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Foucault and the Holocaust: Epistemic Shift, Liminality and the Death Camps

Samuel Joseph Kessler[a]

[a] Department of Religious Studies, The University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, USA
Published online: 08 Aug 2014.

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Foucault and the Holocaust: Epistemic Shift, Liminality and the Death Camps

Samuel Joseph Kessler

Department of Religious Studies, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, USA

Michel Foucault, in his historical and theoretical works, often analyzed the Holocaust by applying his theories of carceral technology and biopower to the German system of concentration camps. This is similarly the case with scholars who write about Foucault as well as those who use his theories in critical application. However, consideration of or allusion to the German-operated death camps of occupied Eastern Europe is surprisingly rare in Foucault's writings. Attempting to explain this silence about the death camps specifically (as opposed to Foucault's more numerous references to the German system of concentration camps generally) in both Foucault's own thought and writings and those of Foucauldian scholars, this article suggest that the death camps occur as something liminal within Foucauldian theory. It argues that, though many of the techniques employed by the Germans in their carceral systems during the 1930s and 1940s were traced by Foucault and his exegetes back to the eighteenth century, looked at differently, the German death camps of Eastern Europe in the 1940s represent (within the framework of Foucault's existing theory) a dramatic and unique departure from earlier instantiations of state violence and biological control. Outlining and examining Foucault's philosophy of history, this article links Foucault's silence on the Holocaust death camps to other silences in his historical writings, arguing that the death camps represent a physical instantiation of a transition point in Foucault's idea of historical epistemes. Such an argument seeks to re-frame Foucault's silence on the death camps as one that reveals an overlooked (but structurally essential) component within his philosophical theorization of history.

Keywords: Foucault; Holocaust; death camp; episteme; silence; liminality

In his historical and theoretical works, Michel Foucault often analyzed the Holocaust by applying his theories of carceral technology and biopower to the German system of concentration camps. This is similarly the case with scholars who write about Foucault as well as those who use his theories in critical application. Both Foucault and his followers have focused their studies on the German concentration camps rather than on the gassing centers of Nazi-occupied Poland. This ostensibly peculiar silence about the death camps is not a mere oversight or sign of ignorance. Rather, the omission of the mass murder facilities suggests that there are clear boundaries in Foucauldian thought. The death camps occur as something liminal within Foucauldian theory; they are a physical instantiation of a transition point in Foucault's philosophy of historical epistemes. Though fully cognizant that arguing from a silence is analytically fraught, I contend below that Foucault used silences very specifically and that this particular silence suggests a certain self-understanding: namely, that assimilation of the Holocaust death camps was not possible within his theorizations either of carceral technology or biopower and, further, that the death camps violently disrupted his broader conceptualization of history.

In seeking to delineate the scope of Foucault's silence about the death camps, this paper describes a substructure in Foucauldian theory, one related to Foucault's periodization of history and his notion of the episteme. Addressing Foucauldian theory through a discussion of the episteme is unusual, however; Foucault is principally known for his analysis of the connection between 'power' and 'knowledge' in modern European history. In a series of books and lectures, most notably *Madness and Civilization* (*Folie et déraison*, 1961 [English translation, 1965]), *Discipline and Punish* (*Surveiller et Punir*, 1975 [English translation, 1977]), *The History of Sexuality* (*Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1 1976; vols. 2 and 3, 1984 [English translation, vol. 1, 1978; vols. 2 and 3, 1986]), and his 1978–1979 lectures at the Collège de France, 'The Birth of Biopolitics' (*Naissance de la biopolitique*, 2004 [English translation, 2008]), Foucault argued that knowledge – the words and ideas produced by a society in search of 'truth' – are intimately dependent on the ideologies of that society itself. What a society conceives of as real and true, and how that society expresses reality and truthfulness, is, Foucault argued, inseparable from the maintenance of a society's regimes of power and political hierarchy. In his writings Foucault further defined a relationship between power and knowledge using a lens he labeled biopower, defining this as the right of the state to control the physical body of its citizens, whether through medicalization or notions of purity and criminality. Using case studies in the history of incarceration, medical technology and sexuality, Foucault sought to expose what he saw as an intrinsic link between ideas of 'knowledge' (regimes of truth) and 'power' (regimes of control).

This article addresses another aspect of Foucault's writings – his theorization of history – primarily through his books *The Order of Things* (*Les Mots et les choses*, 1966 [English translation, 1970]) and *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (*L'Archéologie du Savoir*, 1969 [English translation 1970] and *L'ordre du discours*, 1971 [English translation, 1971], joint English publication, 1972). In this article I connect Foucault's silence on the Holocaust death camps to what I see as an analogous silence in his other historical theorizations, seeking an engagement with his work that both analyzes an absence and defines a pattern. I argue that the death camps become, in Foucault's writing, the shadows from which emerges a post-'Age of Man episteme'. (I define this below.) I contend that the rarity of references to the death camps in Foucault's work marks an important limit in his theories as they relate to moments of historical transformation. While many of the techniques employed by the Germans in their carceral systems during the 1930s and 1940s were traced by Foucault and his exegetes back to the eighteenth century, I will show that the German death camps of Eastern Europe in the 1940s represent (within the framework of Foucault's existing theory) a dramatic and unique departure from earlier instantiations of state violence and biological control.[1]

This article is divided into three parts. Section 1, 'Looking at Auschwitz', is an account of present Foucault–Holocaust scholarship, identifying key themes and trajectories of inquiry. The core of this scholarship suggests a strong causal link between Foucault's interest in discipline and prisons and the concentration camps of the Third Reich, though, as I point out, it fails to

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[1]Though I do not directly engage it here, scholars continue to debate the question of the 'unique' in relation to the Holocaust. Throughout this paper I argue for the death camps as unique within the paradigms of Foucauldian theories of history, which, because of his widespread influence, makes the argument of uniqueness important for understanding his broader philosophical program. For recent work on the uniqueness debate, see Bob Brecher, 'Understanding the Holocaust – the Uniqueness Debate', *Radical Philosophy* 96 (1999): 17–28; Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin, 'The Uniqueness of the Holocaust', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no. 1 (1996): 65–83; Gavriel Rosenfeld, 'The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Studies', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 28–61.

address the death camps in either a significant or critical way. Section 2, 'The consistency of episteme', initiates my argument for a different connection between Foucauldian theory and the death camps. Though Foucault left much undefined, his historical writings are deeply dependent on the idea of periodic massive social reorganizations within limited frames of time. Section 2 examines the elements and definitions crucial to Foucault's understanding of the roots of large-scale social transformation. Section 3, 'The death camps as epistemic moment of liminality', argues for the parallels between Foucault's silence about epistemic shifts and his silence about the death camps. This argument seeks to reframe Foucault's silence on the death camps as one that reveals an overlooked (albeit structurally essential) component within his philosophical theorization of history.

1. Looking at Auschwitz

Many of Foucault's friends and a growing handful of scholars have searched for an underlying Holocaust influence in Foucault's work, many of them ascribing his interest in the history of punishment and incarceration to undisclosed reflections on Nazi fascism and its murderous impulse. Yet the rarity of commentary on the Holocaust – let alone on the death camps specifically – in Foucault's books, interviews, lectures and articles has posed something of a mystery and caused more than a minor problem for certain branches of Foucauldian scholarship. As early as the 1950s, sources existed such that Foucault could have written an investigation of German racial and segregationist policies toward the Jews during the war. Yet as Marc Mazower notes, the

> vast bulk of [Foucault's] work ignores the twentieth century, even though it has subsequently enjoyed enormous influence in helping us rethink that century. Although the recent historiography of both Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia would be unrecognizable without him, he himself visited the subject of totalitarianism only rarely and … reluctantly.[2]

Some scholars have seen this absence as the opening for their own analyses, and a small subfield has emerged devoted to explaining this absence, much of it coming to examine the link between Foucault's interest in disciplinary technologies (e.g. prisons) and the scientific focus on, and state control of, the body (called 'biopolitics') within the German system of concentration camps established before and during World War II.[3] James Miller writes that 'throughout his life, [Foucault] was haunted by the memory of Hitler's total war and the Nazi death camps'.[4] Yet how scholars define 'Hitler's total war' and 'the Nazi death camps' often seems to reveal more about their own interests than Foucault's.

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[2]Mark Mazower, 'Foucault, Agamben: Theory and the Nazis', *Boundary 2* 35, no. 1 (2008): 25.
[3]Some work has been done applying Foucauldian critique to the Soviet Gulag. There is an obvious connection between Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (first appearing in 1973) and the phrase 'carceral archipelago' from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* of 1975. Though this essay focuses exclusively on the Holocaust, the analysis of German concentration camps can fruitfully be applied to those in the Soviet Union as well. What separates the German death camp from the German and Soviet concentration camp is that, to paraphrase Timothy Snyder, the German death camp was created simply for the purpose of producing death, while '[t]he Gulag, for all of the horrors of slave labor, was not a system of mass killing'. Timothy Snyder, 'Holocaust: The Ignored Reality', *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 2009. For scholarship on Foucault and the Gulag, see Desmond Bell, 'Michel Foucault: A Philosopher for All Seasons?', *History of European Ideas* 14, no. 3 (1992): 331–346; Alex Demirović, 'Das Wahr-Sagen des Marxismus: Foucault und Marx', *Prokla: Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft* 151, no. 2 (2008): 179–201; Colin Gordon, 'Question, Ethos, Event: Foucault on Kant and Enlightenment', *Economy and Society* 15, no. 1 (Feb. 1986): 71–87; Jan Plamper, 'Foucault's Gulag', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 255–280.
[4]James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 171.

In a survey of the subject 'modernism and totalitarianism', Richard Shorten briefly describes the two main scholarly trajectories on Foucault and the Holocaust.[5] One trajectory, stemming from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, notes the rise of medical institutions and the removal of segments of the population to prisons or hospitals, with incumbent justifications based on new 'scientific' findings about these peoples. The other trajectory is the approach through bio-power from Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. This, again, is Foucault's idea that in the nineteenth century the form and content of the human body itself became an active site for scientific study and state intervention. 'The implementation of genocide needed power in all its forms, including the new forms of biopower whose strategies imposed an ideal of regularity, method, and cold determination,' wrote Maurice Blanchot in a description of Foucault's theory.[6]

These two trajectories necessarily involve one another – one cannot have implementation without institutions – and in *The History of Sexuality* Foucault hints at their joint potential: 'Nazism was doubtless the most cunning and most naïve … combination of the fantasies of blood [biopower] and the paroxysm of a disciplinary power [state institutionalism]'.[7] Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg are proponents of a form of Holocaust research whose chief argument involves the employment of Foucauldian concepts in order to maintain the link between German crimes and their Enlightenment precursors.

> Foucauldian categories, such as biopower, carceral society, disciplinary and regulatory technologies, and the docile body, among others, can illuminate the structuration of the death-world, and its incipient genocidal universe … In our view, Foucault's analysis … of the 'military dream of society', which underlies the dark side of modernity … and of the regime of biopower through which it is instantiated, is a conceptual key to an understanding of the Nazi project.[8]

Milchman and Rosenberg worry that too often German fascism is interpreted as pre-modern (i.e. segregated from the 'modern'), thereby undermining the fundamental indictment of Enlightenment principles made by German crimes.

Another trend focused on Foucault and the Holocaust is exemplified in the way Milchman and Rosenberg seek to read the Holocaust back into Foucault's work, using Foucault's ideas not only as a methodology for a different sort of research, but also seeing the Holocaust as the potential point of instigation for Foucault's reflections on these subjects. By applying Foucault's categories to the German war against the Jews while knowing that Foucault never wrote on that subject directly, these two scholars interpret Foucault's silence as indicative of some primary motivation. Milchman and Rosenberg write,

> It is Foucault's emphasis on the dark side of modernity, on the other side of the Enlightenment heritage, that links his thinking to a meditation on Nazism and the Holocaust … We can see the inscription of Nazism and the Holocaust in these … Foucauldian models which are traced back to the very dawn of modernity, and which then blend together.[9]

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[5]Richard Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism: Rethinking the Intellectual Sources of Nazism and Stalinism, 1945 to the Present* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[6]Maurice Blanchot, 'Michel Foucault as I Imagine Him', in *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 100.

[7]Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One, An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 149.

[8]Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, 'Foucault, Auschwitz, and the Destruction of the Body', in: Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (eds.), *Postmodernism and the Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1998), 206, 220.

[9]Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, 'Michel Foucault, Auschwitz and Modernity', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 22 (1996): 107, 109.

Though they are eager to note that, like Foucault, they are not searching for origins, the links that are drawn retain a strong sense of the Freudian – the idea that a young person's trauma influences decisions and ideas in adult life.[10]

Unlike Milchman and Rosenberg, who are overt, some scholars only hint at these Holocaust connections in Foucault's thought. In their seminal volume *Michel Foucault*, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow arrive (seemingly by chance) at the idea that some of what Foucault theorized was a direct response to German actions during World War II. Dreyfus and Rabinow write,

> Politics thus became bio-politics. Once the politics of life was in place, then the life of these populations, and their destruction as well, became political choices. Since these populations were nothing more or less than what the 'state cares for for its own sake', the state was entitled to relocate them or to slaughter them, if it served the state's interest to do so.[11]

This passage is immediately followed with a quote from a lecture Foucault gave at Stanford in 1979, which included one of Foucault's rare references to the Holocaust. The mechanisms that result in the definition of groups, they quote Foucault as saying, are brought to purest fruition in the Nuremberg Laws and the concentration camps; it is in the Nuremberg Laws that one can most consciously witness the redefinition of a population through state sanction, the reconfiguration of social norms through legislative fiat and popular participation.[12]

Such a narrative connection suggests that Dreyfus and Rabinow believe that at least some of Foucault's work was a direct attempt to explain how German policies could make sense in an intellectual context. Dreyfus and Rabinow appear to say that, for Foucault, becoming aware of the German camps necessarily meant turning back to the nineteenth century, searching for advancements in and approval of carceral technologies and racial sciences. Concentration camps, judicially sanctioned racial laws, human–cargo railroad shipments – these are just a few examples of what Foucault could have witnessed as a young man in 1940s Europe, a witnessing, Dreyfus and Rabinow suggest, that might later have prompted Foucault to seek historical explanations for such seemingly ahistorical crimes.

In an article published posthumously in *Les Temps Modernes*, Foucault does indeed suggest that his personal awareness of Holocaust crimes led him to argue that German fascism was not an aberration in world history, but rather a radical instantiation of nineteenth-century ideas.[13] The German war against the Jews was not an anomaly, a return to pre-Enlightenment tribalism and fantasies of mythical power. Instead, German concentration camps were fully consonant with the modern episteme. Shorten writes that 'it was the development – post-Darwin – of racial theories in a specific direction, and their uptake in Nazi thought, which, Foucault now seems to say, set the Third Reich apart from the modern mainstream'.[14] In this we hear echoes of Milchman and Rosenberg: 'Foucault has made it possible to see that death-world [at Auschwitz], not as a break with the developmental trajectory of modernity, but as a product of the biopower that it has generated.'[15] It is not, Milchman and Rosenberg argue, that German fascism was inevitable; it is that it was not impossible. To be 'set … apart from the modern mainstream' is not to be an aberration, like a gene that arises by accidental mutation amidst totally dissimilar parts. It is that the modern

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[10]Ibid., 106.
[11]Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 138.
[12]Ibid.
[13]See Michel Foucault, 'Faire vivre etlaissermourir: le naissance du racisme', *Les Temps Modernes* 535 (February 1991): 57.
[14]Shorten, *Modernism and Totalitarianism*, 164.
[15]Milchman and Rosenberg, 'Foucault, Auschwitz, and the Destruction of the Body', 232–233.

episteme engaged with and often validated many of these theories, and what is unique is the way in which Fascist Germany employed them on such tremendous scale.

In his article 'Beyond Life and Death', James Bernauer argues that Foucault's final works are explicit commentaries on fascist Germany, and that Foucault's theoretical development (especially in volumes two and three of *A History of Sexuality*) has lurched toward an '"aesthetic of existence" [that] is in contrast and resistance to a "science of life"'.[16] Bernauer also calls this 'aesthetic of existence' 'ethics', and he draws a link to Auschwitz, writing, 'Although it was only in his last writings that Foucault dealt at length with ethics, the moral interest was decisive throughout his work.'[17] Bernauer sees Foucault as developing a moral philosophy that can combat the assumed biological truths embodied by Nazi ideology – Foucault's being an ethics of continual critique of 'science'-based moral paradigms. Bernauer's relation of Foucault to Auschwitz is a moral one, seeking through Foucault a possible solvent to our culture's seemingly endless fascination with scientific cures for human social ails. Bernauer implies: we have already been down this road once, and Foucault has come along to keep us from repeating our errors. This is not quite the old adage that knowing history keeps one from repeating it; it is more like saying that knowing the untruth of past truths keeps us from believing in those truths again.[18]

In the afterword to Dreyfus and Rabinow's *Michel Foucault*, Foucault validates Bernauer's ethical position to a great extent:

> The relationship between rationalization and excess of political power is evident. And we should not need to wait for bureaucracy or concentration camps to recognize the existence of such relations. But the problem is: What to do with such an evident fact?[19]

For Foucault ideas are a sort of methodological instigator, a question for scholars more than social activists. And, if read with just the right inflection, it is likewise a question that suggests that we are currently at a new beginning. 'The relationship … is evident' – well, it is only evident after having observed the modern episteme and its murderous conflagration in two world wars and German fascism. So when Foucault writes, 'We should not need to wait,' perhaps he is purposefully encouraging Bernauer, who believes that he has found an ethical imperative within Foucauldian methodology. Or perhaps Foucault is hinting that something new awaits on the other side of his methodology, something that may correspond with Bernauer's moral desires, but may also look quite different.

Let us also note in passing the fascinating and utterly un-explicated relationship between Foucault and his support for the State of Israel. James Miller writes: 'As Daniel Defert puts it, "Michel was profoundly philo-Semitic" … in [Foucault's] view, the legitimacy of the Zionist state was simply not open to debate'.[20] This support is credited with ending the friendship between Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, which must count in some sense as an epochal event in the chronicles of postwar French thought. Defert explains, 'Their political differences began to multiply. Their views now diverged on the value of Marxism and on the legacy of May '68. In matters of Middle-

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[16]James W. Bernauer, 'Beyond Life and Death', in: T. J. Armstrong (ed.), *Michel Foucault, Philosopher* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 262.
[17]Ibid., 268.
[18]For another attempt to accentuate the moral lessons of the Holocaust in epistemology, see Michael Dintenfass, 'Truth's Other: Ethics, the History of the Holocaust, and Historiographical Theory after the Linguistic Turn', *History and Theory* 39, no. 1 (2000): 1–20.
[19]Michel Foucault, 'Afterword: The Subject and Power', in: Dreyfus and Rabinow (eds.), *Michel Foucault*, 210.
[20]Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 171.

Eastern politics, Deleuze was staunchly pro-Palestinian, while Foucault was just as staunchly pro-Israel.'[21] In 2000, Edward Said reiterated these sentiments in an article for the *London Review of Books*: 'Finally, in the late 1980s, I was told by Gilles Deleuze that he and Foucault, once the closest of friends, had fallen out over the question of Palestine, Foucault expressing support for Israel, Deleuze for the Palestinians.'[22] What one fears from critics of Foucault's scant references to the German war against the Jews is that their criticism will devolve into personal attack or into questions about Foucault's moral awareness of the end of European Jewry. Foucault's support for the State of Israel, which apparently he linked directly to the events of the Holocaust, should speak loudly enough.

It remains for me to give brief qualification to these interpretations of Foucault and the Holocaust. There is much to be learned by applying Foucauldian methodologies to the study of German fascism, just as there is much evidence to believe that Foucault's first-person observations of the German occupation and German crimes were crucial for his later interests in carceral technologies and biopolitics. This does not, however, fully explain why Foucault may have chosen to stay mostly quiet on the subject of the death camps.

On 17 March 1976, Foucault delivered his final lecture of the semester at the Collège de France, which included one of his longest analyses (two pages) of Nazism and the German war to annihilate the Jews.[23] It is here that Foucault makes some of his most sweeping observations, interpreting Nazism as

> something that is really quite extraordinary: this is a society that has generalized … [the] two mechanisms – the classic, archaic mechanism that gave the state the right of life and death over its citizens, and the new mechanism organized around discipline and regulation.[24]

On first reading, Foucault appears to be arguing that the German death camps are a manifestation of an extreme formation of two pre-existing technologies of power: the right of the state to kill and the right of the state to control. But Foucault also purposefully seems to skirt the issue of the relation between the death camps and non-German Jews, that is, the difference between a war of complete biological extermination (against European Jewry) and a war that accentuates to an unprecedented degree the institutionalization of state-sponsored violence (e.g. the planned starvation of Soviet prisoners of war or besieged citizens in Leningrad). Foucault writes, 'The Nazi state makes the field of the life it manages, protects, guarantees, and cultivates in biological terms absolutely coextensive with the sovereign right to kill anyone, meaning not only other people, but also its own people.'[25]

Foucault's words are neither satisfactory nor self-explanatory if we wish here to comprehend the death camps within his historical theorization. His formulation cannot explain why, in the summer of 1944, the Germans shipped the Jews of Hungary to Auschwitz for extermination. Those Jews were not a part of the German racialized state, but neither were their non-Jewish Hungarian brethren. Hungary was not within the 'field of the life' for which the Third Reich government was responsible. Foucault's analysis makes comprehensible the ghettoization and murder of German Jews or Jews living within the lands chosen for German colonial expansion (e.g. Jews within the General Government, where three million Poles were also murdered to make space

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[21]Ibid., 297.
[22]Edward Said, 'Diary', *The London Review of Books* 22, no. 11 (June 2000): 42–43.
[23]Michel Foucault, '*Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 258–260.
[24]Ibid., 260.
[25]Ibid.

for German settlers.) But the Jews of France, Italy, Greece and the Soviet Union were surrounded by a racial and biological other that was equally foreign to the German self-conception. Yet the Jews were systematically sent to death camps, while their co-Frenchmen, Italians, Greeks and Russians were not. Even in this final lecture, at what appears to be his most overt analysis of Nazism and the Final Solution, Foucault stops short of addressing the meaning of the death camps, the distinction between Jews and non-Jews, and the subsequent systematic murder of the Jews.

Thus we see that the Holocaust was not radical simply because of Nazism's 'paroxysmal'[26] use of incarceration and biological control. The focus of the Holocaust was not, by the summer of 1943, even primarily about the creation of a society wherein a certain people, called Jews, could be put into the most advanced prison network and made to conform, to become something that they were not, to do something they could not do, to die so that they might not be around those who do not want them around. That which, by the summer of 1943, the Holocaust precisely had not become is, in fact, what Dreyfus and Rabinow write that it continued to be: that sometimes 'what the individual had to do, from the state's point of view, was to live, work, and produce in certain ways; and sometimes he had to die in order to enforce the strength of the state'.[27] Rather, by the summer of 1943, the German network of labor and concentration camps functioned alongside another network, that of the death camps. The death camps are what is fundamental and must be reckoned with. As Timothy Snyder says, 'Unfortunately, like the image that we have of the Nazis, it's not that it's too evil, it's that it's not evil enough. It doesn't grasp the totality of all of it.'[28]

The novelty of the death camps is what is most often overlooked in scholarship on Foucault and the Holocaust. Mark Mazower, in words originally meant to describe Giorgio Agamben, writes:

> [He] does not really talk about extermination. He invokes the emblematic power of Auschwitz – its 'uniqueness' – yet his accounts of camp life come back again and again to life in the concentration camps, not the death camps … He is really concerned with Auschwitz as the expression of a general kind of 'limit situation' that will allow him to illuminate the horrors of the 'normal'.[29]

Timothy Snyder makes similar remarks: 'The very reasons that we know something about Auschwitz warp our understanding of the Holocaust: we know about Auschwitz because there were survivors, and there were survivors because Auschwitz was a labor camp as well as a death factory.'[30]

Yet as Snyder's comments make clear, neither Foucault nor Agamben are alone in conflating the various forms of German carceral techniques used against the Jews. Christopher Browning writes, 'The existence of ghettos in the German-occupied territories of Poland and the Soviet Union was so ubiquitous … that the temptation to see Nazi ghettoization as … uniform, centralized and calculated … was irresistible to many historians in the early stages of Holocaust scholarship.'[31] But because Auschwitz – today's quintessential evocation of the evil of the Holocaust – was both a

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[26]Ibid., 259.

[27]Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 139.

[28]Snyder, 'Holocaust: The Ignored Reality'.

[29]Mazower, 'Foucault, Agamben', 29.

[30]Snyder, 'Holocaust: The Ignored Reality'.

[31]Christopher Browning, 'Introduction', in: Geoffrey P. Megargee (General Editor) and Martin Dean (Volume Editor) (eds.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945 Volume II: Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), xxvii.

work camp and a death camp, we who look back through its lens forget that some camps were not constructed, even in ruse, for economic function. Camps like Treblinka, Sobibór and Belzec, made for Operation Reinhardt, were places where Jews went only to die.

Much of the work cited above is the attempt to discern from a few sentences or allusions in Foucault's writings a broader, buried theory about the Holocaust. They are searches between instances, and just as much as they ask questions of Foucault, they likewise reflect some sort of contemporary desire to explain the Nazi horror and to understand it as part of Western history.[32] Robert Eagelstone, while noting the difficulty of arguing for the Holocaust as a unique event, argues for its influence on the beginnings of postmodern theory. His work reflects the method of searching within the writings of postmodern theorists 'to show how [their] ways of thinking, precisely because they [were contemporary] with the Holocaust, both measure and offer new perspectives on a range of issues in our understanding of the Holocaust and its aftermath'.[33] This sort of work is certainly an important homage to Foucault and his fellow postmodern theorists. And it is to some degree very useful, as the study of carceral society and disciplinary culture arising in the nineteenth century does, in fact, do much to illuminate the philosophical groundwork of the twentieth century's terrors. But what I ask in the next section is if we can see absence as a statement, too. What if we theorize not between moments but in the empty space itself? Foucault himself provides my justification:

> In current usage … the notion of writing seems to transpose the empirical characteristics of the author into a transcendental anonymity … This usage of the notion of writing runs the risk of maintaining the author's privileges under the protection of writing's *a priori* status … There seems to be an important dividing line between those who believe that they can still locate today's discontinuities in the historico-transcendental tradition of the nineteenth century, and those who try to free themselves once and for all from that tradition.[34]

Let us, therefore, understand what Foucault does do and does write and thereby attempt to explain why he does not do, does not write something else. In this way we will come to realize that by not commenting on the death camps Foucault was making an important and profound statement about the limits of his own work.

2. The consistency of episteme

Foucault's historical writings rely heavily on the idea of an intellectual transformation between 'ages', which he calls epistemes. In his works *The Order of Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* Foucault describes in detail two earlier epistemes and hints at a future third. Foucault's use of the word episteme is linked with his methodology of historical archaeology and is his term for explaining the vast systems of knowledge, truth, interpretation and power that create what he sees as a uniformity in intellectual purpose within an age. Foucault's self-identification as a historian of the social sciences means that his interests and writings, though broad, are necessarily bounded by his interpretation and definition of a particular subfield of human intellectual endeavor. The social sciences, Foucault contends, are the disciplines developed in the nineteenth century that sought to and succeeded in creating Man as a 'subject' capable of being studied alongside other forms of natural life. Foucault argues that the creation of 'Man as Subject' was new in the history of thought, that it

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[32]See Milchman and Rosenberg, 'Foucault, Auschwitz, and the Destruction of the Body', 223.
[33]Robert Eagelstone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.
[34]Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in: Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 104–105.

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represented a fundamental break with older forms of thinking and knowing, and that it arose in nineteenth-century Europe. He calls this the 'Age of Man' or the 'modern episteme (or age)', contrasting it with a former period, which he labels the 'Classical Age' or the 'Age of Representation'.

Following the modern episteme Foucault hints at a possible third episteme, saying that, maybe now, in the present, we are either just before it or have recently entered it, though its recognition will come only with the passing of many years.

> At this point, where the question of language arises again with such heavy over-determination, and where it seems to lay siege on every side to the figure of man … contemporary culture is struggling to create an important part of its present, and perhaps of its future.[35]

The fact that Foucault does not name the post-Age of Man episteme may be because his methodology does not make predictions and does not build new systems of knowledge. Foucault's theorization of the episteme is not so that it may be employed as a technique for plotting the potential course of the future. 'We are standing on the edge of an abyss that had long been invisible: the being of language only appears for itself with the disappearance of the subject. How can we gain access to this strange relation?'[36] Foucault is a historian who theorizes, and out of intellectual humility he keeps himself limited by the tools he uses.

At this point we must more clearly define 'archaeology' as a historical methodology. Foucault's work refers 'back to a precise and extremely well-determined epistemological arrangement in history. In the Classical period, the field of knowledge … was perfectly homogenous'.[37] The archaeological method can examine an episteme and find within it a more or less consistent social and discursive community. 'Now Foucault, when concerning himself with discourse, does not reject history but distinguishes within it discontinuities, discrete – local rather than universal – divisions, which do not presuppose subsisting beneath them a vast, silent narrative, a continuous, immense, unlimited murmur … '[38] Foucault's rejection of historical teleology means that a 'vast, silent narrative' cannot be used to expound a general law of history. Certain interpretations become widespread and are deployed by, and themselves deploy, various types of power, resulting in redefinitions of truth, which themselves become the basis for discourse constructs and explanatory analyses of the past and present.

Foucault's histories are 'chartings of the epistemic breaks that account for the sudden appearance of new disciplines and the equally rapid demise of certain old ones'.[39] They reflect the way in which Foucault theorizes ideational changes – changes in interpretation and thought, and the formations of new ways of imagining being and the organization of knowledge. As Foucault saw it,

> I am not concerned … to describe the progress of knowledge toward an objectivity in which today's science can finally be recognized; what I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field, the episteme in which knowledge … grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history … [through] conditions of possibility … Such an enterprise is not so much [like writing] a history, in the traditional meaning of the word, as [writing] an 'archaeology'.[40]

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[35]Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 382–383.
[36]Michel Foucault, 'Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside', in *Foucault/Blanchot*, 15.
[37]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 346.
[38]Blanchot, 'Michel Foucault', 73.
[39]Thomas Flynn, 'Foucault's Mapping of History', in: Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32.
[40]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxii.

By 'conditions of possibility' Foucault means an episteme's interpretive scope, the way it creates truth and knowledge by reimagining its own past. An episteme is more than the dominant narrative of the time; it forms the very contours of narrative potentiality itself.

As Foucault writes, these narrative potentialities cannot be noticed by reading general histories of a period. An entirely new methodology is necessary if we are to identify how particular forms and interpretations of ideas come to be accepted within epistemic periods. 'Archaeology' is the name of this method, and it is inseparable from the theory of epistemes – without epistemic unity there is nothing for archaeology to uncover. Likewise, archaeology is highly dependent on a certain scholastic distance, that is, on a scholar's temporal separation from the central period of an episteme's strength, perhaps even from the episteme itself. For a scholar to chart the acceptance and ubiquity of forms of truth, those forms must either already be generally accepted or have long been discarded.

> The word archaeology is not supposed to carry any suggestion of anticipation; it simply indicates a possible line of attack for the analysis of verbal performances: the specification of a level – that of the statement and the archive; the determination and illumination of a domain – the enunciative regularities, the positivities; the application of such concepts as rules of formation, archaeological derivation, and historical *a priori*.[41]

Archaeology as method is not designed to predict which interpretations of knowledge will become dominant. It only seeks to locate them and ask how they became so.

Despite Foucault's repeated return to this theoretical historical phenomenon of the episteme, he never describes in detail a social or philosophical mechanism capable of prompting the massive discursive shifts he so eloquently and vigorously chronicles. Furthermore, the potential period-shift upon which he himself, as thinker and writer, was so dependent, the one from the Age of Man to the present, is hardly discussed at all.

> The epistemological field traversed by the human sciences was not laid down in advance … their intrinsic possibility, the simple fact that man … should have become the object of science [in the modern episteme] – that cannot be considered or treated as a phenomenon of opinion: it is an event in the order of knowledge … was itself produced in a general redistribution of the *episteme*.[42]

The very cultural transformation that allows his type of scholarship to flourish is never granted a name, let alone a sustained analysis. The archaeological method cannot be used to explain shifts between one episteme and the next. A historical methodology founded on the premise that truths and power structures are intertwined with discursive interpretation of knowledge cannot itself supply an account of future epistemological contours. Foucault can only be interested in the historical episteme because 'power … is not exercised from a sovereign, solitary site, but comes from below, from the depths of the social body, deriving from local, mobile, passing – and occasionally minute – forces arranging themselves into powerful homogeneities whose convergence grants them hegemony'.[43] It takes time for power to act, or for it to act in ways that are observable to the historian. Foucault, therefore, must study the *longue durée* and sift through the vast archive of waiting, and is constrained by the complex, time-intensive act of weaving truth production.

Which does not mean, of course, that Foucault is not exasperating. Often as not, he wants to write a history and its paradox and call it a book. He does not want to explain the implications of seemingly divergent statements. Take one example:

[41]Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 206.
[42]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 344–345.
[43]Blanchot, 'Michel Foucault', 95–96.

> [T]he human science, unlike the empirical sciences since the nineteenth century, and unlike modern thought, have been unable to find a way around the primacy of representation; like the whole of Classical knowledge, they reside within it; but they are in no way its heirs or its continuation, for the whole configuration of knowledge has been modified and they came into being only to the degree to which there appeared, with man, a being who did not exist before in the field of the *episteme*.[44]

I commend him for the writing – it is non-dialectical and feels, to this reader at least, descriptively accurate of the historical process. But it is also a veil, a sleight of hand, a form of intellectual resistance. 'They reside within it; but they are in no way its … continuation' though they rely entirely on a subject, man, 'who did not exist before'. The Age of Man episteme is entirely within, yet entirely separate from, the Classical Age episteme – and there was a great transformation that took place between them. This remains Foucault's position throughout his writings.

Charles Taylor voices the frustration of those willing to allow Foucault the paradox but desirous of understanding how archaeology might actually attempt to observe the epistemic transformation.

> But all this does not mean that there is no such thing as explaining the rise and fall of these [epistemes] in history. On the contrary, this is one of the major tasks of historiography … You cannot evade this question by talking of the priority of structure over element, of language over speech-act. What we want to know is why [an episteme] arises.[45]

Refusing to engage does not mean a question disappears. Intrinsically, the archaeological method assumes ruptures in knowledge and truth between epistemes precisely because it assumes such a radical diffusion of power and the comprehensive influence of interpretive assumptions. But what it does not account for, and what Foucault refused to engage with, is the question of how an entrenched and diffuse interpretive knowledge system could be upended and overthrown. Taylor argues that part of being a historian is explicating transition. Foucault, I argue, would disagree. Foucault's contribution is to introduce a new method of historical research. Foucault writes, 'I did not deny history, but held in suspense the general, empty category of change in order to reveal transformations at different levels; I reject a uniform model of temporalization.'[46] But that method is entirely ill equipped to answer other important questions. Foucault's silence about periods of transition is an implicit limitation within his own historical theory.

In the following section I return my attention to the Holocaust and the death camps. In Section 1 I noted that much of present scholarship relating Foucault to the Holocaust traces themes of carceral technologies and bio-political developments from the nineteenth century to German fascism. In Section 2 I argued, separate from issues of the Holocaust, that there is another silence within Foucault, one that suggests something fundamental about his methodology and engagement with the act of history. Below I suggest that, alongside seeing the Holocaust as latent within Foucault's theories of discipline and biopower (which I think it is), we can also interpret it as falling into one of the historical moments about which Foucault has been reticent to speak: 'If there are problems in understanding Foucault, these arise not because of the language in which Foucault writes, but because of what he will not say.'[47] By my naming the death camps as an instantiating change-mechanism, as a moment that ends and begins an episteme, I seek not

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[44]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 363.
[45]Charles Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', *Political Theory* 12, no. 2 (May 1984): 171.
[46]Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 200.
[47]Mark Philip, 'Foucault on Power: A Problem in Radical Translation?', *Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (February 1983): 50.

to reduce, but to describe, to unweave an implication, and to note the limitations of archaeological methodology as developed by Foucault.

3. The death camps as epistemic moment of liminality

In the following pages I put forth an argument that the Holocaust death camps, though outgrowths of state carceral technologies and racialized conceptions of humanity, were not only extreme perpetuations of those policies, but also unique occurrences that existed outside the scope of Foucault's methodologies. The value in this argument rests in its relationship to our own postmodern epistemological moment. If we recognize that Foucault conceptualized his philosophy as existing within a liminal state between epistemes, then our reading of his work leads us not to posit the beginnings of postmodernism, but to recognize a fundamental rupturing within Foucault's comprehension of power and knowledge itself. Foucauldian analyses of state carceral procedures and the use of biopower are widespread and influential. But in what ways are they affected by our comprehension that even those forms of power have already been broken? In other words, knowing that the death camps are the limit of Foucauldian analysis *structurally* weds the Holocaust to contemporary postmodern epistemological theory.

Though I write here that it is Holocaust death camps that fundamentally alter Foucault's conceptualization of the epistemological space of the contemporary West, it is important to acknowledge that the twentieth century witnessed other genocides, both inside and outside the borders of Europe.[48] My contention that it was Holocaust death camps around which Foucault's episteme shifts by no means mitigates these other horrors, nor does it argue that they have less of an impact on their own regions and geographies. But by working with Foucault's thought, and therefore to some extent with the work of those whom Foucault has influenced, the fact that the Holocaust death camps represent as an epistemological threshold reinforces the liminality of our own postmodern intellectual moment in the Euro-American academy.

In *The Order of Things* Foucault writes,

> From within language experienced and traversed as language, what emerges is that man has 'come to an end', and that, by reaching the summit of all possible speech, he arrives not at the very heart of himself but at the brink of that which limits him; [it is] in that region where death prowls, where thought is extinguished.[49]

This 'coming to an end' is as near as Foucault allows himself to describing an epistemic shift, as closely as he ever chooses to comment. Yet he remains aware that something must be said, or that in the not saying, he is saying that something must be said, but that it is too difficult to say. Foucault's repeated acts of avoidance mark for him the edge of a distinct, and foreign, theoretical terrain. When he writes, 'man has "come to an end"', it is as an abdication of his right to speak or comment. It is as a sign of the end of his philosophical vocabulary.

What we see is Foucault bereft of language, but the reason he is forced into such silence has two parts. First, archaeology as historical methodology is designed for periods of epistemic stasis. German fascism and the death camps are eruptions into the world; their extremity breaks their

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[48]For deeper contextualization of the Holocaust among twentieth-century genocides, see Henry R. Huttenbach, 'Locating the Holocaust on the Genocide Spectrum: Towards a Methodology of Definition and Categorization', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 3, no. 3 (1988): 289–303; Scott Straus, 'Contested Meanings and Conflicting Imperatives: A Conceptual Analysis of Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, no. 3 (2001): 349–375.
[49]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 382–383.

causal linkage with the Modern Age. Whereas in 1933 German fascism was the hyperactive embodiment of a generalized epistemology, by 1943 it had transformed into a being without plausible history. Foucauldian methodology cannot comment on breaks; it has no vocabulary or theory with which to access the radical as it separates from the banal.

Second, by 1943 the Holocaust existed as something more than state-sponsored disciplinary technology and biopolitics. Much of German policy can surely be plotted as the extension of a nineteenth-century intellectual regime. But that does not account for the remainder, the excess; it does not take notice of the particularity of the Jewish extermination. German work and concentration camps were the refined and terrifying instantiation of the Modern Age – an outcome that was within the realm of the possible. To speak of the most radical innovation of German fascism is to speak of the 'Final Solution', the industrialized murder of the Jewish people within German and German-occupied and allied territory. In a 1997 interview with Ephraim Kaye of Yad Vashem, Christopher Browning said,

> I think certainly here we see a difference in government policy [between the German killing of Jews and the German killing of others during the War], that the ultimate policy the Nazis reached towards Jews was total genocide, the attempt to kill every last man, woman, and child of Jewish origin in Europe.[50]

Similarly, in an interview with Sasha Weiss for *The New York Review of Books*, Timothy Snyder said:

> To make the most obvious point, the depth of the horror [in the Holocaust] is the killing. And if people are killed and there are few survivors, there's really no way for historians to know about them absent access to documents … There were plenty of places where you were not selected for labor, where you simply were killed, and those places are the death pits [in German-occupied Soviet Union] and the three Operation Reinhardt camps in occupied Poland: Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec. Precisely because Auschwitz had some survivors, a significant number of survivors, we can know about it … And obviously those images of Auschwitz and the Gulag are horrible enough, they're so much more horrible than anything that most west Europeans or Americans have experience with that that seems enough, that that's as far as we would really need to go. Unfortunately, the history is worse … The killing in the Holocaust chiefly took place in the three death facilities of Occupied Poland, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor. It's important to say death facilities rather than camps, I think, because camp is one of those notions which blurs the event, gives us the wrong idea. Auschwitz, for example, was partly a camp. There was a labor camp and a death facility there. But places like Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec, those were just death facilities. You showed up and you were gassed, or occasionally you were shot. But all that happened there was that death was produced, nothing else.[51]

These death camps were not, at the final summation, slave labor camps or segregation camps. They were not punishment or disciplinary centers. They were not places for the state to demonstrate its biological power. They were not adjuncts to judiciary or medical tyranny. Death and segregation in the Modern Era were about state organization and social cohesion. Theodor Adorno writes,

> He who registers the death-camps as a technical mishap in civilization's triumphal procession, the martyrdom of the Jews as world-historically irrelevant, not only falls short of the dialectical vision but reverses the meaning of his own politics: to hold ultimate calamity in check.[52]

[50]'An Interview with Prof. Christopher Browning', by Ephraim Kaye, Shoah Research Center, The International School for Holocaust Studies (March 1997), http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203848.pdf.
[51]Timothy Snyder, interview with Sasha Weiss, *The New York Review of Books* Podcast, July 13, 2009.
[52]Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974), 234.

The death camps were about a fundamental, extra-state erasure of the Jews from space. We must see German fascism not only as the final, ultimate instantiation of the ethos of incarceration, but also as something transitional. The act of carrying the nineteenth century to the extreme was both an apotheosis and a reconstruction. Our side of 1945 is not a simple extension of the Modern. It is something different altogether. Even as it was living a nineteenth-century epistemology, German fascism was creating a twenty-first-century liminality. In Foucault's words, it is the reaching toward death, its thanatopolitics, its willingness for death, that separated the Nazi state from those that came before it.

This difference is not, and cannot be, explained by Foucauldian archaeological history and theorization, and it is our centering of Auschwitz as the quintessential place of the Holocaust that often obscures what is most unique about German fascism. Writing at the very edge of what he could say, Foucault states,

> Wars are no longer waged in the name of the sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital.[53]

Auschwitz was itself three camps: a concentration camp (Auschwitz I), an extermination camp (Auschwitz II–Birkenau) and a slave labor camp (Auschwitz III–Monowitz–Buna). Within the paradigm of discipline and punish, the death camp at Auschwitz remains within the bounds of the explicable – those who cannot work are sent to die. There is a process of selection. The massacre becomes vital because the inmates continue to be conceptualized as part of the state, as functionaries of the state, albeit as state refuse.

At Sobibór there was only death. You arrived and you were murdered. Entering Sobibór, one ceased, even at the most abstract level, to be a part of the state system. The sheer incomprehensibility of this is made apparent by a strange fact: the German guards *pretended* that the arriving Jews would be sent to work. The soldiers told the Jews that this was a transit camp. Using the Modern Era paradigm of 'segregate and punish', the Germans enacted a regime that ruptured the very discursive legitimacy of its own behavior. Again, Theodor Adorno, writing in autumn 1944:

> The idea that after this war life will continue 'normally' or even that culture might be 'rebuilt' – as if the rebuilding of cultures were not already in negation – is idiotic. Millions of Jews have been murdered, and this is to be seen as an interlude and not the catastrophe itself. What more is this culture waiting for?[54]

The German soldiers at the death camps broke what Foucault calls 'finitude',[55] or what we might call the tyranny of the comprehensible. The extermination camps ruptured (Adorno's 'the catastrophe itself') the carefully circumscribed epistemological system out of which they were born.

The present – Foucault's present, our own present – in so far as it exists in some transitional period after the Age of Man, has no place in Foucault's methodology of thought. That is, of course, not to imply that he did not have opinions about the present. But it is to say that his unease about commenting on present political and social circumstances is derived directly from his own recognition of the limitations of his scholarly contributions. Foucault's carefulness in not labeling this postwar moment and not using archaeology as prescriptive rather than

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[53]Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 137.
[54]Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 55.
[55]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 383–384.

descriptive is a subtle, but important, reminder that the task of the historical scholar is really quite limited. Even Foucault cannot find a place to stand in our time.

Foucault's archaeology is founded on the belief that discursive interpretations create truth claims that are broadly supported through the complex relationship between power and knowledge. Truth is a force of stabilization. To admit to an essential instability in our present intellectual era is – pushed to its fullest implications – to deny that there yet exists a 'postmodern' episteme. The establishment of epistemes is inevitable; to read Foucault is to recognize that eventuality. But Foucault does not have a language for our time, limited as he is by the death camps. Understanding that is to realize that all our present knowledge is in some way mediated through the death camps, limited by the death camps, defined at its borders and provoked toward the future by the death camps.

Samuel Joseph Kessler is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Religious Studies, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, UNC-CH, 125 Saunders Hall, CB#3225, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA. Email: skessler@unc.edu