

The Narratable Self: Adriana Cavarero with Sojourner Truth

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This essay engages the work of Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero and her concept of the narratable self. Her relational humanism, rooted in our exposure to others, offers an ontology of uniqueness whose critique of abstraction, masculinism, and identity politics still resonates today where the meaning of a unique “you” is negotiated in embodied exchanges that may offer care or wounds. Cavarero develops an altruistic ethics that cultivates this humanism. I argue that her work should be extended to better capture the political purchase of the narratable self that interacts dynamically and often ambiguously with the “we” of collective politics. Putting her work into conversation with the nineteenth-century abolitionist and women’s rights advocate Sojourner Truth, I suggest that Cavarero’s work illuminates Truth as a philosopher of the narratable self. Moreover, Truth’s work extends Cavarero’s concerns with exposure that may do violence or offer care by making explicit the challenges of narration in the context of inequality, especially in terms of race and class. Exposure as an ontological and phenomenological condition then needs to take account of a broader publicity of textual, individual, and collective exposure to others to develop the critical, ethical, and political purchase it offers.

Adriana Cavarero contends that our sense of self depends on narratives given to us by others. Cavarero argues for a relational view of the self across her corpus, but it is given fullest expression in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (Cavarero 1997/2000). Cavarero’s philosophy takes our exposure to others as central to an ontology, ethics, and politics that reframes the dominant humanist tradition. This tradition denies dependency and enshrines the rational, usually masculine, individualized self. Like other critics of Enlightenment humanism with its civilizational and masculinist view of willful, independent selves, Cavarero deploys strategies of rethinking the human by calling attention to our dependency on others. Like Judith Butler, Cavarero is invested in thinking through our shared vulnerability to others, to norms, and to violence. In this regard both have been identified with a “new humanism” based

on an ontology of vulnerability rooted in the human body (Murphy 2011). Cavarero's critique of the Western individualist tradition is also a project of reconstruction to solidify the unique, concrete, and sexed self in relation to others.¹ The desire for a narratable self is the desire to be given what Cavarero calls the outline of a unique life, one that is not interchangeable with others'. The narratable self emerges in the relationality of giving, listening, and receiving your story from another, which has advantages in diverse fields such as the practice of narrative medicine (Charon 2008), human-rights education (Adami 2017), and as inspiration for the fictional female friendship in the popular Neapolitan novels of Elena Ferrante.²

In *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero argues that our selves, our autobiographies are given to us by others. This autobiographical-biographical practice is what Cavarero finds in women's consciousness-raising activities in the 1970s; she also draws on other tales of "self" disclosure that reveal the narratable self. Cavarero's method is to offer instances of relationality, staging the ethical and political possibility of humanization between a particular "you" and a narrator. In this regard Cavarero offers what she calls an altruistic ethics in *Relating Narratives* that she develops further in *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Cavarero 2016). This is an ethics that is based on our dependency on and exposure to others for our sense of self as unique beings. Such an ethics undergirds a politics that would not dispossess a person of the human quality of uniqueness, whether in exceptional (for example, the Holocaust) or ordinary, everyday circumstances. For this reason, Cavarero is critical of both state-centered nationalisms as well as rigid identity politics that deny the unique self a story that is not interchangeable with others'. She writes, "your story is never my story" no matter how similar our life stories are (Cavarero 1997/2000, 92).

Cavarero's innovative and idiosyncratic reading of moments that recognize uniqueness operates as a counterpart to the abuses that destroy the unique self, from Auschwitz to terrorism to Abu Ghraib (see Cavarero 2007/2009) to sexual and racial violence to conscious or unconscious bias incidents. Hannah Arendt referred to this as when "what" you are hinders "who" you are. Likewise, a well-known concern in feminist and identity politics is that "we" invocations can stifle complexity and the specificity of each "you." Cavarero's method of exemplarity (as well as what she calls stealing back from the Western tradition its hidden, typically female, figures) has the advantage of training us to see ways of living in more ethical and free terms than we may otherwise experience. However, this approach can obscure the broader "we" moments of collective politics, as well as the social and political institutions that shape how a "you" is addressed. That is, despite concerns that "you" can be reduced by a "we," isn't the very ability to say "you" also dependent on different moments of saying "we"?

Even sympathetic critics worry about the relative lack of attention to collective experiences of politics, power, and structures of inequality when it comes to Cavarero's work. Judith Butler wonders how norms that structure our social and political lives are to be taken into account, whether of gender or class or other categories that shape who can be seen as equally unique. When the mode of address is a "you" for whom the story of oneself is never fully one's own, Butler wonders how different

patterns of dispossession and recognition can occur in such accountings of the self (Butler 2005). Bonnie Honig remarks that Arendt and Cavarero both assume that a story's protagonist must be able to recognize the story told about him or her. She says, "But it does matter, surely, who tells another's story, and how and whether the teller in his or her own way exhibits some reflexivity about the politics of story-telling, the historicity of the act, and the teller's responsibility as purveyor of someone else's indigenous story" (Honig 2015, 633, note 1).³ In her positive review of *Relating Narratives*, Kim Curtis also comments on the "persistent indelicacy" in Cavarero's work that "lobs off" key features of the political condition, such as "who" we are being marked by "what" we appear to be, an entanglement Cavarero does not pursue (Curtis 2002, 854).

This essay engages Cavarero's concept of the narratable self in both ethical and political terms. I argue that her work can be extended to better capture the political purchase of the narratable self that interacts dynamically, although often ambiguously, with the "we" of collective politics that resonates in intimate, ordinary encounters. Putting her work into conversation with the nineteenth-century abolitionist and women's rights advocate Sojourner Truth, I suggest that Cavarero's work illuminates Truth as a philosopher of the narratable self, but that Truth's work pushes Cavarero's concerns with vulnerability or exposure that may either do violence or offer care by making explicit the challenges of narration in political contexts of inequality, especially in terms of race, gender, and class. Exposure as an ontological and phenomenological condition then should take account of a broader publicity of textual, individual, and collective exposure to others to develop the critical, ethical, and political purchase it promises.

In the first section of the essay, I explore the concept of the narratable self in Cavarero's work, drawing out the ethical and political purchase it offers in *Relating Narratives* and in other texts. In the second section, I develop the idea that Truth offers a philosophy of the narratable self that reveals dependency on others in an especially vivid way given that her narrative consists of the words of others for the telling of her life story. In doing so I illustrate the importance of extending the idea of the narratable self to one that is more fully agonistic, complex, and able to account for relations of power and privilege. Ultimately, this enriches our ethical and political vocabularies of a relational humanism dependent on scenes of exposure to others.

THE NARRATABLE SELF

For Cavarero, the narratable self reveals an ordinary desire to hear one's own unique story. This desire addresses the fundamental question "Who am I?" Such a desire for narration and identity affirms the phenomenological uniqueness of our birth from a particular mother, showing our embodied concreteness. Given the fact of birth as an ontological given, and given the phenomenon of our exposure to some "parental" other (this need not necessarily be the birth mother), as Cavarero says, we are

immediately narratable from our inception in the world. Over time the narratable self develops memory. “Every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a *narratable self*—immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory” (Cavarero 1997/2000, 33, emphasis in original). Because the self continually finds itself in memory with the attendant remembering and forgetting of experience, the self is narratable, not narrated. The distinction signals that we are not simply a product of narration or of discourses of power or the result of a text. The narratable self is “distinguished from the text of her story” even though it is “irremediably mixed up with it” (35). That is, the narratable self is an ongoing project not determined or explained by a particular object or experience.

Cavarero’s attention to uniqueness as a condition shared by human beings marks an important debt to Arendt’s work. This affinity is further underscored by the interest of each in the significance of storytelling. At the beginning of *Relating Narratives*, Cavarero states that narration is a delicate art. Drawing on the novelist Karen Blixen,⁴ she says that narration reveals meaning without the error of defining it (3). “Unlike philosophy, which for millennia has persisted in capturing the universal in the trap of definition, narration reveals the finite in its fragile uniqueness, and sings its glory” (3). Whereas traditional philosophy traffics in abstraction, narrative is about the unique. We can say that we know ourselves to be narratable, even if we don’t have adequate narratives through which our concrete phenomenological selves can find meaning in our uniqueness. To know ourselves as narratable means that we are interwoven with an autobiographical text, but that autobiography is not from a willful subject dependent on no one. Rather, any autobiographical moment is always also a biographical one insofar as we are exposed to others and narratable by them. This is important when we turn to Truth’s work insofar as the text we have of her life stages the autobiographical as biographical dramatically in her *Narrative* (Truth 1875/1998).

Narration is dynamic. Arendt argues that in speaking and acting together, we show who we are. “This disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is... is implicit in everything somebody says and does” (Arendt 1958/1998, 159). To be reduced to a “what” is to deny the uniqueness of each existent. Arendt mentions that “what” somebody is may relate to “qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings,” but we also know that “what” somebody is can be a dispossession—just a Jew, woman, servant, disabled, or an animal—that denies the uniqueness of a person with a proper name.⁵ Cavarero uses Arendt’s critique for feminist purposes to call attention to our embodiment and dependency on others. Rebecca Adami explains, the narratable self offers, instead of egocentrism or exoticism in looking at others, an “ungraspable *who* in ‘you’ and an ungraspable *who* in ‘me’” such that respecting uniqueness can dissolve the “presumed dichotomy” between universality and particular contexts, cultures, and groups (Adami 2017, 258). The narratable self as the “house of uniqueness” is not simply a product of our memory, nor an imaginary protagonist, nor a fiction separate from reality (Cavarero 1997/2000, 34). Rather, “the other is always a narratable self, quite apart from any consideration of the text, whether oral or written” (34). Although the narratable self isn’t reducible to a text,

it is worth pursuing what types of personal and textual encounters are at stake, since not all will admit the uniqueness of a person.

ORDINARY SCENES OF NARRATION, TEXTUAL ENCOUNTERS

What makes relational humanism valuable is not simply the ontological and phenomenological perspective it offers, but, in Cavarero's hands, the normative valence it brings. She calls this an altruistic ethics as opposed to an ethics that denies our dependency on others, and in doing so she articulates how dependency as a type of vulnerability can foster uniqueness. As Fanny Söderbäck suggests, Cavarero offers a normative distinction between wound and violence and love and care (Söderbäck 2018, 283). In *Inclinations*, Cavarero parses the meaning of the term *vulnerability* to develop this distinction. The term has roots in the Latin *vulnus*, or wound (Cavarero 2016, 158–59). Cavarero says “*vulnus* is essentially the result of a violent blow, inflicted from the outside by a sharp instrument with blunt force, tearing and gashing the skin” (159). This attention to skin leads Cavarero to mine another valence of the term, that of nudity, which becomes “exposure without defense” (160). Vulnerability relates to the human body in absolute nakedness, an exposure that opens the body to a wound or to a caress. The distinction between wound and caress is what shapes the normative register of justice or freedom in how that exposure is treated. Cavarero's own view of vulnerability as exposure stages a contrast between pathological relationality and that of altruism or care (Söderbäck 2018). Yet there is a curious absence in how we see skin, surely one of the most persistent constructions of racial identity and racial hierarchy as a “visible identity” in our worldly encounters (Alcoff 2005). Cavarero could counter that, in general, vulnerability as nudity opens up a critical space of exposure to care and the ability to condemn violence that can include particular violences, such as racial violence. Still, we are left with the question of how that could occur without more attention to the particularity of ethical exchanges and politics as collective action in contexts of deep pluralism and inequality.

In looking at the structure of *Relating Narratives*, we get more insight into the ethical exchanges of narratable selves, but also the politics of ordinary spaces. The four sections of the text are: “Heroes,” “Women,” “Lovers,” and “Narrators.” Why these particular scenes, which range from ancient Greece to bookstores in Milan and New York City? What do we learn from Cavarero's retelling of the classical Greek stories of Oedipus, Ulysses, and of the Italian friends Emilia and Amalia, among others? These are scenes between pairs. They all stage some sort of intimacy, whether a familiarity with a hero's story, a friendship, or a love relationship. They are also encounters that result in a text, oral or written. In this regard Cavarero distills in personal encounters experiences of exposure. The power of these examples is that they are all successful moments of desired narrations—to hear of oneself in a way that isn't degraded but rather shows the outline of “who” one is regardless of the dispossessions of self that one may experience in life. Moreover, each pair has a narrator

who has a related desire to recognize uniqueness, one assumed by Cavarero to be sincere in presenting an outline of a life.

In the "Heroes" section, Oedipus intrigues Cavarero because his is a "polyphonic tale." Oedipus, the mythical king of Thebes, is infamously projected to kill his father the king, marry his mother, and therefore is abandoned at birth by his parents. Not knowing the specific story of his birth means that Oedipus doesn't know who he is as he unknowingly fulfills the prophecy. Once Oedipus learns who he really is, that is, the story of his birth, he famously gouges his eyes out in horror at learning who he is and what he has done. Although for many this is an archetype of tragic knowledge and the unmasking function of truth, Cavarero argues that what is significant is that Oedipus manifests a desire for narration, for the biography of his story. Rather than see Oedipus simply as a tragic hero, Cavarero makes of his tale a lesson of ordinary desire for narration to reveal who he is in his uniqueness.

Like Oedipus, Ulysses too is known as an example of heroic action through his journeys and successes in war. However, Cavarero looks at both as those who desire narration and thus reveals our constitutive dependency on others for that story of our self. Cavarero recounts when Ulysses overhears his deeds told by a blind rhapsode. Upon hearing about his actions, he begins to weep, something he had never done before. When Ulysses hears who he is in this way, he demonstrates the thesis that the traditional autobiography of the willful self does not properly respond to the question of "who am I?" Instead, it must be answered through the biographical tale told by someone else, enabling us to incorporate this telling into our memories of ourselves (Cavarero 1997/2000, 45). Why does he weep? Cavarero suggests that a unity of the self is desired, and we can extract the point that it is not that easily found. For this reason, Ulysses weeps at hearing about who he is as a unique being—an affective response to recognizing himself in this narration. "The unity of the self, which the desire for narration makes manifest, finds in the other's tale her indispensable *incipit*, but never her *final* pleasure" (86). The desire for a coherent life story isn't a final explanation of a life. This desire begins with the loss of knowing the moment of one's birth, something we hear about only from others. We desire a narratable self because it provides meaning that ideally shows care for us. "Fragile and contingent—and already marked at birth by a unity that makes of herself first a promise, then a desire—the narratable self is an exposed uniqueness that awaits her narration. The text of this narration, far from producing *all* the reality of the self, is nothing but the marginal consequence, or symptom, that follows that desire" (86). It is the concrete "you" that matters.

In this regard, Cavarero relates the story of Amalia and Emilia, two women in Milan who enroll in a 150-hour adult-education class, classes that started with trade-union movements and became part of the practices of women's groups. As Cavarero notes, the story is told in one of the most famous texts of Italian feminism, *Don't Think You Have Any Rights*, from which Cavarero draws this example (Cavarero 1997/2000, 55).⁶ Amalia records the story of her friend Emilia (who will die early at the age of fifty-three). Emilia was struggling to tell her life-story, something she never managed to narrate or write in a beautiful or coherent way. Amalia, the one who

could narrate more effectively, realizes after exchanging their writing so many times that she knows the story of her friend extremely well. Amalia writes down the story she knows and gives it to her friend. Emilia reports that she carries this story in her handbag, occasionally pulling out her copy, reading it, and being overcome with emotion at the recognition of her self.

The episode “almost seems like a transposition of the Homeric Ulysses to the outskirts of contemporary Milan” writes Cavarero (55). There is the weeping with emotion at the recognition of one’s story narrated by another. “Of course, Emilia could have written her autobiography with her own hand—in fact she tried. Like Arendt, we nonetheless begin to suspect that what prevented her from successfully completing the undertaking was not so much a lack of literary talent, but rather the impossibility of personally objectifying the material of her own desire” (56). It takes the other to recognize this material and desire. Therefore, “the political thought of Arendt, reinterpreted in light of feminist experience,” helps us better understand the ontological desire for a self that can come through the ethical and political act of narration among friends.⁷ This act of solidarity takes the other seriously as a unique person rather than a type, or stereotype, or symbol. As Cavarero has stated elsewhere, this view of recognizing uniqueness requires some trust, trust often found between friends. Maybe you don’t have trusted friends, but you have the desire to have trusted friends or people who respond meaningfully to the “who are you?” question in a way that would distinguish you from any other.⁸

The feminist experience is one that seeks to renarrate how Emilia and Amalia relate to each other and the world. Although Cavarero doesn’t theorize this background explicitly, the shift requires a feminist social imaginary (a collective backdrop) that differs from a traditional patriarchal one. Without the consciousness-raising and the adult-education class that Emilia and Amalia attend, there wouldn’t be this shared scene between the two. The paradox of Ulysses is again at play. To know one’s self is to know it from the view of an other in a time and place that is itself contingent. Amalia and Emilia occupy an ordinary space mostly determined by domesticity in the roles of wife, mother, and caregiver. To politicize this location as a contingent result of power, gendered norms, and inequalities is essential in feminist movements. “For women, the absence of an interactive scene where uniqueness can be exhibited is historically accompanied by their constitutive estrangement from representations of the subject, which rule in patriarchal symbolic order” (Cavarero 1997/2000, 57). It is the “advent of feminism” that permits the “twisting” of Arendtian categories—uniqueness, plurality, exposure, politics—to “who” moments where there is an intersection of politics and narration (61–62).

What Cavarero describes is the importance of the transformative action of feminist work in interactive scenes (see Zerilli 2005). She says, “what we have called an altruistic ethics of relation does not support empathy, identification, or confusions” (Cavarero 1997/2000, 92). Instead, the ethic desires a “you” who is unique and distinct. She continues, “No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I still do not recognize myself in you and, even less, in the collective *we*” (92, emphasis in original).⁹ However, the link between who narrates and how in relation

to collective identity categories should be explored more to draw out both the ethics and the politics of the narratable self. In this sense there is an affinity with what Lori Marso argues we find in the work of Simone de Beauvoir in relation to her interlocutors who are not only friends, but also enemies and allies: "Politics with Beauvoir is never anything but up close and personal. Situating the body as a primary site where political freedom, as well as affect, violence, and destruction, are located and ideologies take hold ... [we see] that what happens intimately, in agonism and affect, portends the world and is *the* site of politics (Marso 2017, 204, emphasis in original). Marso continues, "What is politics, Beauvoir makes us realize, but the site and shape of relationships body to body" (204).

POLITICS AS ABSOLUTE LOCALITY, BODY TO BODY

What vision of politics does such relationality and narration offer? Feminist political theorists, for example, have recognized the power of storytelling in general, and in Arendt's work in particular, mining it for the attention she brings to the horrors of the twentieth century and for her reconstruction of a public world (see Young-Bruehl 1977; Disch 1993; Wilkinson 2004). Displacing a philosophical tradition of the Archimedean view from nowhere, Arendt offers stories of concrete practices of plurality. This is a good description of Cavarero's own practice. Cavarero says, "We need a new political lexicon, a conceptuality that rejects the categories inscribed in the familiar and this reassuring model of the modern State" (Cavarero 2002, 519). It is this very uniqueness of the self that is lost when a political world built on equality (citizenship rights) and humanity (sharing a common world) is destroyed in the experience of rightlessness and the totalitarian reduction to the "merely human" (Arendt 1958/1998).

In "Politicizing Theory," Cavarero writes,

In Arendtian terms, politics does not consist of forms that put subjects in order by subjecting them to a norm and excluding those who do not belong—insofar as they constitute the figure of the other, the stranger, the alien—within this normalization. Politics is a relational space—from which no one is excluded because uniqueness is a substance without qualities—that opens when unique existents communicate *themselves* reciprocally with one another with words and deeds and closes when this communication ceases. (Cavarero 2002, 514)

She continues, "Consequently, we can say with Arendt that wherever this plural uniqueness is not placed in the foreground (wherever it is not welcomed, respected, set down as a value of primary or inalienable importance) there is no politics" (514). To enter this relational space of politics does not require shared group membership. Identity "must be left behind or subordinated to the genuine political character of mere relation. It is those who are present, insofar as they actively expose themselves

to one another as existents clothed only in their uniqueness, who produce the local political character of the context" (521).

Cavarero herself is a product of the Italian student and women's movements. There are political backdrops to the locations of narration in *Relating Narratives*. These locations counter the state-centered view of modern politics. In "Politicizing Theory," she theorizes a world where the forces of globalization, neoliberalism, and the terrorist attacks of 9-11 on the United States set the stage. For this reason, she highlights moments when New Yorkers put up pictures of family members killed in the Twin Towers and name those lost—whether citizens, residents, visitors, firefighters, or those without papers (Cavarero 2002, 527). She says, "Absolute locality always refers to unique existents who interact and are contextually present: here and now, with a face, a name, a story" (527). As a relational space, absolute locality implies the proximity of one to the other—the link of gazes and voices (527–28). She insists that this isn't a utopian ideal; this view of politics is freed "from the logic of territory" and it "can take place everywhere: unpredictable and intermittent, uncontrollable and surprising" (528). Against Plato, who urged his philosopher kings to look up to find ideas to order the world, this is a looking horizontally or across the table or across the street. Although Cavarero doesn't return to the language of absolute locality in other writings, the idea of this exchange, body to body as Beauvoir mentions, shows us ordinary political spaces for distinguishing each "you" from any other, something race-based nationalist or colonialist politics cover over, thus risking how the human comes to be in each unique instance.

Although Cavarero doesn't use this language explicitly, we can see this as a democratic exchange in the sense of wanting the autonomy of the other that enables us to narrate others and judge those narrations as good if we see evidence of the uniqueness of a self. This is the altruism of the ethics Cavarero suggests is necessary for freedom and equality. This possibility is found in different spaces, but especially in friendship. Friendship, as is well known in political theory, is a horizontal relationship, but unlike the fraternal bonds of republicanism or social-contract theory, this model ideally allows for uniqueness and complexity in relationships of personal and political intimacy. However, we don't always have friends in this way. In the case of Truth, as we see in her collected narrative, she had friends and "frenemies," who often wrote over her uniqueness, especially given the discomfort many had with more radical racial equality.

In terms of the role of narrators, in other work Cavarero explores the issue of who tells the story of another and the challenges of such a narration. She identifies reluctant narrators in the genre of biography when it comes to addressing situations of horrific violence such as the Holocaust. Looking at "narratives against destruction" reveals the power of narrative to "save stories of singular injured lives from oblivion" (Cavarero 2015, 15). Here again we see that the narrator doesn't function as a historian or a therapist, but as a storyteller. W. G. Sebald, who conducted interviews with Holocaust survivors, reconstructs stories where the tellers are often reluctant to return to the experiences of horror; after all, such traumatic events aren't easily returned to for many survivors (6–7). Those traumatized lives call into question the desire to

have a narratable self and the role of the narrator (13). Whereas *Relating Narratives* offers a more optimistic if not redemptive view of the narratable self, here taking account of a “lacerated humanity” from the Holocaust experience reveals a more chastened sense of the success of narration. This recognition of the difficulty of narrating through great harm, and that the desire for a narratable self is vexed by violence, is important when we look at something like slavery (or sexual assault or racial animas). Although Cavarero gestures toward these worries, there is more to extend here in terms of the concept, ethics, and politics of the narratable self.¹⁰ Turning to Sojourner Truth in the nineteenth-century United States, I explore both the desire for a narratable self and the ethical and political challenges of narration, drawing out more the importance of ambiguity, struggle, and the importance of the collective “we” contexts that shape how we interact with others.

SOJOURNER TRUTH AND NARRATABLE SELVES IN AND AFTER SLAVERY

The lacerated body of the slave is evident in the Middle Passage: the violence of the plantation system, the violence of law, and the violence of being registered in an accounting book. In a well-known essay, Hortense Spillers reveals more specifically an American grammar whereby African American women and their children are denied kinship and even gender identity in the property system of slavery. This dispossession continues in how African American women are reduced to types such as “Brown Sugar,” “Sapphire,” or “Aunty” (Spillers 1987, 67).¹¹ Clearly, the desire for a narratable self is violated at every turn in such a system of white supremacy and an economy of violence. Spillers offers a critical intervention into the family narrative that demonizes the black matriarch from slavery to modern social-welfare policy, but I focus here on her attention to the loss of control over communication, which is important to any discussion of a narratable self, particularly from feminist and antiracist perspectives. Spillers shows how the dispossession of personhood and uniqueness through slavery takes place within a grammar that speaks differently in terms of black women and their family ties because the “we” coded in terms of racial identity matters. Gender in this case reinforces the chattel status of enslaved women who would give birth to more “property.” Thus, there is a distinct challenge of narration in the context of white supremacy and in finding narrators who can hear and relate a biography of a black woman in this context. For Spillers, this was true in the past and it remains a persistent issue for contemporary feminist historians and theorists of gender.

As Nell Irvin Painter notes, ex-slave narratives were continually mediated, given their use by abolitionists (Painter 1996). Sojourner Truth poses a challenge for a theory of uniqueness and the narratable self ethically and politically, given these circumstances. Moreover, Truth has operated more as a symbol—historically and today—than as a unique existent for whom narration was available. And yet the text of her life reveals both this desire for a narratable self and the ethical and political importance of that quest. Moreover, it reveals a philosophy of a narratable self

in ways that affirm and extend the view that Cavarero offers in her relational humanism.

Isabella Baumfree (also spelled Bomefree) was born a slave in the Hudson Valley of New York around 1797; Dutch was her first language. Sold as a young child to an English-speaking master whom she did not understand, she was beaten and isolated in his household. After being sold to John Dumont at age thirteen, she suffered abuse by his wife, was forbidden from a relationship with another slave, Robert, and was forced into marriage with another slave, Thomas, with whom she had five children. She walked away from slavery, taking a young daughter with her, when Dumont didn't keep his promise to free her a year before slavery officially ended in New York (slavery would be abolished on July 4, 1827 for those born before 1799; if born after that date, a period of indentured servitude was required). A local Quaker family took in Baumfree and her daughter. Then, as a free black woman, she worked as a domestic servant in New York City, lived with different religious communities, and became an itinerant preacher. It was in 1843 that she gave herself the name Sojourner Truth. As the name suggests, "Truth" "raises a host of issues regarding knowledge, representation, and communication," and "Sojourner" conveys "more than itinerancy, for it imparts the image of a person in a home, with connotations of a temporary stay" (Painter 1996, 68). Giving herself a name certainly can be seen as self-making, but in light of the idea of the narratable self, it can also be read as referencing sources of narration through the abolitionist, women's rights, and religious communities with whom Truth worked, that is, finding her unique self in relation to others.

Throughout her life after slavery, Truth came into contact with important figures in abolitionist and women's rights politics such as Susan B. Anthony, William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass, as well as Presidents Lincoln and Grant. Given that she never learned to read and write, and that Dutch was her first language, one of the ways Truth secured a written record of her encounters was to have these events recorded by others for the abolitionist and suffrage causes as well as for her income. Yet these (auto)biographies were written by others with their own agendas and anxieties about how to portray Truth as a black woman, former slave, activist, and mother. From her first narrative in 1850 with Olive Gilbert, to the 1875 and 1884 editions compiled by Frances Titus, we see the struggle to recognize uniqueness in the outline of Truth's life (Truth 1875/1998). This challenge of narration by others is also evident when Truth includes a "Book of Life" or a "scrapbook" of clippings about her from letters, news, and magazine reports (the 1875 and 1884 editions). Truth's (auto)biography reveals both successes and challenges with an ethics and politics of ordinary encounters with other narrators. That is, although Truth was often written about in very public contexts, those reports as well as personal meetings can be interpreted in terms of Cavarero's idea of absolute locality, as an exchange between a "you" and a narrator. Taking Truth's text as a whole shows the ongoing and often ambiguous nature of these encounters. Rather than framing her narrative as a self who overcomes hardship in a willful way, being attuned to the narratable self shows us a text that offers a polyphonic and jagged tale of exposure to others, revealing a struggle for uniqueness in the context of how a "you" operates within the

politics of “we” configurations and the contest over the meanings of those personal and collective identities.

By all accounts Truth was a brilliant public speaker, able to easily connect with a crowd, often in hostile circumstances. Most reports remark on her physical appearance and voice: she was nearly six feet tall, with dark skin, and a booming, low voice still slightly accented by Dutch. Though she had a disabled right hand from a beating, this is not usually mentioned (Minister 2012). In illustrations and photographs, Truth is dressed in a simple, respectable Quaker manner with a shawl and head cap, which was how she preferred to be photographed. Yet many who recorded her words and deeds failed to provide as successful a narrative moment as the text *Amalia* offers to her friend Emilia, a narrative through which her uniqueness was recognized.

An exemplary story that enables us to see contested, polyphonic narrations is what is called her “Ain’t I a woman?” speech delivered at a women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851. This is the speech for which Truth is most remembered. Most well-known is the version published by Frances Dana Gage in 1863. This version has many historical inaccuracies (Mabee 1995; Painter 1996). Gage presents Truth as speaking in a southern dialect, reflecting the antislavery and feminist politics of the North, which tended to deny its own slave past and focus on slavery in the South, given the impending Civil War (Painter 1996). Still, it is the version that, if not as historically accurate as the report in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* in 1851, certainly captures the wit, logic, and brilliance of Truth’s argument. Despite the errors, Truth includes Gage’s version of her speech in her *Narrative* published in 1875 (Truth 1998, 92–93).

In Gage’s version of her speech we see:

‘Dat man ober dar say that womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab the best place everywhere. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place!’ And raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked. ‘And a’n’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! (and she bared her right arm to the shoulder showing tremendous muscular power). I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And a’n’t I a woman? I have born thirteen chilern, and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off to slavery, and when I cried with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And a’n’t I a woman?’ (Truth 1861/2010)

In the more historically accurate version transcribed by Marius Robinson, who knew Truth, we see: “May I say a few words? I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman’s rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. . . . I have heard much about the sexes being equal: I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. . . . As for intellect, all I can say is, if women have a pint and a man a quart—why can’t she have her little pint full?”¹² Although attention has been paid for some time to the

historical errors of Gage's rendition (both versions of the speech are now regularly printed together¹³), they reveal more than historical challenges; they reveal the challenges of narration. Truth did not speak with a southern accent. Nor did she have thirteen children, although she did have to sue her former master when her son was sold illegally into slavery in the South, a case that she won.¹⁴ For Painter, for whom historical accuracy is important, it is essential that the 1851 version be seen as the more accurate speech in historical terms. Yet even Painter acknowledges the power her students and colleagues find in Gage's 1863 version that captures something true in the sense of meaningfulness about Truth's uniqueness (see Painter 1996, "Epilogue").

Recognizing some partial "truth" moments in each version of the speech enables us to shift our interpretation from the issue of the symbolic or the historical Truth (Painter 1996) to one that looks at the philosophy of self at stake, since neither fully reveals the uniqueness of a person in the way Cavarero suggests for an altruistic ethics and politics of relationality. Donna Haraway says in reading Truth, "Perhaps, what most needs cleaning up here is an inability to hear Truth's language, to face her specificity, to acknowledge her, but *not* as the voice of the seven apocalyptic thunders. Instead, perhaps we need to see her as the Afro-Dutch-English New World itinerant preacher" who she was (Haraway 1992, 98). We should notice an inability to hear Truth, but we should also notice the frequency of needing multiple narratives, even from those who are ostensibly friends. Truth must have recognized this in choosing this speech from Gage for inclusion in the complex tale of her life and actions in her *Narrative*.

Truth's specific query—even if historically untrue—is ethically and politically right: "ain't I a woman?" It reveals a desire for a narratable self in terms that would acknowledge her as such. Truth illustrates through multiple narrators, none of whom are terribly reliable in wanting to showcase her uniqueness, the desire for narration and the struggle for moments of altruistic ethics in the politics of her day. Taken as a whole, Truth's *Narrative* is instructive since it is here that the assembling of words about her from others reveals a cacophony in how a black woman, a former slave from the North, a preacher, an advocate for economic equality, and a women's rights defender is narrated in the context of structural racism. We also see that we can be exposed simultaneously to care and to wounding.

To extend the importance of both care and wounding with the concept of the narratable self, we can also look at "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl," first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1863. There are again factual inaccuracies: she says Truth was born in Africa and that she is now dead. Stowe makes Truth a "Libyan Sibyl," a figure of exotic strength, saying she imagines Truth as "a living, breathing impersonation of that work of art" (in Truth 1875/1998, 103–17). Stowe's representation reveals the challenges of incorporating black and white citizens on equitable terms in the body politic of shared space and shared history, so she instead tries to locate Truth elsewhere (Africa, a statue), but not from US soil nor as a concrete human being. However, Truth, savvy enough to recognize Stowe's influence to help sell her own narrative, and perhaps wanting to correct the record

and show that she was still alive, includes Stowe's article in her *Narrative* (Truth 1875/1998) as part of her "Book of Life," thus folding the article into her own life story, showing both the material benefits at stake and also the desire for narration.

The challenge of personal and political representation from others is something with which Truth and later feminist historians and theorists have wrestled. To make of her life more than an overdetermined historical myth,¹⁵ or a story showcasing the sheer will of the strong black woman in difficult circumstances,¹⁶ is to recognize the violence, dependency, and burden of vulnerability to which she was exposed. An ethics and politics of exposure and the relationality of the narratable self can attune us to this fact. Truth offers a philosophy of a narratable self, one that works within authoritative discourses to expose hypocrisy and reimagine slaves, blacks, and women as human, moral beings and citizens by including multiple narrators of her life in her *Narrative*. Paying attention to who narrates and the pressures of collective struggles and identities can likewise attune us to the pitfalls and dynamics of power in such ordinary encounters.

NARRATABLE SELVES: EXPOSED TO OTHERS, REFIGURING THE HUMAN

Cavarero's humanism dwells in the particular and the unique. The concept of the narratable self stages the desire for uniqueness as at once an ethical and political issue. I've traced Cavarero's claim that the ethical purchase of narration as narrating for an other through care (altruistic ethics) is essential, and I've also explored, in response to critics, how Cavarero develops her politics of the narratable self by drawing out the political context of her writing and exploring her more explicit work in relation to power and spaces of relationality. This allows for a deeper understanding of her work on the narratable self in ethics and political terms, but it also enables us to see a philosophy of the narratable self in the narrative of Truth. For Truth, to be more than a slave, black, or woman—to continually become Sojourner Truth—was an ongoing, difficult project. The narratable self as a concept enables us to be attuned to humanization in ordinary moments of exposure to others—those places of absolute locality, the exchange of "you" and "me" that, when affirming the uniqueness of the self, is an example of ethical and political success, even if only momentarily and as part of an ongoing process. It also asks us to be aware of these as political moments of shared humanity in our mutual dependency in a particular time and space.

I've suggested that Cavarero's view of the narratable self is deepened politically by attention to who narrates and the contexts of narration. This is the case even though Cavarero herself explores in later work reluctant tellers and a politics of absolute locality. The gift of uniqueness from a narrator is rare in the history of unequal societies, even among those working to abolish slavery or defend women's rights. However, if we follow Cavarero's ethical and political lessons, and extend the democratic encounters that allow for the "who" to be in light of the "whats" of structural inequalities, we could better account for those violences and exclusions. Taking

account of this type of vulnerability is important for any critical theory of the narratable self.

NOTES

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1. Rita Felski says critique must do more than deconstruct. "My conviction—one that is shared by a growing number of scholars—is that questioning critique is not a shrug of defeat or a hapless capitulation to conservative forces. Rather it is motivated by a desire to articulate a positive vision for humanist thought in the face of growing skepticism about its value" (Felski 2015, 186).

2. The novelist whose pen name is Elena Ferrante cites Cavarero's *Relating Narratives* as one influence on her/his work (the author hasn't been revealed although many suspect the author is a woman). In the four Neapolitan novels (Ferrante 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015), the structure of narration is indebted to Cavarero's relationality. See Schappel 2015.

3. In the field of international relations and the place of power, see Thomas Gregory's sympathetic and critical engagement with Cavarero's concept of horrorism (Gregory 2016).

4. Karen Blixen used the pen name Isak Dinesen. Her best-known book is *Out of Africa* (1937).

5. Arendt writes, "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (Arendt 1958/1998, 8).

6. This text was published by the Milan Women's Bookstore collective, in Italian *Non credere di avere dei diritti* in 1987.

7. Dave Eggers's *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* follows this format. After many hours of interviews with Deng, they agree that Eggers would write his autobiography about his experience as a child in war-torn Sudan (Eggers 2007).

8. Remarks by Cavarero in the graduate seminar run by Fanny Söderbäck on Cavarero's work (Cavarero 2018).

9. Butler addresses this quote in particular (Butler 2005) along with other references to *Relating Narratives*, for example, in relation to our connection to others through exposure (Butler 2006, 48).

10. Cavarero describes a South African autobiographical novel written by Else Joubert about her black maid Poppie Nongena. Poppie told her story over two years to the “author.” Cavarero reports that Joubert arranged a successful performance of the novel for Nongena’s family and friends. But what is success in this context of racial power and privilege?

11. See Collins 2008, chapter 4, on controlling images for black women in the history of the United States.

12. See <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches/>.

13. The Women’s Rights National Park Service webpage entry for Truth has links to compare the two versions of her speech. See <https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/sojourner-truth.htm>.

14. This was one of three court cases that Truth brought and won in her lifetime.

15. For a view of Truth as overdetermined in the sense of always interpreted by others from their partial perspectives, see Peterson 2007.

16. Even the thoughtful Michelle Obama draws mostly on this triumphant narrative frame. “Remarks by the First Lady at the Sojourner Truth Bust Unveiling,” April 28, 2009. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-first-lady-sojourner-truth-bust-unveiling>.

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