Slippery and Saucy Discourse: Grappling with the Intersection of ‘Alternate Epistemologies’ and Discourse Analysis

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The Trouble with Knowing

‘Passionate detachment’ (Kuhn 1982) requires more than acknowledged and self-critical partiality. We are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view, which can never be known in advance, which promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination.

Haraway 1991: 192

Academic work—the production and dissemination of knowledge and the attendant tools, methods, and processes requisite to create it—has implicitly relied on both the concept of mastery (exhibiting expertise) and the concomitant practice of reason. In the wake of poststructuralism, feminism and postcolonial studies, these foundations of academic personas and practice have been resoundingly destabilized. In short, it is now generally understood in the humanities disciplines that academic analysis can no longer simply be presented as a disembodied and entirely objective undertaking. Subsequently, much effort has been directed towards identifying the biases—personal, political, socio-cultural—that covertly and overtly direct the construction of both the theory and practice of academic investigation. For as Michel Foucault (1969) famously proposed, certain unspoken rules exist for any discourse; these rules direct what can and cannot be presented as knowledge as well as what forms of presentation are acceptable within a given context. These rules or conventions create limits to both forms of argument and conceptual proposition.

This chapter is concerned with the boundary between what can and cannot be presented as knowledge within the discipline of religious studies,1 particularly

1 Teun A. van Dijk refers to the study of how knowledge is “interactively managed” by any given community as “epistemic discourse analysis” (2013: 497). Such analysis is concerned with the modes of engagement with, and communication of knowledge through, either
with regard to studying magic, whether it be ancient forms whose residue is left in the material records of text and object or more contemporary activities (inclusive of healing practices) that utilize a plurality of media and invoke non-empirical causal agents. These practices are considered askance to ‘common sense’ and academic forms of reasoning. This is not the same as claiming that they are devoid of logic. On the contrary, there are often clear (if sometimes complex) logics directing such practices. However, from within the framework of modern categories of epistemology, these practices do not spring from normative forms of reason; rather, they evoke the heady and troubled category of ‘belief’.

Historically, within the academic study of religion, these two terms have formed a very unhelpful and reductive binary pair (reason contra belief) that in turn has formed a foundational ‘lens’ through which religious phenomena is viewed. This ‘either/or’ lens has consistently undermined the mutual imbrication of the two modes of knowing—an imbrication evocatively exemplified in the work of Bruno Latour (cf. 1991; 2013). Further, this binary rendering masks the epistemological plurality of both: there are many forms of reason and many modes of belief. The following discussion sets out—tentatively and experimentally—on the path towards considering how to examine, think, theorize, and practice as an academic focused on the study of ‘magic’ without embodying and ‘unknowingly’ reproducing such epistemological dualisms. As is now well understood, such dualisms lay at the heart of normative subjectivity in the contemporary ‘West’, and many a scholar has been engaged in a quest to disrupt their binary linearity over the past few decades.

This chapter is not only concerned with methodological and theoretical approaches to magical practice, but also with how to render as conceivable and ‘seeable’ the mutual constructions of theory–practice implicit in the practice of magic, which are also generated in academic study. As a ‘history’ of approaches to the academic study of magic falls well outside the remit of this chapter, suffice it to note that the examination of textual sources, in particular, has been (until very recently) dominated by philological concerns. The work of translating and interpreting the textual elements has governed scholarly methods. The ‘turn’ towards concern with bodies, materiality, and agency
direct expression or various forms of implication. Van Dijk argues that sociological approaches to knowledge have failed to adequately take account of discursive forms, especially those produced and reproduced through the media and institutions such as schools and universities. This chapter is similarly concerned with the way in which such institutions produce certain types of discourse; however, its focus is also on the way in which such communities construct what counts as knowledge (and in what contexts) in the first place, as well as validating specific modes of discourse for knowledge engagement and communication.