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**SAFE SEXUAL FREEDOMS:
A NEW NARRATIVE FOR AN AGE OF RISK**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements

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ABSTRACT

'Safe sexual freedoms' is a theoretical and political project of some urgency and this thesis offers a perspective on how best to understand and develop that project. A common political response to the recognition of HIV risk has been to argue that sexual freedom is an inappropriate political and ethical goal. I maintain, on the contrary, that no real change in the sexual practice of individuals is possible outside a radical humanist model of sexual freedom. This perspective is pursued through two interconnected forms of critique. Firstly, I undertake an evaluation of a number of prominent theoretical constructions of sexual freedom in relation to the values which they espouse and the understanding of the self that they promote. In engaging with the meaning of sexual autonomy in the writings of Reich, Foucault, feminists, and gay and queer theorists, I defend a theorisation of the social, sexual self in terms of narrative identity and ethical authenticity. This formulation, I believe, offers a satisfactory synthesis between a previously hegemonic 'leftist' humanist project of the self and the influential postmodernist movement which came to dramatically overturn it. One of the primary consequences of the present analysis is the need to 'roll back' to an extent, the extraordinary - and deserved - place of Michel Foucault's work on issues of safe sex, liberation and human solidarity.

The second moment of the thesis is rather different, though closely linked in conception. Drawing on research material which reveals how sexually active individuals construct their notions of sexual and personal autonomy, I explore the role of narrative identity in the sexual practice of individual gay men and heterosexual women. Through an analysis of eight case studies, I examine how individuals inhabit core sexual narratives that guide HIV risk assessment and sexual practice. These two levels of analysis (critique and lived experience) taken together, provide the means for developing a theoretical and political model of safe sexual freedom.

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