

Lives in Fiction: Auto/Biographies as Theoretical Narratives

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Abstract: Sociological imagination is an open invitation to theorize from the stories we tell about ourselves and others. More than self-expression, the sociological ethos of auto/biographical narration is to extend the reality of a solipsistic and exclusive existence into a common and public experience. In order to achieve this, the narrator must convert biographies into scribed realities. The narrating process, however, has unique epistemic anchorage (memory-based) and stylistic requirement (literary) that engage lived lives in a fictional genre, giving this mode of writing a unique interpretive lens that projects new visions of the social. Consequently for theorizing purposes, auto/biographies are meaning-claims that should no longer be read exclusively in terms of their dramatic and documentary values, but more in terms of their theoretical affordances. This paper explores the implications and utility of fictionalized auto/biographical narratives in expanding the ambit of sociological theorizing.

Keywords: auto/biography, narrative fiction, meaning claims, imaginative truth, social theory, literary.

Biography is...a lasting imaginative truth based on selection of facts.¹

The Social in the Literary: Problems and Prospects

In this paper I neither attempt to produce a theory of biography nor theorize about literary biographies.² Rather, my primary goal is to demonstrate the possibility of visualizing new images of the social—sociological theories in particular—from this genre of literary *oeuvre*. When I speak of literary biographies, I am

referring not only to biographies of writers and biographies with literary qualities (Benton, 2005), but to all sorts of life writing attempts, as it is the paper's overarching assumption that any ventures to write about life—the author's or someone else's—inevitably succumbs to the literary predilection³ (de man, 1979; White, 1984; Erasga, 2010). And contrary to popular discourse, which underestimates the value of

literary materials, the paper takes the position that if *imaginative visions* are the defining ingredients of theorizing (Midgley, 2001; see also Seidman, 1991; Camic & Gross, 1998), then it is the literary essence of auto/biographical materials that makes them an indispensable resource in visualizing the social.

To argue that literary materials are potential resources for sociological theorizing, in itself, is not a treacherous position to take for sociologists. For one, sociology and literature share a common genealogy, if not a conjoined biography (Erasga, 2010). The accounts of Lepenies (1988), Mazlish (1989), and Hewitt (1997) have integrated literature in their versions of the genesis of sociology, albeit each weaves a unique configuration of the nexus of the two disciplines.⁴ Despite the varying narratives, one common theme runs along their accounts: that literature and sociology are moved by a similar desire to dissect society by abstracting and analyzing features of the social experience they want to understand, using the means suitable for their times and places. Hence, both are epistemological attempts to abstract, abduct, and mediate the features of the social reality in different stylistic expressions.

However, the present practice in sociological theorizing suggests otherwise. Sociologists have a disdainful attitude toward literary materials as legitimate sources for, and in the production of, sociological knowledge. So to answer the question “Why are sociologists disdainful of the idea of illuminating the social via the literary?”, we need to understand the root of such disdain, and from there clarify some associated misconceptions. In my judgment, this scornful attitude toward literary materials is tightly focused on the twin issues associated with *authenticity* or the problem of referential confirmation (Neubauer, 2003; Young, 2004) and individualism (Laslett, 1991).

On the one hand, there is a consensus among some sociologists that *literature in general is fiction* and therefore, an unreliable source of

factual information about social reality. Works of fiction, according to this argument, are devoid of any true-to-life information, as they are mere figments of the author’s imagination. Meanwhile, it may also be said that the *personal is believed to be anecdotal*, and hence would not qualify as a representation of the collective spirit and social practices, being unconnected to the larger historical process. Related to this issue is the notion that individual biography is a detached stream of events experienced by a unitary individual (Laslett, 1991).

These issues are poignantly demonstrated by Foster and Kenneford (1973) in their wholesale dismissal of the value of literary pieces in the entire sociological enterprise. They contended that the case of the sociology of literature is not the same as that of industrial sociologists or the sociologist studying religion, as the former cannot contribute to the general theory of sociology in the same way that the latter does. Their line of argument suggests the *substandard* status extended to literature in general and to literary materials in particular. They write:

Fiction stands in a curiously oblique relationship to the ideology of any particular group in any time and place. Fiction, including poetry and drama, apparently has little effect on actions as such. . . . At a level of the individual personality. . . fiction enjoyed by the individual is usually fiction which leads him to do nothing at all. What is true at the level of individual personality system is likely to be even more the case when collective action is considered. (Foster & Kenneford, 1973, p.357)

Foster and Kenneford’s sentiments, moving and quite self-assured, are undoubtedly misplaced as they are not a pretension of the sociology of literature (as a sub-field of sociology) to juxtapose literary reading with behavior change (although I imagine that assuming such influence is not farfetched). If at all, the sociology of literature seeks to discover what types of readership are

produced by certain literary materials, and in what ways and means the readership they generate reflects some unique cultural and national traits (*see* Harrington, 1992; Corse, 1995; Griswold, 1987).

Put simply, the sociology of literature does not gauge the value of literary materials and their consumption via the potential effects they have on individual and collective action. I believe that the utility of narrative fiction—whether in poetry, novels, letters, or otherwise—cannot (and should not) be pitted exclusively against its impact on the social behavior of people reading them, but rather in terms of how its *rendition* of human experience becomes a sort of “vicarious validation of our own lives” (Bell & Yalom, 1990, p. 1)—a palimpsest of human expression, hence a metaphor of human social condition.

As to the first issue that fiction has no reference to reality, let me respond by suggesting that the basis of fiction is actual events. The raw materials for fiction are observed events and lived experiences. Reality is the intrinsic context of storytelling; otherwise there is no story to tell. Fiction is fiction simply because the plausible plots are imagined but the contents are anchored on the teller’s observed and experienced reality. The point to stress here is that the fictional is differentiated from the factual only in terms of *actuality*, not in terms of *possibility*. Take the case of novels. Mazlish (1989) pointed out that:

fiction, in the form of the novel especially, was certainly one of the ways in which nineteenth-century bourgeois Western society tried to know itself. Gaskell, Disraeli, and Eliot are the examples.... These novelists sought to portray and comprehend the profound transformation that England and a few other countries were undergoing as they moved from being predominantly agricultural to industrial nations, or as the early sociologist Sir Henry Maine would have put it, from custom to contract. (p.108)

Webb (1981), in his reading of how Jane Austen portrayed the changing domestic life razed by forces of urbanization, concurs with Mazlish, noting that “the novelist who creates the social world necessarily engages in a kind of politics, for he or she will necessarily *dramatize* relations of power within the family, between the sexes, between classes” (p. 177, emphasis added). In short, fiction tells a *parallel* truth about human relations and their vicissitudes that might otherwise go unrecognized or unnoticed. And *extracting* elements of the actual, fictional rendition of the social allows the author to stipulate relations using analogies and metaphors.

What does this tell us about the fictionalization of facts via stories? For one, stories may be fictitious in rendition, but factual in their generic material. They draw from the core of human experience, so re-arranged as to achieve a stylistic effect unique to the genre it represents. Second, fictionalization is a *narrative technique* that needs to be understood on its own terms. Hence, what probably keeps the story from being used as legitimate material for formal theorizing is stylistic expression, rather than epistemological rigor and content.

The second issue rotates the focus of the first. Here, the spotlight is not only on the fictional character of stories being told, but it also problematizes the subjective experience of the teller. Personal accounts or stories, even if they are true, remain solipsistic and *anecdotal*, and hence do not qualify as legitimate representations of collective life. This line of thinking is untenable in the light of the true nature of anecdotes and how the social collective is a *manifest presence* in the telling of anecdotal experience.

Riggins (2007) concedes that anecdotes are stories and all stories are a combination of fact and fiction. They are partly fictitious in the sense that they are *selections* and *interpretations* of events. Storytellers select from a mass of details they know about incidents and people in order to make a story effective. The fictional nature

of the story then is in this selectivity (i.e. as the literary technique), which in turn guarantees the reception by the intended audience of the experience being narrated. Hence, a story that purports to be used as anecdote needs to satisfy two conditions: the right selection of events or fictionalization and the reception of the story, which I call the *transference effect*.

Despite its sociological nature, Riggins (2007) lamented the mediocre status assigned to anecdotes in formal scientific discourse noting that:

In scientific literature references to anecdotal evidence are usually made in an apologetic manner because anecdotes tend to be opposed to sound data and theory. Anecdotes are found in all types of social occasions and societies; they are windows onto the dynamics of broad social phenomena and should not be dismissed as unreliable and irrelevant. Anecdotes trigger inferences regarding societal forces, social representations, and the anticipation of future conditions. (paper abstract, np)

The present article takes issue with regard to the use of literary materials as source texts for sociologists to generate new theories (Erasga, 2010). Literary materials, it argues, should no longer be judged exclusively in terms of *truth claims* as this stance has epistemological problems (Denzin, 1990; Mouzelis, 1995; Charmaz, 2000; Norton, 2006; Abend, 2008), but in terms of the meanings and insights they convey through imaginative reconstructions of social experience. Imagination via storytelling is a form of *narrative thinking* and not just an aimless gallivanting of the mind, which Gardner (1980, p. xxii) likened “to the works of those peerless poets who[se minds] range freely within the zodiac of their own wits.” I describe imagination as an ontological exercise that creatively weaves life experiences to produce coherent and meaningful grasps of social existence, hence the *storytelling*⁵ (Levine, 1995; LeCompte, 1987). Within the

ambit of sociological theorizing, the purpose of storytelling is to shape life events (of both the teller/writer and the listener/reader), to make sense of the seemingly chaotic and directionless flow of events (Jameson, 1984; Thorne & Lutzke, 1996; Flick, 2002).

Auto/biography: Facts Intersect with Fiction

Production of auto/biographical pieces, however, further complicates the “the-literary-as-legitimate-sociological-resource” debate. In auto/biographical writing, it is no longer the weaving process that is the fulcrum of contestation, but the nature of the album of the *experience* (i.e. memory-based) being recalled. Thus, I define this genre as a form of *literary testimony* whose purpose is to preserve life episodes via memory. Auto/biography is that *creative point* where narrative and memory *intersect* with narrative providing shape and direction, while memory fills in the range of possibilities (of facts) to lend continuity to the life story being told (Benton, 2005). Such *intersection*, according to Holmes (1995), is scandalous because:

All these seem to express the original, underlying tension found in [biography’s] genealogy: Invention marrying Truth. *The fluid, imaginative powers of re-creation pull against the hard body of discoverable fact.* The inventive, shaping instinct of the storyteller struggles with the ideal of a permanent, historical, and objective document. (p. 20) (*emphasis added*)

Hence, the telling of lives does not necessarily reconstitute actual and interpreted details of life experience being summoned. Rather, when a person is writing about his/her life or someone else’s life, what are being assembled are memories (Young, 1988; Luis, 1989; Gready, 1993; al-Nowaihi, 1994; Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Nourkova, Bernstein, & Loftus 2004). More than detailed and chronological accounting of what has happened or a complete litany of

veritable events that have transpired, memory *selectively* brings together significant portions of the experience and with these *montage* (Nora, 1989; Nelson, 1993; Gready, 1993; Passerini, 1983) weaves a meaningful and coherent whole, which for lack of a better term, I call *narrative reduction*—a fictional collage of factual events. Factuality, in this context, is warranted by the nexus of events being summoned, and not by any specific details or content standing on their own.

Interestingly, it is this peculiar nature of memory and the shape-giving impulse of narrative that impute auto/biography with *literary aura*. In this regard, Benton (2005, p. 46) rightly concluded that the generic characteristic of life writing is “its concern to document facts...with narrative impulse.” Thus, auto/biographies are reconstituted factual experiences dressed in fiction. Fictionalization, contrary to popular opinion, does not downgrade the sociological worth of individual lives. Rather it can be a powerful technique that allows the teller to translate, transform, and convey the experience that s/he is exploring into a publicly imaginable experience. As material for theorizing, sociologists must recognize that the literary soul of auto/biography resides *sui generis* in the narrative (i.e. creative) format and *not in the brute factuality* of its contents or in the contents’ chronological sequence (White, 1984). Auto/biography, therefore, is simultaneously factual, fictional, and fictitious.⁶

I should hasten to add that this enigma regarding the literary impulse of auto/biographies is unwittingly invoked to justify the *demotion* of the literary opus in general and life writing in particular as illegitimate resources for sociologists to illuminate the social⁷ (Foster & Kenneford, 1973; Gardner, 1980). By this, imaginative literature (auto/biography included) is treated as only one mode of discourse among others, and denied any privileged status as having a special value, which may provide sociologists with unique insights into the nature of reality and

of human experience, beyond what is derived from history or philosophical discourse. On the contrary, it has been argued by some authors that what literary materials accomplish is no longer limited to entertaining its audience, that is, its dramatic function. Literature in general produces new knowledge that is appropriate to capture the fluid nature of postmodern realities (Lewis, 1957; Roche, 2004).

To address these issues, the present essay revolves around the thesis that in order for life-writing to become legitimate material for sociological theorizing, it must no longer be conceived as an incessant quest to establish *truth* based on a person’s pure historical existence. Memory-based life writing is an attempt to *harvest meanings* out of a person’s life events—from an individual and isolated social experience to a more collective and lasting sense of community⁸ (Gready, 1993; Martin, 2000). This being the case, meaning claims⁹ rather than truth claims are thus the postmodern ethos of sociological theorizing geared toward what Norton (2003) described as “communicative usefulness.” Writing about the problematique of definition making,¹⁰ Norton (1998) declared:

Communicative usefulness, not truth, should determine our definitions – and usefulness implies we must carefully examine our shared purposes toward which communication is directed – and that leads us right back to the subject of social values and commitments. (p. 4)

Extending this insight to the *raison d’être* of sociological theorizing would mean that theory production as an epistemological agenda in the social sciences (notably in sociology) should cease to be a foundationalist discourse (Seidman, 1991), but more an engagement geared toward *diagnosing* the synergy of the personal/private and the collective/public and from there construct common values and commitments (Lemert, 1995). Gauged within the Durkheimian canon, it

may be translated as a form of *moral engagement* that defines all forms of social collectivities, consistent with Seidman's (1991, p. 132) depiction of social theory as "moral tales with practical significance" (see also Mouzelis, 1995).

Auto/biography as a mode and genre of writing allows sociologists to do so. As versions of life stories, auto/biographies are *textual extensions* of our social selves and not just an individual quest for personal meaning. They are both weaved and heard (hence narrativized) for the purpose of building connections toward a common social consciousness and collective identity (Luis, 1989; Czarniawska, 2004; Erasga, 2010). Life stories, according to Linde (1993, p. 4) are social units that are "*exchanged* between people, rather than being treasured in solitude in the caverns of the brain." Such exchange is facilitated by narrative because people, in order to understand their own lives, put their stories in narrative form—and they do the same when they try to understand the lives of others (Czarniawska, 2004).¹¹ The narrative mode of life stories—in this case, its literary predilection—is that singular feature of auto/biographies that sociologists can use as a lens to take a unique glance into the nature of social reality and of human experience. These unique visions should be used more *as tools* to "clarify an event or social configuration" [and]... eventually "to shape its outcome..." (Seidman, 1991, p. 132) than *as truth* standards to be claimed (Mouzelis, 1995; Gready, 1993).

Documenting Sociological Imagination(s) as Auto/biographies

It was C. Wright Mills who first realized the utility of life writing as an accessible entry point—a precursor so to speak—to what he believed to be a genuine sociological awareness. Although he was one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century, Mills was an outsider to the sociological circle of his time. Marginalized, he was a powerful scholar with a brilliant sociological imagination, a phrase

he coined and is also reflective of the kind of life he lived, as defined by a particular context that made him able to conceive such a powerful notion (Horowitz, 1983).

C.W. Mills argued that people in the present time experience their lives as traps that they feel they cannot overcome. He then offered his solution: *ways of seeing* the world around them that help them make wiser, saner, and more effective choices in their lives, as individuals and through their governments. Sociological imagination, said Mills, insists on understanding people in terms of the *intersection* of their own lives (i.e. their biographies) and their larger social and historical contexts (i.e. within history). These *junctions*, so to speak, allow the person to define or distinguish his/her personal troubles from public issues. Mills suggested that this is only possible "if people think of themselves away from the familiar routines of their daily lives in order to look at them anew" (Giddens, 2006, p. 25). Sociological imagination is an attempt to reconstruct life episodes within the matrix of historical events. In short, it means taking a second look at their individual biographies and considering them within a much larger and collective form of biographies (history). This frame of mind empowers individuals to shape their lives and in the process become agents of change themselves.

Ingenuous as this may sound, Mills nevertheless gave incomplete methodological prescriptions as to how individuals can achieve such a powerful imagination. More seriously, he failed to suggest any concrete measures on how people can express and capture—in other words, document—the appropriated details of their lived lives, and draw them as intersections of their personal journeys along historical paths. Denzin (1990) bewailed the futility of using sociological imagination without any means of documenting its processes and contents. Arguing within the context of textuality, he inquired: "society and its members, as they are known, exist primarily in the texts we write

about them...can our texts capture biography, lived history and lived experience?" (p. 2). His answer is rather pessimistic. I presume Denzin may have realized that not too many people are capable of the task, and probably half of those who are capable of doing it do not even write about these abducted moments of their lives or tell their stories. The problem is further complicated by the fact that even if these stories are textually shaped and produced, they seem to attract the exclusive attention of literary aficionados (poets, critic, and romantic lay), but never warrant the serious interest of sociologists beyond the simplistic invocation of sociological principles in analyzing literary materials such as novels, short stories, poetry, and movies.¹²

The burden, therefore, falls on those who write *on behalf* of these people. This tall order for social scientists (notably sociologists) presupposes sensitivity to this burgeoning mode of self-expression and the epistemological nuances that go with it. Hence, Denzin (1990, p. 2) offered a double-edged challenge to colleagues who are willing to address the situation: First, he dared them to learn to "attend to a new set of voices as they develop new styles of writing,¹³ reading and listening." Second, he stressed that this type of writing must be "ethically responsive and responsible" to both its readers and to the people being written about."

Storytelling: Literary Dialog between Text and Reader

Literary narratives are imaginative attempts to tell a story. Imaginative as they are, stories are not necessarily detached expressions of what is seen or devoid of any subjective interpretation. They are *embodied experiences* processed as life is encountered. Hence, every life-telling narrative composed has remnants of tiny biographies in it. But far from being just pockets of extraordinary events and epiphanies, these stories are accounts of the normal and everyday viewed as episodes, yet connected and ongoing.

Why are stories created in the first place? Basing the answer on the above discussion, stories are ontological contraptions that assign order where there seems to be chaos and confusion. Jameson (1984, p. xx) had aptly called this phenomenon the "fragmentation of experience." Levine (1995, p. 7) interpreted it to mean that "coherence of life is lost as it is reduced to bits of sensation torn from the flow of experience, from contexts of encompassing meaning that unfolds in frames of long memory." Jameson added:

In the postmodern force field, the subject has lost its capacity to...organise its past and its future into coherent experience [so] it becomes difficult...to see how cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but heaps of fragments. (1984, p. 71)

So when one sits down, recalls these fragments of experience, and weaves them into coherent and meaningful plots, then a story—a *literary opus*—emerges. The plot serves as an interpretive template that guides the direction of the storyline and helps the storyteller navigate the social world within which his/her stories unfold. It is literary in the sense that it passes the "writing" modality, uses metaphorical imagination in making connections, and subscribes to a stylistic format distinctive to the literary genre.

In this sense, storytelling is a form of "narrative thinking" (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986, p. 26). It requires an audience, without which the entire projective power loses its social appeal. In this type of thinking, the teller is creating a fit between a situation and the story schema: making story out of experience and projecting the story form onto some experience or event (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986). In order to highlight this point, Flick (1999) clarified:

This reconstruction of experiences as narratives involves two kinds of processes of negotiation. Internal/cognitive negotiation between experience and the story schema

includes the use of prototypical narratives given in a culture. External negotiation with (potential) listeners means that they are convinced by the story of the event or reject or doubt it in its major parts. The results of such processes are contextualized and socially shared forms of knowledge. (p. 9)

It should be emphasized that it is in their *telling* that stories become poignant materials of and vehicles for sociological reflections. The telling, as pointed out by Flick (2002), involves (or demands) an audience who will make sense of the story by interrogating its very medium of expression—the text. It is in the telling that the invitation to imagine the experience the author is exploring is being extended; it is in the *consumption* (i.e. reading) of these stories that the invitation is accepted.

Every reading is an act of engagement with an author. However, it is only when the text is *transgressed* that genuine reading is achieved. When a reader violates a text, s/he challenges the experience being told by the author and in the process, invokes every personal experience relevant in the case. Put simply, every textual encounter is a dialog between the reader and the author (Erasga, 2007; Gadamer, 1975), more so when the mediating text is literary.

As emphasized earlier, storytelling only begins when the invitation is taken by a potential reader; and it is through storytelling—as *narrative mimesis*—that the collective nature of the social via stories is invoked and partaken. As it is, the telling facilitates a dynamic engagement between the author and the reader mediated by the text¹⁴ (Flick, 2002; Barthes, 1974). Without such engagement, the story remains a *potential* narrative devoid of any social significance. This phenomenon is exceptionally true with literary texts. Thus, it can be concluded that it is the literary quintessence of storytelling that facilitates the active engagement of text and readers. Such engagement results in the consumption of personal/biographical stories as

collectively shared experience. This being the case, the following key questions are explored: (i) how can life stories become literary testimonies?; (ii) what is it in the weaving process that clothes biographical texts with literary essence?; and (iii) what legitimizes the choice of experiences to be recalled?

When Memory Murmurs:

Auto/biography as Imaginative Truth

Gready (1993) conceded that auto/biography is a notoriously slippery genre because it defies any serious attempts at categorization. Recent articles refer to this enigmatic status of auto/biography as “not quite history” and “not quite fiction” (Sewell, 1992; Benton, 2005; Birch, 2003). I agree with Gready (1993, p. 490) when he noted that this “not-quiteness” is not altogether futile as “it represents the point of entry to the uniqueness of its insight.” Its uniqueness, I deduce, stems from its narrative form, which in turn gives flavor to the kind of experiences to be summoned. Thus, its narrativity and album contents impute auto/biography with a whole new potentiality: as story with *imaginative truth*. Such a feature reflects the initial debates spurred by auto/biography when it became a fashionable way to learn of the lives of people (Adams, 1996; Holmes, 1995). Macy (1928) observed that this development has moved in two directions:

First, the modern biographer regards himself as an artist, a story-teller, who must shape his material effectively, like a poet or novelist, make the tale of his hero entertaining, and prove in the very act of writing about him that he is worth writing about and reading about. Second, the modern biographer must be a thorough and honest student of documents, competent to handle evidence with the skill of a lawyer, to scrutinize the records and make them yield up the facts. He may interpret, guess, surmise, speculate, with the fullest play of fancy; he will work all the better if his imagination has free play, if his intuitions are

swift, his understanding flexible and adroit. But at every step he is obliged to show us what the evidence is and on what his conclusions, his personal construction, are founded. We no longer tolerate ignorance of fact, guess-work passing for truth, the pleasant legend mixed up with documentary evidence.(pp. 355-356)

Macy's statement foreshadowed the trend that characterized the philosophical and methodological debates that followed regarding the enigmatic character of what he boasted was the hallmark of legitimate biographical writing—*documentary evidence*. This mysterious character of documentary evidence shaped the way that historical and literary critics fashioned their respective claims of auto/biography as their own. The historical group treated it as “documentary realism” (Gready, 1993, p. 490), while the literary camp described it as “narrative of fact” (Birch, 2003). What is interesting, however, in both attempts was the silent or perhaps *the unrecognized practice of fictionalization*. The documentary genre, for example, is characterized by and suffused with an amalgam of resource materials carefully selected and *edited* to suit the theme pursued by the documentor; narrative report, on the otherend, *re-creates* not only factual events but goes beyond any conceivable possibilities of what the actual materials warrant (Adams, 1996). Either way, the practice of *literary embellishments* to give face to or represent truth, however defined, is evident. Steinmetz (1992), writing about the role of narratives in class formation, rightly concluded that:

Past research has found that the lives of individuals and the histories of social collectivities are amenable to a multiplicity of narrativizations. Real “experiences” or “events,” in other words, are narratively promiscuous. This means that the comparative analysis of social narrative is more than a redundant supplement to the comparative study of objective life conditions. Interpretation... is concerned less with the historical accuracy of

stories than with plot structures and the criteria by which events are selected for a narrative, arranged, and explained.(p. 491)

At present, it is no longer the practice of embellishing the truth that is the core of the debate. Rather, the discursive attention has shifted to the very notion of truth itself. The epistemological momentum provided by the postmodern critique against conventional theoretical articulations debunks the whole idea of an external truth being discoverable (i.e. it can be documented), given the right instruments to do so. If we define truth as a set of meaningful experience, then truth must be personal, situational, and contextual. Accordingly, our definition of theory must also be recalibrated. Clues as to how we can proceed with such recalibration have been alluded to elsewhere in this paper. The measure of a good theory is no longer reckoned exclusively in terms of its explanatory power (i.e. its analytic power) but more in terms of how meaningfully it can translate social interactions into coherent streams of collective experience (i.e. its narrative power).¹⁵ Thus, theories become a sort of a manual that guides interpretation (i.e. the putting together) of social phenomena rather than as a gadget to document and capture data. According to Abend (2008):

...‘theory’ and ‘data’ are not ontological qualities, which are part of the fabric of the world and hence one can pin down and refer to once and for all. Rather, this is just a convenient analytic distinction that facilitates communication. There is nothing for theory to really be. ‘Theory’ is a relative term, which can be more or less analytically useful, which can cause more or less confusions, which can result in better or worse communication....(p. 190)

Extending this nuanced notion of theory and what constitute data to advance the case of producing sociological theories from auto/biographies requires answering the following

provocative questions: (i) what kind of data is used in writing auto/biographies? (ii) how is such data manufactured?, and (iii) why is such data organized in narrative form?

Auto/biography weaves experiences of individuals in an orderly fashion. The qualifier “orderly” does not refer to the traditional practice of chronological sequencing of events (White, 1984). Order here pertains to the plot and series of themes that the author wishes to pursue in telling his/her story (i.e. interpretive program). The data units being used are bits and pieces of memory. Unlike the traditional notion of data—of factual events based on documents—memory produces “facts” based on *relationships of events* accomplished via certain narrative arrangements. *Facts*, therefore, as used in auto/biographical jargon are strings of events organized in such a way as to allow the teller to pursue certain interpretive program(s). In other words, “memory re-assembles, resurrects, recycles, and makes the past reappear and live again in the present” (Spiegel, 2002, p. 149) and from there *produces facts*, which auto/biographers weave into coherent life stories. Thus “...memory...makes it possible to essentialize and hypothesize the reality which it narrates” (Spiegel, 2002, p. 150). When something acquires an essence, then its facticity is established. This is perhaps a poignant translation of Holmes’ (1995) statement describing biography as an art of *inventing truth*.

This mode of producing facts is dictated by the purpose of life-writing and quite attuned with the idea of theories as communicative tools. Naive as it may appear, communication is the primary ethos of theory, especially if what is desired to be conveyed are meanings and significations. In this day and age of technological volatility that produces what postmodern thinkers describe as fluid realities, the end goal of individuals is no longer just to freeze moments, but to seize them and from these *abducted moments* produce a unique portfolio of autobiographical memories (Young & Saver, 2001). Such an

interpretive regimen transforms the individuals into conscious memory collectors, if only to make sense of what is happening around them and to be able to connect with significant social others (Martin, 2000). In order to do so, memory defies chronology and strict literalism.

Auto/biographies can be said to have been produced with the same reason poetry is produced by poets—to arrive at greater self-knowledge. As literary pieces, poems are tools to convey and share experience. Reading a poetic piece allows the reader to recall a string of events, however distant in space and time from that of the writer, and by doing so become one with the poet in clarifying the same sets of experience (Jones, 1932). The conveyance is only made possible by memory, which must not be restricted by chronology if it is to be a meaningful agenda at all.

Not all poets in all their poems, but at least many poets in many of their poems, are aiming to relate and clarify their experience, to arrive at greater self-knowledge. The poet’s problem of communication is this: he wishes to communicate something to himself; if he succeeds in doing so, he will also communicate something—though not precisely the same something—to the reader. He is unlikely to nowadays to think of poetry as an imitation of nature, of human action and virtues; he sees it rather as re-ordering of experience, or as a process by which the symbolic value of his memories is discovered. (Lewis, 1957, pp. 17-18)

The collective value of auto/biography as collected memory is three-fold: (i) to commune, (ii) to celebrate, and (iii) to reify. Stories made out of a person’s life aim to share and from there create a common experience. The diversity of experience allows members of a social collectivity to look for their commonality because it is only by doing so that they become one. The commonness of experience allows a community

to celebrate. According to Spiegel (2002, p. 154), memory casts the past into something useful for the present dilemma. Using the Jewish experience as a case in point, he argued that “the tendency to immerse in the past liturgical time and memory represents both the first and, to some extent, the persistent response on the part of Jew to Holocaust”—that is, the Jew’s response to the Holocaust was significantly shaped by the very memory collected in the Jewish Scripture. Expounding on the significance of memory to explain the nexus of liturgical time and historical time, Spiegel (2002) wrote:

Recent or contemporary experiences acquire meaning only insofar as they can be subsumed within Biblical categories of events and their interpretation bequeathed to the community through the medium of Scripture, that is to say, only insofar as they can be transfigured, ritually and liturgically, into repetitions and reenactments of ancient happening. In such liturgical commemoration, the past exists only by means of recitation; the fundamental goal of such recitation is to make it live again in the present, to fuse past and present, chanter and hearer, into a single collective entity. (p. 149)

The celebratory function of auto/biography expands the reality of events from mere auto/biographical memory to a collective memory—a form of commemoration (Hamad 1998; Jones, 1932). Vance’s (1979) definition of commemoration is instructive at this point. He defined commemoration as “...any gesture, ritualized or not, whose end is to recover, in the name of the collectivity, some being or event either anterior in time or outside of time in order to fecundate, animate, or make meaningful a moment in the present” (Vance, 1979, pp. 374-375).

Commemoration either makes significant events of a person’s life become an index, a sort of “post it” that flags an important portion of a group’s collective achievement or reckons a person’s life in terms of such momentous events.

Political auto/biographies and biographies of national figures represent the former case, while auto/biographies like that of Esteban Montejo (Luis, 1989) illustrate the latter. Montejo’s narration of his story from being a runaway slave before the Cuban revolution to a free person upon the establishment of the Cuban republic has *thematic coincidences* with the slavery, abolition and War of Independence periods of Cuban history. This biography of a 105-year old runaway slave, therefore, cannot be conceived as interviews with historical development, but a discourse that breaks away from history and is subject to the strategies of memory (Luis, 1989; see also Brah, 1999; Bringhurst, 1990; Bixler, 2002). Thus, through memory, the individual and the collective experience become one and the private and collective spheres are both clarified and unified.

Locating the Social in the Literary: Three Theoretical Pathways

This paper neither attempts to produce theories nor theorizes about literary biographies. Rather, its primary goal is to facilitate a discussion demonstrating the plausibility of producing sociological theories from auto/biography. This sounds contentious, given the universal disdain for the value of literary materials in advancing sociological theorizing as a knowledge production agenda of the discipline (Erasga, 2010). This disdain is anchored on the scientific “literalism of documentation” embodied by the two-pronged issue of factuality and chronology, which the literary genre bluntly transgresses. However, if sociological theories are to be conceived as interpretive tools rather than truth principles and auto/biographies envisaged as legitimate sociological imaginations rather than armchair stories, then the criteria of strict literalism must be qualified, if not dismissed altogether. This stance must be seen as a welcome development in the sociological agenda because it may be the only way to circumvent what Seidman (1991)

and Baudrillard (1995) have forecasted as the impending “death of the sociological.”

Given the discussions so far, there appear three theoretical directions in which the literary can create whole new avenues of configuring the social. These avenues lead to the path where sociologists learn to attend to a new set of voices as they develop new styles of writing, reading, and listening, while consistently being ethically responsive and responsible to both their readers and to the people being written about (Denzin, 1990). Within the context of research, they are theoretical requirements necessary for exploring and understanding the postmodern condition, which Charmaz (2000) diagnosed as being composed of several perspectives that significantly:

(1) [interrogate] the relationship between the viewer and the viewed; (2) focus on texts, language, and literary forms of presentation; (3) question traditional social scientific conventions concerning representation of research participants; and (4) emphasize the commodification of culture. The currency of these perspectives has been bolstered by their appeal to new scholars.(p. 356)

Charmaz’ characterization of the postmodern outlook on social research provided a suitable background to what I believe are theoretical trails provided for sociologists by the literary tradition via life writing. Consequently, these theoretical pathways interrogate our very notion of what constitute legitimate knowledge, which according to its conventional rendition, is based on the visible, transparent and obvious and not on what is felt, mediated and expressed (see Spiegel, 2002). As materials for sociological theorizing narratives in the form of life-writing, stories are, therefore, simultaneously a mode of communication and a mode of knowing (Lewis, 1957; Czarniawska, 2004), and as such, do not only edify as traditionally expected of literary texts, but to a special extent, *create new knowledge*.

They do so in three ways. First and foremost, the literary way of knowledge allows sociologists to see dimensions of social reality that are hidden from the purview of conventional social research either by *extending social possibilities* or *problematizing the taken-for-granted*. Second, auto/biography as literary rendition of lived lives reinforces the sociological character of memory as a form of social interpretation and knowledge production and not just ideal types. And lastly, the literary aura of auto/biography suggests a good measure of a sound sociological theory—the ability to *evoke*.

- *The literary projects what is possible and exposes the hidden dimensions of everyday social reality.*

One common concern about the literary rendition of life is its fantastical and most often exaggerated depiction of the intricacies of human existence and social interaction. Plots and themes are exploited by literary writers to achieve such levels of complexities, and they may employ them in ways beyond the usual expectations. Human characters can be evil, good, or both at the same time, and situations can be equally enigmatic, predictable, and yet twisted to lead to a different ending. Viewed within the lens of the sociological, these complexities and unpredictability—elements of exaggeration—can serve useful and practical purposes similar to what Hans Jonas (1984) called the “literature of distant effects.” What cannot be seen at the moment can only be postulated, and literary imagination may be the only vehicle to prefigure the possible—also known as *prediction* in scientific jargon. On this note, Sanchez (1994) commented:

Perhaps it is in their hearts that writers create fiction, drawing upon everything in their universe of living and learning to *create truth on paper*. Writers’ pens weave events, nuances, and even smiles from life into the

pages of fiction. Likewise, *imagination can enlarge truth with details, adding the human conversations and thoughts that could have been.*(p. 40) (*emphasis added*)

On the other hand, fantastic and even ugly renditions of lived lives render visible what tends to be neglected in our everyday relationship to reality and our everyday use of categories. Auto/biography as re-assembled memory arouses an awareness of what might be superficially overlooked; it draws our attention to the marginal, the less readily apparent, the forgotten. In short, fictionalization of life events tells a *parallel* truth about human relations and their vicissitudes that might otherwise go unnoticed. And by *extracting* elements of the actual, fictional rendition of life experiences allows the author to stipulate relations using analogies and metaphors to project them into some distant futures (Erasga, 2010). Thus, more than *predictive power*, fictional rendition of life events imputes *projective power* to theories produced thereon.¹⁶

- *The literary depicts life more than as ideal-types but as interpreted lived experience.*

Since social reality is so diverse and consists of multiple and layered phenomena, we need a language to describe it. According to Weber, ideal types are heuristic lens to understand reality and serve as a vocabulary to describe it. In terms of auto/biography, we may recognize something similar to ideal types in evil figures such as Shakespeare's Edmund or Iago, or we may reflect in this way on figures that are much more difficult to evaluate, such as Cervantes's Don Quixote or Moliere's Alcestre. The literary style allows us to uncover ideal-typical norms in the Weberian sense; "these acts of unveiling give us great insight into the logic of human behavior and the consequences of given positions. Thus the effort to render the essential structures and

forms of reality more visible is common" (Roche, 2004, p. 19).

When we read auto/biographical literature, we encounter stories of virtues such as prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, tales of faith, hope, and charity as well as narrative themes that depict pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Lives of individuals are suffused with encounters—most of which engage moral questions. Reading these literary lives as *virtual encounters* enables us to gain a subtler sense of virtue and vice. "The reader encounters imaginative and compelling situations that s/he *has yet to experience*, and these literary encounters are capable of giving him/her a more differential grasp of life as well as a wider and more nuanced moral compass" (Roche, 2004, p.21).

As life stories of real historical personalities, auto/biography gives face and flesh to lessons accomplished by fictional characters in novels, plays, and short stories. Auto/biographies, therefore, vivify the credence to the lessons learned by these famous literary characters. As Roche (2004, p. 24) suggested, auto/biographical work "interests us not because it was written by person X or Y but because person X or Y was able to write something of general interest that provides vision, a critique, an epiphany, a mood, something of value to a broader consciousness that define our social existence."

More than life's lessons learned, they are social narratives—that is, they are interpretive insights that may justify certain forms of ideologies. Formation of class identities is one typical example (Sewell, 1992). Steinmetz (1992) argued that narrative has what Janet Hart (1991) called a "dual role": it is not only a means of representing life, used self-consciously by historians, novelists, and storytellers, but a fundamental cultural constituent of the lives represented. Within the context of class formation, this means that more successful cases of working class formation involve

the elaboration of coherent narratives about individual and collective history, stories that are coordinated with one another and that are organized around the category of social class.

Interpretation in this sense lies not only on narrative coherence but in the very selection of events—that is, “events are selected for inclusion due to their relevance to social class, or they are excluded or deemphasized because of their irrelevance to class, and events are interpreted, emplotted, and evaluated in a way that emphasizes class rather than other possible constructs” (Steinmetz, 1992, p.489).

- *The literary provides a good measure of a sound sociological theory: evocation.*

Whereas insight into overarching and specific ethical issues follows from auto/biography’s moment of truth, the primary social consequence of auto/biography’s moments of sensuousness is its *power to motivate*. Auto/biography addresses the imaginative, emotional, and subliminal parts of the self that motivate the soul more than argument does. Whereas reason sometimes falls short of motivating persons, auto/biography often succeeds—because of its examples and models, its sensuous patterns, and its imagery as well as its resulting appeal to emotions. Auto/biography often gives us intensity often lacking in merely *inferential experience*. A person’s life told in invented figures “is more of a bridge than philosophy, particularly insofar as it conveys concrete truths that grip the imagination, particular expressions and images that say more and awaken more sympathy than any argument or citation of statistics” (Roche, 2004, p.26).

If explanations of human social experience are based on this power of auto/biographies to motivate, then the resulting theories must be imbued with a parallel attribute—the *power to evoke*. To evoke does not only mean to bring to mind, as if it is something available upon effortless recall. If we are to argue that theories

are tools to communicate and to create new knowledge, we have to define evocation as the poets describe it: *mimesis*—an imitation that performs two functions: to abstract and to criticize. To abstract means that when people read theories they will have a feeling—a sense of being invited to remember a similar experience, mood, or situation. To criticize is fundamentally the same as to abstract, the only difference being that instead of sympathizing with the evocative invitation of the theory, the reader takes on the invitation by *interrogating* it. Interrogating a theory requires the challenger to refute. Refutation, according to the classic Popperian tradition, elevates the discussion to a different epistemological plane. Either way, the end results are new knowledge in the form of reinforced experience via modified understanding and consciousness.

CONCLUSIONS

The scientific orientation of theory production in sociology makes it difficult to appreciate other sources of knowledge about the social world and our place in it. This is rather pitiful because knowledge production has been made limited by a narrow set of standards that are not attuned to the changing nature of the social world, given the advances in technology and how these advances changes the way people organise their lives. The “death of the sociological”, as poignantly proclaimed by the ideas of postmodern/poststructuralist thinkers such as Baudrillard, Foucault, Bauman, and Barthes to name just a few, is fast becoming a reality. The only way to avoid it is through the imaginative reconstruction of the social via the lives of flesh and blood people.

Auto/biographies as the “literature of distant effects” (Jonas, 1984) told within the context of individual lives can equip sociologists with an appropriate frame of mind *to explore distant sociological possibilities right here, right now*.

The expedition into the possible and plausible nature of the social is, first and foremost, carried out because of the inherent limitations of the predictive power of even the firmest and most rigorous scientific theories. It is also paramount in order to understand the future consequences of our actions (i.e. *theoretical prefiguration*) and to shape it and to emphasize the need for responsibility (i.e. *theoretical transformation*).

NOTES

¹From Lyndall Gordon's description of Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte* (Benton, 2005, p. 46).

²No specific auto/biography was discussed in detail. General principles generated from auto/biographical accounts were collected and used as *theoretical assumptions* to bolster the paper's main contention supporting the utility of auto/biographical literature in advancing sociological theorizing.

³Alluding to this phenomenon Benton (2005, p. 49) argued that life writing is no more than narrative imposing a shape on real life. Thus, the adjective "literary" is redundant, making "literary biography" a misnomer.

⁴See Erasga (2010) for detailed descriptions of these various accounts of the conjoined origin of sociology and literature.

⁵Narrative is derived from the Indo-European root "*gna*," to tell and to know. Hence, storytelling as life narrative has a dialectical quality of both telling and knowing and the corresponding power to critique and emancipate (Martin, 2000).

⁶Admittedly, the distinction is rather contrived since domains of literary materials may range from being "fictional to factual" (Bell & Yalom, 1990). However, the two extremes are both problematic since there is neither pure fiction nor pure fact as far as life writing is concerned, and because "the interaction between fictional

and factual levels" in auto/biographical texts "occurs frequently" (Genette, 1991 in LeCompte, 1987, p.45).

⁷LeCompte (1987, p. 46) even takes the position that ethnographic works are less trustworthy because they are suffused with bias, and that one of the possible sources of ethnographic bias is the "literary tradition" of ethnography.

⁸Along this line of thought, Denzin (1990) reiterated that "the truthfulness of these texts is immaterial; their reliability, validity, and generalizability represent meanings brought to them by observers who believe in an objective world that can be accurately recorded" (p. 2).

⁹Reviewing Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990)—a novel based on the author's experience as a foot soldier during the Vietnam War—Sarmiento (2002, p. A4) arrived at the same conclusion: "If the writing of literature is the business of remembrance, the criterion of literary worth must be accuracy of recollection. *But accuracy of a recalled experience is not about the precision of the material dimension, but of insight*" (emphasis added).

¹⁰The context of Norton's paper is the coinage of the term "biological diversity" (biodiversity). He attempted to explain that biodiversity as a phenomenon became real because of the definitions created by conservation biologists in their attempt to push a political agenda that would safeguard endangered flora and fauna. He cautions, however, that definitions must not be construed as truth claims. Rather, they function more as meaning claims— a tool that allows conservation biologists to understand each other and work together toward a common goal.

¹¹To narrate, therefore, is to establish connections. Connections, to be useful, must not be one-way, but multifarious in order to reach as many audiences as possible.

¹²See for example Hegtvedt, 1991; Jones, 1975; DeVault, 1990, Griswold, 1981;

Demerath, 1981; Ruff, 1974; Lena and London, 1979. These articles are examples of the trend of utilizing sociological perspective/principles in understanding literary works and *not* literary works illuminating the sociologist's quest to explore the social.

¹³To this end, Abbot (2007, p. 67) proposed a form of lyrical sociology. This particular mode of sociological writing "is characterized by an engaged, nonironic stance toward its object of analysis, by specific location of both its subject and its object in social space, and by a momentaneous conception of social time. Lyrical sociology typically uses strong figuration and personification, and aims to communicate its author's emotional stance toward his or her object of study, rather than to explain that object."

¹⁴This position regarding the *sociology of telling* is consistent with the notion of *reflexive textuality*, where both readers and authors enter into an asymmetrical dialog in which the readers become the overriding presence, since the stories "being read" will only make sense if and when juxtaposed with the personal experiences of the readers themselves (Erasga, 2007).

¹⁵A typical procedure in scientific research, analysis breaks down experiences into bits and pieces to understand the whole; narrative, on the other hand, gleans the pieces and glues them together. The putting together is not fixed, but temporary and situation-dictated based on the teller's interpretive program. This type of narrative reduction explains why Shakespeare, for example, has several hundreds of biographies—which are different interpretive programs of the different authors.

¹⁶Within the context of scientific method, the *predictive* power of a theory is achieved through repetitive experimentations and trial and error—in short, through replication and analysis. *Projective* power, on the other hand, is achieved through the arrangement of significant episodes courtesy of narrative.

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