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Postmodern Evaluation for an Inclusive Future

Given the dense and eclectic ideas found in the work of theorists associated with postmodern thought, it is not surprising that many find it hard to define exactly what characterizes the postmodern condition. However, there are a few foundational concerns and goals that draw the ostensibly disparate works of notable postmodern theorists Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard together. All three of these theorists reject the idea of unified narratives or discourses possessing ultimate truth-value. From this conclusion, these theorists posit any knowledge approaching complete validity in societal discourse, whether it be within documents containing historical content, authority figures given large amounts of power based on specific knowledge they possess, or rules found in a discipline or field that invoke sanctions when transgressed, contains socially, linguistically, and historically constructed elements that rest on foundations of exclusion and oppression. Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard then argue that because these problematic foundations are often obscured from view, a primary concern of evaluating the postmodern condition is how to utilize a genealogy and archeology of knowledge into all academic pursuits; in other words, how to take into consideration the history, institutionalization, and archivization of concepts, memory, and social structures when analyzing the discourses of knowledge society and the academy deems valid. By forming a "critical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault 1984, 47) and the

knowledge that organizes the social world, these postmodern theorists both advocate for the deconstruction of the institutionalization of archival methods and power relations that are inscribed in any exclusive knowledge given absolute validity by authority, as well as issue an ethical imperative to create new, inclusive, and liberatory discourses.

In response to rapid changes in contemporary archival technology, Derrida implements a unique deconstructive approach to the postmodern concern of the processes by which knowledge is deemed invalid and excluded from authoritative discourse. Derrida argues that archival structures, which form in the presence of longstanding power relations, also determine much of the content of the archive, and because of the externalization of this memory, prompt the forgetting of the information excluded in the archive. In the archiving process, "the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming to existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as records the event" (Derrida 1995, 17). If this is the case, then the individuals who have the power to shape the archival structure have an enormous effect on the information that an archive externalizes and gives truth-value. These individuals have "the right which authorizes" (4) the methods of institutionalizing specific archival techniques, and this right "imposes or supposes a bundle of limits which have [...] a deconstructable history" (4). Derrida insists that there is a strong ethical call to undertake the painstaking endeavor of analyzing the deconstructable topography and history of power relations that make up the way society stores memory, because "the archive [...] will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience" due to the archive taking place "of [the] originary and structural breakdown of said memory" (11). The archive "incites

forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory" (11); however, "there would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of forgetfulness that does not limit itself to repression" (19). The ability to archive, which distorts its content via the archiving methods that came into being under the influence of authoritative power structures, provides no incentive to keep a living memory of anything that is not able to make it into the archive. So, archival technology introduces a paradoxical pathogen called the "archive fever" that destroys memory with the intention of preserving memory. The discourses informed by the structurally inadequate and inaccurate archives will inherently exclude the knowledge and narratives that the individuals with the power to create archives deem invalid due to their standards informed by the dominant discourses of the time. The selected postmodern theorists calls for the illumination of this exclusion, and issues an ethical imperative to create new discourses that value the knowledge unjustly excluded from preservation.

Michel Foucault furthers Derrida's theory of how power sculpts the knowledge invited and preserved into authoritative discourses by explaining how power not only determines the knowledge within archives but inscribes this knowledge directly onto the bodies and lives of the individuals under the control of these discourses. Foucault states that scholars have an obligation to implement "a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying" (Foucault 1984, 46). This statement, which calls for a "critical ontology of ourselves" (47), is distinctly postmodern, as Foucault does "not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as

so many historical events" (46). This statement mirrors Derrida's desire to deconstruct the authoritative truth-value of archives by illuminating the many different registers of linguistic, historical, and socially constructed elements that make up a repressive document many perceive as an infallible source of knowledge. Foucault declares more explicitly than Derrida that "power produces knowledge" (Foucault 1995, 27) and "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (27). The creation of "delinquency" as a biographical classificatory power relationship in penal institutions by new authoritative discourses exemplifies Foucault's idea of a field of knowledge inextricably bound to power relations: when the discourses of psychology, medicine, and criminology worked together to "fabricate" the biographical concept of delinquency, "it gave to criminal justice a unitary field of objects, authenticated by the 'sciences,' and thus enabled [delinquency] to function as a general horizon of 'truth'" (Foucault 1984, 256). The 'truth' historically constructed by certain fields of knowledge found in authoritative discourses is actively used as an instrument for forcibly inscribing power onto the bodies of the marginalized in the name of "reform," or norming. Foucault sees this as problematic, and advocates for ethical action against this exploitative system by proposing a critical ontology containing experimental elements that combine "a realm of historical inquiry" (46) with a "test of contemporary reality," in order to "grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take" (46). Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his discussion of postmodern art, issues the most complete and explicit call to create and embrace new "game rules" (Lyotard 1984, xxiii) that inherently appreciate difference and diversity in discourses of knowledge.

By outlining the differences between modern and postmodern aesthetics, Lyotard demonstrates that when metanarratives inform artistic production, as they have done throughout history, these unified conceptions of what art should represent stifle liberatory innovation and invalidate diversity of knowledge and narrative. While Lyotard explains that modern aesthetics have thankfully moved past the obviously exclusionary realist standards of presenting "the 'correct' images, the 'correct' narratives, the 'correct' forms which the party requests, selects and propagates" as an "appropriate remedy for the anxiety and depression that the public experiences," (Lyotard 1995, 75) Lyotard also argues that the aesthetics of the sublime operate with similar, if more concealed, exclusionary regulations. Modern art claims that "the unpresentable exists" and it is possible to "conceive of the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make visible' this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate" (78). This art, in an attempt to strive for an ideal that transcends the real and creates a nostalgia that gathers people to celebrate the pleasure and pain of the unpresentable, rests on a *unified* standard that presumes there to be one mode of the unpresentable. This foundational belief in a singular aesthetic ideal does not reflect how "each of us lives at the intersection" of "clouds of narrative language elements" (Lyotard 1995, xxiv) that "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv). If the "rules" that classify valid knowledge foundationally do not allow for the representation of diverse meaning and knowledge, then these discourses will not only serve to eliminate innovation, but to exclude, marginalize, and oppress any knowledge that authoritative discourses do not deem valid by the rules of its own system. Lyotard views aesthetics incorporating unified

ideas of taste, consensus, and transcendent ideals destructive to both art and a just and diverse society. Just as Derrida and Foucault issue ethical calls to deconstruct exclusionary and oppressive power structures embedded in ostensibly reasonable knowledge in order to create just modes of existence in the future, Lyotard demands that artists and any other producer of culture "wage a war on totality, [...] be witness to the unpresentable, [and] activate the differences" (Lyotard 1995, 82) in order to strive for the valuing of traditionally disenfranchised modes of existence.

Putting these three diverse postmodern theorists in conversation with one another reveals the uniquely postmodern interest in crafting a program of action for a just and inclusive future based on the information gained from deconstructing the origins of exclusionary memory preservation, power-laden discourses of knowledge, and artistic production. The work of these and other postmodern theorists marks a shift in how scholars approach their disciplines and produce knowledge, and the effects of the postmodern condition can clearly be seen in the approach to the academic study of religion. Because religion shapes human culture worldwide, "except for anthropology, no academic study is so thoroughly imbued with the mandate to study its subject matter cross-culturally" (Gross 1996, 7). Due to the necessity of cross-cultural evaluations of religion, "empathy is the only pedagogically appropriate method," (10) and this method "involves temporarily dropping or 'bracketing' one's worldview, value, and preconceptions as much as possible while engaged in study" (10). However, if the scholar of religion does not recognize that the language, methodology, and knowledge of power relations imbued in academic discourse has historically led to the exclusion of and violence against marginalized forms of knowledge, how is true scholarly empathy

possible? To be a truly empathetic scholar necessitates an awareness of how the scholar is situated in historical forms of power and exclusion, and to constantly engage in deconstructing the academic tools used to approach religion. The scholar must be eternally engaged in this arduous process in order to answer the theorists' call for a future where difference and diversity is valued above unified narratives that privilege few and harm most.

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