

IF I WERE IN HER SHOES, I WOULD DOUBTLESS BE AND THINK LIKE HER¹: Methodological Reflections on Bourdieu and *Testimonio*²

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Bourdieu emphasizes that intellectuals are not politically neutral and possess cultural and symbolic capital and thus are predisposed to preserving their dominant class position. In light of this, what can intellectuals contribute to the emancipation of dominated classes? Bourdieu suggests reflexivity. This paper critically analyzes how *testimonio* as a research methodology moderates the power of intellectuals by privileging the voice of the narrator and minimizing the social distance between the two as Bourdieu suggests. The cultural and symbolic capital of the intellectual is lent to the narrator so that the bourgeois public may listen to the silenced voices. There is however a limitation to the privileging of the subaltern voice – that which Bourdieu calls objectivation. To limit objectivation, the researcher must reflexively engage the *testimonio* in a manner that aims to understand rather than evaluate.

Keywords: Bourdieu, *testimonio*, reflexivity, methodology, realist construction

INTRODUCTION

*History is inscribed in things – in institutions . . . and also in bodies. My whole effort aims to discover history where it is best hidden, in people's heads and in the postures of their bodies.*³

- Pierre Bourdieu (1980)

Great hope was seen in resurrecting silenced pasts and recognizing silenced presents by listening to the voice. Orality promised recognition and even liberty to the marginalized (Thompson 1988). Originating and imposed by the West, the written is viewed as a tool of colonization and imperialism. Indeed, orality enabled colonized peoples to write their own histories. Most colonized people's particularly Latin American and African began the task to decolonizing their histories after liberation from the West. Coinciding with this task of rewriting national and local histories from the people's perspective,⁴ poststructuralism drawing primarily with works of Derrida and Foucault and their criticism on metanarratives, armed social scientists to embark on projects to listen to the silenced voices of women, peasants, workers, indigenous peoples, gays, and other marginalized groups. This led to the proliferation of narratives based on the perspectives of the marginalized in challenge to the traditional history and social science research based on the written text.

In the early eighties, a unique form of oral history methodology emerged in Latin America in the struggle for human rights. Rigoberta Menchu, a poor Indian woman gave her *testimonio* on the abuse she, her family and her people suffered, endured and struggled against. Her testimony generated international support for the recognition of human rights and put pressure against the dictatorship in Guatemala. In 1992, she won the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition for her human rights struggle. The *testimonio* however became subject of severe academic criticism. A number of intellectuals questioned it on the grounds of historical validity and accuracy. One can imagine Bourdieu doing engaged in the very same criticism – but on the grounds of objectivation. Moreover, such perception on orality, while it has lead to the development and increase of local histories, and the histories of the marginalized and silenced, has meant the continued embracing of the neutrality and power of the intellectual. The intellectual remains the catalysts for those not heard to be heard, for the silenced to be finally listened to. It is only through the lens of the intellectual that the silenced voices are heard. More importantly it presumed that the methodology itself is political, indeed it is, and is adequate politically. Intellectuals only have to privilege the voice, particularly those of the silenced, to be politically associated with marginalized. Those who continue to advocate the primacy of the written source perpetuate the domination of West, white, male, and capitalist class. The intellectual thus only has to choose the method, and easily becomes an ally of the disempowered. Bourdieu questions this very presumption on the intellectual.

This paper explores the possibility of indeed uniting the activist intellectual with the subaltern by looking on the testimonio using the lens of Bourdieu on intellectual and scientific sociology. It critically analyzes how testimonio as a research methodology moderates the power of intellectuals by privileging the voice of the narrator and minimizing the social distance between the two as Bourdieu suggests. The cultural and symbolic capital of the intellectual is lent to the narrator so that the bourgeois public may listen to the silenced voices. Listening however is not enough. Simply listening leads to what Bourdieu calls objectivation. The social scientist must understand. This is the role of social science. This is the role of the intellectual.

This paper first describes the testimonio, including the debates on the issues of validity versus memory and ideology. It then briefly discusses Bourdieu's theory on the intellectual and summarizes the guidelines Bourdieu suggests so that research becomes truly scientific. It concludes by engaging the testimonio as a method and the criticism against it using Bourdieu's theory.

ORALITY AND TESTIMONIO

At the advent of social research methodology inspired by poststructuralist discourses, oral history slowly gained legitimacy against the dominance of the written modern history. Lives of those that did not matter were surfaced and their voices heard. History written from the perspective of the outsider historian, usually white, male, and Western, was challenged and supplemented by history from below using the voice of the local people. Individual lives of ordinary people told from their point of view became sources of history. Within this life history framework, the testimonio occupies a unique space. Like life history, it is a story from a personal perspective. However, the testimonio is always told from a position of marginality, of subalternity. The narrator with the aid of the intellectual interlocutor "offers to bring his or her situation to the attention of an audience—the bourgeois public sphere—to which he or she would normally not have access because of the very conditions of subalternity to which the testimonio bears witness" (Baverley 2000: 556). The testimonio is always a voice of a silenced. It is always an "'emergency' narrative" (Jara as cited in Beverley 2000: 556) involving poverty, exploitation, repression, and survival.

Whereas the usual life history is elicited to gain a greater understanding of the cultural milieu in which the individual is inscribed, the testimonio is always told " . . . in connection with a group or class situation marked by

marginality, oppression, and struggle. If it loses this connection, it ceases to be a testimonio and becomes an autobiography" (Beverley 1992: 103). While the story teller shares her story, her story is also the story of a social class struggling for social justice and human rights. It is narrative of a person struggling, moving with other marginalized for social change. The life story is also story of a social movement.

The defining feature of the testimonio as a life history is "that the voice that speaks to the reader through the text is the form of an I that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention . . ." (Baverley 1992: 556). It is told and written in the first person. Revealed in the presence of an audience—i.e., the researcher—this I in the testimonio demands attention and recognition of an individual social experience. Thus, the "Testimonio represent an affirmation of the individual subject . . ." (Baverley 1992: 103). Recognizing that the researcher comes from a different social experience and position, the narrator explains her situation in a "snail-like" (Beverley 2000: 556) manner and as Rivero notes ". . . the act of speaking . . . remains in the testimonio punctuated by a series of interlocutive and conversational markers . . . which puts the reader on the alert, so to speak: True? Are you following me? OK? So?" (as cited in Beverley 1992: 556). Like a seasoned teacher explaining to a student, the narrator does this to enable and ensure better understanding of the subaltern suffering and struggle.

Similar to the researcher, the reader is put into a situation where the story of the individual, her suffering and struggle, are impressed into the listener. This recognition demands a response. The testimonio is told "by the one who testified in the hope that his or her life's story will move the reader to action in concert with the group with which the testifier identifies" (Tierney 2000: 540). It hopes to inspire the readers to act against social injustice. It hopes to move the reader toward political action against issues such as torture, human rights violations, social marginalization, poverty and survival. It calls for unity with the subaltern witness.

Memory, history and identity

As the testimony is a reconstruction of past events, its historical value is always suspect. Those who consider life history as a portal to the given past and culture dichotomize between the researcher and the life historian. Within this perspective, the researcher's tasks is to validate the historical accuracy of the life story with other historical sources such as written documents, and is

responsible for the final production of the narrative. The veracity of remembering is tested against presumably more accurate written historical documents. This not only contributes to the silence of the already silenced voice of the subaltern. It reinforces the privilege of voice to the intellectual by bestowing upon the researcher the final decision to decide what is historically true (Tierney 2000).

One of the glaring examples of the divergence of history and memory is on the testimonio of Nobel Prize winner Menchu. Her story entitled *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1984) was based on a one-week long interview with Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. In it, she testified to the massive human rights abuses—economic, social, cultural and political—perpetuated by the landowning class, and the elite-controlled state and military. Among others, she told of the wretched working conditions in agricultural plantations and recounted her personal experience of seeing her brother Nicolas died of malnutrition, and a second brother tortured and burned alive in public. She detailed how she, her family and her people struggled against these abuses using indigenous knowledge and culture and how they organized successful resistance among the farmers, workers and sympathetic professionals.

American researcher David Stoll (1999) spent almost ten years verifying and challenging the historical veracity of Menchu's story and concluded that "In and of itself, the contrast between Rigoberta's account and everyone else's is not very significant. Except for a few sensational details, Rigoberta's version follows others and can be considered factual . . . The important point is that her story, here and at critical junctures, is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be" (p. 69-70).

Other research later on found more evidence in contradiction with Menchu's story. *New York Times* found Nicolas, the supposed brother dead from malnutrition, alive and well (in D'Souza, 1999). In a reaction to the proliferation of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* as one of the reading materials in American high schools and universities, D'Souza (1999) literally called Menchu's story fraudulent and cites several inconsistencies with her testimony and those of other sources. He claims that according to members of Rigoberta's own family, as well as residents of her village, she fabricated her account of how a second brother was burned alive by army troops as her parents were forced to watch. Menchu herself admitted to incorporating other people's stories into her own and that this was ". . . a way to making her story a collective one, rather than a personal autobiography" (in Baverley 2000: 559).

This critique of the historical validity of testimonio is situated in the criticism to subaltern studies in general as to the availability only of “historical fragments” (Pandey 1997: 28-29). In the study of social violence in India between Muslims and Hindus, Pandey (1997: 19) calls attention that “The knowability and representability of subaltern experience—of its moments of violence, of suffering, and of many of the scars left behind by the histories of domination—is actively suppressed within the time horizon of capital itself, while the subaltern’s spectral partnarratives continue to circulate in often unknowable fashion among more or less reticent subaltern populations.” Within the frame of traditional historiography, subaltern studies including the testimonio thus present necessarily incomplete and insufficient histories running the risk of being considered supplement to modern historiography.

THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITIES OF THE INTELLECTUAL

The intellectual has a peculiar point of view on the social world, the “scholastic view” made possible by his/her social situation that allows *scholae*, or leisure. Leisure or the time outside the urgency of practical situation, allows the scholar the “neutralizing disposition . . . the bracketing of all theses of existence and all practical intentions” (Bourdieu 2000: 128). The scholar’s point of view is not practical. When intellectuals think and analyze the social world, however, they often leave unexamined their “*epistemic doxa* . . . the presuppositions of their thought, that is, the social conditions of possibility of the scholastic point of view and the unconscious dispositions, productive of unconscious thesis, which are acquired through an academic or scholastic experience” (Bourdieu 2000: 128). This social condition of possibility of the scholastic point of view is upon which knowledge produced is based. Thus knowledge produced is historically contingent.

Within the intellectual field, the *homo academicus* engages in the struggle, against other intellectuals for the capacity to represent the social world, or “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1977: 183), which is ultimately valued for its convertibility to economic capital.⁵ This struggle for “worldmaking power” (Bourdieu in Swartz 1997: 89) is masked in the intellectual’s disinterested effort of knowledge production. In the pursuit of knowledge the intellectual struggles to make her scholastic point of view the academically accepted point of view – that is to universalize her scholastic point of view, and make her point of view the dominant worldview. Thus, in her struggle for symbolic capital, the intellectual unconsciously aims to monopolize the universal from

the particular, and “tacitly legitimizing a particular form of experience and, thereby, those who have the privilege of access to it” – that is the intellectual (Bourdieu 2000: 135).

Outside of the academic field, the homo academicus imposes his point of view, born out of leisure, on agents within the social world. Scholars often impose knowledge generated from their particular social position and corresponding to a particular habitus. This reproduces and reinforces the power of the intellectuals, and consequently also their worldview which is consistent with their homologous dominant social positions within the entire field of class domination.⁶ In their struggle for symbolic capital in the academic field, often without their conscious intention, intellectuals reinforce domination through the imposition of their point of view, or what Bourdieu (as cited in Swartz 1997: 89) calls “symbolic violence.” Intellectuals thus in keeping with their dominant position within the field of classes, reproduce the interests of dominant class.

Methodologically, this imposition of the scholastic point of view is translated into research instruments. Interviews, focus group discussions, and survey questionnaires ask respondents to symbolize and analyze their actions within a given social position, that is sociologize their worlds, without the benefit of leisure and the entire habitus necessary for such a task. Upon the prodding of the intellectual, the respondent is suddenly tasked to reflect on their individual lives. This scholastic fallacy pictures “all social agents within the image of the scientist” (Bourdieu 2000: 132-133) capable of scientifically examining their lives. This recognition of symbolic violence poses a very critical question to the progressive intellectual. If the intellectual is predisposed towards the reproduction of class domination in her struggle for legitimation within the academic field, what can she contribute towards the creation of a humane and just society? Is the intellectual, no matter how she struggles, predisposed to reproduce the system of class domination? Is the intellectual forever a servant of domination?

Bourdieu points a way out – reflexivity. Reflexivity or participant objectivation as applied to the social sciences means the “objectivation of the subject of objectivation” (Bourdieu 2003: 282). It “undertakes to explore not the ‘lived experience’ of the knowing subject but the social conditions of possibility—and therefore the effects and limits—of that experience and, more precisely, of the act of objectivation itself. It aims at objectivising the subjective relation to the object which, far from leading to a relativistic and more-or-

less anti-scientific subjectivism, is one of the conditions of genuine scientific objectivity” (Bourdieu 2003: 281-282). The objectivation process is to be carried out in three levels: first, objectification of the position of the subject of objectivation in the overall social space, her original position and trajectory; second, objectivate the position she occupies within the field of specialists; and lastly, objectivate everything that is linked to membership of the scholastic universe (Bourdieu 2004: 89). That is to say, the first level is the sociology within the field of power and classes based on the volume and type of capital; the second, the sociology of intellectual within the academic field in the pursuit of symbolic capital; the third, the sociology of academe and its autonomy within the field of power and class relations.

The reflexive method of Bourdieu is to be applied upon the subject herself, the intellectual. She must critically assess her social position, her possession capital in terms of volume and type, in relation to intellectuals within her academic discipline, to all intellectuals, and to overall dominant class. Bourdieu wields participant objectivation as a weapon against “spontaneous sociology” (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron 1991: 20) to achieve a scientific sociology. The task of science, as Bourdieu argues, is to uncover the social condition of possibilities upon which a particular social experience and practical knowledge is contingent and constrained. Thus expose the limits and applicability of knowledge. He argues that “. . . science cannot be reduced to the recording and analysis of the ‘pre-notions’ (in Durkheim’s sense) that social agents engage in the construction of social reality; it must also encompass the social conditions of the production of these pre-constructions and of the social agents who produce them . . .” (Bourdieu 2003: 282).

Reflexive self-assessment is to be done at all times and must be revealed in public. For reflexivity to lead to science it must be a collective effort of the scientific community. This to finally unearth the “universal logic of practice” (Bourdieu 2003: 286) and “increasing the chances of attaining truth . . .” (Bourdieu 2004: 89). By making the social conditions of possibilities of reason visible, cross-controls, technical critique, epistemological prudence generated from other reflexive scientists can be used to manage factors that prevent the unearthing of objective knowledge, truth. This reflexive method of unearthing of practical science reduces the symbolic violence that intellectuals commit. By sociologically analyzing the social position of the homo academicus, the historicity of knowledge and the social conditions of its genesis and perpetuation is revealed. Through reflexivity, social sciences take itself as its object, “using its own weapons to understand and check itself . . .” (Bourdieu

2004: 89). By practicing reflexivity the intellectual not only contributes to the generation of science, but also advances her knowledge of herself and her unconscious. As she uses her habitus to objectify, she in turn analyses her unconscious to reveal the historicity of the knowledge she has generated. Only then is she able to surmount her unconscious limitations, and her role in the perpetuation of symbolic violence and class domination. "One knows the world better and better as one knows oneself better," Bourdieu (2003: 289) notes. Reflexivity demands the slow and difficult "conversion of the whole person" (Bourdieu 2003: 292).

The development of the reflexive methodology is the personal story of Bourdieu. Being the son of a peasant sharecropper, who eventually got into public service, he was considered outsider by his relatives. Coming from lower-class and provincial origins, he was considered outsider within the educational aristocracy. And moving from philosophy to the then emerging sociology, he was considered outsider by the academe. This 'outsider' experience inspired him to look into his social experience, his social conditions of possibilities, and compare it with those that considered him different (Bourdieu 2004).

Bourdieu in *Understanding* (1999) offers guidelines for a reflexive research. First is the need for "non-violence communication" (Bourdieu 1999: 608-609). To reduce the propensity of the intellectual for symbolic violence on the dominated, she is first tasked to reflex reflexivity, that is to recognize the social distance between the object and the intellectual's social position. The power of the intellectual is evident even during the interview process. At the onset, the accommodation of the intellectual for the interview intrudes in the every life of the participant. It is her who sets up the interview and its implicit rules, its objectives and its projected uses. This initiates an understanding of what can and cannot be said, a form of censorship. This according to Bourdieu "occurs everytime" as the intellectual possesses more capital (Bourdieu 199: 18-19). In this consideration, this is the second, there is an imperative to truly listen. Since it is the intellectual who sets up the game and rules in traditional research, there is a need for "active and methodological listening" requiring "total attention to the person questioned, submission to the singularity of her [the respondent's] life history – which may lead, by a kind of more or less controlled imitation, to adopting her language and espousing her views, feelings and thoughts ... " so that the distance of the subject and the object is minimized. The symbolic violence is reduced as much as possible by a "'non-violent' communication" through

increased social proximity and familiarity of the researcher and respondent ensuring interchangeability and immediate agreement (Bourdieu 1999: 608-610).

Non-violent communication makes research a spiritual experience. When social distance cannot be minimized, the researcher is tasked to "mentally put herself in their [respondents] place," to become "necessarily what they [respondents] are" based on the respondents social conditions. Extensive preliminary knowledge gained through research "could not lead to true comprehension if it were not accompanied both by an attentiveness . . . and openness to [others]." Research thus is journey to forget oneself in order to understand other through "intellectual love" different from the gaze. Only thus can the respondent freely explain themselves and experience the "joy of expression." (Bourdieu 1999: 612-614) In this light, Bourdieu emphasizes that ". . . one knows the world better and better as one knows oneself better, that scientific knowledge and knowledge of oneself and of one's own social unconscious advance hand in hand . . ." (Bourdieu 2003: 289).

ENGAGING THE TESTIMONIO

Minimizing social distance/power: The alliance of the scientist and the subaltern activist

The testimonio offers to the intellectual a methodology that allows for political unity with the subaltern. Through the use of repeated interview/story telling sessions, the intellectual is able to cast doubts on her values and politics and continuously subjects her interpretation to the process of validation and revalidation with the life-historian. Is what she heard correct? Did she understand and interpret it as the narrator intended? The repeated interviews allow the intellectual to engage and verify her understanding, to engage precisely in non-violent communication. Thus, the intellectual's power and authority to determine the truth, her capacity for symbolic violence, which contributes to the silencing of the subaltern, is suspended. This leads to the democratic construction of the witness-narrator's account of the subaltern experience. As such the testimonio is a seriously appropriate form to recognize, listen and understand the silenced voice of the subaltern in the reconstruction of history. Such democratic conditions in its production results to the snail-like pace of the interview process of the testimonio. The subaltern viewing the intellectual as coming from a different social position yet sympathizing with the same politics meticulously explains her social

experience of exploitation so that the intellectual may better understand. Thus the constant need for the “interlocutive and conversational markers” (as cited in Beverley 1992: 556) to verify that a common understanding is reached.

This brings to light information that may not be solicited in a traditional interview. In *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, she demonstrates her empowerment in the resistance to reveal all. Menchu (1984: 247) declares, “I’m still keeping what I think no one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets.” Where the subaltern is capable of filtering information based on her politics and articulating this choice despite the solicitation of the intellectual is testament to the democratic character of the testimonio.

Indeed, subaltern studies upon which the testimonio is one of the methods used “necessarily hesitates before its objects.” Latin American Subaltern Studies Group (Steinberg 2007: 263) claim that subaltern studies “not only . . . new ways of looking at the subaltern . . . but also of building new relations between ourselves and those human counterparts who we posit as objects of study.” Subaltern studies affords agency to the narrator-witness by privileging the voice and suspending the authority of the intellectual. Within this frame, the criticism of Stoll, D’ Souza, and others on the validity of the testimonio as history becomes a question of power. It is as Beverley (2004, as cited in Steinberg 2007: 267) argues “resubalternizing” a subaltern narrative. In the argument between Stoll and Menchu, Beverley (2000: 559) considers it a question on “who has the authority to narrate.” As Menchu reconstructed her personal experience given a political agenda, she refused to accede to the agency of the intellectual like a native informant and to the literacy and literature that the intellectual privileges. She does not simply answer the questions of the intellectual. She asserts herself and her story based on her own social experience and politics. So the authority of the intellectual is suspended. Using Bourdieu, this criticism of historical validity of the testimonio is precisely an imposition of the scholar’s point of view. The testimonio is taken out its practical context – that is outside of the political urgency of generating support for the struggle against the continued oppression and marginalization of the subaltern. It is consumed by the academe from their schole, their social position and interests falling into the trap of theoreticism and objectivism.⁷ Gegalberger (1996: 14) calls this the “reterritorialization of the testimonio in the institutions of higher learning” and argued that precisely for the renewed historization of the cultural production and

consumption of the testimonio. Instead, the testimonio produces a “reality effect” and that, as Sklodoska (1982) mentions “it would be naïve to assume a direct homology between text and history [in testimonio]. The discourse of a witness cannot be a reflection of his or her experience, but rather a refraction determined by the vicissitudes of memory, intention, ideology” (as cited in Baverley 2000: 557). The text becomes as Baverley (as cited in Tierney 2000: 546) argues, “a site of political struggle over the “real” and its meaning.”

Tierney suggests that like the life history, testimonio “be seen as a personal narrative whose ontological status as a spoken interaction between two (or more) individuals helps create, define, reinforce or change reality” (Tierney 2000: 545). Thus the testimonio, as a life history, not only lets the life-historian and the researcher understand the past, it helps create identities in the past and the present. The testimonio inspires solidarity with transformation of subaltern identities.

And those past identities may be complex, partial and contradictory. Indeed fragmentary. The testimonio as a “personal interpretation of past time . . . [is] often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture” (Steedman 1986: 6) since it lies within the “interstices of history and memory” (Kreigger 1996; Steedman 1986). This incomplete, fragmentary and ideological character of testimonios and subaltern studies in general questions the very foundation and continuity of traditional historiography. Since subaltern studies can only be represented through fragments and at the limits of hegemonic discourses, history’s penchant with continuity, totality and objectivity is challenged by their partiality, provisionality and politics. The very reproducibility of the field of knowledge production is questioned and demands a re-evaluation of the knowledge production and its historical and social conditions of possibilities (Williams 2000: 142). Within the context of colonial history and the subsequent project of nationalizing histories, subaltern studies provide the “spectre that hunts, challenges and undermines hegemonic histories from within by upholding the possibility of subaltern reflection and questioning its productivity as a site of argumentation and resolution” (Williams 2000: 139).

Subaltern studies force intellectuals to think of a different history—“to think its fragmented leftovers and the fissures in our critical narratives that they presuppose—in order to open up reflection to the emergence and agency of momentary and partial glimpses into subaltern subject positions—discursive fragments—that arise from the experience (and understanding) of social conflicts, and which also say something about the parameters and

limits of our own understandings as intellectuals and institutionalized thinkers" (Williams 2000: 142). This counter hegemonic capability of the testimonio necessarily raises a pertinent question: is the alliance with subaltern an option available to every intellectual? Is the methodology itself politically adequate to ally with the marginalized?

Using the concept of "structural and functional homologues" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 105) between fields, Bourdieu argues that the dominant within a particular field are more or less dominant within the entire field of power and class relations. Intellectuals thus who occupy the dominant disciplines within the academe such as economics, engineering, business, and the natural sciences, which provide the technical skills and knowledge to capitalism thus have greater symbolic capital, tend to reproduce patterns of domination and will find it extremely difficult to listen to and engage the subaltern. The social distance between the intellectual and subaltern witness-narrator, that is the difference in their symbolic and cultural capital that the interview process makes explicit, is seriously considerable to engage in any substantial communication. These dominant intellectuals are more prone to symbolic violence. These intellectuals may not even recognize the validity of the testimonio, much less is counter hegemonic and ameliorative potential. Within this frame, the testimonio as a social research method is not available to any intellectual if its aim of listening, recognizing and politically uniting with the subaltern is to be preserved. Those who are dominated within the academic field and those belonging to the marginalized disciplines, such as sociology, may be capable to use testimonio as valid research method. Even within sociology only those who are not consecrated into the dominant positivist paradigm may find testimonio liberative. Bourdieu (1987: 85) writes that "those who occupy inferior positions in the field . . . tend to work with a clientele composed of social inferiors who thereby increase the inferiority of these positions." These intellectual's social distance relative to the subaltern is thus not as considerable compared to those coming from capital-endowed families. Thus, only those considered outsiders within the academe may opt to ally with the subaltern. Historically, these intellectuals may come from marginalized classes, born of worker or peasant families unable to possess the necessary symbolic and cultural capital necessary to gain access and be consecrated within the more dominant and capital-rewarding disciplines. Or that even with access to the dominant disciplines they find themselves not at home, uneasy to the discipline's habitus and thus find their homes within marginalized disciplines.

This social distance is critical to the choice of life-historian. Witnessing is an arduous task. Within the subaltern, those that are relatively articulate may be able to tell and represent their and their people's struggles better. Witnessing demands a minimum ability to communicate and rationalize. Moreover, it demands a certain form of legitimacy in the eyes of the subalterns. They must be viewed by their people as credible and one with them in their struggle. Only then can the testimonio be given credibility. And only those who fully appreciate the importance of telling their stories and struggles may be capable of such a task.⁸

The question on whether the methodology itself is politically adequate is addressed by the political prerequisite of the testimonio. A subaltern as a life historian will not share his experience and practical knowledge to those who do not essentially share their politics. The testimonio is shared with the hope that with better understanding of the subaltern position the reader will become like the intellectual an ally to the urgent altering of a wretched situation. The political alliance is an essential prerequisite. The testimonio is the expression of that alliance.

Towards the reflexive testimonio

As the testimonio diminishes the social distance between the intellectual and the subaltern, or to put it more accurately the testimonio requires a familiarity and interchangeability to achieve a nonviolent communication, where the intellectual shares the essential political position of the subaltern, the danger of what Bourdieu calls objectivation becomes serious. The researcher must also be wary of objectivation, or the respondent's attempt to "impose their own definition to the situation" (Bourdieu 1999: 615). By allowing free reign of respondent, the life story may become a "folk theories" (Bourdieu 2003: 289) which the respondent constructs to control the image that she wants the intellectual and others to have of her. In such instances, the data gathering process "becomes a monologue in which the respondent asks herself questions and replies at great length . . . each deceives the other a little while deceiving herself: the researcher is taken in by the 'authenticity' of the respondent's testimony, because she believes she has access through . . . the respondent pretends to play her expected part in this interview . . ." (Bourdieu 1999: 617). When objectivation occurs, the respondent takes over the interview.

From a theoretical standpoint, objectivation is analogous to the trap of empiricism and subjectivism. It records only the prenotions, the subjective

commonsense notions, of the respondents. It also takes the social experience of the witness-narrator as given, and may largely fail to unearth the social conditions upon which these experiences are contingent leading to the false application of this knowledge to realities that have different contexts. In this way, the scientist fails to be a scientist and the sociologist fails to be a sociologist.⁹

In *The Craft of Reflexive Sociology*, Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron (1991: 37-38) state:

“When the sociologist counts on the facts to supply the problematic and the theoretical concepts that will enable him to construct and analyze the facts, there is always a danger that these will be supplied from the informants’ mouths. It is not sufficient for the sociologist to listen to the subjects, faithfully recording their statements and their reasons, in order to account for their conduct and even for the reasons they offer; in doing so, she is liable to replace his own preconceptions with the preconceptions of those whom he studies, or with a spuriously scientific and spuriously objective blend of the spontaneous sociology of the “scientist” and the spontaneous sociology of his object. Those who restrict their means of interrogating the real (and of interrogating their methods for doing so) to elements that are in fact created by an interrogation that refuses to admit it is an interrogation, and who thereby deny that observation presupposes construction, inevitably end up observing a void that they have unwittingly constructed.

. . . the sociologist who refuses the controlled, conscious construction of his distance from the real and his action on reality may not only impose questions on his subjects that their experience does not pose them and omit the question that it does pose them, but he may also naively pose them the question he poses himself about them, through a positivist confusion between the questions that objectively arise for them and the question they consciously pose themselves. Thus the sociologist is spoilt for choice when, led astray by false philosophy of objectivity, he undertakes to nullify himself as a sociologist.”

To resist objectivation, and this is the third guideline towards reflexive social research, Bourdieu suggests realist construction, or the reflexive unearthing of immanent structures contained in the conversation via constructive engagement during the urgency of the interview. This is the engaging of the narrator and the narration by accounting for the social, cultural and economic structures that structured and structures the practical knowledge of the life story. To preserve thus the scientific and liberative possibilities of the testimonio, the intellectual must not only listen, she must engage the

narration. She must never simply let the narrator tell her story. Bourdieu argues that "It is precisely by leaving things alone, abstaining from intervention and from all construction, that one falls into error . . . It is only through an active denunciation of the tacit presuppositions of accepted belief that one can stand up against the effects of all representations of social reality to which both researched and researcher are continually exposed" (Bourdieu 1999: 620). Only by unearthing and understanding the immanent structures that act as structured and structuring structures, for both the intellectual and the narrator, can the subaltern and those that ally with her be able to understand these structures. And only thus can the voice of the subaltern be listened to in a way that matters.¹⁰ Methodologically, this means developing a craft upon which the intellectual is committed to "help[ing] respondents deliver up their truth or, rather, to be delivered of it" (Bourdieu 1999: 621). An essential part of this craft is to free the interview as possible of its practical constraints. "By offering the respondent an absolutely exceptional situation for communication, freed from the usual constraints (particularly of time) that weigh on most everyday interchanges, and opening up alternatives which prompt or authorize the articulation of worries, needs or wishes discovered through this very articulation, the researcher helps create the conditions for an extra-ordinary discourse, which might never have been spoken, but which was already there, merely awaiting the conditions for its actualization." (Bourdieu 1999: 614).

During the interview itself, one needs to minimize the social distance by active and methodological listening so that it becomes a spiritual journey. This requires the intellectual to "improvise on the spot, in the urgency of the interview, strategies of self-presentation and adaptive responses, encouragement and opportune questions, etc . . ." (Bourdieu 1999: 621). This implies avoidance of soliciting "opinions," which may be internalized dispositions¹¹ articulated, by the posing of artificial (from the point of view of the narrator) questions by a researcher committed to "neutrality"¹² (Bourdieu 1999: 619-620). It means reflexively analyzing and constructing, in the process of interviewing, the social position of the narrator, his practical knowledge, the interview and language used, and the social position of the intellectual. This is an almost gargantuan task. In fact even in the *Weight of the World*, which is a collection of sociological accounts of social suffering in contemporary society by professional sociologists, Bourdieu et al. had to drop "botched" (Bourdieu et al. 1999: 617) interview, because of objectification. Repeated interviews, which the testimonio requires, affords

the researcher and the narrator more time to reflect, in between the interviews. The researcher reviews the interviews and is able to make notes on issues and concerns that need deeper discussion. The narrator on the other hand is able to reflect on her/his story, and may revise and recreate his/her story on the subsequent round of interviews. Such provides for a greater possibility of realist construction.

Realist construction can only be done if the sociologist has a deeper understanding of the conditions of existence and their effects on the respondent's field. Before the actual interview process, as any good social science methodology book will suggest, the researcher must spend time reading through literature written on the subject and preparatory field work to familiarize oneself with the physical and cultural space. Indeed, Bourdieu (1999) notes that it may require a lifetime (this may even be insufficient) of research to truly understand and mentally share the respondent's disposition. This realist construction must reassert itself even in writing of the interview. In transcribing the interview process, the researcher is constrained to being faithful to the source, being readable to the audience, and able to reveal the social conditions of possibility of this experience and knowledge. Thus the challenge of writing is not only to convey the "revelation" (Bourdieu et al. 1999: 623) of the respondent but also to control the risks of allowing readers free interpretation of the text beyond outside of the sociological interpretation. Exposing the social conditions that contribute to the marginalization of the subaltern enable readers to better understand the subaltern experience, and may lead the way towards liberative political action. In referring to the testimonio, this free interpretation is what Gegulberger (1996) refers to as the commodification, or its consumption by first world and bourgeois readers based on their social position and interests. In fact the revolutionary potential of the testimonio is considered to be seriously undermined because its readers consumed the text and evaluated it based on their positionality. Nance (2001) analyzed how first world readers, reacting to the discomfort that the testimonio brings to their worldview, deny the political action called for by either not reading, denying the witness-narrator credibility, or considering themselves as 'unworthy' addressee either because they view themselves as incapable of political action, an inappropriate addressee or undeserving of the responsibility. Others fuse with the narrator but use her experience to deal with their own personal oppression.

When the testimonio is a story written in conjunction with an underground social movement, the *guerrilla testimonio*, its commodification is seriously

debilitating. In the case of Che Guevarra's testimony derived from his diaries as he was involved in underground vanguard party in Bolivia, the CIA upon capturing these documents used these to launch successful counter-insurgency operations (Olguin 2002). While the cooptation of the information by counter revolutionary forces may not be prevented, the public that have the possibility of political alliance or even sympathies may be inspired towards political action with the sociological understanding of the subaltern testimonio.

Nance (2001: 578-581) noted that in ensuring the solicited response of political action with the subaltern, the speakers/witness narrator must guard against readers' resistance "by explicitly constructing their narratees, and offering precepts, examples, and counterexamples of appropriate reader response. Speakers, for example, ward off listeners' attempts to fuse with them by reminding listeners of their privileged difference and consequent responsibility to act . . . A testimonial speaker may resist the readers' relative self-abasement by insisting on her own humanity, a delicate balancing act since she must remain 'good enough' to merit help without being 'too good' to need it. Speakers thus often deny that they are certain, superhuman, and saintly, emphasizing instead their fallibility . . . stress moments of discouragement, depression, and indecision, as well as conviction and hope . . . Finally, and perhaps most importantly . . . speakers continue to press their case as one of social change, keeping that case contingent, possible, and distinct from the acts of writing and reading." All of these are meant to persuade the reader towards social action. These persuasive speaker's strategies are attempts to distinguish the 'worthy' readers, that is, those who capable of allying with the subaltern as the intellectual-collaborator is. They represent the potential base for political action outside of the subalterns. In this respect the intellectual bears a greater responsibility.

If the testimonio is a democratic creation of the subaltern and the intellectual, the misappropriation of the text by first world readers is a joint responsibility. The burden is not solely on the witness. It weighs heavier on the intellectual. It is the intellectual that has the social experience of speaking and being listened to in a way that mattered. It is the intellectual who is familiar with the bourgeois reader as she herself is bourgeois. It is the intellectual who is afforded credibility.

The intellectual thus must make sure, using the most of her social position and symbolic capital, that the proper response is given. Thus, to write is to rewrite. Bourdieu emphasizes that headings, subheadings and preambles must

accompany interview transcriptions. These must explain the historical, social and political context of the narrator, researcher and the interview without imposing the scholar's point of view. The language used must convey the respondent's point of view, rather than an objectified point of view. Gestures that may sometimes be as important as the conversation itself, so the researcher must use all available tools to convey these bodily movements. The final output is product of the practical knowledge of the respondent and the reflexive sociological analysis of the intellectual. The *Weight of the World* (Bourdieu 1999) provides a template of reflexively writing sociological accounts.

To preserve the political urgency of the testimonio, however, I am suggesting here that the engagement may even explicitly advocate for readers' political participation towards alleviating the subaltern condition – e.g., pointing to particularly repressive policies and politicians.¹³ These political suggestions must be products of the democratic discussion between the intellectual and the subaltern life historian. Realist construction thus requires reflexively learning and understanding from the pre-interview state until the writing and editing of the final text. Beyond these pre-interview preparations and the cautions in writing, the intellectual's habitus is critical to uncovering the tacit understanding of the respondent's worldview. While active and methodological listening may decrease the social distance, the considerable difference in symbolic and cultural capital brought about by largely divergent social position and trajectory is a serious impediment towards realist construction. Thus, I argued earlier that the testimonio as a research methodology is only available to 'outsider' intellectuals.

An important issue, a seeming contradiction, may be raised here – if the testimonio requires the essential political unity of the intellectual with the subaltern, how can she continue to use her point of view that is based on a social condition that precisely affords her symbolic capital? Or by uniting with the subaltern, will she also not be heard and silenced? The production of the testimonio requires the political unity and the symbolic and cultural capital of the intellectual, precisely those very factors that separate her from the subaltern. But what makes the testimonio democratic is that while the intellectual recognizes her symbolic and cultural capital, she refuses to impose her scholastic point of view via reflexivity. She allows the marginalized to make her voice matter to the bourgeois public through the intellectual's symbolic capital. She lends her symbolic capital to the subaltern to wield as weapons for her emancipation.

The engaged testimonio extracts the practical knowledge of the subaltern and uses the theoretical knowledge of the intellectual to produce a sociological account. But one that continues to privilege the voice of the subaltern in an urgent call for social action using the symbolic capital of the intellectual. Avoiding the danger of imposing the scholar's point of view does not mean preventing the intellectual from using her point of view. She should not hesitate "from making use of [her] native—but previously objectivated—experience in order to understand and analyze other people's experiences. Nothing is more false, in my view, than the maxim almost universally accepted in the social sciences according to which the research must put nothing of himself into his research. He should refer continually to his own experience . . ." (Bourdieu 2003: 287-288).

Bourdieu (1999: 625-626) declared, "The sociologist must never ignore that the specific characteristic of her point of view is to be a point of view on a point of view. She can only reproduce the point of view of her object and constitute it as such, through resituating it within the social space, by taking up that very singular (and, in a sense, very privileged) viewpoint at which it is necessary to place oneself to be able to take (in thought) all possible points of view. And it is solely to the extent that she can objectivate herself that she is able, while remaining in place inexorably assigned to her in the social world . . ."

In addition to being an 'outsider' within the academe, the possibility for a realist construction is founded upon the capacity of the intellectual to reflexively look at his social position and experience, and unearth his social conditions of possibility that allows for the construction of the scholar's point of view. This necessarily demands from the sociologist the destruction of the ivory tower, from the high and controlling panopticon, "back to the rough grounds." It demands utmost humility. To be able to practice reflexivity means first admitting that knowledge one knows and generates is incomplete, historically contingent, perpetuates symbolic violence and serves a dominant class interest. That what she utters as truth is true only from her social experience and position. Thus, while the testimonio "displace[s] the centrality of intellectuals" (Baverley 2004: 69) and cancels some of the authority of intellectuals, Nance (2001) argues that it cannot be produced without their intervention – a kind of self-cancellation. She says (p. 570) "Testimonio is the site of intellectual's self cancellation, but in this self-cancellation, a kind of renewal is averred; we both find and lose ourselves reading testimonio." This is the spiritual journey that Bourdieu speaks of in the practice of reflexivity,

that which allows intellectuals to experience the journey of forgetting her power to impose their point of view and recognize the historicity of this point of view, and ultimately know their selves better. Sociology is thus necessarily political as it “attempt[s] to transform the principles of vision whereby we construct, and there may rationally and humanely shape, sociology, society, and ultimately, our selves.” (Wacquant 1992: 59). This in keeping with the sociologist’s primary task “to imagine themselves in the place occupied by their objects . . . to understand that if they were in their shoes they would doubtless be and think just like her” (Bourdieu 1991: 626), so that the truth of domination will be revealed, so that the struggle against it be more forceful.

NOTES

- 1 The feminine pronoun is used to here to refer to both the intellectual and the life historian.
- 2 Being a methodological paper, the theoretical polemics of Bourdieu against the epistemological couples—objectivism/subjectivism and theoreticism/empiricism—are set at the background.
- 4 This is not to say that orality has always produced liberative texts. In the struggle for national liberty, local elite rewrote their history based on their interest and perspective drowning the voice of the marginalized peasants and workers, aptly labeled “internal colonization.”
- 5 Bourdieu considers cultural, social and symbolic capital as “transformed, disguised forms of economic capital” (Bourdieu 1991 in Swartz 1997, p. 80), and are ultimately valued for their convertibility with economic capital. The struggle for symbolic power is also a struggle for ‘disguised’ economic capital in the academic field. Thus, intellectual are predisposed to serving the dominant classes in their struggle to gain ‘disguised’ economic capital.
- 6 While Bourdieu (1988) analyzes the intellectual field, he situates it within the entire field of power and social classes through the volume and type of capital intellectuals possess. Bourdieu notes that “the producers and transmitters of symbolic goods owe their most essential characteristics to the fact that they constitute a dominated section of the dominant classes” (Bourdieu, as cited in Swartz 1997: 223). Belonging to the dominant class, intellectual in their struggle for symbolic capital produce knowledge that reproduce the immanent structures of domination via system of binary

symbols that political function as inclusive-exclusive or dominated-dominant categories. As agents in the social world use their cognitive categories in their everyday interaction, they unwittingly reproduce the system of hierarchical distinction leading the dominated to accept their domination.

- 7 Agents in their everyday interaction are practical in their disposition. Intellectuals taking out social experience outside of this practical disposition leads to what Bourdieu refers to as theoreticism and objectivism. While science requires the first epistemological break with empirical reality and its subjective commonsense representation, for it to proceed it must experience a second epistemological break with theoreticism and objectivism. Objectivism is the false belief that theoretical constructs that are constructed at start of scientific inquiry have a one-to-one correspondence with reality outside of the theoretical frame, and thus acquire a universal character applicable to all reality (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron 1991). Positivist scientists committed to objectivism engage in statistical regularities of the real (Swartz, p58), failing to recognize that these data are only valid within the theoretical position upon their construction. Theoreticism is committed when the intellectual projects her "cognitive and social interests", her frame, "onto the nontheoretical work of practical action" (Swartz 1997: 58). Intellectuals guilty of objectivism interpret these practical actions using their theoretical standpoint, which arises from a different social condition to those of the respondents.
- 8 This may invite criticism that the testimonio in itself privileges the social experience of the relatively articulate witness-narrator. This is true only if the testimonio is not a reflexively constructed. By unearthing the social conditions of possibilities of the narrator, her knowledge and experience is necessarily historicized.
- 9 Bourdieu et al. (1991) brilliantly argues that science must break itself from commonsense only by constructing concepts. This is a necessary and the first epistemological break with empiricism and subjectivism which Bourdieu calls "objectivist moment" (as cited in Swartz 1997: 56). This is the start of all scientific inquiry. These constructs are necessarily different from the subjective everyday representation of agents, their "common sense notions" (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron 1991: 15) as they act in the social world. Further, empiricism considers facts as data, relying on the real to supply categories for theoretical formulation and the relationship between them, and fails to link these facts to larger and abstract macrostructures, "surrendering to the given" (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron 1991: 37).

- 10 The engagement of the testimonio as a methodological tool against objectivation provides for the epistemological break with both the false epistemological couples of subjective/objective and theoreticism/empiricism.
- 11 Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus which is "a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which general and organize practices and representation that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes ... " (p. 53) is an attempt to dialectically bridge structures and agency and avoid the trap of epistemological couples.
- 12 This is a critic to those intellectuals who insist on an objective and neutral position in the conduct of research. As such they pose their questions as if they and all of their respondents share the same language. (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron 1991)
- 13 I am thinking here that methodological reflections, on the journey of the intellectual's forgetting of oneself, may even supplement the main testimonial text as it describes and demonstrates the process of reflexive understanding and unity with the subaltern. It points to the reader that it is indeed possible to sympathize, unite and act against domination.

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