# Can Resistance Scholars Hear the Subaltern Speak?

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It is a hot and humid afternoon on August 22, 1964, when representatives of the civil rights movement enter the conventional hall in Atlantic City to make a case for seating delegates of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the Democratic Party's National Convention. Proponents of the proposal argue that African Americans in Mississippi deserve to appoint their own elected officials, because the state's Democratic Party systematically denies them the right to vote and participate in the political process. The session starts with testimonies by prominent witnesses for the MFDP. Aaron Henry, son of an African American sharecropper and chair of the MFDP, appears in suit and tie, and reports calmly and concisely on the terror experienced by African American Mississippians attempting to register and vote. He also indicates that he is a strong supporter of the national Democratic Party and president Lyndon B. Johnson. Then Joseph Rauh Jr., the MFDP's white legal counsel and also a supporter of Johnson's presidential campaign, challenges the all-white Mississippi delegation by declaring: "Are you going to throw out of here the people who want to work for Lyndon Johnson, who are willing to be beaten and shot and thrown in jail to work for Lyndon Johnson? Are we for the oppressor or the oppressed?" (New York Times Archives, 1964). Soon after, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., dressed sharply as usual, eloquently highlights the moral significance of the decision before the committee. Looking at the MFDP delegation, he states: "You cannot imagine the anguish and suffering they have gone through to get to this point." And he ends his presentation by proclaiming: "If you value your party, if you value your nation, if you value the democratic process, you must recognize the Freedom party delegation" (New York Times Archives, 1964). So far, the committee meeting has proceeded smoothly and cordially, according to the institutional norms of civil discourse and political practice.

Observing my comrades in the civil rights struggle, I am both impressed with the quality of their testimonies and somewhat nervous about my own. I am comfortable speaking to local people in Mississippi, but have never spoken at a national event that will be covered by national television. Right when I decide to just tell my story with the language I normally use, I hear the Credentials Committee calling Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer to the witness table. After I take a seat and wipe the sweat off my face, I move toward the microphone. While my voice is a little hesitant at first, it gains strength and passion when I describe growing up on the plantation and failing my first attempt at voter registration. Then I share how local white police officers arrested and molested me following a voter registration workshop in June of 1963:

> I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Ivesta Simpson… And it wasn't too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he asked me where I was from. And I told him Ruleville… He said, "You are from Ruleville all right," and he used a curse word. And he said, "We're going to make you wish you was dead."
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> I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack. The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman, to lay down on a bunk bed on my face. And I laid on my face, the first Negro began to beat me. And I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted. I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side, because I suffered from polio when I was six years old.
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> After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted, the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack. The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat to sit on my feet – to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush.
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> One white man—my dress had worked up high—he walked over and

> pulled my dress. I pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back up… (Brooks and Houck, 2011: 44-45).

I see that the officials and audience at the hearing are shocked by the brutality of what happened, and decide to end my speech with a plea to the American people:

> All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America (Brooks and Houck, 2011: 45)?

How should we, as resistance scholars, interpret and respond to public speech by subaltern subjects like Fannie Lou Hamer, subjects who generally lack discursive access, lines of social mobility, and political influence (Spivak, 1988; Morris, 2010; Guha, 1982-1999)? Our most common response is to focus on whether and how they contribute to *contentious politics* (Tilly and Tarrow 2006). Do the words of subaltern resisters increase the capacity of protest groups and social movements for mass mobilization and public persuasion, or not? Do they have significant effects on the political processes of ruling institutions and their cultural legitimacy in mainstream society, or not? From this perspective, the relevance of Hamer's testimony is limited at best. Some scholars adopting this approach argue that, although her performance impressed many supporters and turned her into a popular icon, it failed to change the Democratic Party and could not prevent the civil rights movement's decline after the 1964 Democratic National Convention (McAdam, 1988). Others propose that Hamer's real political importance lies in her organizational capacities and efforts as one of the black "women leaders" of the civil rights movement, not in her passionate truth-telling (Robnett, 1997). Contentious politics scholars, therefore, prefer to emphasize Hamer's mobilizing work and leadership, rather than pay careful attention to her disruptive testimony as a subaltern subject.

In contrast, scholars influenced by political anthropologist James C. Scott (1985, 1990) regard subversive subaltern words and deeds as hidden forms of *everyday resistance*. They point out that most oppressed

individuals and groups avoid direct confrontations with authorities and political systems, favoring "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: footdragging, dissimulation, false-compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" that often don't require much organization, mobilization, or leadership. They criticize historians and social scientists for concentrating on highly visible campaigns of public contention and mass social movements, while ignoring the invisible language and acts of resistance that do not make headlines or directly challenge domination. Scott and affiliated researchers undoubtedly open up new avenues for studying subaltern resistance. Yet they are ambivalent about subaltern "fighting words" that explicitly contest the elites and social order. Although they would appreciate Hamer's cultural heritage and courage as poor sharecropper, they might question whether her public performance contributes positively to the material interests of herself and other lower-class Black people in Mississippi (idem). Thus, even researchers devoted to exploring subaltern resistance are usually not prepared to listen to contentious subaltern speech in the face of dominant rulers and institutions.

What can we, as resistance scholars, do to improve and expand our capacity to hear subaltern subjects speak? First of all, we need to become more fully aware of how epistemic violence destroys the ability of subaltern individuals and groups to speak and be heard, while recognizing our complicity in silencing subaltern knowers and dismissing subaltern knowledge. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) notes in "Can the Subaltern Speak?," epistemic violence occurs when dominant forces normalize conventional discourses and make subjugated ways of thinking and communicating disappear. To understand how epistemic violence works, we need to study how communication involves particular power relations between speakers and audiences. While privileged speakers can often influence audiences, subaltern speakers per definition heavily depend on listeners. Public speech only emerges under conditions of reciprocity between speakers and audiences: Speakers in general, and subaltern speakers in particular, need audiences that are willing and able to hear them (Dotson, 2011: 237). As resistance scholars, we need to make an existential choice: Do we want to be part of audiences that distort or silence what subaltern voices like Hamer's are articulating?

Or do we want to be part of audiences committed to learning how to listen constructively to subaltern stories and testimonies, while taking responsibility for our own complicity in epistemic violence?

Besides epistemic violence, resistance scholars also need to consider how we engage in the *politics of listening*. As social and political scientists in neoliberal universities, we are susceptible to pressures to see ourselves as neutral observers of social reality who use legitimate scientific procedures to produce observable, measurable, and valid knowledge about the world. To do so, we often treat individuals or groups we research as "objects" that serve to support our theoretical arguments and empirical findings. In the process, however, we not only fail to recognize that those we research are "subjects" in their own right, with their own capacity to know and act upon social conditions, but also that we ("the researchers") are part of intersubjective relationships with "the researched." Susan Bickford's *The Dissonance of Democracy* (1996) is particularly useful for developing a politics of listening that allows us to hear the subaltern speak as creative subjects rather than given objects. Without denying the importance of speech, she argues that focusing on listening allows for more dialogical and interactive understandings of political action. She writes: "To highlight the role of listening is to confront the intersubjective character of politics. Communication inherently presupposes different beings and the possibility of something between them; it points to both separateness and relatedness" (Bickford, 1996: 4). Although Bickford primarily discusses how listening shapes democratic conflict and citizenship in general, her perspective also helps rethink relationships between "the privileged researcher" and "the subaltern researched."

Another way to improve our capacity to listen is to highlight "fearless truth-telling" as a vital and generally neglected form of subaltern speech for Resistance Studies. Here, Michel Foucault's writings on what ancient Greek philosophers call *parrhesia* urge us to investigate the rare cases when subaltern subjects disrupt dominant discourse legitimating the social order. For Foucault (2001, 2011), *parrhesia* is a way to respond to the "regimes of truth" that rule normative thinking by taking responsibility for self-formation and creating partially autonomous ways of life in relation to others. As an alternative orientation toward governing the self and others, it is therefore relevant for exploring speech

by subaltern resisters like Fannie Lou Hamer. Thus, researchers can learn from the lived experience and counter-discourse of the researched, while the researched can gain political power by being seen and heard by researchers with enduring access to dominant discourse.

Having sketched the conceptual background, it is now time to shift attention back to Fannie Lou Hamer, her life story, and her subaltern speech. The first section considers how epistemic violence shapes Hamer's truth-telling and interpretations by her audiences, including resistance scholars. The second section examines her words and deeds from the perspective of the politics of listening, while the third does the same from the perspective of fearless truth-telling. The conclusion briefly discusses the contemporary relevance of subaltern truth-telling and reflects on future possibilities for subaltern-oriented research in Resistance Studies.

## Epistemic violence and subaltern testimony

Hearing the subaltern speak requires more than just good intentions and progressive ideas on the part of audiences. It involves paying careful attention to the deep roots of epistemic violence that normally prevent observers from *seeing* subaltern people as fully human subjects and *listening* to them as capable knowers. It also involves basic understanding of subaltern standpoints based on their descriptions of lived experiences and social conditions. In her speeches and texts, Fannie Lou Hamer often tells stories about her upbringing as daughter of sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta, arguably the poorest and most viciously racist part of American society at the time. At the age of six, for example, she was playing near the shack that she called home when the plantation owner came to ask whether she could pick cotton as well as her brothers and sisters. After answering that she didn't know, the white owner said that she seemed strong and mature enough to be a great cotton picker. In exchange for picking thirty pounds of cotton a week, he offered her the kind of rewards that appealed to a Black child in the South who regularly went to bed hungry: fish, cheese, candy, and a gingerbread cookie. When she told her parents about the landowner's proposal, they did not discourage her—despite knowing that their white boss was deceiving Fannie Lou like he had done with her brothers and sisters. The next day, she started working twelve to fourteen hours a day—from "can see to can't

see"—and continued doing so throughout her youth. After becoming involved in the civil rights movement as an adult, she eventually realizes that the white landowner had taken advantage of her at a young age in order to perpetuate an oppressive system: "So I picked the 30 pounds of cotton that week, but I found out what actually happened was he was trapping me into beginning the work I was to keep doing and I never did get out of his debt again" (Lee, 2000: 2-4). Here, in her own language, Hamer shows that she is a "knower" of her predicament as a subaltern, as someone forced into poverty, exclusion, and abuse without the capacity to make herself be seen, treated, or heard as a dignified human being.

Hamer's example demonstrates the meaning and practice of epistemic violence in everyday life. Based on similar subaltern voices and perspectives, feminist theorists conceptualize *epistemic violence* as the disappearance of a subaltern group's cultural knowledge and erasure of a subaltern person's existence as "knower" due to social structures, spaces, and relationships of "pernicious ignorance" (Dotson 2011: 244). Such pernicious ignorance does not necessarily originate in bad intentions or deliberate acts of audience members, but emerges from enduring systems and processes of representation, silencing, and objectification by privileged audiences and institutions. Whereas "epistemic justice" occurs when speakers enjoy reciprocal relationships with audiences, allowing their words and speech acts to be received as they intended, "epistemic violence" arises when speakers are unable to speak for themselves without being ignored, dismissed, or stereotyped by their audiences. In turn, epistemic violence is often closely associated with other forms of direct, structural, cultural, and routine violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2003).

Hamer encountered many other forms of epistemic violence in her life. Because of the long working hours, for example, Fannie Lou could only attend her Black school after harvest time. And since her school year was already shorter than the school year of white students, she was only able to pursue her education between December and March (Lee, 2000: 5). Although she was an engaged and talented student until she dropped out at age twelve, Fannie Lou's lack of schooling prevented her from gaining the "cultural capital" (the social skills and cultural habits promoting social mobility in unequal societies) that allow people to

sound educated or appear sophisticated in public life (Bourdieu, 1986). As civil rights movement activist, therefore, Hamer had no trouble speaking to and with subaltern audiences, consisting of local Black people in Mississippi who appreciated her heartfelt language and easily identified with her dramatic stories of despair and hope. But while she was highly popular and effective as organizer in the Delta, she faced various manifestations of epistemic violence in her interactions with white people in the South and mainstream society as well as with Black leaders in the civil rights movement.

The relentless force of epistemic violence once again appeared a few days after Hamer's testimony in Atlantic City. On August 26, 1964, MFDP delegates met and unanimously decided to refuse the compromise of two symbolic MFDP seats at the convention proposed by the administration of president Lyndon B. Johnson. Before this decision, Hamer had persuasively declared to her colleagues that "We didn't come all this way for no two seats" (Lee, 2000: 99; Carson, 1981: 126). But many of the male Black leaders disagreed, arguing that the compromise represented a small but tangible victory. Although he was an ardent MFDP supporter, Martin Luther King, Jr. favored a pragmatic approach: "out of thesis and antithesis should come synthesis" (Lee, 2000: 99-100). But Roy Wilkins of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) felt that the MFDP should take a back seat to established Black elites (often called "the black bourgeoisie") and strongly disapproved of Hamer's influence: "You all are just ignorant. You have put your point across. You should just pack your bags up and go home" (Lee, 2000: 100). In response to such blatant epistemic violence, Hamer immediately canceled her membership in the NAACP and grew increasingly critical of "progressive" Black civil rights leaders and their white liberal allies. She began focusing primarily on local grassroots organizing and encouraging poor Black people to rise up: "How much have the people with suits done?... Preachers and teachers look down on little people, but now these little people are speaking up" (Lee, 2000: 116). Soon Hamer's grassroots radicalism even led to rifts with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the MFDP's parent organization, over whether uneducated local people were capable of leading struggles for Black liberation (Lee, 2000: 119). In

short, epistemic violence shaped perceptions of subaltern Mississippians in everyday life and the civil rights movement.

Resistance scholars have probably studied the American civil rights movement in more depth and detail than any other resistance struggle. Yet research on epistemic violence and subaltern speech in the face of powerful authorities remains limited. Prominent social movement scholar Doug McAdam (1988: 119), for example, recognizes the significance of Hamer's 1964 testimony for the Freedom Summer campaign:

> The highlight of the appearance was Fannie Lou Hamer's emotional account of being savagely beaten in jail following her arrest for participating in voter registration activities… Hamer's electrifying testimony moved even the hardened party regulars on the Committee, as well as a national television audience… It began to look as if the moral force of the challenge might actually prevail. Almost unbelievably, the MFDP was poised to play David to the Mississippi Dixiecrat's Goliath.

But for McAdam, Hamer's testimony represents the emotional dimension of the MFDP's political strategy at the Convention, the subaltern voice of passion to complement the pragmatic lobbying of state delegations. His argument not only implies a problematic dichotomy between rational negotiation (by male leaders) and moral persuasion (by subaltern women), but also overlooks the substance of Hamer's subaltern speech or her status as subaltern "knower." Feminist sociologist Belinda Robnett (1997: 19-23), in contrast, concentrates explicitly on subaltern Black women like Fannie Lou Hamer and highlights their activities as "bridge leaders" and grassroots organizers. Like the majority of resistance scholars, however, Robnett focuses on improving academic theories and frameworks, rather than listening to subaltern speech for its own sake and on its own terms.

## From the politics of speech to the politics of listening

Feminist and critical theorists have long argued that political emancipation requires inclusion of the "voice of the voiceless" to ensure representation and participation by subaltern people excluded from existing systems of domination. They commonly assert that allowing members of marginalized and silenced groups to have their say disrupts hegemonic discourse, expands the political power of counter-hegemonic speech, and

contributes to radical forms of democracy. As Gayatri Spivak (1988) points out, though, benevolent intentions by progressive scholars are not enough to perceive the subaltern as equally human subjects and hear their words as reasonable speech rather than primal expressions of pain or pleasure. In her eyes, even researchers seeking to liberate the subaltern tend to "speak for" and silence them. According to Spivak, therefore, *the subaltern cannot speak* in the sense that hegemonic discourse prevents them from being heard on their own terms, including by researchers claiming to take their side. I suggest that Spivak's critique is valuable yet one-dimensional. Although her argument is strong from the perspective of "the politics of speech," it does not adequately consider "the politics of listening." If the subaltern cannot speak because they are not being heard, can resistance scholars learn to listen to—and thereby amplify—subaltern speech like Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony? Can we enhance our capacity for "counter-hegemonic listening" or are we doomed to merely reproduce hegemonic ways of silencing the subaltern?

The politics of speech usually highlights social inequalities between speaker and audience, showing how one exerts "power over" the other, with the audience either silencing or validating the speaker. In contrast, the politics of listening emphasizes that communication is an uncertain and open-ended process that involves various forms of social interaction and political struggle among speakers and listeners. Although the speaker's and listener's social positions, locations, and contexts matter, some social forces contribute more to reproducing oppressive conditions and others contribute more to resisting them. While the resistance researcher is generally privileged in relation to the subaltern researched, this does not necessarily mean that we are unable to learn to speak and listen in ways that facilitate rather than stifle subaltern speech and ways of life. Instead of playing it safe by *retreating* from engagement with subaltern words and deeds, therefore, we need to accept *responsibility* for how we speak and listen in our studies of subaltern resistance, while openly acknowledging our flaws and challenges. As feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff (1991-1992: 29) points out: "It is not *always* the case that when others unlike me speak for me I have ended up worse off, or that when we speak for others they end up worse off. Sometimes..., we do need a 'messenger' to

advocate for our needs." But how can we hold ourselves responsible as resistance scholars engage with struggles by the marginalized and muted?

To address this question, I draw on work on the politics of listening by feminist political scientist Susan Bickford (1996). She points out that most scholars see and hear their research subjects from a distance—from a position of neutrality and expertise in relation to the individuals and groups they are studying. In contrast, Bickford's approach prioritizes the *practice of listening to others*, the practice of intensively focusing on and engaging with speakers as unique human beings rather than abstract objects. Her perspective is clearly relevant for researchers studying political speech by subaltern resisters. It emphasizes that listening is intertwined with speaking, and that both are creative acts based on persistent effort by researchers and subjects alike (Bickford, 1996: 141-173). More specifically, Bickford's approach identifies three concrete areas of focus for resistance scholars seeking to engage in counter-hegemonic listening that contests and subverts dominant discourse on the subaltern.

Bickford's first point is that political listening occurs when the self (the listener) demonstrates *openness* toward the other (the speaker), especially when the differences and disagreements between them are significant (Bickford, 1996: 146-147). Listeners should avoid prioritizing or imposing their own preconceptions and worldviews, while paying careful attention to the contexts and statements of each speaker, without rushing to judgments or conclusions. Such attention involves "stilling the self," but also actively imagining the place and perspective of the speaking other—even if the listener cannot easily understand or accept what the speaker says. As Bickford (1996: 147) writes: "This kind of listening and speaking together engages both agency and situatedness: I cannot hear you except against the ground of who I am, and you are speaking, not in the abstract, but to me—to who you think your listeners are." Openness as orientation is particularly important and challenging for scholars studying the speech of subaltern resisters normally ignored and muted in mainstream society. It implies shifting emphasis from making persuasive scholarly arguments and gaining academic approval to exploring the everyday lives of subordinated subjects based primarily on their (not our) particular styles, standpoints, and stories.

As resistance scholars, practicing openness in studying Fannie Lou Hamer is far more difficult than it might seem. Hegemonic discourse encourages us to either romanticize her as an exceptional individual or categorize her as a particular type of subaltern resister. As mentioned earlier, McAdam (1988) uses academic language to classify her as a strategic moral persuader and Robnett (1997) similarly identifies her as an indigenous bridge leader. While neither interpretation is wrong, both constrain our openness toward Hamer as a unique human being, whose everyday struggles are both situated in particular contexts as well as connected to wider struggles for human emancipation. Despite our differences as academics in today's neoliberal universities, we can learn to avoid imposing our "academic self," and prioritize how Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony speaks to us as fellow human beings, by carefully examining video of her speeches and (auto)biographies on her life stories.

Bickford's second point is that political listening entails not only openness as an orientation, but also *pathbuilding* as a practice of forging relationships between listeners and speakers (Bickford, 1996: 148-153). Pathbuilding is a delicate process that attempts to avoid the extremes of not hearing what the other is saying and allowing the other's opinion to replace one's own. As Bickford (1996: 148) articulates it:

> We do not simply float over to another's position in our heads; we create together a concrete worldly means of getting at each other's perspectives. Or, rather, of getting as close as we can get; we cannot inhabit others' perspectives or hold their opinions as they do, we are still travelers coming from somewhere else.

Thus, resistance scholars can learn to hear the subaltern speak by building connections across differences and engaging in dialogues with each other, as long as we remember that—as privileged academics—we can never fully define or capture the existential conditions of subordinated others. In the process, we have to recognize that this kind of listening is risky, because it might compel us to change our familiar ways of thinking and being-in-the-world. We might come to realize, for example, that our established fields, theories, and empirical studies fail to shed sufficient light on the daily realities of particular subaltern resisters.

As resistance scholars, the first move toward pathbuilding is changing our habit of taking a detached and neutral position as social scientists in academia. We need to acknowledge that scholarship in our field mostly appeals to fellow academics and lacks relevance for activists (especially subaltern activists) directly confronting oppressive authorities and institutions (e.g. Flacks, 2005). Once we commit to connecting with subaltern subjects and learning from subaltern stories, we can begin engaging in dialogues across and beyond our differences. This process is often painful, because it involves taking responsibility for our academic training, choices, institutions, and subjectivity. In writing this essay, for instance, I regularly encounter my shortcomings as researcher accustomed to relying on historical documents or secondary literature to narrate "what really happened," instead of examining the everyday lives, circumstances, and interpretations of distinct subaltern individuals like Fannie Lou Hamer. I also try to discipline myself to worry more about how I engage with Hamer as subaltern subject than about pressures to publish my essay, increase my academic capital, and become a successful scholar. At the same time, I also wrestle with how to build paths with an historical figure who is no longer available for face-to-face communication. Here, listening involves moral and sociological imagination to gain some understanding of her life story and existential dilemmas. How did being a child of two sharecroppers shape her sense of self and purpose? How did she think voting and running for office would empower her and other subaltern people in Mississippi? How did the disappointing 1964 convention affect her and her activism? Reading and reflecting on such far-reaching questions helps relate to Hamer as a fellow human being rather than just as a convenient object for our academic projects (Mills, 1993; Lee, 2000). But it also makes us aware of how rarely contributors to Resistance Studies (including myself!) do the kind of pathbuilding necessary for practicing the difficult art of political listening.

Bickford's final point is that how we speak and listen to each other shapes our *common worlds*, our intersubjective relationships constructed in shared social spaces (Bickford, 1996: 159-173). These common worlds might seem consensual and orderly, but actually emerge from the presence of multiple perspectives and dissonant voices. According to

Bickford (1996: 162): "We have the capacity to hear something about the world differently through the sounding of another perspective: we are able to be surprised by others and by our own selves." Although political communication often leads to disagreements and misunderstandings, it can also open up possibilities for subjective, relational, and social transformation. The main purpose of political listening in the world is therefore not to (re)produce consensus or control public discourse, but to continue conversations across borders and expand fields of political action toward autonomy and dignity for all. As resistance scholars, we are influential participants—rather than just neutral observers and researchers—in shared social spaces with our research subjects. How we see, hear, and respond to subaltern resisters is an urgent academic as well as political question. If we treat subaltern resisters as mere "objects" for our social-scientific analyses and explanations, we reinforce the hierarchies and inequalities of our current world. But if we engage with subaltern resisters intellectually, emotionally, and politically as equally human "subjects," we might help make less-hierarchical interactions and relationships possible, where in the words of Karl Marx: "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." In the end, listening to subaltern resisters can only flourish if we live in shared social spaces with them—whether these spaces are face-to-face or virtual, within or across historical periods.

How can we, as resistance scholars and social scientists, live in a common world with subaltern speakers and resisters like Fannie Lou Hamer? For starters, we need to accept our complicity in dominant ways of thinking that rely on abstract categories, binaries, analyses, and judgments for developing valid knowledge. We commonly identify Hamer as a black woman, civil rights activist, local organizer, or indigenous leader to support our arguments for how she was distinct from other kinds of resisters, and for how she contributed to the civil rights movement as a whole. By doing so, we separate our "academic world" from her "experiential world," instead of starting from her life story to gain deeper understanding and connection to her. If we seek transformation of our oppressive world-system, however, we can appreciate how Hamer's world in many ways closely intersects with our own. Her words and

deeds—from her subaltern standpoint—then enable us to hear and see something differently about our world and ourselves.

The concept of *transcommunality*, coined by Afro-indigenous sociologist John Brown Childs, is especially useful for listening with the purpose of constructing common worlds. If we see ourselves as a diverse community engaged in struggles over knowledge and power, then transcommunality refers to "the constructive and developmental interaction occurring among distinct autonomy-oriented communities and organizations, each with its own particular history, outlook, and agenda" (Childs, 2003: 10). Although much has changed since Hamer's time and place, for example, the current treatment of African American men and women by brutal police officers and an unjust criminal justice system is eerily familiar. Recognizing commonalities in our worlds facilitates listening to commonalities in our words. Aren't Black Lives Matter resisters also questioning America and asking why subaltern African Americans still face daily threats to their lives? And don't both Fannie Lou Hamer and the Black Lives Matter movement speak for and to all of us—across race, class, sexuality, nationality, and educational status? While mainstream media and academia generally perpetuate hegemonic discourse on Black Lives Matter, we need to experiment with counter-hegemonic methodologies for listening to subaltern participants struggling with and for human dignity. By practicing transcommunality, we can both recognize each other's distinct roots, standpoints, social contexts, and ways of speaking, and form cross-cutting alliances with each other as co-conspirators confronting the pervasive militarism, police brutality, school-to-prison pipeline, prison-industrial complex, and fascistic tendencies in our neoliberal world-system.

## Subaltern testimony as parrhesia or fearless speech

So far, I have argued that resistance scholars can learn to hear the subaltern speak by paying attention to epistemic violence and by reflecting on how to listen. But how do we decide what kind of subaltern speech to research and amplify? And what can we learn by opening our eyes and ears to what subordinated people do and say? I propose that subaltern speech is particularly significant when it involves a kind of truth-telling that ancient Greeks call *parrhesia* and Michel Foucault (2001) translates

as "fearless speech." To support and develop this claim, however, I need to first clarify the concept of parrhesia and show how it differs from the modern understanding of truth that prevails in social science research, including in Resistance Studies. After doing so, I return to Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony to show how she exemplifies parrhesia in her speech, life, and subjectivity.

In his early work, Foucault (2011) focuses on how dominant discourses produce and reproduce "regimes of truth," disciplining how we think, speak, and act in particular situations and institutions. Academic regimes of truth, for example, compel resistance scholars and other social scientists to use conventional methodologies to do our research projects and develop our arguments in ways that conform to established rules, norms, procedures, and institutions. Even if we present ourselves as critical of oppressive systems, we generally adopt widely-accepted scientific standards for making, supporting, and communicating our perspectives on resistance campaigns and social movements. We tend to separate ourselves as researchers from the subjects we research, engage in contentious debates with fellow scholars rather than reciprocal dialogues with subaltern resisters, and see ourselves as contributing to academic Resistance Studies instead of political struggles with those we study.

Starting around 1980, Foucault begins exploring another politics of truth. He shows that while modern regimes of truth rely on intersections of power and knowledge to construct docile subjects and normalize oppressive institutions, some forms of ancient truth-telling involve human subjects who can constitute themselves as truthful beings capable of truthful speech and ways of life. Foucault meticulously examines the classical Greek practice of *parrhesia* to critique modern understandings of (academic) truth and consider the potential of fearless speech to transform truth-telling subjects and political struggles against subjection (Rabinow and Rose, 2003: 130). I suggest that *subaltern parrhesia* is a particularly important form of speech that resistance scholars need to hear and examine.

In his work on parrhesia, Foucault acknowledges the value of studying how structures of discourse shape what is considered true and untrue, valid and invalid knowledge. Yet he contends that what is lacking in such epistemological analysis is attention to how truth-tellers,

participating in "games of truth" with relatively powerful authorities and audiences, form themselves as subjects in their acts of *truth-telling*. In other words, he is less interested in big philosophical questions about what is or isn't really true than in "the problem of the truth-teller, or of the truth-telling as an activity… who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relations to power" (Foucault, 2001: 5). For modern scientists, *objective* methods for gathering, analyzing, and using evidence about external reality determine what is true. In ancient Greek culture, however, speakers' unique subjective qualities shape whether fellow citizens regard their speech as more or less truthful. Personal and social standards for positive manifestations of parrhesia are particularly high. Parrhesiasts must express themselves in transparent language and demonstrate persistent courage in what they say and do in relation to people with power to punish. As Foucault (2001: 19-20) specifies:

> *[P]arrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.

Contrary to modern science, therefore, parrhesia involves subjects who are capable of living as well as telling the truth of their existence, and are recognized as such by others in their community. And contrary to manipulative rhetoric designed to persuade audiences, parrhesia implies fearless speech motivated by speakers' ethical commitment to their subjectivities as truthful subjects, and to their truthful intersubjective relationships with fellow human beings. In short, *truth-telling* in specific moments, spaces, and interactions goes hand in hand with *truth-living* over the long haul.

Foucault suggests that due to our modern structures of power and discourse, contemporary examples of fearless speech are extremely rare or even non-existent. In my view, however, Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony at the Democratic Party's convention in 1964 is a clear case of subaltern

parrhesia that deserves further exploration by resistance scholars. First of all, Hamer's truth-telling is explicitly grounded in her *personal relationship to truth*, in how her lived experiences have made her into the subject speaking her truths. Instead of highlighting her organizational leadership in the SNCC or MFDP, therefore, she begins her testimony by vividly describing what happens to her in jail, after being arrested for voter registration activism. Her words indicate that she courageously suffers the violence inflicted on her by police officers and fellow inmates, just as she suffers the violence of systemic racism, sexism, and oppression in everyday life. Her unrestrained truth-telling, moreover, comes from who she is—a poor, uneducated, religious Black woman struggling for survival and freedom—rather than from instrumental attempts to influence political decision-makers or persuade wider audiences. Thus, the contrast between her subaltern parrhesia and Martin Luther King's sophisticated rhetoric is stark.

Second, Hamer speaks her truths about racial, sexual, and economic violence despite clear *risks* to her way of life, reputation, and status within the civil rights movement. Unlike established movement leaders like King, CORE's James Farmer, and NAACP's Roy Wilkins, who try to convince MFDP delegates to accept President Johnson's compromise, Hamer speaks primarily from a sense of duty and responsibility toward Black subaltern subjects in Mississippi. The insulting remarks by Wilkins about MFDP delegates are particularly painful. After the convention, therefore, Hamer not only breaks her ties with the NAACP, but also becomes increasingly alienated from her own SNCC and the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, her truth-telling demonstrates her subjective capacity to use freedom to opt for frankness over rhetoric, experiential truth over obedience to expectations, danger over security, criticism over flattery, and moral responsibility over self-interest and moral apathy. She does so not only for herself and fellow subaltern people, but also in name of society: "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?" (New York Times Archives, 1964; Lee, 2000).

And last but not least, Hamer's fearless truth-telling resonates because it intertwines with how she "lives in truth." Her tireless organizing

and daily engagement with Mississippians show that her personal and communal struggles are inseparable from her political struggles, and that her words are inseparable from her deeds. Far from using her growing popularity to increase her own influence as civil rights leader, she instead draws on her social connections and capacities to directly enhance the dignity, autonomy, and living conditions of subaltern people in their own spaces and communities. Several years after her famous public speech in 1964, for instance, she initiates the Freedom Farm project. Having experienced several political defeats and recovering from the death of her daughter Dorothy due to malnutrition, Hamer decides to focus primarily on fulfilling urgent human needs rather than pressuring established authorities to promote legal reforms and civil rights. Whereas prominent civil rights movement leaders and organizations speak and act *for* subordinated African Americans, Hamer wants oppressed Mississippians to gain capacity for self-sufficiency, self-empowerment, and self-government, so that they can learn to speak and act for (as well as among) themselves (Lee, 1999: 136-162).

Freedom Farm consists of six major components, each focusing on a particular local problem and enabling cooperation among participants in the project. The most important component is acquiring common land for Black families as the first step in achieving freedom from economic dependency and freedom to take care of themselves rather than depend on government aid or charity. As Hamer repeatedly stresses during her speaking tours: "Give us food and it will be gone tomorrow. Give us land and the tools to work it and we will feed ourselves forever" (in Lee, 1999: 154). Freedom Farm participants raise pigs, donate some to starving families, and plant various crops on their land to meet urgent need for *food*, the project's second key component. Members also harvest vegetables and grow cotton, sharing produce with hundreds of families in the region. The third project concentrates on *housing*, developing processes for using federal housing mortgages to turn shacks into livable and secure homes. The fourth initiative emphasizes education, providing funding to local Black youth pursuing higher education or vocational training, and addressing the lack of schooling and intellectual oppression experienced by Black elders. They also support several producer cooperatives—including a clothing shop, sewing coop, plumbing business, and

laundromat—to expand opportunities for *employment* of young and old. Finally, Freedom Farm engages in *social service* by pooling resources and performing mutual aid for families and communities in crisis, without relying exclusively on government handouts. Each aspect of Freedom Farm addresses an existential challenge confronting poor Black people in the Mississippi Delta, including her own family. And each aspect of Freedom Farm is a way of "truth-living" that adds symbolic meaning and material substance to Fannie Lou Hamer's parrhesiastic "truth-telling" (Lee, 1999: 136-162).

## Conclusion: Learning to hear subaltern speech in Resistance Studies

In *Politics*, Aristotle famously declares that what sets human beings apart from other animals is our capacity for reasonable speech. While other animals also have access to voice to convey raw feelings of pleasure or pain, only we are blessed with "the gift of speech… to express what is useful for us, and what is hurtful, and of course what is just and what is unjust" (Aristotle 2017: chapter II). Only we, as political animals, are able to think, communicate, and act in ways that allow for virtuous decision-making, government, and ways of life. But after originally claiming that the power of speech is universal among human beings, Aristotle later divides human beings into "slaves" and "masters," assigning different natures to each. Most people are like "slaves," who can merely serve the common good with their bodies—not with their minds or words. Just a select few are "masters," fit for moral discourse, free participation in political life, and rational governance of the community.

This essay proposes that, however good our intentions, resistance scholars tend to hear what the subaltern say as voice rather than as speech, as passionate noise rather than as reasonable articulation of their lives and conditions. We typically revert to the logic of hegemonic discourse that urges us to pay attention to "masters" in society (whether master authorities or master resisters) and to silence or speak for today's "slaves." But this does not mean that we can't improve our capacity to hear subaltern resisters speak. To become better counter-hegemonic listeners, we can prioritize the *words and stories of subaltern speakers* like Fannie Lou Hamer, instead of focusing primarily on our own academic

interests and perspectives. We can examine the *epistemic violence* that makes subaltern subjects invisible and inaudible, while compelling us to mute or distort their speech. We can explore our part in the *politics of listening* and take responsibility for our openness, pathbuilding across differences, construction of transcommunal relationships, and common worlds with the subaltern resisters we encounter. And we can highlight the rare yet transformative cases of *subaltern parrhesia*, when courageous truth-tellers like Fannie Lou Hamer unexpectedly force mainstream audiences to recognize and respond to their experiential truths. This essay is clearly just a first step toward appreciating the value of subaltern speech and knowledge for resistance struggles and resistance studies. Each subaltern speaker and story deserves much more in-depth and detailed investigation than I have offered here. But at the very least, resistance scholars should now collectively agree with fearless novelist Arundhati Roy (2004:1) that: "[T]here's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." Only then can we start the never-ending process of learning to see the invisible, listen to the unheard, and struggle together for a world shaped by dignity rather than subalternity. Imagine the new possibilities and pathways for Resistance Studies!

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