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### Power and the Celebration of the Self: Michel Foucault's Epideictic Rhetoric

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# Power and the Celebration of the Self: Michel Foucault's Epideictic Rhetoric

Robert Danisch

*I argue that Michel Foucault can be read as practicing a kind of epideictic rhetoric. Foucault's work is epideictic because it tells a history of the present, is concerned with aesthetics, and is involved in uncovering and displaying common cultural values or ideals. Through an analysis of the epideictic dimensions of Foucault's work I link his conception of power to his concern with the self and demonstrate that self-creation is connected to a display of the history of the present. Such a move implies that epideictic is a critical practice for contemporary rhetorical theorists and critics, the significance of which can be extended and developed in the light of Foucault's position on power and human agency.*

In "The Subject and Power," Michel Foucault (2001) stated that the goal of his work "has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (p. 326). His essay intended to make clear that the "general theme" of his work "is not power, but the subject." This is not to say that power relations do not constitute a major focus of Foucault's writings. Instead, this argument illustrates the importance of analyzing the ways in which subjects are constituted in, and by, power relations. Such an analysis is carried out by describing and outlining the operations of discourse in various settings and institutions (in asylums or prisons, for example). By tracing the manner in which discourse operates, Foucault is able to carry out an extended critical analysis of the function of power relations in constituting subjects.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I argue that this kind of critical analysis is best understood as a form of epideictic rhetoric.

Even though most classical Greek intellectuals privileged political and forensic rhetoric, they were wise enough to include the epideictic kind. In part this was

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due to their awareness that much of the drama of the self unfolds outside the stages of deliberation or adjudication. Their love of spectacle and their appreciation of the performative dimension of public speaking combined in the recognition that all discourse, but especially the epideictic kind, betrays the orator's character and establishes the common values of the audience (Aristotle, 1984, *Rhetoric* I, ix, 1).<sup>2</sup> I argue that Foucault is one particularly rich and provocative example of someone working in the tradition of epideictic rhetoric. By virtue of his focus on discourse, power, and the subject, his work revises key issues in the history of epideictic rhetoric, suggests the importance of epideictic for questions of human agency and subjectivity and recommends epideictic practices for contemporary social affairs. In order to develop these claims, first I will show how Foucault's work on power recommends a unique understanding of rhetorical practice. Second, I will show how that understanding relies on a revised evaluation of the importance of epideictic rhetoric. And third, I will use Foucault's later works on sexuality and the self to show how this revised understanding of epideictic rhetoric plays out in cultural practices.

Epideictic rhetoric praises or blames those common values that are important for a particular audience. Poulakos and Poulakos (1999) described epideictic as a "matter of display" that turns "a piece of discourse into an art object" (p. 61). In addition, they claimed that epideictic functions as a way of "uncovering what lay hidden" through its use of "excess and exaggeration" (pp. 63–65). Poulakos and Poulakos drew on Aristotle's description of epideictic in *The Rhetoric*. In that work, Aristotle claimed that epideictic speaking is closely related to the occasion and the moment that mark a performance. In other words, Aristotle began the complex work of theorizing the relationship between temporality and rhetoric and claims that epideictic speaking is always directed at the present, while forensic speaking concerns the past and deliberative the future. Epideictic, therefore, is a matter of praising or blaming the common values of an audience in the present moment and on a given occasion.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) also pointed to epideictic as a "central part of the art of persuasion," even as there was a lack of understanding of epideictic in current conceptions of rhetorical theory (p. 49). They contended that epideictic rhetoric addresses the "unquestioned values" of an audience, and thus it is practiced as a method of education aimed at displaying, amplifying, and enhancing the values that bind an audience together in the present. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca contributed to part of a larger contemporary understanding of epideictic that outlines and develops the practical and civic function of this kind of rhetoric. For example, Vickers (1988) claimed that epideictic's focus on values makes possible the development of civic cohesion. Ochs (1993), in a similar fashion, argued that epideictic rhetoric is a form of symbolic action whereby social cohesion is produced and audiences are bound together by common values (see also Hauser, 1999). This civic conception of epideictic demonstrates the lasting effects that this kind of rhetoric has on its audience, effects that allow audience members to make truth claims based on shared values. From this perspective, epideictic rhetoric is seen as constitutive of self, identity, and community.

Rosenfield (1980) explained that the meaning of epideictic can clearly be traced to notions of “display” and “shining forth,” arguing that epideictic rhetoric makes apparent what might otherwise go unnoticed. According to this phenomenological understanding of epideictic, an audience bears witness to some constitutive factors of the present moment and is expected to judge the value of the moment and occasion. Traditionally, this project of making present involves ornamentation, style, and exaggeration. Accordingly, epideictic privileges ornament over truth, style over substance, and exaggeration over argumentation. For these reasons, epideictic has been dismissed as inferior to deliberative and forensic rhetoric (see Burgess, 1987; Cope, 1867; Kennedy, 1963; Sheard, 1996). But for these same reasons, Foucault's work on discourse, power, and the self can be understood in the light of the lines of thinking traditionally associated with epideictic rhetoric.

In what follows, I assume that epideictic rhetoric is defined by: 1) aesthetic practices of display that uncover what lies hidden, 2) a focus on outlining, on describing, and on making present the common values of audiences, and 3) mechanisms for generating cohesion in a community. More importantly, I claim that Michel Foucault is practicing a kind of epideictic rhetoric in line with this description. In other words, Foucault's critical practices uncover what lies hidden, are concerned with the aesthetics of display, play on the dominant values of his audience and show what makes various communities cohere.

In order to accomplish this task, I explore the link between Foucault's final works on the self and his theory of power. The later Foucault (especially in the final two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*) was explicitly concerned with the project of self-creation. An epideictic reading of this work will reveal that such a project can only be carried out if the structures, conditions, and contexts that impinge upon the self are clear. Deliberative decisions about the future of the self can be made only after an epideictic rhetoric demonstrates the quality of the present moment within which the self is embedded. Foucault's work on power is epideictic because it produces a history of the present, and it is linked to the self because it is that history of the present that conditions the possibilities of self-creation and individual action. Practicing epideictic rhetoric, then, involves telling the history of the present so that one can understand how subjects are constituted in a given historical moment and so that one can begin the project of self-creation.

I acknowledge that Foucault may never have conceived of the possibility of such a designation for his work. However, I am using this designation for two purposes. First, I want to reimagine the possibilities of practicing epideictic rhetoric. Second, I want to invent new, productive ways of reading and understanding one of the more influential philosophers and critical theorists of the past few decades. In other words, I find epideictic rhetoric useful for understanding the significance of Foucault's project; conversely, I find Foucault useful for expanding our understanding of epideictic rhetoric. In the first section of this essay I offer a reading of Foucault's work on discourse, power, and the history of the present. I show that this reading has the potential to help ground and theorize the importance of epideictic rhetoric. The second part of the essay articulates compelling lines of thought that coincide with, and

extend, classical conceptions of epideictic rhetoric and develops the implications of practicing a kind of epideictic rhetoric in line with Foucault's work.

### **Discourse, Power, and the History of the Present**

Michel Foucault remains an important figure in contemporary academic thought primarily because of his innovative and complex understanding of "discourse" and "power." To understand both "discourse" and "power" from Foucault's perspective, one must ask how these both function and how they are produced and regulated? What is innovative and complex about Foucault's use of these terms is that they allow him to investigate the self-evident and the commonsensical in order to show the production of instruments of control and institutions that legitimate knowledge claims. By control, I mean the power of positive production. In other words, Foucault uses the terms "discourse" and "power" to show how certain kinds of questions and claims to knowledge are generated and placed within systems that support those questions and claims. From this perspective, "discourse" makes possible disciplines and institutions that, in turn, sustain and distribute those discourses. Furthermore, "discourses" and their related disciplines and institutions are functions of power: they distribute the effects of power. They are power's relays throughout the modern social system.

"Discourse" is one of the most important ways in modern and postmodern societies for the forming and shaping of humans as "subjects." Power, through the function of discourse, makes us into subjects, and it subjects us to the rule of the dominant disciplines that are empowered in our society and that regulate its possibilities for human freedom. In other words, power, through the operations of discourse, subjugates us. Because power is omnipresent and produced through the operations of discourse, individual subjects do not have power—power is anonymous. Therefore, Foucault makes the relationship between language (or symbol systems) and persuasion complex. If individual subjects are formed in, and through, the productive capacity of discourse to make possible and legitimate certain claims, then persuasion is a diffuse and anonymous process whereby the discourse within which one speaks is more important than the person speaking. For this reason, Foucault's work can be read as a challenge to rhetoric's most basic assumptions about the relationship between a speaker, a speech, and an audience (see Vivian, 2004). For my purposes, I am concerned with the ways in which this conception of power and discourse (as omnipresent, anonymous, and productive) reworks and extends the classical genre of epideictic rhetoric. But in any case, in the light of his perspective on discourse and power, Foucault's work stands as both a critical challenge to traditional conceptions of the rhetorical process and a useful resource for rethinking the relationship between persuasion and language. To show that Foucault is practicing a kind of epideictic rhetoric is to argue that epideictic rhetoric has the potential to reveal how discourse and power organize and order communities.

Foucault's later works focus clearly on the productive and omnipresent characteristics of power. Lentricchia (1982) remarked that power "tends to occupy the 'anonymous' place which classical treatises in metaphysics reserved for substance: without location, identity, or boundaries, it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time" (p. 56); in its omnipresence, power has "no predominant direction, no predominant point of departure, no predominant point of terminus" (p. 56). Within such a reading, power resembles "some Eastern metaphysical force that ensnares us all" (Lentricchia, 1982, p. 51). Given this ubiquity, Foucault complicates and challenges the question of agency in several ways: by using reflexive verbs, infinitives, and the impersonal and anonymous "one"; by writing about strategies and tactics without indicating whose strategies or tactics they are; and by telling us that certain historical realities "can be viewed as" having a certain significance, with the question of historical actors absent.

One way to make sense of this conception of power is to consider Foucault's relationship to Nietzsche (Thiele, 1990). *Discipline and Punish* marked a complete turn to genealogy, and this coincided with a turn to a Nietzschean conception of power. This was most clear in the 1970s, when Foucault (1977) contended that power is not exclusively negative; it is actually a positive phenomenon:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms. . . . In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production (p. 194).

*Discipline and Punish* eloquently attested to this attitude toward power—the central argument of the work was that the social role of the prison is to create delinquency, not just to repress it. By producing a threat to social stability, the prison provides a justification for the formation of the apparatus of discipline and control that permeates present society. This "productive" conception of power was even more thoroughly developed in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (Ransom, 1997).

In this work, Foucault (1978) rejected the idea that sex is, and has been, repressed; instead, he asked: "Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?" (pp. 8–9). This question is meant to complicate the connection between "the workings of power" and "the category of repression." The intent, then, is to search for "instances of discursive production," "the production of power," and "the propagation of knowledge" concerning sex (p. 12). On one level, the "History of Sexuality" that Foucault writes rejects the "repressive hypothesis" concerning sexuality; on another level, it rejects the "repressive hypothesis" concerning power relations in general. This dual rejection enables Foucault (1978) to ask questions about the "juridical notion of power"—"Why are the deployments of power reduced simply to the procedure of the law of interdiction?" (p. 86). Through an analysis of power relations that considers not just the prohibitive and repressive but also the productive part of power, we can begin to break free from the assumption that power is exercised only through law and politics:

One remains attached to a certain image of power-law, or power-sovereignty, which was traced out by the theoreticians of right and the monarchic institution. It is this image that we must break free of, that is, of the theoretical privilege of law and sovereignty, if we wish to analyze power within the concrete and historical framework of its operation. We must construct an analytics of power that no longer takes law as a model and code . . . *We must at the same time conceive of sex without the law, and power without the king* (Foucault, 1978, p. 90, italics added).

Power's omnipresence, its anonymity, and its productivity led Foucault to reject the paradigm of analysis that essentializes civic deliberation, or political rhetoric. Undue concern with civic deliberation is misleading because the operations of power extend beyond the public sphere. To think about power without also thinking about politics would be revolutionary, and it is Foucault's attempt, in places like *The History of Sexuality*, to begin such a revolutionary undertaking. This undertaking requires Foucault to demonstrate how discourse can provide a coherent system of values within which people can make legitimate claims to truth. This is an important function of epideictic rhetoric.

Foucault (1977) also developed a similar argument in *Discipline and Punish* by subjecting the notion of visibility to a piercing inspection. The visibility of power, in the form of Bentham's "panoptic" prison, is challenged. The "major effect" of the panopticon was "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." The aim was "to arrange things" so that "surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in brief, that the inmate should be caught in a power situation of which they are themselves bearers" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). This is a paradigmatic example of how Foucault understands the manner in which discourse and power are able to make humans into subjects. Revealing the operations of such a process can demonstrate the underlying characteristics that mark a given moment and condition the possibilities of acting, understanding, and knowing as a subject.

This argument is not confined to the prison. It is Foucault's contention that *all* of us are trapped within disciplinary systems—systems of micropower. These systems exist throughout society and control our behavior unbeknownst to us, and the function of epideictic rhetoric is to make the operations of these systems present. In other words, Foucault's critical project operates so as to show how these systems of micropower provide the social sphere with coherence. This is an epideictic practice, in line with the classical understanding of epideictic but also uniquely attuned to the complexities of the relationship between language, knowledge and persuasion in a postmodern context. A regime of observation, surveillance, and inspection (less obvious than Bentham's Panopticon) controls the functioning of these systems of micropower. The operation and function of discipline within modern society presupposes "a mechanism that coerces by means of observation" (Foucault, 1977, p. 170). This disciplinary power "is exercised through its invisibility"; yet it "imposes on

those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility,” and so controls, limits, or destroys individual agency (p. 187). Accordingly, a major concern of *Discipline and Punish* was the active play of forces in the present and their genealogy, and it is this presentism that becomes clear alongside Foucault's full articulation of power's productivity and that further links Foucault's critical project to epideictic rhetoric.

As early as *History of Madness*, Foucault was concerned with destroying, transforming, or revolutionizing the present. In a 1971 interview, he claimed that “it is a question, basically, of presenting a critique of our own time, based upon retrospective analyses,” and he explained that “what I am trying to do is grasp the implicit systems which determine our most familiar behavior without our knowing it. I am trying to find their origin, to show their formation, the constraint they impose upon us; I am therefore trying to place myself at a distance from them and to show how one could escape” (Simon, 1971, p. 192). It is explicitly a question of putting “into play . . . the systems that quietly order us about” (Simon, 1971, p. 201). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) claimed that he “learnt not so much from history as from the present” that “punishment in general and the prison in particular belong to a political technology of the body” (p. 30). It is about the prison in its actuality “that I would like to write the history,” a project that is not “writing a history of the past in terms of the present,” but “writing the history of the present” (Foucault, 1977, p. 31; see also Connolly, 1991). Foucault considers genealogy as directed against the notions of an “objective” reality, an “objective” identity, and an “objective” truth because these notions merely confirm the extant order. The idea of an “objective” reality, identity, or truth is a product of the “will to knowledge” that has dominated our perception up to now. Against this “will to knowledge” Foucault deploys “a will to creative opinion” (Megill, 1985, p. 244). Foucault's epideictic rhetoric does not seek to objectively describe and reaffirm the values of the present moment but to first display and then transform those values.

What precisely constitutes “a will to creative opinion” may be somewhat ambiguous, but it becomes clearer if approached it in the light of Foucault's (1980) claim that “one ‘fictions’ history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one ‘fictions’ a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth” (p. 193). Within this statement, truth and lie are playing off one another in a peculiar way: a history that is a lie is made legitimate by a “true” political reality; while a political reality that is a lie is made legitimate by a “true” history. To develop this further: what makes an account of prisons “true” (despite the fact that the account may be representationally inadequate) is that we live in a disciplinary society. So despite any inadequacies, such an account is justified because it enables us to apprehend more clearly the reality of the disciplinary society within which we live. In other words, Foucault is “telling us lies about the past in order to open our eyes to the reality of the present” (Megill, 1985, p. 244). What kind of rhetoric, then, is Foucault practicing by following such a procedure?

Weaver (1953) claimed that rhetoricians are often accused of indulging in “exaggerations,” but according to Weaver:

The exaggeration which [the true] rhetorician employs is not caricature but prophecy; and it would be a fair formulation to say that the true rhetorician is concerned with the potency of things. The literalist . . . is troubled by its failure to conform to a present reality. What he fails to appreciate is that potentiality is a mode of existence, and that all prophecy is about the tendency of things.” (pp. 19–20)

Weaver’s argument is an effective defense of Foucault’s work against conventional historians and philosophers, who object to him on “objective” grounds. “Factual” objections may be perfectly correct but they miss the point. Foucault is not concerned with logical or historical correctness for its own sake; he is interested in altering or transforming the way things are. Sometimes “objectivity” may aid or assist this aim, but it is equally plausible that it may not. The exaggerations that Foucault employs function in the same manner that exaggeration functioned in classical epideictic rhetoric—the aim is to make present aspects of the social world that remain hidden. More importantly, the transformative dimension of his work is made possible only in the light of an epideictic rhetoric that can display the defining characteristics of a given moment. These need not be “objectively” true characteristics, but they must be characteristics that reveal the manner in which a given context makes some claims appear “objective” and “true.” Foucault’s epideictic rhetoric reveals the solidifying and unifying practices of a given moment with the aim of making transformation possible.

Foucault’s claims, however, go much further, and are much more revolutionary, than those of Weaver’s “true rhetorician.” When Foucault speaks of “truth” he uses the term in the same way that Nietzsche understands it in “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.” Foucault’s claim, then, that he is engaged in “fictioning” a history “on the basis of a political reality that makes it true” is a lie—Foucault has already eliminated from consideration any notion of “political reality” that is divorced from rhetoric. It is possible to acknowledge that there is a sense of liberation in choosing, and engaging in, the free play of interpretations, but this sense of liberation is deceptive. As Megill (1985) pointed out, “Foucault postulates a present reality on the basis of which we attribute truth to a ‘fictioned’ history, but this present reality is itself a fiction” (p. 245). Of course, this is not to say that such fictions cannot have much impact on material conditions. Foucault’s unique insights often uncover and produce such impact. His “fictioning” of the past, then, is also a “fictioning” of the present, but such “fictionings” have tremendous potential, and in this regard the rhetorical dimension of Foucault’s project is essential.

Foucault’s work provides an interesting interplay between history, politics, truth, and rhetoric. From his perspective, political action is a matter of “experience with,” and politics is not an independent sphere of privilege in a human hierarchy (Miller, 1993). By “experience with” I mean the ways in which one understands and lives an everyday political reality instead of the manner in which one advances or engages in a set of political tactics in an overall strategy meant to change actual institutions or policies. Still, it is tempting to derive from Foucault’s history of the prison true propositions regarding that actual institution. Instead, one can find useful suggestions, hints for further work, or perspectives that let us see our world more clearly—and

perhaps even alter it. We are better off seeing Foucault as an instigator or animator, not as an authority. The kind of rhetoric that Foucault is practicing does not seek to get the past right, nor does it seek to establish policy proposals for future courses of action. This kind of rhetoric is presentist; it seeks to reveal and transform the present, and this is precisely what makes his rhetoric epideictic.

Like any potentially powerful rhetoric, Foucault's can be as dangerous as it is good. His writings have a potential utility in that they help us to see the world in ways that we might not have otherwise, but the visions and prophecies they contain may conceal from us an "ordinary world" very different from the one invented in Foucault's writings. This "ordinary world" is the world of natural or social human needs. Foucault's own strategy, as a writer, fosters misreadings. He can only occasionally admit to the fictional character of his histories. To admit to such tactics consistently (to declare that he is writing novels and not histories) would strip his writings of the rhetorical force that they have. It is too easy to read Foucault in the mode of "is" rather than the mode of "as if"—the force of his project may come from the "is" but it is always moving toward the "as if." Even if Foucault is wrong in his interpretations, his rhetorical strategies demonstrate the significance of the manner in which communities can, and do, describe their own moments as a means for escape and resistance.<sup>3</sup> Epideictic practices reveal the manner in which subjects are constituted by the operations of "discourse" and "power" in a given community.

### Celebrating the Self as an Epideictic Practice

According to Poulakos and Poulakos (1999), epideictic rhetoric is that genre engaged in "uncovering what [lies] hidden, of bringing into the open what remain[s] covered and disclosing it to plain view" (p. 63). Of course, traditionally epideictic rhetoric manifested itself in speeches at ceremonies and funerals, but Foucault's work (although it has occasions in mind other than funerals or ceremonies) is *precisely* involved in "uncovering what [lies] hidden." The entire genealogical and/or archaeological method was established to "bring into the open what remain[s] covered." Foucault's work has an enormous suspicion of depth and of a hermeneutic model of uncovering (uncovering of course can be seen to imply the need for resistance since there must be repressive power that covers). But rhetoric is involved in the kind of uncovering that is contingent and relative based on an audience's cultural, historical, and social position and the relationship that a rhetor can forge with that audience (i.e., the present). There is a persistent problem with Foucault: we want to find a language to name what he discloses but our metaphors traditionally belong to metaphysics, which Foucault's thinking opposes. The category of epideictic rhetoric offers us the potential to operate with an uncovering or revealing vocabulary outside the realm of traditional metaphysics.<sup>4</sup>

One way to better understand the significance of this kind of epideictic rhetoric is to consider the notion of resistance in relationship to Foucault's understanding of power. Wendt (1996) provided a genealogical analysis of resistance, taking Foucault's

understanding of power as a starting point and trying to enact a similar method. “Histories of resistances,” according to Wendt, have been “obscure[d]” and “marginalize[d],” and so it is his attempt “to rectify part of this inequality by supplying a select reading of resistances” (p. 251). In a sense, this kind of project seeks to uncover tactics of resistance that even Foucault’s work only vaguely conceptualizes. Wendt (1996) located his work in the larger tradition of “critical studies in the areas of rhetoric and organizational communication” that deal with “social influence and control” (p. 252). Within this tradition questions about whether “a program of political action flows from Foucault’s work” take center stage. One answer to these questions references Foucault’s attention to “local resistances.” In this local sense, resistances “are struggles against forms of subjectivity and submission, not struggles or attacks against a specific case or institution of power” (Wendt, 1996, p. 256). One example of these “local resistances” might be an “extra-firm handshake, or the overuse of a title” (p. 246). These “tactics” or “strategies” are certainly not political; they are tied to a kind of self-disclosure. Wendt posed the following set of questions:

What are the political implications of thinking and writing differently, of poaching texts instead of re-presenting texts, of forming new resistances instead of resurrecting old ones? Is textual poaching one answer to the apolitical nature of Foucault’s “local resistances”? Does poaching add a political dimension to genealogy? (p. 269)

On the surface, Wendt’s work, as well as others working on “local resistances” in the critical tradition, may offer an answer to the claim that Foucault leaves us with no political project. Such an answer may even take the genealogical method seriously and uncover certain stories. In the end, however, the purpose of such work is still political. One central question, then, persists: Could we invent a kind of resistance that does not ask questions about political effectiveness yet offers an alternative, viable form of agency?

Engaging in epideictic rhetoric, engaging in the very process of “uncovering what lay hidden,” can be a form of resistance in itself. It is at least noteworthy that, traditionally understood, epideictic rhetoric is directed at present concerns while deliberative rhetoric is directed at future concerns. We have already seen how Foucault is interested in writing a “history of the present,” which is exactly what epideictic orators were doing in Classical Athens. Foucault’s work itself, then, stands as an example of epideictic rhetoric as resistance—it is an epideictic rhetoric that, on its surface, blames. Foucault, by passing judgment on the present through his work, is clearly involved in blaming some aspects of the present. However, he does not stop at blame—there is an aspect of his work that praises and an aspect of his work that is more than mere resistance.

If power and resistance are always intertwined (producing a “plurality of resistances” and “polymorphous power relations”), then it is possible to turn resistance into power. If we could practice the kind of epideictic rhetoric that produces power relations instead of one that operates at points of resistance, then our conception of epideictic rhetoric would be altered and so would the possibilities for, and understandings of, human agency. If we read Foucault’s work as an ironic refusal of

repressive institutions, we are left with political projects that rely on handshakes. If we can begin to read Foucault's work as a kind of celebration and a kind of poetics, then we can begin to see its capacity to produce new power relations and not simply resist old relations. Ultimately, we can begin to witness its ability to produce new forms of agency.

Along with "uncovering what [lies] hidden" epideictic rhetoric has always been that province of rhetorical discourse most interested in aesthetics. As such, the ability of the orator/writer to use language artistically is on display. Display is a kind of production; it produces beautiful discourse; and it produces new ways of seeing the world; but can it produce power relations? Here we must turn to Foucault's (1985, 1986) later work. In the final two volumes of *A History of Sexuality*, he turned to the question of the self in Antiquity and the relation between the self and aesthetics: "The elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art, even if it obeyed certain collective canons, was at the center, it seems to me, of moral experience, of the will to morality in Antiquity" (Foucault, 1997, p. 49). He extended this concern with an aesthetics of existence in "Friendship as a Way of Life," "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," and "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity" (Foucault, 1997). In each of these essays the focus is on gay rights in some way. Of course, any discussion of gay rights tends to point one to deliberative rhetoric, the practice of which can lead to securing such things as "rights." However, Foucault is uncomfortable with that kind of analysis. He is more interested in envisioning different possibilities for altering the very way that gay people live their lives. When discussing possibilities for gay culture, Foucault (1997) has in mind a "culture that invents ways of relating, types of existence, types of values, types of exchanges between individuals which are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural forms" (p. 160). In other words, new power relations can and should be produced by a gay culture.

This analysis need not be limited to gay culture—it extends and applies to other cultures, communities, and people. The central concern here is with the aesthetic creation of new possibilities for everyday lived experience. The method by which one can realize such new possibilities is by first refusing the accepted categories of existence (mostly heterosexual categories) and then producing and displaying new categories. The production and display of new ways of living would be more than merely resistance. In the sequence from refusal to production to display, one moves from a method or mode of living that simply resists to one that makes and lives within new power relations. Aesthetic self-creation is not equivalent to resistance for Foucault; nor is it a question of simply expressing oneself. Instead, it is a process of understanding the structures and values that order individuals about, of refusing those structures and values, and of using them to produce and to display new ways of living. It is also a way of celebrating the self and thus practicing a kind of epideictic rhetoric that seeks to produce power relations and new forms of agency. Resistance is undermined by its willingness to accept the power of that which it seeks to resist. In a similar way, an epideictic rhetoric that seeks to blame some institution, category, or policy is doomed by its unwillingness to offer praise of some alternative. Foucault does not make this mistake. In fact, his entire work can be read as a creative

celebration of the self through an analysis that blames power relations that try to order the self about. Nietzsche's Zarathustra saw the power of celebrating the life of the self—Foucault took up this project in a uniquely caring and grounded way.

Foucault's (1997) historical analyses in *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* run parallel to his arguments about gay culture. *The Use of Pleasure* began with the claim that the object of these new volumes of *The History of Sexuality* was to learn "to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently" (p. 9). Again the presentist concern is obvious, but now the emphasis is no longer on power relations or structures of repression. The emphasis is now on "what might be called 'arts of existence,'" defined as "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (pp. 10–11). This is not to say that techniques of the self do not involve power relations at all:

To form oneself as a virtuous and moderate subject in the use he makes of pleasures, the individual has to construct a relationship with the self that is of the "domination-submission," "command-obedience," "master-docility" type. (p. 70)

The relation one has with oneself is perhaps the most "local" power relation possible, but this power relation does not automatically or inherently turn into a form of resistance. Instead, a person can become an ethical subject without relying on structures of domination that provide or impose a system of ethics. Speaking about pleasure in antiquity, Foucault explained: "Ethical conduct in matters of pleasure was contingent on a battle for power," but it is a power that one has over oneself (p. 66). Moderation, then, was "an art, a practice of pleasures that was capable of self-limitation through the 'use' of those pleasures that were based on need" (p. 57). By displaying these alternate conceptions of the self, Foucault showed the possibility of thinking about power and the self without focusing on the episteme that made contemporary notions of subjectivity and agency legitimate.

*The Care of the Self* moves down a similar path. Here Foucault (1997) claimed that it is a "matter of forming and recognizing oneself as the subject of one's own actions, not through a system of signs denoting power over others, but through a relation that depends as little as possible on status and its external forms, for this relation is fulfilled in the sovereignty that one exercises over oneself" (p. 85). One produces oneself, or produces relations with oneself, and then by displaying that very production forges new kinds of relations with others. Beginning with refusal (or moderation) in *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault moved from the self's need to resist pleasure to the process of self-production in *The Care of the Self*. Resistance and production are clearly connected for the individual, just as they were clearly connected in Foucault's work on structures and discourses. The panopticon is such a devastating metaphor because any form of resistance is futile when power is everywhere at once—resistance can never turn into the production of new power relations on this level because one can never precisely identify all of power's polymorphous operations within a given structure.

The relationship between the self and a social structure within which a self is located does not hold the potential for producing new kinds of power relations. That is why Foucault turns to the relations one has with oneself as the remaining possibility for turning resistance into new kinds of power relations. But to get into relation with oneself, one needs to understand the content and quality of the structures that regulate the self. Because autopoiesis, or self-production, attempts to produce new power relations and new kinds of agency, its rhetoric is distinctly epideictic. Foucault must first perform a genealogical analysis that displays the operations of discourse and power in the present moment before he is able to attempt to engage in the production of new power relations.

Miller's (1993) biography clearly demonstrated Foucault's own personal interest in such a project for himself—"the key to understanding a philosopher's work, as he conceded near the end of his life, was to study the philosopher's 'ethos'" (p. 19). For Miller, Foucault's project was to "become what one is," but this project is linked to both Nietzsche (with an irresistible will to say yes to life) and to the Enlightenment (where the question is "What is my present?"). An "aesthetics of existence" is not possible today in the same way as it might have been in antiquity, but this is not to say that such a project is no longer interesting or admirable. Foucault's later work on the self was linked to his work on structures through the productivity of power. Cultural structures provide the means of self-creation and the possibilities for individual action:

The Apollonian element, by contrast, lay in part beyond the power of the will. Having inculcated patterns of behavior, a culture has roots sunk in the past, and "the will," as Nietzsche put it, "cannot will backwards." Born and raised in a tradition, a human being at first may experience its cultural inheritance as a cozy haven of custom and habit. But each person's cozy routines turn out, on closer inspection, to be a singularly haphazard concatenation of "fragment and riddle and dreadful accident," hidden beneath a comforting veneer of "borrowed manners and received opinion." Sorting through the manners and opinions, and the desires and appetites, that any culture implants in every soul—and trying to imagine transforming them—is, in effect, the challenge every truly creative human being must resolve. (Miller, 1993, p. 70)

This is the challenge that, more than any other, has defined Foucault's work. It is most clear when we consider Foucault as historian in search of "his *daimon*" within "the heterogeneous media of archival documents" where he produces texts that work as "a kind of vessel, offering free passage, through its cargo of words, to 'the truthful precipitate of dreams'" (Miller, 1993, p. 109). The danger of the system of surveillance described in *Discipline and Punish* is that the external becomes the internal, and the prisoner watches himself. The promise of Foucault's epideictic rhetoric is that the external presently reinvents the internal while the internal aesthetically reimagines the external. That is why Foucault is able to say things with the "aim of self-destruction" and with the aim of "transforming the present" (p. 240).

Along with "uncovering what [lies] hidden" and the aesthetics of display, epideictic rhetoric is deeply concerned with "the ideals of the community" or "dominant values" (Poulakos & Poulakos, 1999, pp. 62, 66). These "ideals" and "values" opened the space for artistic display for classical rhetoricians. Again, this is *precisely* what

Foucault is doing. The disciplinary structures that he uncovers ring true for audiences because of their association with some set of dominant values in our present culture. But the ideal of the “subject” is just as dominant. Accordingly, Foucault’s rhetoric is able to play with, and in, the relationship between the structures of our culture and the types of subjects that can and are produced within that culture. In the end, he produces a self made possible by the structures that have provided his audience with a set of dominant values. Foucault’s work celebrates the self but only through uncovering and displaying the power relations that permeate his audience’s experience of the world. This display can produce the possibility of new kinds of relations; the impact of Foucault’s work is evidence of this fact.

### **Rethinking the Significance of Epideictic Rhetoric**

Epideictic rhetoric is also called “ceremonial” because it celebrates. In celebrating it affirms, and in affirming it says again and again the great “Yes” to life in its lived manifestations. It is Foucault’s ability to say both “Yes” and “No” through, and in spite of, pervasive power relations that calls attention to the epideictic kind of rhetoric. Epideictic rhetoric can be a useful resource in rethinking resistance, the production of power, and agency. This suggestion finds warrant in Foucault, who argues that all sorts of interesting, fruitful, and productive questions and analyses can be discovered outside the deliberative realm of politics. I am unsure whether Foucault was aware of the classical rhetorical tradition, which divides rhetoric into the deliberative, epideictic, and forensic genres, or whether he would accept being situated within the epideictic genre. However, there are obvious affinities between Foucault’s work and epideictic rhetoric that cannot be denied. These affinities are useful for interpreting his work. Foucault uncovers what was hidden, concerns himself with the aesthetics of display and plays on the dominant values of his culture, all with the aim of understanding how discourse functions so as to produce social cohesion and the hope of transforming both himself and the present.

Questions about what kind of self one wants to create or send into the future may be deliberative. Such questions may imply a kind of decision making that affects the future. But what Foucault teaches is that these questions cannot be answered effectively without first generating an epideictic display of the conditions within which we find ourselves in the present moment. Again and again, he reasserts the importance of epideictic rhetoric; and in doing so he expands and alters the set of questions epideictic rhetoric can address. Displaying, and then praising or blaming, the dominant values of a culture can now have greater significance both for that culture and for individuals within that culture. Practicing epideictic rhetoric can now mean telling the history of the present and helping the individual negotiate his or her relationship with the dominant social structures of the present moment. The epideictic rhetorician must ask two fundamental questions: First, how can I define, describe or explain the present moment? Second, how will that definition, description, or explanation affect who I am? In asking and answering these questions, the epideictic rhetorician can reinvent himself or herself and reinvent the culture within which he

or she is situated. This may even involve reinventing new understandings of subjects and new forms of agency in addition to new kinds of selves. In the light of Foucault, these questions imply that subjects are formed by the anonymous, productive, and omnipresent discourses and power relations of a given moment. An epideictic rhetoric that reveals the active play of such forces is the only means available for these acts of reinvention if one decides to eschew the assumptions about agency and subjectivity tied to Western metaphysics.

Without an epideictic rhetoric to display the operations of power in a given moment, then our understandings of ourselves will always be the product of discourse and power working to subjugate us. Epideictic rhetoric, in turn, has implications for our view of the function of resistance. Foucault offers celebration, defined differently from the ceremonial aspects of classical rhetoric, as an addition to strategies of resistance and as an extended explanation for how change happens outside of political struggle. Perhaps celebration, appreciation, and artistic creation have more “power” than we have realized or acknowledged. Perhaps “praise” goes much further than “blame.” And perhaps epideictic rhetoric can provide the grounds for a different kind of political change—a kind of change beyond the possible changes inscribed within the operations of discourse that subjugate us and that insist we speak only those truths legitimated by the power relations of the present moment.

Systemic power can be resisted by an individual's will to live his or her life aesthetically, as an artistic phenomenon. The display of such an artistic phenomenon has the ability to do more than just *resist* systemic power—it can produce new relations of power. The self can be an artistic project, and it is as local as any resistance can get. Epideictic rhetoric, however, tells us (a lesson that Foucault was clearly aware of) that the creation of the self is deeply connected to the dominant values of the audience that watches or hears. Our projects of self-creation are limited by the structures that order us about; but those very same structures also open up possibilities for self-creation in the first place. This insight pushes us past the style of celebration enacted in classical rhetoric into a new opening through which we can ask questions about the affect of such artistic projects on politics and deliberation. The power of epideictic rhetoric lies precisely in its ability to produce power in ways that politics and civic deliberation cannot. Relations of power still need to be studied. But at the heart of these relations lies a relation between the subject and social structures, and a host of questions about how those relations can or cannot be developed, produced, or constituted, as well as questions about the relations we have with ourselves. We may need to call on the practice of epideictic rhetoric to answer such questions. Art, in the end, may be preferable to some forms or conceptions of politics, and it may even be capable of suggesting ways to rethink the deliberative debates of our moment.

### Notes

- [1] Both “subject” and “self” appear a number of times in this essay and in Foucault's works. There is an important difficulty in using these words. Traditional metaphysics uses the concept of the self and the subject as an essential trope in understanding how individuals know

and act in the world. From the perspective of traditional metaphysics, individual and subjective notions of selfhood prescribe and privilege a certain form of agency that Foucault tries to avoid but that is often inscribed in the very ways language operates. Foucault's task is to begin to think about the subject and the self as constituted by discourse and power relations—that is, as something more complex than a subjective agent free to know and act in the world. In what follows, I attempt to follow his lead by understanding the self and the subject as made possible by the power relations and discourses that operate in a given context, but I cannot avoid employing language in a way that hints at the presence of the notion of free and subjective agency. This is both a testament to the influence of Western metaphysics and a sign of the limitations of our own language to escape the patterns of thought already established.

- [2] By writing about epideictic rhetoric, the Greeks emphasized the values that tied a speaker to an audience—this is made possible, in part, by the assumption that there was one, homogeneous Greek culture. One of the problems in writing about Foucault's epideictic rhetoric is that he is French. One must assume that the values he outlines are the values of Continental culture and not necessarily American culture. This is one of the problems of importing any Continental theorist into an American context, especially in terms of a rhetorical theory that pays such close attention to context. In what follows, it is not necessarily the content of Foucault's rhetorical practices that interest me, but the shape of the strategies themselves. In other words, I do not assume that what he says necessarily applies to an American context, but I do assume that the strategies he uses to make his case can be useful in an American context.
- [3] As a specific example of a community redescribing its own moment as a means of resistance, one can consider AIDS activists during the 1980s. The confrontation between the medical industry and the gay community revealed the need for the gay community to both master the discourse of the medical industry in order to understand the manner in which sufferers were turned into patients *and* to invent mechanisms to reimagine the gay male body that could escape the oppressive cultural categories of the moment. Many of the mechanisms for reimagining the gay male body were aesthetic, and these aesthetic mechanisms underscored any overtly political strategies used by the activists. For an extended commentary on this story, see Treichler (1999).
- [4] By "traditional metaphysics" I simply mean the distinctions between appearance and reality and surface and depth that mark the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato. The assumption is that appearances hide something that is true and the job of philosophy is to get beyond or underneath appearances so that one can know what is real or what is true. This is not the kind of uncovering that Foucault practices—it is the kind privileged by Plato.

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