DISCOURSE OR MORAL ACTION? A CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERNISM

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Postmodern analyses have appeared with increasing frequency over the last several years. They have raised a number of important questions about the role of knowledge claims and forms of rationality (in general and with respect to schooling in particular), the relationship between individual and particularistic situations and larger social contexts, and the predicaments of disenfranchised others. Such questions are unavoidable for all those interested in educational studies. In helping illuminate, for example, the degree to which discourse is hegemonic, the pervasiveness of technical/rational modes of thought and analysis in educational life, and the ways that patterns of domination deny authenticity to marginalized groups, postmodernism has contributed significantly to our understanding of the educational world.[1]

At the same time, we see a number of problems with aspects of postmodern writings. These problems may be especially serious for educators, for whom both intellectual engagement and transformative practice are mandatory. In positing what appears to be a self-referential and particularistic realm of theoretical discourse as the successor to modernism, postmodernism may limit the kind of productive moral and political actions that can make a difference in the public space — may erode, that is, the notions of pedagogy and praxis that are so crucially important in educational theory and the reconstruction of social, cultural, and educational institutions. Postmodernism, in the end, seems to undermine moral responsibility for the educator, the artist, and the citizen, as it makes problematic significant contributions to alternative social and educational actions.

In this essay we examine the general tenets of postmodernism, and the nature of educational theorizing as it has been informed by postmodernism. We suggest a renewed attention to the dynamics of the educational and social worlds that surround us, dynamics that demand concerted forms of action in the public space. We maintain that such attention requires some form of communal identity that respects

1. For a critical but supportive view of postmodernism and political analysis see Stephen K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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difference as it builds solidarity, and that is able to formulate moral imperatives that may transcend particular circumstances.

This last point needs to be underscored. Children of color, the homeless and the urban underclass, the middle class, the rural poor, and the privileged of our society receive distinct and disproportionate social, cultural, and educational resources. Yet postmodernism seems to suggest that systematic, nonparticularistic knowledge of this situation is unattainable, and that a moral critique of this situation calling for the development of alternatives and sustained action to achieve them will not be forthcoming. While teachers continue to feel disenfranchised and unempowered even in the "new" site-based school management approaches — or, worse, when ameliorative responses to the deskilling of teaching or to the continued degradation of curriculum form and content are assumed to offer substantive change — the postmodern analyst may tell us that reliable knowledge of underlying societal dynamics and mechanisms of oppression is not really possible, and may in any case be misleading. When real world concerns like these arise and are motivated by a general concern for social justice, equality, or liberation, postmodernism seems to deny the authenticity of such nonparticularistic moral claims.

It is appropriate to recognize the substantive contributions of postmodernist literature, even as we continue to seek more sustaining, internally coherent, and socially enactive analyses. To begin, we must critically analyze the meanings of postmodernism, and examine both the possibilities and limitations contained within them. In the next section we point to both the problems and assets of postmodern analysis, and in the following section highlight some paradoxes within it.

POSTMODERN ANALYSIS

At times the term "postmodern" is used to designate a particular social condition, a historical juncture that is said to capture the fractured world in which "we" now live.[2] At other times it designates a particular mode of critique or analysis. In what follows we will focus not on the claim that postmodernism names a social condition — as interesting as that claim may be — but on the paradoxes and possibilities of postmodern analysis.

It is perhaps an understatement to say that the portent of postmodernism is less than completely clear. While the terms postmodern, post-structural, post-Enlighten-

2. For a further analysis of the postmodern condition see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989), and Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53-92.

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ment and post-analytic have occurred with increasing frequency, they have been used in a variety of ways to designate new modes of intellectual and cultural criticism that are often broad in scope but unclear in meaning.[3] Given the multiplicity of writings that have appeared in the last decade, and the rather wide-ranging claims made on their behalf, some clarification of what is meant by postmodernism is in order.

Postmodernism seems to denote several modes or strands of analysis, but modes which have, in many ways, become interrelated. What the variety of postmodern texts seem to have in common is the claim that our current forms of intellectual activity and critique, both radical as well as more mainstream and conservative, are fettered by an outmoded intellectual heritage. The bearers of this heritage, postmodernists say, can neither defend their reliance on universal reason nor deliver on their promises of incremental (or revolutionary) progress. Reason and progress purportedly elude our practical activities and our understanding of the social and natural worlds. Rather than delve into the distinctions among various intellectual positions associated with postmodernism, we will focus on the literature that suggests some commonality of themes and concerns.[4] It is possible to identify generally shared tenets that help us understand the contours of this literature. For clarity and brevity we will define these shared themes as revolving around these views: (1) the attempts to specify metanarratives that have allegedly typified modernist perspectives are misguided and ultimately futile; (2) claims regarding knowledge cannot be based on a realism that promotes "the myth of the given," or "the metaphysics of presence," and are instead necessarily non-representational; and (3) the crucial importance of a multi-vocal "otherness" makes communality in discourse and action infeasible and/or dangerous.

AGAINST METANARRATIVES

An often-cited entrance to the domain of postmodernism is provided by Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*:

> I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences...the society of the future falls less within the province of a Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles.[5]

This rejection of metanarratives is related to the embrace by postmodernists of a pluralism in languages through which we create meaning and in interpretations of

3. For different analyses of these distinct types of approaches see: Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*; Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (New York: Verso, 1987); and Bryan Palmer, *Descent into Discourse* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

4. There is always the danger in this sort of analysis that all postmodern literature will be treated as variations on a single theme. In what follows we attempt to identify common tenets and assumptions within postmodernism, recognizing that not every postmodern analysis will necessarily subscribe, especially with the same emphasis, to these tenets.

5. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv; cited in Cleo H. Cherryholmes, *Power and Criticism: Poststructural Investigations in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 10.

phenomena which can never be unambiguously known, and a renunciation of realism. It leads to an undermining, for example, of the hope to discover or create a true theory or an accurate description of a just society.

The anti-metanarrative theme within postmodern literature is essentially the rejection of social, moral, political, or psychological theories, as well as any metaphysical or epistemological views, that posit a synthetic or natural/historical *telos* toward which we are inevitably heading or which we might prescribe. There is no "grand scheme" of the natural or social world that is unfolding or capable of being enacted. Among others, this theme may be used to discredit the historical materialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, with its presumably determinist progression toward a communist society. It may also be used to undermine religious actions aimed at implementing a conception of brother/sisterhood, a just society, and equality in this world that resonates with the design of the Creator — features that were clearly central, for instance, in liberation theology and Christian base communities as these supported the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua.[6] Postmodern analysts maintain that all such theories are inherently totalitarian and symbolically terroristic in their efforts. For postmodernists maintain that it is impossible to aspire to any unified representation of the world, a world where there are multiple connections and differentiations united by some broader, less particularistic overview. But not only are substantive theories rejected for their metanarrative qualities; "reason" itself is subjected to a similar critique and dismissal. According to postmodern writers, reason cannot deliver universal and valid claims about any alleged reality. Instead, reason, rightly construed, can only provide partial, locally determinate, isolated claims. The works of Michel Foucault are often cited in this context, and his reflections on his own research are illuminating:

> A certain fragility has been discovered in the very bedrock of existence — even, and perhaps above all, in those aspects of it that are most familiar, most solid and most intimately related to our bodies and to our everyday behaviour. But together with this sense of instability and this amazing efficacy of discontinuous, particular and local criticism, one in fact also discovers something that perhaps was not initially foreseen, something one might describe as precisely the inhibiting effect of global, *totalitarian theories*. It is not that these global theories have not provided nor continue to provide in a fairly consistent fashion useful tools for local research: Marxism and psychoanalysis are proofs of this. But I believe these tools have only been provided on the condition that the theoretical unity of these discourses was in some sense put in abeyance, or at least curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalised, or what you will. In each case, the attempt to think in terms of a totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research.[7]

Within educational theory, these views are echoed by, among others, Henry Giroux:

> General abstractions that deny the specificity and particularity of everyday life, that generalize out of existence the particular and the local, that smother difference under the banner of universalizing categories are rejected as totalitarian and terroristic.[8]

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6. See, for example, Joseph E. Mulligan, *The Nicaraguan Church and the Revolution* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1991).

7. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 80-81 (emphasis in original).

8. Henry Giroux, "Postmodernism and the Discourse of Educational Criticism," *Journal of Education* 170, no. 3 (1988): 14. We would note here the clear use of "universalizing" claims made by Giroux regarding what he considers to be "general abstractions" used by "modernist" writers. Such ironic or self-contradictory claims are, we believe, not an anomaly within postmodern literature.

With metanarratives and "universal" reason rejected, postmodern writers claim further that informed moral deliberation and action cannot operate on the terrain of a global project. Commitments to political revolutions, more gradualist cultural and social transformations, religious struggles, and ecological and social progress are all illusory, self-defeating, and oppressive. Instead, Foucault says that we must resist the centralizing tendencies of globalizing theories, substituting instead research into "subjugated knowledges" that combine "erudite knowledge and local memories."[9] Similarly, many postmodern writers maintain that the only acceptable arenas are at the local level; as one critic notes, "action now felt to be acceptable [is] of a local, diffused, strategic kind: work with prisoners and other marginalized social groups, particular projects in culture and education."[10]

As individuals engaged in educational studies and the preparation of future teachers, we of course agree with the view that local struggles are vital sources of knowledge, research, and practical action. Yet we would argue that the postmodern valorization of local and diffused actions, of particular projects, leads to the formation of intellectual enclaves of research and isolated and decontextualized forms of action that are less helpful than we would like in addressing the causes of the problems that confront local situations and particular individuals and groups. Local efforts frequently require insight attainable only through the examination and critique of non-local sources of exploitation and oppression, and necessitate directions that are ascertainable through cultural and moral visions that may transcend the immediate situation.[11]

The problem with postmodernism in this respect is that it draws too sharp a distinction between the local and the more distant, the particular and the general. We would argue, on the contrary, for a more dialectical relationship between these things: the sense that the local can illuminate the more general, and that the global can heighten our sensitivity to the more particular.[12] Consider, as an example of this, the educational practices associated with Assertive Discipline. In incorporating a form of behaviorism that may successfully train students to act in ways that are desirable, given a particular conception of effective teaching, we may object to this practice on several grounds. It reinforces the role of teacher as behavioral manager rather than pedagogical guide; it disrupts the flow of classroom interaction; it provides a system of reinforcements and penalties that students may quickly learn to manipulate to their own advantage; it stultifies student-teacher and student-student interaction, and so on. Yet there are other critiques of Assertive Discipline interventions, informed by moral or epistemological understandings, that transcend the locality of those interventions. For example, there are serious ethical questions

9. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 83.

10. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 32.

11. On this and related points, see Svi Shapiro, "Postmodernism and the Crisis of Reason: Social Change or the Drama of the Aesthetic?" *Educational Foundations* 5, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 53-67.

12. We are indebted to Jo Anne Pagano for a reading of a previous version of this paper, and for helping us put this point in this way.

about treating people as ends rather than means, emphasizing training rather than educational actions,[13] and about the ethics of personal interaction. Such questions and forms of critical analysis rely on an understanding of a body of literature removed from the immediate reality of Assertive Discipline as this is practiced in local situations, but may indeed sharpen our perception and interpretation of that reality. Likewise, observing a localized instance of Assertive Discipline may make more vivid or real issues that have concerned moral philosophers for centuries, and may lead to refinements in our more general moral understandings. Teachers as moral actors in localized situations, like all of us, need reasons for our actions. Sometimes those reasons may be effectively drawn from more general precepts and principles.

ANTI-REPRESENTATIONALISM

Closely connected to the rejection of metanarratives and the preference for more local analysis is the postmodern disavowal of the view that knowledge of the social world can be representational or systematic. The postmodern orientation challenges

> notions of cumulative knowledge, scientific progress, and objectivity. The more characteristically postmodern thesis of the intertwinement of and the symbiotic relationship between power and knowledge amounts to an outright rejection of the possibility of validating scientific method or knowledge on independent, ahistorical, gender- and race-free grounds: hence the dismissal of the time-honored aim of the sciences as the representation of an inviolate and unmediated cultural and natural reality...knowing can no longer be conceived as the mirroring of an independent reality or be reduced to the prediction or manipulation of psychic, cultural, and natural phenomena.[14]

In more optimistic postmodern accounts the rejection of knowledge as representation and of systematic accounts of the socio-political world is accompanied by an important qualification. Giroux, for example, argues that if postmodernism rejects all notions of totality it will run the risk

> of being trapped in particularistic theories that cannot explain how the various diverse relations that constitute the larger social, political and global systems, interrelate or mutually determine and constrain each other. In order to retain a relationship between postmodern discourse and the primacy of the political, it is imperative that the notion of totality be embraced as a heuristic device rather than an ontological category. In other words, we need to preserve a notion of totality that privileges forms of analysis in which it is possible to make visible those mediations, interrelations, and interdependencies that give shape and power to larger political and social systems.[15]

For Giroux the notion of totality needs to be retained for "heuristic" purposes. Yet, given the rejection of metanarratives and the renunciation of reason as a source of nonparticular, non-local claims to knowledge, it is difficult to see how postmodern writers could ground this commitment to a totality, or what criteria might be offered to help us make choices about competing heuristics, analyses, and calls to action. The labeling of a commitment to nonparticular theories and analyses a mere "heuristic device" is not convincing, in part because it is difficult to see what case

13. For example, see John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916).

14. Mustafa ü Kiziltan, William J. Bain, and Anita Cañizares M., "Postmodern Conditions: Rethinking Public Education," *Educational Theory* 40, no. 3 (1990) 353-54.

15. Giroux, "Postmodernism and Discourse," 16.

could be made, in concert with postmodernist premises, for the choice of this particular heuristic route rather than some other one. We agree that particularistic analyses entrap us in ways that deny the interconnections and tensions among people, ideas, and social practices and systems. Yet it is difficult to see why "a notion of totality" should be retained as a heuristic device, unless there is something beyond this device (which looks suspiciously as if it must represent something not exclusively local and particular) that justifies its usage; and if such a justification does exist, it is not clear how it could be squared with the premises of postmodernism that deny nonparticular knowledge and the possibility of progressive change.

The anti-representationalist emphasis in postmodernism is also related to a philosophy of language that has roots in the views of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida. Arguing that linguistics unites a concept (the "signified") and a "sound-image" (the "signifier"), Saussure saw the reality of language in relations between concepts and sound-images, not in what language might refer to in a non-discursive world. The point then is to establish language as a system of signification where the only reality it has is its relation to other signifieds and signifiers. As Saussure put it, "the important thing in the word is...the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others, for differences carry signification."[16] Forms of language rely for their authenticity on other forms of language, for,

> whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it.[17]

In a similar way, Derrida rejects the "metaphysics of presence" in favor of a system of signs that accentuate *differance*. An experience of any kind can be understood as a text, which allows for an ensemble of readings that it and the reader make possible. New readings of texts/experiences are in fact often made possible by previous ones. Yet the point of interpreting or re-interpreting a text is not to discover some new knowledge about our social, cultural, or personal worlds, but to create new meanings through the play of signifiers/signifieds. For Derrida,

> No engineer [who utilizes discourses from formal logic and the pure sciences, and aims at exactitude and the discovery of knowledge] can make the "means" — the sign — and the "end" — meaning — become self-identical. Sign will always lead to sign, one substituting the other as signifier and signified in turn...the notion of play is important here. Knowledge is not a systematic tracking down of a truth that is hidden but may be found. It is rather the field "of *freeplay*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble."[18]

To know is thus something like to be able to interpret or provide meaning to a text/experience within a system of signs that allows for new substitutions through a kind of intellectual playfulness. Yet taking part in this play of infinite grammatical substitutions will not enable us to better perceive or understand the world, or to act

16. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 118.

17. Ibid., 120.

18. "Translator's Preface" to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xix; the quote within this citation is from Derrida.

in more insightful or morally compelling ways. Again we see the central importance of language systems within postmodern analysis.

Richard Rorty argues that our language inevitably alters what we have mistakenly thought to be a separate, external world with an independent existence, and he highlights the importance of metaphor, alternative language games, and poetic imagery as routes to a changed human world. To suppose that there is a separate external world, Rorty tells us, is to be stuck within the outmoded linguistic frameworks of our philosophical predecessors. For Rorty, we have no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate, no deep sense of how things are that philosophers must spell out. Rather, language on this view becomes the central, non-transcendent, human reality, generating a kind of aestheticism. The creation of new metaphors thus comes to replace the search for more adequate or true theories, insightful explanations, and defensible social actions which have been thought to have some non-linguistically defined value and some extra-particular status.

Rorty is attempting to persuade us that our cultural and social worlds are inevitably mediated by the adoption of different languages, that through the creation of metaphors new languages can come to exist, and that such creative acts replace the search for theories and explanations. However, it is difficult to see on what basis we might come to approve one sort of language, choose to create or adopt one new metaphor over others, or on what non-emotivist basis such preferences could be expressed. We grant that language is a human creation and that changes in language may project new physical and social worlds. Yet if we lack access to alternative visions of what those worlds might become, and if we cannot assess their validity and value outside the domain of metaphorically and poetically suggestive language systems, why should we adopt those new metaphors and transformed worlds? If the basis for action is a system of signs and signifiers whose authenticity depends only upon an internal consistency and meaning, social problems can be encoded — as personified, for example, by David Duke — in ways that have the effect of reinforcing patterns of social injustice, oppression, and racism. If all possible encodings are to be judged only by their internal/linguistic persuasiveness, with no appeal to moral or political principles that transcend such persuasiveness, on what basis can we reject, for example, Duke's messages? Saying that we would be "better off" to follow alternative metaphors or languages begs the question, unless we can provide some substantive reasons that justify a different sort of world beyond their linguistic/aesthetic appeal. The possibility of such a justification only makes sense outside the framework of aestheticism Rorty adopts, since we cannot appeal to the value of a new language without a social and moral basis for its superiority. This in turn requires more than rejecting "the habitual use of a certain repertoire of terms," more than superseding "old tools which as yet have no replacements."[19]

19. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 22.

Anti-representationalism as a component of postmodern analysis rejects "the metaphysics of presence" — the view that reality is directly given, without mediation, to subjects. Dissenting from this naive realism results, as we have seen, in postmodernists embracing "textualism," a concern with texts as the only source of meaning. Every experience, then, becomes some sort of text, its meaning uncovered through the play of signifier and signified. However, rejecting naive realism does not necessarily imply embracing textualism. That is, different forms of language can result in different understandings, and may even disclose features of our world previously hidden. But, as previously, we would suggest a more dialectical relationship between language and social reality. We agree with the postmodern position that new meanings can be acquired through the use of new interpretive languages to clarify and understand our experiences. Yet a novel experience may itself make us realize that our forms of language are obsolete and inadequate, stale through familiarity, and push us to find new modes of expression that capture the meanings of that experience. Moreover, our actions in the world can result in our searching for new modes of expression that will better communicate their meaning to others, just as we may develop and utilize multiple languages that create new meanings for us. In both kinds of cases, patterns of discourse or texts are not the *only* source of meaning.

Within educational theory, Jo Anne Pagano's discussion of feminist pedagogy significantly challenges the primacy of aestheticism and textualism:

> A feminist pedagogy is one in which the two meanings of "true" [facts in the public space and faith in the private] meet....[A] feminist pedagogy is faithful to the truth of the agora and faithful to the facts. The discourse of pedagogy should shift from place to place and from position to position, taking up multiple relationships with multiple persons. The discourse of educational theory should make those same shifts, each position rediscovering itself and others over and over again. Our discourse should unfold conversation between household language and the language of the symposium, between the literal and the figurative. Each language provides a critical completion of the other. We must return our figures to the literal origins, fasten our words again to things if we are not to be forever lost in the wilderness of our figures. We must find the figures to express literal experience in our common search for liberation if we are not to remain exiled in the wilderness of our silence.[20]

The aestheticism and textualism of postmodern writings seems to make it impossible for us to "fasten our words to things." As a result we seem condemned either to exile in a wilderness of silence or to a trap of linguistic mirrors. In either case the search for liberation through education is compromised.

"Otherness" versus Commonality

Postmodern writers repeatedly emphasize a concern for the "other" — those who have been oppressed or exploited. Women, people of color, prisoners, children, and the economically underprivileged have, on this view, been left out of Reason's grand equation. According to Stephen White, one of Foucault's greatest legacies is this focus and concern for the "other." White captures one of Foucault's greatest contributions when he writes:

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20. Jo Anne Pagano, *Exiles and Communities: Teaching in the Patriarchal Wilderness* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1990), 149.

> If the underlying effect of our Western, cognitive machinery — political, philosophical, and psychological — has been to introduce clarity, metanarrational unity, and consensus into our lives, then Foucault's purpose can be described as that of elucidating how an Other is *always* pushed aside, marginalized, forcibly homogenized, and devalued as that cognitive machinery does its work. The other may be other actors, external nature, or aspects of our own physical or psychological life; but in every case, Foucault awakens in us the experience of discord as otherness is generated.[21]

In the educational arena, Carol Nicholson notes that once the postmodern orientation is brought into educational practice,

> we must listen to those who are telling stories about what it means to be excluded from a conversation or a community because their "heroes" or "heroines" are different from those of the dominant group. We need a "rainbow coalition" of postmodernists, feminists, and educators who are committed to the task of making sure that no serious voices are left out of the great conversation that shapes our curriculum and our civilization.[22]

We strongly endorse White's and Nicholson's comments. We are acutely aware of how a selective tradition in curriculum and schooling in general has disempowered non-dominant groups, and of the need to alter curriculum form and content so that they are more expansive and liberating. Indeed, much of our work with students and teachers has been aimed at doing just that.[23] Yet an emphasis on making sure that voices of the other become heard has led some postmodernists to become suspicious of or hostile to "community." For some writers, it seems community is necessarily oppressive, patriarchal, and limiting. On this view the most that might be hoped for is a gathering of voices of the other, to which still more others might be added, clustering discrete voices within increasingly small and homogeneous groups. Such voices will, it is understandably feared by postmodernists, be lost or silenced within larger communities whose interests are opposed to those of the "other."[24]

The notion of community can and has been used by powerful individuals and groups to assimilate differences among people and to homogenize alternative perceptions, ideas, and feelings in a manner that protects their power and interests. We unequivocally support the movement toward a pluralism that will support difference by altering structures of power. Further, we agree that personal and social conditions need to be continually created, recreated, and reinforced that will encourage, respect, and value expressions of difference. Yet if the valorization of otherness precludes the search for some common good that can engender solidarity even while it recognizes and respects that difference, we will be left with a cacophony of voices that disallow political and social action that is morally compelling. If a

21. White, *Political Theory*, 19.

22. Carol Nicholson, "Postmodernism, Feminism, and Education: The Need for Solidarity," *Educational Theory* 39, no. 3 (1989): 204.

23. For instance, see Landon E. Beyer, "Curriculum Deliberation: Value Choices and Political Possibilities," in *Teaching and Thinking About Curriculum*, ed. James T. Sears and J. Dan Marshall (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990); Landon E. Beyer and Kenneth M. Zeichner, "Teacher Education in Cultural Context: Beyond Reproduction," in *Critical Studies in Teacher Education: Its Folklore, Theory and Practice*, ed. Thomas S. Popkewitz (London: Falmer Press, 1987); and Daniel Liston and Kenneth Zeichner, *Teacher Education and the Social Conditions of Schooling* (New York: Routledge: 1991).

24. See, for example, Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (August, 1989): 297-324. For a critique of this view, see Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue Across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (November, 1991): 393-416.

concern for otherness precludes community in any form, how can political action be undertaken, aimed at establishing a common good that disarms patriarchy, racism, and social class oppression? What difference can difference then make in the public space?

In a recent essay entitled, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" Elizabeth Ellsworth deals with a number of these issues.[25] Ellsworth provides a provocative description of efforts to generate anti-racist activities as part of a course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The goal of the course was to "define, organize, carry out, and analyze an educational initiative on campus that would win semiotic space for the marginalized discourses of students against racism."[26] Writing of the dominating tendencies she sees in the assumptions surrounding critical pedagogy, Ellsworth says that post-structuralism,

> has demonstrated that as a discursive practice, rationalism's regulated and systematic use of elements of language constitutes rational competence "as a series of exclusions — of women, people of color, of nature as historical agent, of the true value of art." In contrast, post-structuralist thought is not bound to reason, but "to discourse, literally narratives about the world that are admittedly *partial*."[27]

A crucial aspect of true empowerment is, therefore, a rejection of Reason and the encouragement of narratives that are necessarily partial. Moreover, the goal of encouraging unfettered, open communication among the members of this course — as often celebrated by critical pedagogues — itself turned into a form of repression in this case. This occurred, Ellsworth tells us, because apparently "open communication" actually denied power differences between professor and students, white students and students of color, heterosexual and gay and lesbian members of the class, and so on. As she puts this point, "Educational researchers attempting to construct meaningful discourses about the politics of classroom practices must begin to theorize the consequences for education of the ways in which knowledge, power, and desire are mutually implicated in each other's formations and deployments."[28]

As a result of the need to acknowledge the differences that existed within this class, the participants formed "affinity groups" whose membership could be reshaped as the need to confront alternative forms of oppression arose. As a result, "the differences among the affinity groups that composed the class made communication within the class a form of cross-cultural or cross-subcultural exchange rather than the free, rational, democratic exchange between equal individuals implied in critical pedagogy literature."[29] Rejecting any universal characterization of appropriate anti-racist activities, proposals for action were to be judged "in light of our answers to this question: to what extent do our political strategies and alternative narratives about

25. Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?"

26. Ibid., 302.

27. Ibid., 304 (emphasis in original).

28. Ibid., 316.

29. Ibid., 318.

social difference succeed in alleviating campus racism while at the same time managing *not to undercut* the efforts of other social groups to win self-definition?"[30]

The recognition of differences that transcend the usual search for commonality, Ellsworth tells us, is a strength, not something to be overcome. Such a recognition made possible, for this class, the fact of interdependency even while difference was not only tolerated but celebrated and protected. The "affinity groups" that formed eventually engaged in interventions to combat racism on campus. One of the conclusions Ellsworth draws from this experience is that there are realities that are unknown and unknowable, because "the meaning of an individual's or group's experience is never self-evident or complete," and "no one affinity group could ever 'know' the experiences and knowledges of other affinity groups." Moreover, she adds, "social subjects who are split between the conscious and unconscious, and cut across by multiple, intersecting, and contradictory subject positions [cannot] ever fully 'know' their own experiences."[31] Ellsworth says that such (at best) partial forms of knowledge name an important reality and are not a failure to be overcome or feared; what is genuinely frightening is a situation "in which objects, nature, and 'Others' are seen to be known or ultimately knowable, in the sense of being 'defined, delineated, captured, understood, explained, and diagnosed' at a level of determination never accorded to the 'knower' herself or himself."[32]

Objects, nature, and Others may be knowable in a multiplicity of ways. Such ways of knowing are often assimilated into a dominant mode on the basis of power relations that are affected by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on. Yet we would argue that there are some elements of community that must be regained if we are to effect significant changes in these power relations. First, it is important that we have some conception of the source of social problems and forms of oppression if our actions are to be efficacious. While particular experiences and interactions are of course essential for understanding the realities of racism, for example, this is not the same as understanding the causes of racism and how to combat them. The latter understanding requires both experience and a theoretical framework with which to understand and attempt to reverse racist practices. Second, we must have some conceptions of equality, social justice, and a reconstructed sense of daily life within which social relations and institutional practices freed from the taint of racism could develop. Some alternative vision to current forms of oppression seems necessary. Such a vision provides both a counter to current realities and a tentative direction for our actions — even when that direction is continually scrutinized and reconstructed. Third, if we are to avoid fragmented and even contradictory efforts at alleviating oppression, it would seem that we need some way to provide a measure of solidarity even across differences. This was apparently achieved in the "affinity groups" discussed by Ellsworth. Yet this requires agreement of some sort among people whose own experiences, and those of others, may be unknown and unknowable. The

30. Ibid. (emphasis in original).

31. Ibid., 318-19.

32. Ibid., 321.

substitution of otherness for commonality promoted by Ellsworth, and generally celebrated by postmodern writers, makes the creation of coalitions seem quite difficult if not impossible. This difficulty is exacerbated by the postmodern rejection of "metanarrative" principles or commitments that transcend discourse and by the trends toward aestheticism and textualism already noted.

This discussion of some of the central tenets of postmodernism should orient the reader to what we believe are common strands within postmodernism, and to our concerns about these strands. Next we elaborate further some of the theoretical difficulties and paradoxes contained within postmodernism, and conclude with a discussion of its limitations for the kind of moral action that is necessary for the reform of educational institutions and practices.

SOME PARADOXES OF POSTMODERN ANALYSIS

"STANDPOINTS WITHOUT FOOTINGS"

Postmodernists critique the supposedly "totalitarian" nature of the metanarrative present in "all" Enlightenment thought and offer in its place local, standpoint epistemologies. Having given up the belief that the social world can be understood in any systematic and nonparticular sense, postmodernists maintain that what we are left with is a world defined by fragmentation, indeterminacy, and partiality. But the postmodern claim that knowledge of the social world can only be related through various, discrete, and unrelated standpoints has to be justified. Many commentators have turned to Friedrich Nietzsche and Foucault for these justifications.

In discussing the legacy of Nietzsche and its influence on postmodernism, Alex Callinicos identifies several Nietzschean theses that are commonly invoked by people writing in this tradition, one of which is that

> the only attitude appropriate to the seething heterogeneity of the actual world is perspectivism, which recognizes every thought as an interpretation, valid only within a conceptual framework the grounds for whose acceptance lie not in any supposed correspondence with reality, but in the purpose, construable ultimately in terms of the will to power, which it serves.[33]

There is something clearly paradoxical in this view, since it belies the concerted efforts of postmodern writers to *convince* the reader of their claims about the poverty of modernism. Here we follow Peter Dews's analysis as presented in *Logics of Disintegration*.[34] As Dews argues, "if no perspective can claim ultimate validity...then the problem of the correct philosophical standpoint is raised for Nietzsche himself."[35] Dews indicates that Nietzsche's answer to this conundrum has two parts. The lack of an ultimate perspective "must first be compensated for by a timeless variation of perspectives, none of which lays claim to absolute validity."[36] Dews goes on to quote Nietzsche, who writes that,

33. Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 65.

34. Dews, *Logics*.

35. Ibid., 205.

36. Ibid.

> There is *only* a perspective seeing, only a perspective "knowing"; and the more affects we allow to speak of one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity", be.[37]

But, according to Dews, this multiple perspective approach is, for Nietzsche, merely preparation and training for the "true philosophical task of commitment and creation."[38] The task of the philosopher is not to discover or uncover Truth but rather to decree and proclaim truths. Again Dews cites Nietzsche:

> Authentic philosophers...are commanders and law-givers: they say "thus it shall be!", it is they who determine the Wherefore and Wither of mankind....Their "knowing" is *creating*, their creating is a law-giving, their will to truth is — *will to power*.[39]

This linkage of truth to power is characteristic of Foucault's work as well. For Foucault, "Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime of truth.'"[40] Dews maintains there is an obvious difficulty that Foucault and other perspectivist theorists "must confront: the problem of their own status and validity as theories."[41] Dews maintains that Foucault has not and indeed cannot answer this issue adequately:

> "If one is interested in doing historical work that has a political meaning, utility and effectiveness," Foucault suggests, "then this is possible only if one has some kind of involvement with the struggles taking place in the area in question." Indeed, it is clear that, behind this activist stance, Foucault never abandons his fundamental objectivism, since he immediately goes on to *distinguish between* truth and effectivity: "The problem and the stake was the possibility of a discourse which would be both true and strategically effective, the possibility of a historical truth which could have a political effect." But if Foucault is claiming truth for his historical theories, while insisting on an immanent connection between truth and power, he can only be claiming recognition for the particular system of power with which his own discourse is bound up. The fundamental question which emerges at this point, therefore, a question which is central to Nietzsche's thought, is whether it is possible to secure assent to a discourse by mobilizing a persuasive force entirely disconnected from considerations of veracity. It is a measure of the perfunctory nature of Foucault's formulations on truth and power that he fails to pay attention to this problem.[42]

In other words, even when truth is wedded to power one cannot escape considerations of veracity, unless one considers truth essentially illusory and reducible to power. In a world where truth is connected to a "will to power," throwing out concerns for veracity would seem to leave only ineffectualness or raw force, neither of which is desirable. It appears that even in the postmodernist flight from metanarrative and the Archimedian framework, with their purported claims of objectivity and "universal truth," some justification for the accuracy and veracity of a particular point of view cannot be escaped.

This issue arises frequently in contemporary postmodern educational theory. For instance, Patti Lather, in *Getting Smart: Feminist Research With/in the*

37. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Genealogy of Morals*, cited by Dews, *Logics.*, 205.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 133.

41. Dews, *Logics*, 213.

42. Ibid., 215.57. Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 78.

Postmodern, is centrally concerned with assessing distinct modes of research.[43] The need to adjudicate between distinct empirical accounts of educational phenomena is recognized by Lather when she explicitly states that even in a postpositivist age there remains a need for empirical rigor.[44] But her avowed concerns for validity frequently shift to a focus on the construction of meaning. For example, when she wants to explain existing structural contradictions she maintains that:

> For theory to explain the structural contradictions at the heart of discontent, it must speak to the felt needs of a specific group in ordinary language. If it is to spur toward action, theory must be grounded in the self-understandings of the dispossessed even as it seeks to enable them to re-evaluate themselves and their situations.[45]

It would seem that in order to offer a reasonable explanation of structural conditions something more than group affirmation is needed.[46] Certainly for an explanation to be rhetorically sound and politically efficacious it must speak to the felt needs of that group. But there are other methodological issues to be addressed. How does one identify, locate, and explain structures of oppression, much less structural contradictions? Throughout Lather's account the focus tends to be on meaning and the construction of meaning, rather than the explanation of material conditions or social structures. Even though she speaks of the need to come up with credible data, she does not discuss how we might investigate the social, material, and structural world. One need not be a naive, stubborn, or even sophisticated realist to maintain that explanations of structural contradictions in the socio-political world require more than an examination of meaning.

Lather's preferred research orientation moves all too easily from this focus on meaning to the acceptance of regimes of truth. She states that research is "an enactment of power relations; the focus is on the development of a mutual, dialogic production of a multi-voiced, multi-centered discourse. Research practices are viewed as much more inscriptions of legitimation than procedures that help us get closer to some 'truth' capturable through language."[47] Given Lather's preference for multiple voices, and assuming that these voices will at least sometimes conflict, we must confront the status and validity of these multiple views — or simply assume they are all equally true (or false), equally revealing (or opaque). Postmodern educational theory, at least in this form, does not address these issues.

"TALKING ABOUT NOTHING"

It is not clear how these issues can be addressed within postmodernism. For questions of non-discursive veracity and accuracy presume, to some degree, that our knowledge of the social world refers to a reality that exists, in some fashion, apart from us and our operant system of discourse. Such questions presume, in other

43. Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/In the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

44. Ibid., chap. 3, "Research as Praxis."

45. Ibid., 65.

46. For a similar critique of "social moral relativism" as this sometimes is embodied in critical education theory, see Landon E. Beyer and George H. Wood, "Critical Inquiry and Moral Action in Education," *Educational Theory* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 1-14.

47. Lather, *Getting Smart*, 112.

words, something very much like "the metaphysics of presence" that postmodernists reject. We agree that reality may be described in various ways, and may be more or less accurately rendered for particular purposes; and these purposes are not necessarily equally valuable. Yet postmodernism provides us with little moral guidance about how to choose from among those purposes and descriptions and thus about how to act in the world.

One of the problems with rejecting the "metaphysics of presence" — one alluded to earlier — is that if discourses lose all connection to a world outside a particular language system then, as John Searle has said, "they remove the rational constraints that are supposed to shape discourse, when that discourse aims at something beyond itself."[48] But even more is at stake. Without some sense of a reality beyond the language in use, postmodernists lack intelligibility. Again Searle is helpful:

> The person who denies metaphysical realism presupposes the existence of a public language, a language in which he or she communicates with other people. But what are the conditions of possibility of communication in a public language? What do I have to assume when I ask a question or make a claim that is supposed to be understood by others? At least this much: if we are using words to talk about something, in a way that we expect to be understood by others, then there must be at least the possibility of something those words can be used to talk about.[49]

Consider, if you will, the claims that people of color are oppressed, that meanings are derived from interpretive readings of texts/experiences, and that differences and the "other" need to be valued. All of these postmodern claims presuppose, for their intelligibility, "that we are taking metaphysical realism for granted."[50] Where are these people of color, what is this text, and how can we value the "other" if he/she does not exist and cannot be more or less accurately portrayed (even though we grant the reality of multiple interpretations and portrayals)? Without some assumption that our words refer to a world beyond the text, the postmodern stance is reduced to unintelligible utterances.

Searle goes on to state that one need not claim to "prove" metaphysical realism is true "from some standpoint that exists apart from our human linguistic practices," but rather that "those practices themselves presuppose metaphysical realism."[51] In other words:

> Metaphysical realism is thus not a thesis or a theory; it is rather the condition of having theses or theories....This is not an epistemic point about how we come to know truth as opposed to falsehood, rather it is a point about the conditions of possibility of communicating intelligibly.[52]

For postmodernists, then, without some sense of words and referents that extend beyond the signifier and the signified, their talk amounts to nothing. Postmodernism appears to be locked within a circular narcissism that undermines not only the claims of "modernism" but its own writing as well. This circularity is especially debilitating for those involved in education, who are confronted daily with choices that call for concrete action.

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48. John Searle, "The Storm Over the University," *New York Review of Books* (December 6, 1990), 40.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

Thus far we have identified a number of problems and paradoxes within postmodernism. Our analysis suggests the following: (1) In spite of the postmodern repudiation of metanarratives, some writers have admitted the need for them at least as a "heuristic device." Yet this seems contradictory, and the grounds on which to prefer one such device over others are not clear. (2) The rather sharp distinctions made between the local and the global, the particular and the general, as well as the separation between social realities and language, are misguided. We would instead argue for a more dialectical relationship within these areas. (3) The rejection of moral imperatives, at least implicit in much postmodern writing, makes it difficult to determine how to choose among competing ideas and courses of action, especially given the aestheticism and textualism apparent in postmodern analyses. (4) While communities, especially as they currently exist, often promote hegemonic practices that deny difference in their search for homogeneity — practices that maintain social and cultural disparities of power — we would argue for an altered understanding within which difference and multivocality can be maintained as part of the search for solidarity and a common good. (5) A concern for veracity cannot be avoided, despite the claim that power is really only another name for truth; the singular pursuit of power undermines not only postmodernism but all other forms of analysis and critique. If all knowledge is really a will to power, the status of postmodern knowledge is as suspect as any other. (6) While multiple interpretations of actions and events are always possible, our statements about the world must refer to something outside their own existence if our discourse is to be intelligible. It is not clear what postmodern words are being used to talk about, if they have no connection to anything outside of discourse itself.

These issues and dilemmas raise serious and apparently irresolvable questions about the postmodern project. They identify internal contradictions and limitations that undermine key positions of that project itself. In addition to these problems, we want to conclude with a set of questions about the role and value of postmodernism as a force for moral action, especially in educational contexts.

POSTMODERNISM AND MORAL ACTIONS

In 1983, Derrida contributed a piece of writing, "Racism's Last Word," to a catalogue accompanying an anti-apartheid art exhibition in Paris assembled by the Association of Artists of the World against Apartheid.[53] His essay was criticized by two American literary theorists, Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon,[54] to whom Derrida in turn responded.[55] The nature of this debate is relevant and illuminating:

> The main philosophical point at issue was whether or not Derrida's denial of the existence of the "*hors texte*" was responsible for his failure to attend to the evolution of racial domination in South Africa. Perhaps more interesting is the contrast he draws between apartheid, which he describes as a "concentration of world history"...and the opposition to it, which depends on "the

53. Published in *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 290-99, trans. by Peggy Kamuf.

54. Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, "No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida"s "Le Dernier Mot du Racisme," Critical Inquiry 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 140-54.

55. Jacques Derrida, "But, Beyond...Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon," *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 155-70.

> future of another law and another force lying beyond the totality of the present." But it is impossible now to anticipate the nature of this "law" and "force." Commenting on the paintings, Derrida says: "their silence is just. A discourse would compel us to reckon with the present state of force and law. It would draw up contracts, dialecticize itself, let itself be reappropriated."[56]

The difficulty of postmodernism pointing the way toward reconstructed social, racial, economic, and cultural realities is here crystallized. Locked into a kind of discursive presentism that accompanies the postmodern ambiguity with respect to the myth of the given, future possibilities seem not only remote but beyond justification and construction, while present social realities appear to be beyond reconstruction. What we are left with is a kind of political conservatism that seems endemic to postmodernism; in reference to Derrida's reaction to the anti-apartheid art exhibit, Callinicos observes:

> So the resistance to apartheid must remain inarticulate, must not seek to formulate a political programme and strategy: any attempt to do so would simply involve reincorporation into "the present state of law and force" and perhaps even into the "European discourse of racism"....we can only allude to, but not (at the risk of "reappropriation") seek to know anything lying beyond "the totality of the present."[57]

An alternative to apartheid is not nameable because there is no extant system of discourse into which such an alternative could fit. Moral judgments like those condemning apartheid are thus not analyzable outside the system of discourse from which it has presumably been generated. More important, no alternative to apartheid can be offered since there is no set of extant discursive practices that will support such an alternative. Since relations of discursive practices are the only source of meaning and veracity, alternatives to apartheid must await new discursive practices — even when it is not clear what the source of those new practices might be or how they could be justified. In the meantime, silence (Pagano's fear of being "exiled in the wilderness") seems to be the only available response to racial oppression; thus the silence of the paintings in the exhibition assembled by the Association of Artists of the World against Apartheid is "just."

Such a perspective reveals a lack of moral imagination and a withering of commitment to social and political action that seems representative of the postmodern turn. In isolating discourse and securing meaning through the relations of signs and signifiers, and in focusing on the particularities of experience within enclaves of social groups within which some people may decide at a given point in time that "the practice of dialogue...is not the most promising way to expend their energies and resources,"[58] meaning is in danger of becoming separated from political struggles, unable to influence social events. Such a state of affairs makes postmodernism especially problematic as a basis for changing educational theory and practice, shaped as they are by current social arrangements, and linked as their transformation must be to moral actions.

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56. Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 78; the quotation within this citation is from Derrida, "Racism's Last Word," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1986): 299.

57. Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 78.

58. Mary S. Leach, "Can We Talk? A Response to Burbules and Rice," *Harvard Educational Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 262.

The literature connecting education to larger social, historical, cultural, and ideological phenomena directs us to look at the these interconnections as necessarily implied in any sort of educational undertaking. Debates continue, of course, regarding the sort of autonomy that cultural practices and institutions possess, their viability in terms of the radical reconstruction of capitalist society, and the role of theory in this process. But it does seem to us, as suggested above, that one of the prerequisites for any sort of social transformation is a moral and political vision of how things might be different and better — of how, for instance, to justify and work toward a social formation characterized by racial equality and pluralism instead of oppression. Further, such a vision must be accompanied by a clear and justifiable description of the current social reality, if we are to understand the importance of praxis in the process of its reconstruction. This will require a theory of language and meaning that moves beyond the world of signifier and signified, while avoiding the positivistic contention that there is a world of atomistic empirical events that allow for veridicality.[59]

The educational import of these postmodern deficiencies can be clearly seen in light of Jonathan Kozol's work, *Savage Inequalities*.[60] The author describes a set of financial, social, and political conditions that have kept poor minority children from receiving their share of basic educational resources. Examining the legal, educational, and administrative practices in both large and small cities, Kozol describes with particular detail the plight of urban children. He also relates how the school financing structure undermines attempts to reduce "savage inequalities." Kozol conveys with alacrity, outrage, and alarm a situation that is educationally and politically unacceptable. In a rather disarming use of poetics, he relates that:

> In seeking to find a metaphor for the unequal contest that takes place in public school, advocates for equal education sometimes use the image of a tainted sports event. We have seen, for instance, the familiar image of the playing field that isn't level. Unlike a tainted sports event, however, a childhood cannot be played again. We are children only once; and, after those few years are gone, there is no second chance to make amends. In this respect, the consequences of unequal education have a terrible finality.[61]

Postmodern writers, in pointing to the need for local action within determinate contexts, might well celebrate works such as Kozol's, which movingly and poetically portray the plight of children caught within a local system of racism and social exploitation. In this sense we might see *Savage Inequalities* as responding to Foucault's call to conduct research into "subjugated knowledges" that combine "erudite knowledge and local memories."[62] It tells a revealing story about "others" whose existence and authenticity are often submerged within the official rationality of American capitalist hegemony.

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59. See Landon E. Beyer, *Knowing and Acting: Inquiry, Ideology, and Educational Studies* (London: Falmer Press, 1988), especially chap. 2.

60. Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).

61. Ibid., 180.

62. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 83.

Yet for Kozol, as for us, language must be tied in some sense to an external reality. Moreover, our outrage at the conditions described by the author must be rooted in a moral condemnation of injustice and inequality. In the context of such social and moral evils, postmodern premises fostering insularity and narcissism for discourse, the particularity of knowledge claims based on aestheticism and textualism, and a lack of substantial moral imagination, do not serve us well. Such premises leave us without a clear direction to pursue in the alleviation of the inequalities Kozol describes. Racial, social class, and gender inequalities require concerted, collaborative actions involving global as well as local sensitivities; yet postmodernism leaves us silent in the face of such social realities.

Given the interrelationships of educational and social theories and practices, it is clear that no substantive changes will take place through exclusively individual initiatives or isolated events. Moreover, the kinds of actions required for significant change must, we would argue, be guided by genuinely democratic social relations. This makes problematic the postmodern emphasis on particularity, the local, and the specific as sources of efforts that must be collaborative. While we recognize and concur with the need to create the conditions under which previously silenced voices can be heard, the segmentation of people into groups within which they primarily speak to each other undermines a broadly based, morally informed political project. Our commitment must be to the sort of community that endorses solidarity and collaborative moral action even as it seeks to abolish power differentials that deny the authenticity of the other. The development of the sort of theoretical formulations implied in the above comments are the subject of a larger project, obviously. Such formulations require not only theoretical defense and justification but a description of the practices to which they will lead and an indication of how to get from "what is" to "what might yet be." In short, this effort requires both political and ethical work that is neither simple nor uncontested. The problem with postmodernism is not that it might serve as one of the contestants in such struggle, but that it seems unable to participate, locked into a presentism of particularity and discourse analysis that affords no likelihood of helping develop moral visions that can lead to transformative social critique and action. While such analytic niceties may be invigorating for academics inside that "bastion of protectionism, the university,"[63] they are not adequate for the kind of work that educators are obliged to do.

As educators we are always and necessarily moral actors, at whatever level we teach, in whatever subject matter we claim competence. We are confronted daily with myriad choices that call for the development of reasons to support one course of action over another, the result of which may have profound and long-lasting consequences. A postmodern orientation seems ill-equipped to handle these deliberative features of daily educational life.

Within curriculum deliberation, for example, the defining questions are what knowledge is most worthwhile and what forms of experience are most worth having. Within the public schools, it has become relatively common for many to regard these

63. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 199.

as technical or procedural questions exclusively, to be answered by appeal to school district or state curriculum guidelines, textbook publishing house materials, tradition, or presumed experts outside the schools. Yet these fundamental curriculum questions are at heart moral, political, and cultural inquiries that can only be adequately dealt with by considering a host of allied questions that take us beyond the classroom door.[64] For example, we must consider the relationship between what is included and excluded in the current curriculum and how this is related to social dynamics of power, influence, and domination; how events are portrayed and interpreted in textbooks that lend credibility to certain points of view at the expense of others; how the very form of curriculum materials and a certain constancy over time in this regard affects students' perceptions of themselves as well as their peers and teachers, knowledge, and education itself; how the curriculum as it actually unfolds in a classroom assists and retards the development of personality traits; the extent to which different forms of language and systems of value infiltrate the processes of creating and enacting the curriculum; and so on. In any curriculum there are commitments regarding the kind of people we want students to be and become: how they will act with others, form their identities, shoulder social responsibilities, and exercise and act on their own choices.

Questions of curriculum deliberation are unavoidably normative in character, mandating political choices that require our most illuminating analyses, our deepest commitments to beneficial social relationships, and our most thoughtful and heartfelt moral imaginations. In the last few years we have seen numerous examples of the types of concrete curricular choices that educators must confront.[65] For example, the disciplinary and interdisciplinary foci present in the proposals of Theodore Sizer and Howard Gardner[66] can be contrasted with the moral and social emphases of Nel Noddings, John White, and Jane Roland Martin.[67] Both of these perspectives can be compared with the neo-conservative emphasis on cultural literacy represented by the proposals of Diane Ravitch, William Bennett, and Chester Finn.[68] In Sizer's and Gardner's proposals there is evidence of a very real concern that the curriculum be knowledge-based, interdisciplinary, and capable of connecting with students. There is, however, little justification presented in these two works for their particular approach to curriculum. In the proposals from Noddings, White, and Martin, the concern for conveying knowledge is less strong than the need to create

64. See Landon E. Beyer and Michael W. Apple, eds, *The Curriculum: Problems, Politics, and Possibilities* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988).

65. In the examples that follow, we would argue that the commonalities among each group of authors permit them to be grouped together for our purposes, even though we acknowledge the significant distinctions among the works cited within each of the next three footnotes.

66. Theodore R. Sizer, *Horace's School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992); and Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

67. Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992); John White, *Education and the Good Life* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991); and Jane Roland Martin, *The Schoolhome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

68. Diane Ravitch, *The Schools We Deserve* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); William Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); and Chester Finn, *We Must Take Charge* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

moral communities guided by a concern for others. Questions regarding the relationship between knowledge and personal autonomy are raised in the course of reading these works. The neo-conservative proposals of Ravitch, Bennett, and Finn suggest that cultural and moral literacy provide the glue that ought to bind us together. In this orientation the conceptions of learning and the curriculum seem quite shallow and the role of education for democracy ill-defined. Today we have before us a plethora of proposals that require not only circumspect examination on their own terms but also analyses of present public school inequities, larger social and economic trends, and a real consideration of what types of knowledge, experiences, and dispositions are most educationally valuable in a democratic society. The postmodern premises discussed in this essay leave us with a diminished capacity to deal with these crucial curriculum questions. They make it difficult to create community while valuing difference, to put forth coherent political and moral stances, and to examine the educational terrain for the ways it bestows benefits and injuries. These curricular deliberations cannot be carried out in isolation, especially if we hope to resist the powerful influences in current U.S. society that seek to bring schools into even greater conformity with corporate interests and the agenda of the neo-conservative "New Right." The words and deeds of educators necessarily extend to a world beyond the text.

Consider another educational domain. While oversimplified, we may distinguish between two approaches to the preparation of teachers. One attempts to equip students with the skills, forms of knowledge, and personality traits that are necessary for the public schools to flourish in their present forms. Such programs place a premium on professional socialization into the patterns of work and meaning that now dominate, experiences in schools designed to ease the transition from college student to professional teacher, and courses that reflect a technical-vocational orientation. The other construes professionalism, teaching, and the preparation of teachers quite differently. Instead of a technical-vocational orientation, some teacher educators take a critically-oriented social foundations approach that regards the current realities of schooling as important but not defining features of what the preparation of teachers might include. Emphasis may then be put on the development of critical reflection, a view of teaching as a moral calling, and the capacity to see the relation of schools to our society holistically.[69] In either approach (and in all others) teacher educators take a moral stand on how the best interests of students, prospective teachers, public school students, parents, and larger communities are to be served. The choices we make will in important respects affect the kinds of teachers we will have in our schools, and the kinds of schools we will have in our society.

Both public school and college teachers confront moral and political choices that demand some form of reasoning, decision, and action. Postmodernism has helped

69. See in this regard Landon E. Beyer, Walter Feinberg, Jo Anne Pagano, and James Anthony Whitson, *Preparing Teachers as Professionals: The Role of Educational Studies and Other Liberal Disciplines* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989); Daniel P. Liston and Kenneth M. Zeichner, "Reflective Teacher Education and Moral Deliberation," *Journal of Teacher Education* 38, no. 6 (1987): 2-8; and Landon E. Beyer, "Schooling, Moral Commitment, and the Preparation of Teachers," *Journal of Teacher Education* 42, no. 3 (May-June 1991).

alert us to the realities and consequences of marginalizing voices of "others," to the tendency for a technical, Western rationality to become hegemonic and oppressive, and to the need to become sensitive to the particular and the local. Yet the problems we have identified — especially those regarding the loss of general principles and values that can affect and be affected by the particular and local, the tendencies toward aestheticism and textualism that embroil us in languages that overlook praxis, the conflation of veracity and power, and the denial of community in a reconstructed form — should make us wonder about the efficacy of postmodernism in dealing with the political and moral deliberations and actions that educators must undertake. The inability of postmodernism to provide support for the type of political project that educational transformation must be, in addition to the conceptual and empirical problems and paradoxes it contains, should give pause to the inflated claims being made on its behalf.

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK Nicholas C. Burbules, Michael Dale, Scott Fletcher, Jo Anne Pagano, and the anonymous reviewers of the previous version of this essay, for their thoughtful criticisms and suggestions.