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The History of Digital Desire, vol. 1:
An Introduction

In or about 1996, sex changed. For those with Internet access, it started going more or less digital. Increasingly, it is going more or less digital whether you have Internet access or not and whether you like it or not. With the development of digital imaging, communication, data storage, and medical technology, there have been radical shifts in the way we experience, represent, and theorize about sexuality and desire. Members of generation Google, born digital, are coming of age now in an erotic terrain, online and off-, that was scarcely imaginable before they were born. I say this with a degree of irony, knowing full well that there is no such thing as the “great paradigm shift” that changes everything everywhere once and for all. Change happens in different places and at different speeds, and old paradigms reassert and reconfigure themselves long after their invention and alleged extinction. I speak of this paradigm shift knowing that currently only about a quarter of Americans go online daily, though the personal images and information of a great many more Americans also are accessed daily, whether those Americans know it or not; that the Google Generation may not be as sleuthfully adept at Googling as was once believed; and that, with the world population around seven

billion, only about two billion are using the Internet, and the mere half-billion or so currently on Facebook are a privileged, if not always contented, minority. I speak of this shift knowing that English remains the lingua franca of the Internet, even though it is not the native language of most of the people online. Nevertheless, if I had to pick a year for this shift, it would be 1996, a pivotal time for exploring the erotic potential of the Internet and for being scandalized by it:

1. In 1996, America Online opened its Instant Messaging and Buddy List options to all subscribers, and I was assailed by my first Buddy, a fellow subscriber of indeterminate sex, unknown to me, residing in a distant state, as I gathered from the profile, which was both too coy and too candid.

2. In 1996, we could log on to JenniCam, whose eponymous performance artist mounted an increasing number of webcams in an increasing number of private spaces in her dorm room and other apartments, so that we could watch, and eventually pay to watch, her every activity, however mundane, however sexual, thereby making domestic privacy seem merely *passé*.

3. In 1996, partly in response to a moral panic the year before, the U.S. government realized that the Internet had rendered pornography laws, including the exceptionally strict child-pornography laws, virtually unenforceable, and so it responded with the Communications Decency Act, which was immediately challenged as an assault on free speech and a burden to educational institutions, as were its successors, the Child Online Protection Act (1998), the Children's Internet Protection Act (2000), the PROTECT Act (2003) that has successfully outlawed erotic cartoons of children, and the Deleting Online Predators Act (2006). These Internet censorship laws, including especially stringent ones in Canada, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, and the UK, are still difficult to enforce, and very few predators have been, as if by the press of a computer key, deleted.

4. In 1996, the Communications Decency Act rendered credit-card verification an attractive option to identify minors and thereby helped to spur an intense commercialization of Internet pornography purchasable with cards.

5. In 1996, Bennett Haselton created PeaceFire.org to preserve freedom of speech on the Internet, especially for minors, in reaction to the Communications Decency Act, and that same year, CYBERSitter included his organization on its list of "pornographic" sites.

6. In 1996, section 230 of the Communications Decency Act granted broad immunity to all interactive online services from certain types of legal

liability for content created by others, thereby allowing the Internet chat-room, blog, or forum of your choice the freedom not to interfere when you use the site to expose, harass, and shame—sexually, easily, anonymously, brutally, unjustly, permanently, and very publicly—any person or institution you dislike.

7. In 1996, in the UK, the somewhat misleadingly named Internet Watch Foundation was founded to seek out and report to the police any illegal Internet pornography.

8. In 1996, Megan's Law went into effect, mandating that law enforcement notify the public about certain convicted sex offenders in their communities, and publicly accessible Web sites for the purpose provided very efficient and searchable formats.

9. In 1996, Rentboy.com went online and revolutionized the convenience and appeal, for renter and rented both, of sex for pay (headline: "Pimp yourself now!") for locations throughout the world—much to the distress, however, of certain individuals who found that its promises of confidentiality were unreliable.

10. In 1996, Google began as a research project at Stanford University and was launched online in 1998. The search engines Lycos, Yahoo!, HotBot, and Ask Jeeves had been launched between 1994 and 1996. With Google's generous and well-financed assistance I located all the information above in about an hour, and given a few more hours, one might say whole afternoons, Google and other engines could help me find innumerable online sites and services for sexual history, sexual politics, sexual theory, sexual health, sexual hookups, sexual gear, sexual devices, sexual performance art, sex for pay, sex for free, and gossip about the sex of friends and strangers alike—the SafeSearch option not on Strict or Moderate, but most assuredly Off.

Here I pause, not for want of more examples of emergent, sex-changing Internet phenomena in 1996 or any other year in the past two decades, but to allow you to contemplate your own favorite narrative of digital sexual initiation, or lack thereof, on earlier or later occasions, through a series of quickly outmoded gadgets, sites, and software.

"Digital Desire" gathers a few choice essays on changes, more or less recent, in the erotics of digital technology: new forms of digital pornography and other sex work, the pleasures and perils of new digital gadgets and apps, transformations and representations of the digital in art, the digitization of earlier technologies such as film and television, BlackBerry and SmartPhone mobility, Internet affect, cybersexual identities, cybersexual

communities, cybersexual activism, interactive sites for erotic connection from Facebook to Grindr, anxieties about Internet safety and cyberbullying, children on the Net, and challenges to earlier conceptions of archiving, copyright, vice laws, privacy, shame, consent, connectivity, reputation—in other words, radical changes to the way we live now, if we happen to live online in some form or other.

As is the case in many such inquiries, the work of Michel Foucault remains of abiding interest, even indispensable prescience, despite his never having lived to experience the World Wide Web. Instead of merely citing him, what if we update him for a digital era not his own and borrow from his habit of numbering, nominalizing, and italicizing ideological forces as if that made them more ominously important, more precisely accounted for, and more legible? By way of an introduction that is most likely not one, I offer here a brief updating of this canonical text of sexual theory, known originally by that Nietzschean name *La volonté de savoir*, volume 1 of *Histoire de la sexualité*, and translated into English misleadingly, though more invitingly, as *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, *An Introduction*.¹ Neither title seems to fit the book well. Foucault has inspired academic discourses (queer theory, feminist theory, gender studies, sexuality studies) that, like his own, are most certainly less an *ars erotica* and more *scientia sexualis*, which is to say, rather than making us apprentices in an art of pleasure, which digital technology and culture certainly encourage, it partakes of the modern professional imperative to pin sex down, talk it over, and make it admit to some elusive but essential truthiness about itself, which digital technology and culture also encourage. Is Foucault's truthiness my truthiness, given that I, too, like the World Wide Web, came of age after his death? I am making the most here of an occasion to write a brief history of digital desire, just volume 1, an introduction to an update of Foucault's theorization of sex in an idiom somewhat like his own, now that many of his ideological concerns strike me and my students as, at first, merely quaint. Needless to say, the "lines of penetration" for sexual ideology have multiplied with the increasing bandwidth of Internet communication and documentation. "Perverse implantation" and the "deployment" of sexuality hardly seem now as insidious to me as they did when I first read Foucault's volume, since I know them when I see them and sometimes seize the occasion to embrace them even when they fail to embrace me. For every perversion a previous generation could medicalize or criminalize, there is now a welcoming Web site. Who would not want to be so penetrated, implanted, and deployed? In Foucault's formulation, however, plea-

sure was the point of power: the more pleasure, the more power, and the more power, the more pleasure, in an ever-escalating spiral that one may take for granted now as a state-sanctioned, corporate-sanctioned imperative to enjoyment that may or may not be in one's best interest.

We might reconsider his “four privileged objects of knowledge,” those sexually suspect inventions which proved that sex was most certainly not repressed so much as it was deployed, announced, studied, categorized, and confessed, endlessly talked into being, and even, by a “reverse” discourse, given its own political voice. This part is the hardest to teach. Foucault has foremost in mind the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult. My students often feel as if he were merely making a joke about the sexual mores of an earlier age, an age even earlier than his own personal antiquity. He does give the impression that he can speak of a history of sexuality only insofar as it no longer exercises much of a claim over him, but his privileged objects of knowledge, helpfully numbered and italicized, innocent of footnotes, are easily renovated for current use in the context of digital culture:

1. “A *hysterization of women's bodies*,” in which he includes not only hysteria as a nervous disorder but also motherhood as a saturation of the woman's body with the sexual significance of her procreative role. Now there is a hysterization of just about everybody—women, men, children—and it accelerates with the invention of new drugs by which medical professionals can invent treatable disorders with new and more clinical names, new drugs that sound like distant planets: Xanax, Zoloft, Ritalin, Viagra. This hysterization accelerates also with the flood of digital imaging that more efficiently eroticizes, commodifies, and advertises all those bodies and their attendant gender norms. Global feminism is still deeply concerned with both the remnant and current instances of this hysterization: this ongoing narrative of women in particular on sedatives, hormones, fertility drugs, birth control drugs, and antidepressants; women as victims of the marriage market, homophobia, rape, incest, slavery, and now misogynistic cyberassault; and women who are otherwise physically, medically, economically, and culturally oversaturated with erotic significance—this ongoing narrative that has been more encouraged than challenged by the efficiency of digital communication and financial exchange. When I first Googled images of “digital desire,” I racked up seventy-five pages of scantily clad women in erotic poses, followed by a man in Mongolia who used his new digital camera to snap a picture of the word *desire* scratched into a car window, followed by many more pages of scantily clad women in erotic

poses, most of them connected with a pornographic operation that understandably chose the same title that I did but had much more focused sexual interests. The example illustrates not only the repetitiveness and banality of young women's sexual exposure and men's sexual imagination on the Internet but the serendipitous variations to this norm that lead us along very different threads. A Google image search for the word *feminist* will get you somewhere else entirely. There are now hits for this text under *feminist* and *digital desire*, but unfortunately, as far as I can ascertain, the guy in Mongolia with his new camera has since vanished into the cybernetic ether.

2. "A *pedagogization of children's sex*" got even more intense after Foucault died. The popular and medical preoccupation with the dangers of child masturbation would no longer merit the professional attention of a doctor, one hopes; rather, a child or adolescent who *neglected* to masturbate might arouse medical concern. Foucault did write on more recent instances, such as the child pornography panics of the late-1970s and Anita Bryant's child-obsessed campaign against gay rights. He also dilated on the paradox of children's consent being categorically disqualified, such that they had to be protected from all desire, including their own. Foucault witnessed only the early stages of the more recent salacious media frenzy over child sexual abuse in day-care centers, schools, families, neighborhoods, churches, and Michael Jackson's own personal amusement park. Foucault has already explained to us why most attempts at censorship are now organized around an anxiety about child safety, even when it is the children themselves who are producing the offending text with impressive technological skill.

3. "A *socialization of procreative behavior*": yes, of course, when and where has this not been a phenomenon? One need not know who Thomas Malthus was to experience this state-mandated valorization of the parenting couple and its responsibility to the future of the nation. There are the hundreds of special rights for most married couples and for certain kinds of families, the state regulation of adoption and abortion, and the continuing state assault on or enforcement of different forms of birth control. What makes less sense now is Foucault's focus on the couple. The industrializing teleology from relatively agrarian structures of kinship to the nuclear family (with its marginalized perverts) to rights-based individualism brings Foucault's formulation a step farther even than his critique of the socialization of the procreative couple over the pathologized pervert. The state-mandated, corporate-mandated progression to individualism, whether procreative or not, is in close competition with familial ideology. The target is

the individual consumer, whose pleasures are implanted and excited, yes, and increasingly well located, verified, and quantified through mass state and corporate data surveillance and biometrics with unprecedented digital access to personal information such as purchasing habits, sexual interests, travel destinations, medical and legal records, physical appearance, digital communications, and home and Internet addresses. The Internet is a powerful source of resistance to familial tradition and a powerful initiation into consumerism on a broader and more individually defined level than was previously possible. Anything like the Defense of Marriage Act (1996) is a lost cause in a nation online: marriage, even gay marriage, has less force to bind or to monopolize the erotic and affective lives of individuals. In the United States, the percentage of married couples has declined, while the numbers of wives in the workplace, unmarried women having children, and adults who live alone have increased. A consumer's options are multiplied by an ever-greater ease of global socialization, relocation, and connectivity that renders relationships with family and friends increasingly virtual and dispensable. What matters most is the individual, its access to digital connection and skills, its purchasing power, its evermore personalized hardware that responds to its individualized touch, its various but quantifiable and temporarily satisfiable desires, and its assertion of pleasures and preferences of its own to be explored, indulged, withheld, and otherwise negotiated in more or less contractual and depersonalized interactions with other individuals. MySpace, iPhone, Facebook, what William J. Mitchell dubbed that ever-extending "Me++,"² this persistent digital reaching out from a password-protected me and mine, this digitally mediated and impersonal intimacy, this lonesome accessibility all demands a clickable thumbnail individuality on an electronic network of one's own. To Foucault's conception of a socialization of the couple, we might add a competing, depersonalized socialization of the individual that Marx was well aware of, that consumerism valorizes, and that the Internet encourages more powerfully and more sexually than any other phenomenon.

4. Where does this leave "*a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure*"? As a way of corralling everyone into a procreative marriage and pillorying those who refused, it made sense. Economically, it did not. In Foucault's lifetime, capital more than its critique fueled the movements for feminism and sexual liberation. A few remnant perversions survive now as paraphilias in the revised fourth edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychological Association* and will most likely increase in number in the fifth edition scheduled for 2013, but they are included pri-

marily because they raise pressing questions of consent: the sadist, the frotteur, the zoophile, and above all the pedophile still retain their psychiatric notoriety. What the privileged have now might better be described as the *psychiatrization of disabled pleasures*: a corrective technology not to pathologize harmless pleasures but to pathologize our failure to enjoy as many of them as possible, whether in procreative relationships or not. This does make economic sense. In a *New Yorker* cartoon from 2004, a psychiatrist says to his patient: “These feelings of yours aren’t unusual—in fact, several of them have Web sites.” The Internet and psychiatry are working in each other’s service to implant, deploy, and maintain an ever-widening variety of pleasures and to pathologize, profile, and treat their hindrance. Generally speaking, we are grateful to them for it: we do not wish to be the absexual, the depressive, the addict, the erectile dysfunctional, or the gender identity disordered. These designations are not asking why one is not the marrying kind. Not the pleasure but the ability and willingness to sustain it are in question. The new class of addicts, among others who are enjoyment challenged, includes those who make what is deemed an inappropriate use of digital technology. In popular journalism if not in the DSM, we have the texting addict, the gaming addict, the chatroom addict, the online gambling addict, the online pornography addict, and of course the CrackBerry addict. The young are especially prone to such addictions: they allegedly acquire a new digital skill at the expense of a robust attention span for more traditional and meaningful academic pursuits, such as Latin or calculus. In academic and popular media accessible online, psychologists and journalists announce that the hard wiring, the brain development, indeed the very DNA of these distracted children will be different from that of previous generations, and this change is rarely if ever considered evolutionary progress. Pleasure and mental health are increasingly a matter of how deftly we manage our drugs and our gadgets.

One of the great impasses of queer theory, even what could have been called queer theory in Foucault’s time, is its frequently noted difficulty in committing itself to a particular agenda or paradigm of sexual politics, but this may also be one of its great accomplishments. Queer theory, even the Marxist or psychoanalytic variety that appears to oppose something called queer theory, is exemplary of capitalism and largely to be found within its liberating confines. Queer counterpublics? Queer death drive? Queer jouissance? There’s even a Web site for it. As Foucault observed, power generates the resistance to itself, a paradox that renders resistance a strangely immanent force of ideology, more its partner than its enemy. We find this

paradox even in the most canonical of queer theory texts before and after Foucault. For example, in John D’Emilio’s canonical essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” this “gay identity” is an invention of capitalism;³ at the same time, he would like to argue that “gay identity” also poses a challenge to capitalism, an inherent resistance, in that it is predicated on a heterosexualized family life that is essentially homophobic. However, we could also make the opposite argument with equal force: capitalism serves the queer revolutionaries that are ostensibly inimical to it, since its essential logic serves to disrupt family life and multiply sexual pleasures. Homophobia is an ideological death rattle. We are caught now between two figures of denial, the capitalist family and the capitalist queer, the former denying it is dying and the latter denying it has already been born. Capitalism is queer that way.

We might then revise, or perhaps merely add to, Foucault’s privileged objects of knowledge by identifying specifically digital ones, a history of sexuality that is not comfortably behind us but rapidly unfolding in the present:

1. *An institutionalization of personal privacy* as a human right that no one seems to enjoy. As hundreds of recent and well-informed books and articles remind us, privacy is imperiled, declining, or dead. I suspect rather that, by discussing privacy to death, we have brought it more vigorously to life than ever before. Privacy, that utterly confused category, that monster of modernity and urbanity, is always in danger of being *invaded*—the verb of choice—by digital consumer-tracking, surveillance cameras, personal cameras going public, hackers, Google stalkers, WikiLeaks, indiscretions on Facebook, and so on. Even as we carelessly, even happily, upload personal information and images online, we are reminded to panic about this “invasion of privacy.” In an intriguing grammatical ambiguity, our privacy is invaded, yes, but privacy itself is invading us too. In olden days before the Internet, I understand, our personal information, even our secrets, normally enjoyed a limited audience for a limited time, such that privacy could be at once improbable and yet taken for granted. Now we have too much privacy and press for more. Privacy stalks us online and off- as a continual cause for legal intervention and journalistic panic. The privacy of private property is alive and well, as we know, but with a few changes in tort law and such, we are assured, even personal privacy might still flourish. In the anthology *The Offensive Internet: Speech, Privacy, and Reputation*, various contributors compellingly argue that the repeal or reform of section 230 of the Communications Decency Act would at least make Internet sites more

answerable for the abusive revelations posted by their anonymous users.⁴ In other words, you should be able to sue for damages and respect for what is properly your own and should not be available for others. Such arguments about personal privacy or reputation sound to me more like defenses of private property than manifestos for the delight of being unobserved and undisturbed. The personal privacy that we lack does indeed function like corporate “privatization,” the sort of privacy that we have in abundance and that seized on the Web with its commercialization on a grand scale in the mid-1990s. Should not personal privacy, too, be institutionalized through legislation so that it may be bought, sold, and secured, even on the Internet, whether by locked portals, locked files, or protected passwords? More precise is Helen Nissenbaum’s claim in *Privacy in Context* that we seek not so much privacy, as integrity of context.⁵ We do not need more secrets or more privacy; we need more different places dedicated to more different activities in which certain information, even certain secrets about us, may be known but not at issue. Either way, personal privacy will still be a dream of ethical consensus enforced by the threat or exercise of righteous aggression, if only it were powerful enough. Will the Internet revolutionize our understanding of privacy, private commerce, confidentiality, shame, and reputation—or merely hystericize it more than ever and require a more clinical institutionalization? I find privacy exceedingly difficult even to define, never mind to police. Everything is in some way both private and public at the same time, such that privacy and publicity are always already invading each other. Even the privacy of individual consciousness bears the traces of intrusion by other people. Privacy is merely a polite name we give to our dread of other people’s aggression. We comfortably dispense with privacy when people are reliably nice, but they are too often not. Personal privacy will flourish only when it finally merges with private property under the watchful eye of the law and its enforcement. No one should use your information and your image without permission and payment. True personal privacy is the trademarking of the self.

2. A *prostheticization of affect*, the feeling that we should be available for communication with all our friends, met or unmet, at all times, and we should announce, perhaps with varying degrees of honesty, our current activities and, more important, our current feelings about them. Affect is atwitter on a vast scale and rarely for a definable audience. We need not be bothered to feel, but merely present an avatar or emoticon of feeling, to do the work of connectivity and emotional agency. In return, we expect to know the current feelings, felt or unmet, of other people with a similar degree of

technified immediacy. We may indeed feel in touch with an increasingly dispersed, diasporic set of acquaintances, friends, and family—let us just call them all “friends” in the Facebook sense of the term. We may feel a welcome retreat from sociality, a sexual distance and defense, as if our online avatars could do the work of sociality for us, more or less adequately. Then looms the threat of disconnection: it is a cruel punishment to have our phones, along with Internet and e-mail access, taken away. We vanish; we confront solitude in its specifically digital existential anxiety. With or without our digital prostheses, we are socially and emotionally alienated and disabled again.

3. *A deprofessionalization of information*, which is not necessarily to say a deprofessionalization of knowledge, which is an instrumental organization of information. Information has been democratized online, often with little respect for professional protocols of confidentiality, credibility, copyright, and distribution. It is the force that is rendering libraries of the nondigital variety increasingly redundant. One goes online for medical information to question a doctor’s opinion, a professor’s data, a priest’s dire predictions—or to do without them. This trend includes the deprofessionalization of sexual knowledge, especially for children and other sexual minorities, that has accompanied the decline, if not the fall, of the medicalization or criminalization of their erotic behavior. The access to sexual information is unprecedented and subverts the power of professional authorities to define the limits of the sexually acceptable. For sexually marginalized or pathologized people, this unprecedented access to diverse forms of information is most welcome.

4. *A fetishization of consent*. We live in the Age of Consent, or wish we did. Consent, including the “decency” by which we acknowledge the consent of onlookers, is one of the few official restrictions or demands on sexual behavior, even though consent can never be counted on to make sex pleasurable or meaningful. This liberal rhetoric of consent, like a fetish, is all seduction and no content. It is neither an *ars erotica* nor a *scientia sexualis*, nor does it represent eroticism as a communal ritual, a form of social belonging, a structure of social meaning, or an expression of love; rather, the focus of consent law narrows sexual morality down to a contractual liberty of the individual on a par with the defense of private property. Above all, throughout every sexual interaction, we are to be individuals in full possession of our independent judgment, preferences, and laptops. We agree to agree about everything we do, as well as how, when, where, and with whom we do it. As we all know, however, consent can be a mirage. Who

can give consent, how could we be sure, should we get it in writing, need we always care? In “Thinking Sex,” a justly canonical formulation of sexual ethics around the concept of consent in civil-rights law, Gayle Rubin diagrams and deconstructs a series of oppositions, the “inner circle” and the “outer circle” by which certain cultures valorize good sex, while pathologizing, criminalizing, and otherwise marginalizing bad sex.⁶ Among these oppositions are sex that is marital or in sin, free or for money, vanilla or S-M, at home or in the park. Why do we know from childhood on that we should we not make ourselves at home in the park? Would you, could you, in the park? Would you, could you, in the dark? The one opposition that is pointedly inadmissible to these circles, the one that remains sacred in Rubin’s analysis, is “consensual or non-consensual,” even though sexual pleasure on the part of the unconsenting has enjoyed a long and obvious history. The Internet intensifies the epistemological challenges to the rhetoric of consent: how do we always or even sometimes know whether our erotic interactions online are truly consensual, if we are addressing sane adults, if they are who they say they are and do what they say they do, if the content of a site is what it says it is, if our money is going where we are told, if we will be exposed online embarrassingly or unwittingly to our friends or enemies, if all will remain respectfully confidential and contained within its moment, and if a performer is live or a recording, under duress or free, legally protected or legally exploited? Pornography and prostitution have always been affiliated with these nagging worries, but the stakes are higher, the contexts are more obscure, the mobility of the market is global, and the possibilities for fraud and the trafficking in human beings are more numerous and profitable. How does one avoid being sexually stalked, exposed, bullied, blackmailed, or humiliated, when so many people have so many digital tools and databanks on hand to cyberassault us anonymously, brutally, globally, unpunishably, and permanently? There is also the question of vastly different conceptions of sexuality and consent across increasingly porous national and cultural borders, which is also to say it is not the Age of Consent for everyone everywhere.

5. *A commercialization of sexual variation.* Even more now than Foucault could have predicted, our pleasures are implanted, deployed, and excited within a capitalist economy of enjoyment and power. Whatever your pleasure, there is most likely a Web site for it, an invitation to the voyage that may have premium members with special privileges at higher prices and advertising space individually and automatically tailored to your most esoteric desires. Sexual activism will help you assert your pleasure more

profitably. “Reverse” discourse was never the best term for it, nor was *reification*. Through activism we seek what Axel Honneth, in Hegelian mode, calls the empathic *recognition* that precedes all social cognition and intercommunication: at once an expansion and a condensation of the market of desires evermore queerly, creatively, exhaustively, narrowly, locally, verifiably, and legally defined as human.⁷ Queer is the new normal. It thrives with capitalism online. What is queerest in queer theory sounds like capitalism: no reliable future, no indispensable past, everyone connected rhizomorphically online, everyone an individualist in a serially repetitive search for pleasure and depersonalized intimacy in the moment. This insight was not lost on Foucault and his generation. One of his frequent interlocutors, Guy Hocquenghem, wrote in 1973 that the queer “cruising machine” displays strong analogies with capitalist accumulation under “the guise of perpetual drift and sway” in which “the conqueror thinks of his next conquest immediately upon completing the first.”⁸ Queerness is allegedly the gift one has for a pleasure, even a devastating pleasure, beyond any symbolic economy that could articulate it as an ideal or norm, and yet articulate it we do, even in books published by university presses: the queer erotics of cruising, transience, fragmentation, ambiguity, impersonality, anonymity, experimentation, individualism, diversity, multiculturalism, freedom—in short, the sexual ideal of capital. This is not to say that the queer are to be forgiven for serving as allegorical figures of the success of capitalism, rather than its decline—nostalgia beckons, as we know.

6. *A rhizomorphic dispersal of erotic connectivity.* Online, one can experience countless possible permutations of friendings, ratings, hits, chats, pokes, thumbs-up, glances, flirtations, cruising, hookups, and invitations from places one has never otherwise been and from people one would never otherwise meet, but one might find oneself paradoxically anchored to a keyboard or webcam, in solitude, in a room somewhere, for hours on end. The unpredictability of this movable feast, to what locations it might drift, mimics and transcends the concurrent global movement toward urbanization. Exploration online is like moving to the city, and then to another city and another, even if your body is in the middle of nowhere. One moves through this city of cities for the same old reasons: to make more money, to meet exciting people surprisingly different from oneself, and best of all to meet exciting people surprisingly like oneself. The sexual opportunities may be thrilling or sustaining or demoralizing, but they will also seem boundless and defy our powers of representation.

7. *A gothicization of children’s sex.* This is just an increasingly paranoid

version of the pedagogization of children's sex that Foucault described. The appeal for the professional, juridical, and technological micromanagement of children escalated with digital technology, as did the nagging fear that none of it was working. The child online gives us pause. By way of cinematic horror and tabloid scandal, we have maintained an increasingly violent and creepy account of this child who knows too much and who resides seductively alongside our wishful certainty about children's innocence, their sexual vulnerability to trauma or adult manipulation, and their need of constant protection. To borrow a phrase from James Kincaid, the child is a figure of "erotic innocence."⁹ For every article about children's traumatic exposure to pornography or predators on the Internet, there is an article on children's uncanny, erotic, even vindictive exploitation of digital communication. Sometimes the Internet is childlike. The child and the Internet represent our ambiguous future: they may seem at once harmless and dangerous, vulnerable and scary, supervised and unmanageable, innocent and amoral, ignorant and much too well informed.

8. *A despatialization of sexual community.* If there was ever a bar for it, there is now a Web site for it. In his theorization of queer counterpublics, Michael Warner emphasizes the necessity of queer commercial spaces for queer community and also describes a nostalgia for queer community organized around iconic locations of queer socialization: the neighborhood bar, bathhouse, or bookstore.¹⁰ Online, however, geographical community gives way to digital connectivity with no necessary dependence on the proximity of queer neighborhoods. Even when there is still a bar, bathhouse, or bookstore for it, digital applications have already penetrated it: digital advertising, digital music and images, digital systems for surveillance and money management, and wireless digital access for your personal digital gadget that will connect you with old friends who are somewhere else and new friends who have profiles with various personal measurements and are standing a specified number of feet behind you (the leading cause of another new digital pathology, Grindr whiplash).

9. *An aestheticization of gender and sexuality.* What purpose do they need to serve anymore? If your sexual interests, your gender interests, and your anatomy no longer determine your destiny or your social role (that is a big *if*), we are left with gender for its own sake, sex for its own sake, recalling the mantra of aestheticism, art for art's sake: not necessarily for the sake of profit, religion, politics, procreation, or morality, but rather for the intensity of the pleasures of its own form as it strikes our fancy, less a politics than a cosmetics, whether topical or surgical. Queer performativity has

been its most elegant theorization and transgendered transformation its emblematic instantiation. From Donna Haraway's cyborg women to Sandy Stone's posttranssexual manifestos to Eve Shapiro's gender circuits, digital technology is both the playground and the battleground for radical and not-so-radical erotic and gendered performances, communities, interventions, experimentations, and transitions. Everyone online finds this out sooner or later.

10. *A deregulation of sexual commerce.* This may seem counterintuitive at first, given the escalation of legislation on pornography, prostitution, and privacy; nevertheless, a law is only as good as its enforcement, and vice laws are only minimally enforceable when the Internet can transcend national and cultural boundaries to allow the much freer flow of capital, communication, and images. This deregulation amid escalating regulation may be attractive to the relatively harmless, stigmatized seekers and sellers of sexual images, sexual companionship, or sexual community, but it is also attractive to that more vicious population who uses the Internet for sexually exploiting vulnerable men and, far more commonly, vulnerable women and children. If, for example, making your prostitution plans is as easy online as making your vacation plans, indeed if the two are indistinguishable, could there ever be enough cops and courts in the world to police so vast and nimble a market?

11. *A global hybridization of sexual discourse, or its digital creolization,* to borrow Jillana B. Enteen's preferred term in *Virtual English*.¹¹ She acknowledges that there are digital divides and unequal exchanges of power among classes and cultures on the Web, but she also reveals in Foucauldian fashion how simplistic the distinction has become between the digital haves and the digital have-nots, as if power functioned in only one direction, from the top down. She describes the cultural mashing and misprision of English and local languages in Southeast Asia, the mixing of foreign and local traditions, the effort of some sexual networking sites to incorporate cultural diversity, and hybridized networking sites that are concerned less with sexual tourism than with local sexual community, activism, and education. The anthropology of the digital is less about cultural integrity than about cultural collisions, collaborations, and compromises.

12. *An oedipalization of the Cloud.* As it has in recent years been developing and debated, "cloud computing" is strictly speaking a private utility for off-site data storage and management that interfaces with a client that pays for access to its own information; however, it is also an inviting metaphor for thinking more generally about digital desire. *The Cloud* is a term

rich in connotations of deified paternal authority that begs for a capital letter and a masculine pronoun. Technological utopianism has always had its sci-fi, paranoid shadow, usually based on the fear that our machines are devious and might betray us. The metaphor of the Net or the Web is a perfect occasion for such fantasies. They both have that reassuring promise of a vast and complicated structure of interconnection—and also its scary shadow. As a metaphor for social connection, the Web evokes an elegant pattern, a silken fabric, a tenuous thread that attaches but may be brushed away. Similarly, the Net evokes a safety net should we stumble, a sporting net should we score, a net of transparent walls should we feel a bit crowded, and a fishnet stocking should we like that sort of thing. At the same time, both terms have an insidious, arachnoid connotation of fatal entrapment: nets for catching prey, webs for a spider to spin around flies, creepy cobwebs, tangled webs of deceit, as we digital Ariadnes attempt to follow the threads on our screen unscathed, in and out of the labyrinth. The Cloud as a metaphor, especially that more comprehensive and monotheistic thunderhead, the Intercloud, seems the very sublimation of the Web and the Net—though it, too, casts a shadow over the digital landscape. As the Internet is the network of networks, so the Intercloud is the Cloud of Clouds and resides in Heaven, like the king of kings and the mystery of mysteries—in Heaven, or somewhere similarly vague, sublime, and cold. Do you know where all your hardware is? If so, you have not yet ascended to the Cloud. Your beautiful room should be emptied of all that hot, sweaty machinery, and your data should be condensed and cooled off somewhere icy and distant, maybe Finland, maybe Siberia, saving power, saving you money, saving you space. The Cloud, like an angelic judge, has all your information and much more besides. You feel lighter because you feel your accounts, your history, your resources are uncannily elsewhere, in a place amorphous, ethereal, or wandering, but potentially stormy, confusing, or unreachable. Net and Web are more like id or ego, but the Cloud is pure superego. As such, the Cloud is supremely off-site and difficult to grasp. His interface is a demanding office where we possess little but guilt or praise and where all is virtual but this body and this room. He knows too much about us and might judge without mercy. He knows even more than we do and passes all understanding.

The digital revolution is already under way. Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming of age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse of digital desire. Some of the ancient functions of prophecy are reinvigorated herein. Online, sex will be good again.

Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; New York: Pantheon, 1978); later reissued as *The Will to Power* (London: Penguin, 1998). For an astute critique of the Hurley translation, see Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- 2 William J. Mitchell, *Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
- 3 John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 100–113.
- 4 Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum, eds., *The Offensive Internet: Speech, Privacy, and Reputation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 5 Helen Nissenbaum, *Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Law Books, 2009).
- 6 Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 267–319. For a critical celebration of this essay and its influence, including commentary about its context by Rubin herself, see “Rethinking Sex,” special issue *GLQ*, 17:1 (2011).
- 7 Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Honneth, *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, trans. Ladislav Löb (2001; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 8 Guy Hocquenghem, *The Screwball Asses*, trans. Noura Wedell (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 72–73; originally published anonymously in French in 1973.
- 9 James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 10 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999); and Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2002).
- 11 Jillana B. Enteen, *Virtual English: Queer Internets and Digital Creolization* (New York: Routledge, 2009).