

Giving Testimony and the Coloniality of Knowledge

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There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. . . . In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.

—Michel Foucault (27-8)

Recent innovative work in epistemology has involved re-valuing testimony as a source of knowledge, challenging standard methodologies of research that maintain the coloniality of knowledge by deauthorizing the testimony of the very people about whom the research is conducted. The question becomes, when does a subject of knowing become a knowing subject? How can a (marginalized) subject of knowing be acknowledged by discourse as a knowing subject? In theorizing the aftermath of her rape and attempted murder, Susan Brison notes that women who have critical experiences are rarely part of the discourse about them. Moreover, policy makers such as the IMF and the World Bank regularly ignore, undermine, and destabilize local knowledge in “undeveloped” areas when making capital decisions affecting agricultural subsistence and imposing structural adjustment programs.

Concerns of advocacy researchers involve the voices, testimony, of those normally excluded from hegemonic discourse production, those who might be spoken about, but not spoken with. Feminist advocacy research recognizes that there are some who are unable to advocate for themselves, or who are dismissed as knowers in their self-advocacy, and works to widen the field of knowledge in order to admit local knowledges. I have raised questions with regard to a researcher’s competency to hear an Other in order to be an advocate. Moreover there is the Western epistemic relationality whereby, among other things, research methodologies dictate that the only agents in the relation are presumed to be the knowing (authorized) subjects, and within authorizing institutions, theirs is the prerogative of interpretation and packaging of information. Western scientific practice thus positions the researcher as a judge of credibility and a gatekeeper for its authority. This is an aspect of the coloniality of knowledge, a discursive enactment of colonial relations and understanding (Hoagland forthcoming).

In this paper, I want to take up questions arising from the positions of those giving testimony, including what they/we must do in order to speak, and continue to trouble the epistemic relationality between authorized knower and subjects of knowledge in the process of knowledge production. When someone marginalized gives testimony, they enter a frame of meaning within which the inquiry itself makes sense, and speak to an audience not normally used to hearing or acknowledging the sorts of things they have to say. My concern involves what marginalized testifiers are required to do to enter the field of meaning within which the testimony is to be given, as well as strategies we/they might use when giving testimony in light of the discourse within which we/they have to make sense.

1. One issue facing someone giving testimony involves whether those receiving it are assuming the information given will be ostensive, something clearly obvious to all, external to our minds, something which when pointed to becomes clear to anyone. If everyone is operating within the same conceptual framework, this might not be a problem. But if those giving testimony are marginalized in one way or another, likely what they have to offer is also marginal to the conceptual framework of those hearing the information. Testimony and giving information is a performance that involves addressing audiences. What the audience is familiar with and has skill thinking about will affect whether simply pointing to the information of the testimony will be possible. In challenging the reference theory of meaning, Ludwig Wittgenstein shows us that the skills of grasping ostension presuppose a great deal of sophistication within the language game. Simply pointing to racism or sexism, for example, doesn't work in U.S. hegemonic understanding, in part because the language games of racism and sexism involve naturalizing white and male privilege. Preserving this historic privileging, legal precedents focus on intentions rather than effects.

A related issue concerns what the authorized knower is expecting in the way of performance from those giving testimony. Is the presumption of authorized knowers that those giving testimony will engage in what Doris Sommer calls "artless confession," responding simply to the particular questions the researcher has constructed? Or if a researcher is open to collecting narratives, is the information gathered understood to be something to which s/he can apply research methodologies, compiling some grid onto which the narrative is disciplined in order to provide the researcher with "objective" means of selecting and deselecting, comparing and evaluating elements? Or is there what Doris Sommer calls an "inquisitorial demand for knowable essences?"

Exploring Rigoberta Menchú's declaration that she is keeping secret some things about her indigenous communities, Doris Sommer suggests that in relation to Western audiences, Rigoberta Menchú is exercising "the uncooperative control that turns a potentially humiliating scene of interrogation into an opportunity for self-authorization" (Sommer, pp. 135-6). In giving testimony, Rigoberta Menchú is not just giving her "simple story" to a white, progressive and affluent community of potential sources of financial aid and political pressure. She is making an appeal to a Western audience and she is resisting a particular colonial relationship in the process.

Moreover, Rigoberta Menchú portrayed the murder of her brother in the form of testimonio, a practice by which a compilation of stories of those enduring atrocities is told as the story of one individual. This is a practice which drives atomistic, positivist academics wild and has left some scholars demanding she be stripped of her Nobel Peace Prize. Ostensive thinking means she is approached as one who if she does not tell a simple truth could only be telling a simple lie.

2. A second point involves recognizing that we are interpellated in a field of meaning, that in order to speak (and be understood), we and our speaking must be recognizable in a field of meaning. As Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, if a lion could speak we would not understand him

(Wittgenstein, p. 223)¹. In the domain of U.S. and Anglo-European meaning, Rigoberta Menchú is interpellated as a simple peasant woman with simple truths (or lies).

In his book, *Impossible Witness*, Dwight McBride explores testimony of several abolition activists interpellated as slaves or former slaves. He notes that the language about slavery preexisted “the telling of the slave narrator’s experience” and created the “codes through which those who would be readers of the slave narrative understand the experience of slavery.” That is, it made the narratives possible, while *ipso facto* limiting them. He argues that “in using the very terms of the institution of slavery to talk about these human beings as ‘slaves,’ ‘Africans,’ and later ‘Negroes,’ one supports and buttresses the idea that the slave, if not subhuman, is certainly not of the same class of people as free Europeans” (McBride, p. 7).

Mahmood Mamdani addresses ways we are interpellated through the political framing developed at the time of the construction of the state, the organization of power. He takes up political identities, not as identities people claim such as feminist or Marxist in challenging social injustice, but identities legalized and institutionalized for different populations at the point of state formation: who is defined as citizens, how and which people are legally identified in particular ways and so on. He thus distinguishes political identities from cultural and market-based identities. If the state recognizes you as an ethnicity, you become an ethnic being legally and institutionally. If the state recognizes you as a member of a racial group, then your relation to the state and to other legal groups is mediated through racial law. For example at the moment of the U.S. state formation, (white) women were institutionally constituted as not full citizens, persons for whom the vote was irrelevant. Tribal peoples were constituted as savages, enemy combatants. And the descendants through their mother’s line of those brought over from the continent of Africa were constituted as 3/5th persons. Resultant and ongoing battles for civil rights continue to emanate from that instigating designation. For example, attempts to rectify racial, political and economic inequalities are understood by most whites as attempting to get preferential treatment or as a matter of reverse discrimination. Such interpellation affects how one is understood even when one is in a position of authority, such as a professor or a president.

3. A third point, as a result, is the possibility of having the meaning of ones words reversed when giving testimony, particularly if one is operating under the assumption of ostension—that all one needs to do is point to, say, an injustice, and any rational being will grasp it. Catharine MacKinnon invites us to consider how women’s testimony of sexual abuse has been turned against us. In this regard she makes two general points: Often when a woman testifies as to abuse, (1) one’s very testimony itself becomes pornography, and (2) that which is offered as proof of sexual torture can become instead proof of woman’s nature (MacKinnon, Chapters 1, 2). A related reversal occurs in the U.S. regarding race. For example, instead of being ostensive and indisputable proof of police brutality, the video tape of the L.A. police beating Rodney King became, in the court system, proof of the dangerous nature of Black men—the police have to resort to that much force.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein’s point is about logic, about what makes sense. There are animal communicators, and once you enter that world of meaning, lions saying something makes sense. However, in the dominant logic it does not make sense. So someone lodged in that logic could not understand a lion speaking no matter what was going on before their eyes and ears.

These two sorts of reversals raise questions about how contexts and collective backup can affect the possible dimensions of a given testimony, how existing conventions, such as those developed in a culture of racism and sexism, are used to read or re-read testimony and to change it into “proof” of something quite different. The lack of sexual credibility on the part of women in hegemony, or the lack of racial credibility on the part of people of color in hegemony, themselves testify to the conventions of racialized sexism and sexualized racism engendered by the state and affect the possibility of giving testimony. Thus when Anita Hill testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee describing Clarence Thomas’ sexual harassment, her performance was turned into racialized pornography,² which members of the Senate Judiciary Committee then dismissed because Clarence Thomas successfully invoked a lynching metaphor (even though sexual conduct between black men and black women has never been a cause for lynching) (Crenshaw).

Ludwig Wittgenstein notes that there are two ways to challenge a proposition, show it to be false, or render it nonsense. Proving something false, however, implicitly validates it as worthy of consideration, as possibly true even if false. Rendering something nonsense avoids even that (Hoagland, 2002). Governmental responses to Anita Hill’s testimony ultimately rendered it nonsense in hegemonic discourse, the ranting of a disgruntled or rejected employee.

When a white woman gives medical testimony that undermines a received pharmaceutical practice or product, she has to go as a supplicant, showing she is not THAT kind of woman (e.g., a whiner or attention seeker, a disruption-causing feminist, etc.) She must appear reasonable on their terms.

4. Consequently, a fourth point in thinking about testimony involves considerations of the listening audience and their worldview. Edward Said, for example, describes one aspect of Orientalism as constructing information to be made to be presented to a Western audience (Said, p. 293). Exploring testifying as a performative, (wherein one is doing something in relation to an audience) rather than a constative (a matter of simple ostension) (Austin), positions one to consider the field of meaning that both preexists and is shaped by the encounter and engagement when testimony is given. It involves being affected by the researcher or lawyer, and the public. It involves strategic thinking in relation to communicating. Someone giving testimony in a context in which their voices are not normally heard needs to consider how what they have to say is going to be heard and/or used.

Susan Brison discusses the reactions to her telling various people about her rape and attempted murder, how many responded to her testimony in ways that would allow them to keep their worldview intact. She explores the various narratives she constructed, shaped by what the listener needed to know most urgently, for example, the narrative she told the police and courts, the one told to her family and friends, the one told her therapist, and the one she will tell her infant son when he grows up (Brison, 2002).

Moreover, one has to consider how to manipulate one’s audience. Dwight McBride analyzes the rhetorical strategies used by several activists in the 19th century who were legally and politically

² I have found that many men will feel dirty when a woman testifies to what men do to women, and yet feel jocular when talking about women sexually among themselves.

designated as slaves or former slaves to negotiate the “discursive terrain” of abolition. Among other things, he draws our attention to the discursive terrain such witnesses had to fit to be intelligible (to whites), the competency of white abolitionists to hear the narratives, means by which the witnesses constructed their narratives to meet the white imaginary, and strategies the witnesses used to remain the testifying authority, for example, how those designated as slave witnesses rhetorically kept white abolitionists at a distance precisely so white abolitionists could not position themselves to speak for slaves, so the witnesses remained the “experts” (McBride).

It is critical for marginalized testifiers to acknowledge structured power relations, whereby the audience can compel meaning if functioning from the center, where listeners will make efforts to frame the information in ways that keep their worldview intact, and where willingness to listen in order to understand becomes an act of generosity.

5. So as a fifth point, I want to revisit the question of lying in giving testimony, as being at times conducive to the production of knowledge.³ The negotiation between those giving testimony and the recipients becomes important, and lying can be a critical tool. An example that interests me concerns Karen Messing’s work in occupational health studies, where she challenged standard views that workplace problems women faced were the result of women’s biology or psychology and showed, rather, that the problems stemmed from workplaces occupationally designed for men, which put many women and some men at a disadvantage (Code, 52-4, Messing, p. 188). In a footnote, Lorraine Code remarks, “When workers engage in activist projects to improve their circumstances, their activities tend to corroborate a suspicion that ‘they will fake their symptoms to gain their point’” (Code, p. 54). That is, when workers act on their own behalf, they could manipulate the data and the researchers. Yet if one considers the discourse they had to counter, including that of company doctors and lawyers whose obligation is protecting the company, faking symptoms is a critical epistemic strategy to address institutional indifference beyond company liability (Hoagland, forthcoming). In this case lying will generate more accurate understanding of the situation.

In *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie Cannon challenges mainstream ethics which makes virtues of qualities such as self-reliance, frugality and industry—staying-in-charge virtues. She argues that for those under slavery the true sphere of moral life is survival against tyrannical systems of oppression. “Living under a system of cheating and lying, blacks learned to consider these vices as virtues in dealing with whites” (Cannon, pp. 75-6).

I used to believe a logical point concerning lying, one from the way I read Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative: One cannot will lying universally not because we don’t like the consequences as John Mill argued, but because if everyone were to lie, there would be no such thing as lying, nothing would count as a lie. I thought one logically couldn’t will this because the result would be loss of meaning and hence communication within which lies can take place. But the fact is, when entering the field of U.S. political office, politicians lie all the time, and yet the language game of politics continues to function. So I shifted my thinking. Politicians are constantly negotiating multiple contexts and multiple agendas and a simple ostensive performance does not carry across them all. Hence manipulating testimony/performance for

³ The credibility of testimony becomes of concern because positivists believe that experiential testimony derived from first-person tellings compromise objectivity and hence truth.

different audiences (with the exception of those a politician can ignore or discredit) is part of the skill set of the job.

The difference between workers and politicians is that politicians can do it individually, and workers must agree collectively. And that opens the door to all the difficulties of collective struggle in our Modern individualized culture, where testimonio is approached as lies, where attention is focused on a single instance of “did it happen?” while the ground is ignored that gives rise to and fertilizes the phenomenon. While collectivity is easy to sustain within the frame of hegemony, for example the maintenance of racialized and gendered social assessment, the maintenance of against-the-grain understanding, on the other hand, seems to require movement activism to sustain it.

6. A sixth point concerns the fact that there are multiple audiences, and more than the hegemonic domain of meaning. It is true we are never outside culture, or language, or discourse, but it does not follow that we can never move in spaces that do not carry dominant Anglo-European white phallic cultural logic, that there is no sense apart from that discourse. To understand this, one has to be able to think in terms of multiple logics, multiple realities.

That is, we can and do meet each other outside the hegemonic discourse. In her paper, “On Complex Communication,” María Lugones challenges the liberal presumption of transparency and/or a shared vocabulary in communication, and argues that monologism is a way of silencing all contestatory interlocution. She suggests we recognize that the oppressed and marginalized are not exhausted by the framings of hegemonic discourse (Lugones 2006, p. 78). In “Playful World Travel” she argues that communicating with her mother requires that she travel to her mother’s world, that she perceive both herself and her mother as constructed in her mother’s world, that she see how her mother resists there, that she see her mother not only as subjected but also as a subject, and that she witness herself from within her mother’s world. Only then would she cease ignoring her, only then could they be fully subjects to each other (Lugones 2003).

She cites Humberto Maturana’s argument challenging the liberal premise of the myth of the Tower of Babel—that people have to speak a uniform language to communicate. Humberto Maturana argues that this is true only if in addition to being embedded in different cultures and languages, people lack the *disposition* to communicate (Lugones 2006). That people speak the same language doesn’t mean they communicate, and certainly many people have found ways to communicate who do not speak the same language. What is the case is that one cannot do so immediately or with easy translation. María Lugones argues that intersubjective conversation is a “portal to a life lived differently.” It certainly involves knowing as a different practice than that fostered by Modern Western epistemology. Maintaining monologism means refusing a disposition to understand each other’s way of living (Lugones 2006). A popular saying during and after the Thomas hearings was, “men don’t get it.” A similar phrase comes to mind as a result of the Sotomayor hearing: “whites don’t get it.” This is a result of what Charles Mills calls the epistemology of ignorance, not a result of a lack of (non-hegemonic) meaning.

A critical point for marginalized interlocutors is that there can be more than one conversation going on, more than one field of meaning within which one can offer information, and more than one discourse staging a performance of the same testimony (Lugones 2006). Sustaining against-the-grain meaning requires understanding this.

7. Consequently, a seventh point involves a question that drives my work, how do marginalized peoples approach each other? Within what field of meaning do we insist other others meet us?

I am specifically interested in how we meet in the construction and performance of knowledge. We are positioned in relation to each other through political identities that are not always or necessarily named but which are nevertheless enacted and resisted. It is not the relationality to power or authority that interests me; it is our relationality to each other. My concern is the relationality between various marginalized people, particularly for our purposes, people who are themselves marginalized in some way hearing testimony from or about others who are marginalized in different ways. How do we epistemically engage each other? My concern is one raised by Michael Horswell: what happens when two hybrids meet?

He explores the agency of ladino and mestizo informants during the Spanish colonization of the Andean region of South America. Spanish colonizers sought out informants to describe and record critical elements of the civilizations they were appropriating and attempting to colonize. In particular, he is interested in how the informants positioned themselves in representing third-gender subjectivity, “how their contributions entered into the colonial discourse on same-sex practices and cross-dressing” (Horswell, 177-8). Strategies of resistance he explores include ways some informants distanced themselves from the Spanish and countered biases of their interrogators’ questions. For example, some informants used the phrase, “those they call Indios” to mark the political identities imposed and distance themselves from the conceptual constructions of the Spanish interrogators. “Here we see the workings of the performative strand of colonial discourse, the agency of the indigenous informants, and how silence and resistance enter the historiographic record” (Horswell, p. 182, 185).

The work of one informant in particular leads to Michael Horswell’s question, “What happens when two hybrids meet?” Inca Garcilaso de la Vega is heralded today as a subaltern writer of a counter history of the Incas, *Commentarios reales de los Incas* published in Spain in 1609. Michael Horswell argues, however, that while Garcilaso de la Vega positioned himself as Other to challenge hegemonic Spanish representation of the Inca, he also positioned himself as Same and entered Spanish discourse: “Inca Garcilaso sacrificed what he perceived to be distasteful, unspeakable even, to the hegemonic culture: that same-sex sexuality and transgenering could have a role in the reproduction of Andean culture” (Horswell, p. 256-7).⁴ Rather than representing the third gender as collective members of a society that relies on their ritual performance for its own reproduction, and instead conforming to Spanish constructions, he represented them as particular individuals in need of confessing their sins.

⁴ Michael Horswell cautions the reader against attempting to translate these ideas into current gay and lesbian gender understandings; such translation would be a practice of the colonality of knowledge. He argues that gender liminality in the Andes is not about breaking binaries conceived as naturalized notions of masculinity and femininity, but about negotiating gender difference to create a complementary pairing, an invocation of an androgynous whole critical in the maintenance of culture. Andeans conceive of themselves on a continuum in temporal performances that are not fixed in space and time (Horswell, p. 23).

María Lugones points to a paradox: as marginalized others, even if we nourish a resistant logic with respect to our own marginalization, we may nevertheless paradoxically approach other others through normalizing, dominant logic (Lugones 2003, chapter 7). And Michael Horswell notes, “the issue should not be, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ but, in the colonial or any historical context, how to decipher his or her voice from the multiple utterances that form hegemonic discourse” (Horswell, p. 234). Hearing each other into speech is the epistemic question facing feminists, critical race theorists, and decolonial theorists.

Anibal Quijano argues that the coloniality of knowledge keeps us from accepting the idea of knowing subjects outside the confines of modern epistemic rationality (Mignolo 2000, p. 60, citing Quijano 1992, p. 442). Within Western intellectual practice, the coloniality of knowledge is a process of translating and rewriting other cultures, other knowledges, other ways of being, presuming commensurability through Western rationality (Dussel, 1995; Mignolo, 1995). That is, our disciplinary practices are colonizing practices. Those of us who are educated in and inhabit the academy are trained to use our disciplines to render distinct cultural notions intelligible, that is commensurable, through processes of interpellation into Anglo-European cultural productions—concepts that we hold to be universal.

Many people not framed as the center are embedded in different locations, indeed often in different cosmologies, which fertilize them, give them their possibilities and from which they think and speak complexly. Liberal presumptions of transparency and translation strategically function to leave the hegemonic worldview unscathed. Many are also crossing borders, inhabiting more than one cultural context, living on the hyphen. The abilities they’ve/we’ve developed in negotiating this multiplicity include skills we need for competent and critical engagement when meeting others, when moving to think and act with, along with the ability to re-cognize resistant logics. Édouard Glissant offers the concept of *donner avec*, translated by Betsy Wing as “gives on and with” as a concept of understanding in contrast to the Modern Western idea of *grasping*.

Moreover, as Édouard Glissant declares of those inhabiting difference, “we demand the right to opacity,” to not be made consumable (Glissant, 1989, p. 189). Possibilities lie in taking up testimony and knowledges from other locations and working for these knowledges to engage each other. But such work can, and often does, result in making territorial claims—in looting, appropriating, telling secrets to power—activities that maintain a colonial fabric (e.g., Smith, 1999). Those insisting we speak only to power, those insisting we meet each other there, maintain the coloniality of knowledge. Let’s return to the paradox María Lugones points to, namely that even if we nourish a resistant logic with respect to our own marginalization, we may nevertheless approach others who are marginalized through normalizing, dominant logic. She argues, “those who cultivate resistant perception with respect to each other in their ‘home’ place nevertheless often internalize oppressive perception of those outside their circle.” If I only struggle with the resistant perceptions of communities I inhabit, I’ll see other resisters through the dominant frame of sense and reference. There is more than one resisting logic.

As marginalized others, exploring the bifurcation of consciousness and multiple realities is key to developing skill in the practice of knowing, of destabilizing ones ignorances--developing fluency in more than one resistant logic, being able to engage in playful world travel, developing

our strategies and skills at complex communication, and hence in becoming competent receivers of each others' testimony.

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