiting, but in an entirely different frame of mind.

Standing near my bed, the doctor considered me attentively, full of interest, while giving vent to muffled exclamations of this sort: ‘My God! Is it possible?’

I understood by his gestures that he would have liked to prolong this examination until the truth sprang to light!!!”<sup>30</sup>

Deprived of a consultation regarding these apparently shocking medical discoveries, Barbin knew only that h/er body was a near-impossible object, located at the cusp of medical credulity; moreover, s/he came to find out that that this aberrant corporeality was somehow considered necessary and sufficient grounds for h/er dismissal from h/er post in an all-female milieu. Somehow, then, h/er corporeal atypicality was linked to a hovering threat of sexual impropriety. This was a common linkage in Renaissance-era European thinking on hermaphroditism. Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass attest to this phenomenon in their article “Fetishizing Gender: Constructing the Hermaphrodite in Renaissance Europe”, asserting that:

“In France, there was certainly an increasing tendency to absorb the hermaphrodite into the figure of the deviant woman, a conflation which was made more plausible by the medical rediscovery of the clitoris in the mid-sixteenth century. Henceforth, in France, at least, the hermaphrodite could be categorized as a woman with an enlarged clitoris, and was thus prosecutable for committing sodomy with other women”.<sup>31</sup>

The conflation of tribadism and hermaphroditism engaged by Barbin’s examiner attests to the shaky diagnostic status of hermaphroditic “true sex” at this particu-

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, p. 68.

<sup>31</sup> A. R. Jones and P. Stallybrass, ‘Fetishizing gender: Constructing the hermaphrodite in renaissance Europe,’ in J. Epstein and K. Straub (eds.) *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge, 1991). pp. 80-111, p. 90.

lar historical moment. The Barbin case, as Foucault calls our attention to, is located on the cusp of a shift in the medical perception of atypically sexed bodies. So it is perhaps not surprising that Barbin couples her castigation of the medico-scientific establishment at the end of her memoir with a deep critique of what we would now call heteronormativity. If tribadism and hermaphroditism were conflated, then a critique must address not only medico-scientific protocol but also socio-sexual normativity. Given the competing scripts of intelligibility regarding hermaphroditism, perhaps it is also not surprising that Barbin relies on yet another trope of queer corporeality to frame h/er critique: s/he posits h/erself, prior to suicide (and contra Catholic belief that one cannot enter the kingdom of heaven after suicide), as “partaking of the nature of the angels”, as a being divinely marked for suffering on account of h/er existential placelessness. S/he writes that, while “others have the earth”, s/he has “boundless space”; while others are “enchained here below by the thousand bonds of your gross, material senses,”<sup>32</sup> s/he claims that, through h/er saintly apprenticeship in suffering elicited by this existential placelessness, s/he has a spirit able to “plunge into that limpid ocean of the infinite”, and a knowledge of “surges of pure ecstasy” of the soul of which s/he is capable on account of the fact that h/er “earthly ties to humanity have been broken”.<sup>33</sup>

Subjectivities shaped by conventional sexualities and corporealities are thus relegated to a position of base, material enslavement by the sensorium, while Herculine conjectures h/er dire circumstances as a Job-style trial of faith, a test of suffering that opens one up to great spiritualised ecstasies. H/er forced transition to maleness is entirely compatible with this counter-understanding of h/er experience – Barbin, on account of h/er deeply religious education, was certainly familiar with understandings of female Christian devotees as virile women, as beings who, in leaving their sexualities behind and devoting themselves to spiritual asceticism, attained a masculinised mode of being in the world. Barbin, too, had undergone this cross-gender transition and had, in the process, abdicated h/er embodied sexual self. In grasping this alternative logic of gender transition, Barbin constructs a history of the present – s/he repurposes saintly cross-gender tropes in a way that ruptures the ascendant medico-scientific emphasis on sexual dimorphism. This narrative, in placing h/er beyond the stranglehold of modern western corporeal intelligibility, enables the following moment of vitriolic critique, one that resonates deeply with contemporary efforts to depathologise understandings of other-than-normative bodies. Barbin presciently conjectures the fate of h/er body following h/er willed death, writing that:

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32 M. Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, p. 99.

33 M. Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, p. 99.



“When that day comes a few doctors will make a little stir around my corpse; they will shatter all the extinct mechanisms of its impulses, will draw new information from it, will analyze all the mysterious sufferings that were heaped upon a single human being. O princes of science, enlightened chemists, whose names resound throughout the world, analyze then, if that is possible, all the sorrows that have burned, devoured this heart down to its last fibers; all the scalding tears that have drowned it, squeezed it dry in their savage grasp!”<sup>34</sup>

Here, Barbin works the importance of phenomenological, affective, existential modes of knowledge against the detached, investigative (and invasive!) empiricism of scientific modes of analysis that work by severing corporeality from experience. S/he insists on the inadequacy of this valorised, hegemonic mode of knowledge-production, and counters it with a call to consider the violence produced by the power/knowledge networks that construct bodies as freakish, marginal, deformed, and somehow imperfectly human.

My hope is that we allow this complex style of resistance to inform and complicate our understandings of abnormality, sex, and gender difference in the multiple contexts our current historico-political conjuncture affords. In order for this to happen, we must refuse positioning these memoirs, as well as other traces of queer, crip counter-histories, as medico-scientific artifacts that speak to us only of disciplinary power. Rather, we can connect with this particular auto-graph in a mode that focuses on Barbin’s queer pleasures and h/er longing for a social world not so straightjacketed by the violent presumptions of modern positivist understandings of sex difference and corporeal normality. In other words, we can deploy Barbin’s critiques in the context of developing a queer, crip politics. I would like to suggest that what we need today, in order to resist the multiple violences entailed by late modern disavowals of corporeal and sexual difference, is a coalition of monsters – those beings that embrace corporeal non-normativity, hybridity, and mixity as a source of strength and resilience capable of challenging understandings of extraordinary bodies as pathological, aberrant, and undesirable.