Narration as a Practice of Care in the Wake of Violence: Adriana Cavarero's Narrative Theory and Saidiya Hartman's Critical Fabulation

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Abstract

In this essay, I engage Adriana Cavarero's narrative theory and put it into conversation with the work of Black feminist scholars who engage in practices of narrative rewriting of the archives of Black life in the wake of slavery. First, I elucidate the importance of Cavarero's narrative theory for developing a framework for understanding selfhood in relational terms. Next, I turn to Saidiya Hartman's concept of *critical fabulation*, reading it as an example of the kind of relational narrative that Cavarero seeks to promote in her work. I suggest that Hartman, like Cavarero, ventures to trace the contours of the extraordinary singularity of the women and girls whose lives she narrates in her work – lives that would have been rendered invisible and silent had it not been for her insistence on putting them into what she calls a *counternarrative*. I also engage Christina Sharpe and M. NourbeSe Philip, among others, to expand my analysis of how it is that narration, and especially counternarratives, can serve as practices of care in the wake of violence and destruction. My hope is to open avenues for

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relating the narratives of these distant traditions to one another, through their shared commitment to relational uniqueness and their mutual desire to narrate history – and histories – otherwise.

Keywords: stories, critical fabulation, narrative, counternarrative, slavery, Adriana Cavarero, Christina Sharpe, NourbeSe Philip

Biography

Fanny Söderbäck is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Södertörn University and the co-founder and co-director of the Kristeva Circle. She holds a PhD in Philosophy from the New School for Social Research and has held positions at Siena College and DePaul University. She is the author of *Revolutionary Time: On Time and Difference in Kristeva and Irigaray* (SUNY Press, 2019). She has edited *Feminist Readings of Antigone* (SUNY Press, 2010) and is a co-editor of the volume *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). She is also the editor of a special issue of *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* on the topic of birth. Her work has appeared in scholarly journals such as *Diacritics*, *Hypatia*, *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, *Signs*, and *Theory & Event*. She is currently working on a book project on Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, in which she puts her work into conversation with queer and trans theories as well as Latinx, Black, and decolonial feminisms to re-envision selfhood and human relations through the framework of singularity.

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Rather than salvation, the accidental needs care.
To tell the story that every existence leaves behind itself is perhaps the oldest act of such care.
(Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*)

The past cannot be undone, but its narration and monumental illustration can.
(Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*)

Adriana Cavarero has devoted much of her work to a reflection on the loss of singularity in Western philosophy and culture, which, she argues, privilege abstract universality over embodied uniqueness. As I have argued elsewhere, each of her books examines the logic by which universality commits the crime of covering over the unrepeatable uniqueness of the existent, in the name of the Human, the Subject, or Man (Söderbäck, 2020: 2). Cavarero argues that this logic, which has dominated much of the Western philosophical tradition (even though, of course, there are myriad exceptions to it), "ignores uniqueness as such, in whatever mode it manifests itself. The unrepeatable singularity of each human being, the embodied uniqueness that distinguishes each one from every other is, for the universalizing tastes of philosophy, a superfluity. *Uniqueness is epistemologically inappropriate*" (Cavarero, 2005: 9, emphasis added). What is proper to each is thus inappropriate to an abstract all that views embodied uniqueness as either irrelevant or irreverent. Cavarero seeks to challenge this epistemic paradigm, and her work as a whole could be described in terms of its efforts to offer a relational ontology of uniqueness that puts the hegemony of universality into question by way of embracing the inappropriateness of embodied uniqueness.

Her critique of the dominant Western philosophical paradigm rests on the claim that, while philosophy has reduced embodied uniqueness to fit its own anonymous-abstract epistemic framework, narration, instead, gives voice to such uniqueness. If philosophy has been concerned with naming the *what* of universal abstract Man, Cavarero thus turns to narration as a kind of discourse that holds the promise of teasing out the *who* of singular embodied individuals (*ibid.*: 9).[2] From Penelope to Diotima (*In Spite of Plato*), from Antigone to Ophelia (*Stately Bodies*), from Oedipus to Ulysses (*Relating Narratives*), and from the Muse to the Sirens (*For More than One Voice*), she mines her cast of figures to develop her own relational ontology of uniqueness, and to think selfhood as constitutively "marked by exposure, vulnerability, and dependence" (Cavarero, 2016: 11).

[2] Cavarero borrows the what-who distinction from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1998: 179).

Challenging the hegemony of individualistic ontologies of sameness, she insists on thinking "relation itself as originary and constitutive, as an essential dimension of the human" (*ibid.*: 13).

I want to stress from the outset – and here I think Cavarero would agree – that no rigid distinction between philosophy and narration exists, and that attempting to draw one would ultimately be reductive. Rather than saying that there is an absolute difference between narration and philosophy, it might make more sense to highlight how and why it is that philosophers depend on narration without recognising and acknowledging that this is so. To be sure, the very philosophers we tend to point to as the ultimate examples of the privileging of universal abstractions – I am thinking here of Plato and René Descartes among others – depend on narrative tropes such as fiction, mythology, and autobiography in constructing their arguments. Plato might insist that art must be banned from the city, yet his own dialogues depend on artistic imagery and stories throughout. Descartes might claim that experience is antithetical to philosophical clarity, yet he draws upon his own experience at every step of his philosophical work. We might also add, of course, that there are examples of narration that foster forms of universalism, discrimination, and violence. Rather than being separate and distinct genres, I would argue that philosophy and narration are co-constitutive and co-dependent in ways that philosophers have tended to deny. It is, therefore, also not really the case that philosophy deals merely with abstract-rational truth while narration deals exclusively with emotional-lived experience. As much as certain philosophers might like to uphold such distinctions (for the sake of maintaining the "purity" of philosophy), they are bound to collapse and undo themselves, such that singularity always rears its head even in the most abstract-philosophical accounts, albeit quietly and from the margins of the text. Cavarero is a master of seeking it out and rendering it audible-visible where we least expect it. And her own philosophy of narration is indeed an attempt, I think, to blur such boundaries while centring embodied uniqueness as that which must be brought into focus.

In what follows, I want to engage Cavarero's narrative theory and put it into conversation with the work of Black

feminist scholars who engage in practices of narrative rewriting of the archives of Black life in the wake of slavery. I begin by elucidating the importance of Cavarero's narrative theory for developing a framework for understanding selfhood in relational terms. Next, I turn to Saidiya Hartman's concept of *critical fabulation*, reading it as an example of the kind of relational narrative that Cavarero seeks to promote in her work. I suggest that Hartman, like Cavarero, ventures to trace the contours of the extraordinary singularity of the women and girls whose lives she narrates in her work – lives that would have been rendered invisible and silent had it not been for her insistence on putting them into what she calls a *counternarrative*. Along the way, I also engage Christina Sharpe and M. NourbeSe Philip, among others, to expand my analysis of how it is that narration, and especially counternarratives, can serve as practices of care in the wake of violence and destruction. My hope is to open avenues for relating the narratives of these distant traditions to one another, through their shared commitment to relational uniqueness and their mutual desire to narrate history – and histories – otherwise.

Narrating Relational Uniqueness: An Epistemology of the Inappropriate

If much feminist theory has relied on the notion of a *narrative* self – the idea that the self comes into existence through the very practice of self-narration – Cavarero instead insists on a *narratable* self. For her (and here as so often she follows Hannah Arendt), the telling of our life-stories depends entirely on others, the spectators and onlookers who bear witness to our lives they unfold, in large part unbeknownst to us, retrospectively and from the outside: "Exposed, relational and contextual, the Arendtian self leaves behind a life story that is constitutively interwoven with many other stories" (Cavarero, 2000: 124).

In *Relating Narratives*, each chapter offers a variation on this theme. Her analysis of Oedipus in the opening chapter (in which she establishes the very distinction between a philosophical focus on whatness and the narrative propensity

for whoness), provides the literary landscape in which the central thesis of her book can be formulated: "what man is, is said by a definitory knowledge of philosophical assonance – who Oedipus is, is said by the narration of his story. To complete the thesis, however, we must add a qualification: it is *others* who tell him *his* story" (*ibid.*: 12). Insisting that the Sophoclean drama gives us a "polyphonic tale," Cavarero invites us to pay attention to the "dramatic assembly" that gives us the "narrative fragments" that allow Oedipus to finally ask "Who am I?" instead of remaining trapped in the Sphinx's formulaic "What is Man?" (*ibid.*). Jocasta, Teiresias, the messenger – these are the characters who help him arrive at an answer to his pressing question, whereas Oedipus alone was able to resolve the Sphinx's philosophical riddle.

A necessary other stands at the heart of Cavarero's narrative theory – one who can bear witness to my actions and put them into a story to be told and remembered. In the court of the Phaeacians, heroic Ulysses "does not seem to know who he is, until he meets up with himself through the tale of his story", as told to him by a blind rhapsode singing of the Trojan war (*ibid.*: 17). Recognising himself in the story, receiving it from another's narration, Ulysses weeps, and his tears bear witness to our desire to hear our story told, to appear in our constitutive exposure to others: relational, embodied, born-of-another.

On the outskirts of Milan, Cavarero gives us Emilia and Amalia, two close friends, the former trying and failing repeatedly to coherently narrate her life story, the latter finally writing it for her such that she can carry it in her purse, reading it "again and again, overcome by emotion" (*ibid.*: 55). Emilia weeps as her story is told to her, confirming the desire to achieve unity through narration, to have her life take shape or form a pattern. Cavarero elaborates: "the *who* of Emilia shows itself here with clarity in the perception of a narratable self that desires the tale of her own life-story. However, it is the other – the friend who recognises the ontological roots of this desire – who is the only one who can realize such a narration" (*ibid.*: 56).

And in a Paris apartment, Gertrude Stein attempts to write her own life story, but can only do so by making it be told by another, Alice Toklas, who types up the narrative as handed to her by Gertrude, under the rubric of the now famous book, *The*

Autobiography of Alice Toklas. Under the pretence of writing Alice's autobiography for her, Gertrude instead has Alice write her – Gertrude's – autobiography, because the text was never intended to be about Alice, but about Gertrude herself: the text is "an autobiography of Gertrude Stein, written by Gertrude, where Gertrude herself appears in the text, however, as a character narrated by Alice" (*ibid.*: 81–2). While nobody seems to weep on 27 rue de Fleurus, there is plenty of desire here, and Cavarero describes the text as "a feast of exhibition and appearance", where the reality of the self "is totally *external*" (*ibid.*: 83). The basic rule of autobiography – that one narrates one's own story – implodes upon itself and is fundamentally undermined by the relational ontology of uniqueness that underpins Cavarero's argument. Stein's text "puts into writing the relational character of the self that the autobiographical genre – as such – is prevented from putting into words" (*ibid.*). We are, in other words, "completely given over to others", we are "fragile and unmasterable", and, as it turns out, the "protected spaces of private rooms of impenetrable refuge for self-contemplation" (*ibid.*: 84) – à la René Descartes and others – are a philosophical fantasy guilty of reducing embodied-relational uniqueness to the irrelevance and irreverence of epistemic inappropriateness.

Cavarero's attention to the violence of abstraction motivates her, from the start, to revisit the archives of philosophical discourse, to scrutinise their founding acts of erasure, and to retrieve from them the silenced figures – almost all women – who serve as the constitutive others of such archives:

> My hermeneutical project consists of investigating the traces of the original act of erasure contained in the patriarchal order, the act upon which this order was first constructed and then continued to display itself. This is how my technique of theft works: I will steal feminine figures from their context, allowing the torn-up fabric to show the knots that hold together the conceptual canvas that hides the original crime (Cavarero, 1995: 5).

A classicist by training, she is in the "habit of going backwards, to the beginning, the origin, the source" (*ibid.*: 9) – a historical

impulse to engage the past – yet this movement of return is always for Cavarero motivated by present concerns and injustices: it is from the "here and now" that we must begin, and her "enterprise of theft is inspired by women's present needs and the categories of their current political practice" (*ibid.*). Her hermeneutics of theft – mimetic and repetitive-playful in nature – thus amounts, for Cavarero, to a form of care. And narration, as we saw in the epigraph of this essay, "is perhaps the oldest act of such care" (Cavarero, 2000: 53). The Italian here is *cura* – meaning both "care" and "cure" – such that narration must be understood as care-work but also as a cure, a salvation, what might save uniqueness from the abyss of oblivion and generalisation.

If philosophy has taken it upon itself "to redeem, to save, to rescue the particular from its finitude, and uniqueness from its scandal" – what Cavarero has in mind here is the philosophical tendency to reduce finitude and materiality (among other expressions of our embodied uniqueness) to problems to be resolved, as evidenced by the influence of the metaphysics of presence or mind-body dualisms – "this task of redemption, however, logically transformed itself into an act of erasure" (*ibid.*). She references both Hegel and Arendt as having importantly recognised that the ultimate intention of philosophical contemplation is to abolish the accidental, which is to say singularity, uniqueness, our being-born and embodied and sexuate and relational and vulnerable – as Cavarero so often puts it, our being irreducible: "this and not another" (*ibid.*).[3] But rather than salvation, then, "the accidental needs

[3] While Cavarero names Hegel here, she rarely if ever engages with his work beyond this reference. That said, the reference is perhaps telling, in that it locates in Hegel – who typically would be depicted as a paradigmatic proponent of universality – the capacity to also register philosophy's own erasure of uniqueness. This speaks to my comment at the beginning of this essay about the need not to establish a rigid boundary between philosophy and narration, but rather ambiguate and complicate philosophy such that it can include uniqueness in its epistemological framework. If Hegel remains a marginal figure for Cavarero's own project, Arendt is a key interlocutor for her, and many of the terms that organise Cavarero's own philosophy of singularity – plurality, natality, being as synonymous with appearing, the who of embodied uniqueness, to name but a few – derive from her work. Importantly, Cavarero tends to couple Arendt's political

care", and narration is "perhaps the oldest form of such care" (*ibid.*). What, we must ask, does it mean that narration is a form of care? What kind of caring is involved in storytelling, and in what way is this care also a cure, a remedy, a form of healing?

To begin to address these questions, I want to turn now to Cavarero's essay "Narrative Against Destruction". Here, she examines the circumstances under which a self can "emerge from the ruins of a self", through narration (Cavarero, 2015: 7). More specifically, her focus is on the totalitarian dismantling of the human being during the Shoah, and she attempts to resurrect singular human beings out of oblivion. With Arendt, Cavarero believes in the "redemptive power of narration", since it "saves and hands down to posterity" both our singular life stories and history more broadly construed (*ibid.*: 4). Narration, in other words, is the most powerful remedy for our finitude and the fragility of human life – through narration we are made immortal as our life is put into a story to be retold and remembered – but this remedy should not be confused with the philosophical call for salvation – a call, as we have seen, that denies the power of the accidental and that has transformed the task of redemption into an act of erasure (Cavarero, 2000: 53).

Narration "does not explain, does not organize nor understand the events from within a conceptual framework", but rather "reveals the meaning without the error of defining it" (Cavarero, 2015: 9). What is more, it "saves this meaning from oblivion, a forgetfulness that [...] is not the consequence of the simple passing of time, but the intentional outcome of violent erasure" (*ibid.*). Narration, in other words, is a restorative response to violence: more than serving as a remedy for our finitude, it is a form of resistance against the destruction that we might experience in the course of our lives. Narration can bring us back from the dead, not only because a life put into a story can be remembered into posterity, but also because the very act of telling can serve to animate a self whose selfhood has been under attack to the point of erasure and silence.

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ontology with Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, which is what gives her work the distinctly feminist orientation that is lacking in Arendt. For an engagement with Cavarero's feminist critique of Arendt (and more specifically with the concept of natality in her work), see Söderbäck, 2018.

Citing first Arendt and then Primo Levi, she insists that "human nature as such" – more so than human suffering or human lives – was at stake in a totalitarian machine aimed at the "demolition of man" (*ibid.*: 6). Her claim, then, is that the saving power of life stories has the capacity to restore the human status of uniqueness to victims of ontological violence. Narration is a form of rehumanisation, a "redemption of the meaning of the human from the ruins of the inhuman" (*ibid.*: 10). But this work of narration does, again, have a complex relation to the work of philosophy. It is less a matter of *understanding* the horror, or of offering an analysis that would capture correctly its undoing powers; rather, and here again Cavarero follows Arendt, it "belongs to the sphere of *poiesis:* of making, constructing, creating" (*ibid.*: 14). Narration, on Cavarero's account, "is not merely a 'reconstructing' [of] the thread of a life story; it is above all opposing the work of destruction that has devoured life itself. It is ultimately a making against destroying, a creating against demolishing, a doing against undoing" (*ibid.*).

Cavarero offers a reading of W. G. Sebald, who attempted in his work to narrate the stories of "ordinary individuals" who had survived the Holocaust, stories that might otherwise have been lost and silenced (*ibid.*: 7). In *The Emigrants*, for example, Sebald draws from interviews and archival research to narrate the lives of four survivors – life stories that "would have never seen the light of day", had they not been put into a narrative by the author (*ibid.*). The work of narration, in this context, constitutes an aporia of sorts – as Cavarero herself puts it, it entails the task of "narrating the unspeakable" (*ibid.*: 8). To be sure, Sebald's narration cannot bring lost ones back to life, but as Timothy Huzar has pointed out, he "restores the damage and destruction wrought on these lives, a damage and destruction that would too often remain silent (if not invisible)" (2018: 159).

At stake, again, is the possibility of rendering audible and visible each of their uniquenesses – cast into the form of a narrative – assembling "the fragments of a life experience that disclose the meaning of the uniqueness of that very life", here and now and for posterity (Cavarero, 2015: 9). Cavarero notes that there is an ethical dilemma in soliciting traumatic memories to put them into a story. Sebald himself spoke of the

"collateral damage" that such intrusion can cause, and Cavarero alludes to a "reluctant narratable self" that is made to "emerge from the ruins of a self that the totalitarian machine has intentionally tried to destroy" (*ibid.*: 7). If Emilia wept as she read her own story as Amalia had written it down, then "what tears must the victims of the totalitarian catastrophe shed", Cavarero asks, "when forced to tell their stories to the narrator who may be able to retell them?" (*ibid.*).

To narrate the lives of those who perished in the disaster that was Auschwitz – those "whose existence, starting with the erasure of their names and personal data, was being obliterated, so that having lived in the world, they could not become part of a story, nor of history" – thus poses a particular set of challenges and impossibilities that Cavarero examines in her work (*ibid.*: 5). How to narrate what cannot be narrated? How, to echo Theodor W. Adorno, to narrate after Auschwitz? With Sebald, as we have seen, Cavarero invites us to confront this "aporia of narrating the unspeakable" (*ibid.*: 8), to save meaning from an oblivion that is "the intentional outcome of a violent erasure" (*ibid.*: 9). But Cavarero is careful not to fall into the philosophical temptation of definition. The task, she insists, is not to *resolve* "the inexplicability of the horror [...] in a frame that articulates it or explains it", but rather to sit with inexplicability,[4] allowing it to intensify, which in turn will require a categorical interrogation of our own relation to such impossibility and inexplicability (*ibid.*: 11). In other words, Cavarero's narrative theory does not seek closure or explanation – I read it as an invitation to a radical rethinking and reimagining of our own place in history and in relation to one another.

Such a monumental task, Cavarero tells us, requires "mixing facts and fiction, life and art, in addition to using images and photographs – sometimes real, sometimes fictitious portraits" (*ibid.*). We shall see, in what follows, how such challenges and such narrative modes get reproduced in the context of another disaster, namely that of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and forms of anti-Black violence that follow in its wake. In the hope of having provided a sufficiently coherent

[4] A task similar perhaps to what the poet Dionne Brand has described as "sitting in the room with history" (2011: 25).

framework for thinking the power and limits of narration through the lens of Cavarero's philosophy of relational uniqueness, then, I want to turn to a specific set of narrative efforts, namely those that attempt to singularise where uniqueness has been subjected to forms of erasure, specifically in the context of Black archives of history. I think, especially, of Saidiya Hartman's work on critical fabulation and intimate history, but also of Christina Sharpe's articulation of wake-work, as well as poetic attempts at narrating singularity in the wake of slavery, such as M. NourbeSe Philip's long poem *Zong!* While Cavarero herself never engages with these bodies of work directly, I want to show that staging a dialogue between them can be a fruitful exercise, both because Cavarero's conceptual toolbox allows us to see aspects of such Black feminist discourse that might otherwise have gone unnoticed, but also because I believe bringing this discourse to a volume on Cavarero's work opens up new avenues for thinking – avenues that both confirm and challenge or complicate the conceptual universe that Cavarero's philosophy of singularity and her narrative theory make possible.

Narrating in the Wake of Slavery: Telling, Un-Telling, and the Impossibility of Narration

Like Cavarero, Saidiya Hartman has devoted much of her work to reclaiming singular uniqueness where abstraction-destruction has led to its erasure, although, to be sure, her work is situated in a context very different from that of Cavarero's. Hartman does not turn to Homer, Sophocles, or Shakespeare in her search for singularity, nor is she interested in the role that Western philosophy has played in facilitating its erasure. As a scholar of African American literature and history, she focuses instead on Black life in the wake of slavery, and on the forms of erasure that constitute the archives in which the afterlife of slavery is contained. She argues that what is at stake as we venture into these archives is the possibility of tracing unique life stories, and that such work – as challenging and fraught as

it is[5] – might serve as a remedy against the violences of the past as well as the dehumanising effects of ongoing forms of generalisation (its own form of monstrosity), and the violent erasures of the archives themselves. Narrating uniqueness is a matter of seeking intimacy where it has been destroyed, of forging human bonds where they have been severed. It amounts to retrieving "the ruins of the dismembered past", as Hartman herself puts it (1997: 11). At stake, we might say, borrowing from Cavarero's Arendtian vocabulary, is the possibility of making a *who* appear, in excess of the whatness of archival frames and erasures.

Throughout her work, and much like Cavarero, Hartman is particularly invested in giving voice to girls and women whose life stories have been reduced to tropes, statistics, stereotypes, and generalities, if not buried in complete silence. But if Cavarero takes it upon herself to narrate and expand upon the uniqueness of Demeter, Medea, Medusa, Eurydice, and Echo, among others – mostly mythical and fictional figures firmly situated in a European context – Hartman goes in search of Black women and girls in the midst and wake of trans-Atlantic slavery: slave women like Sukie and Celia (*Scenes of Subjection*); emancipated women exploring their newfound freedom in the midst of carceral logics, like Ida, Mattie, Mamie, Harriet, Esther, Eva, and Mabel (*Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*); but also the nameless ones: slave girls, Negro girls, meagre girls, the ditto dittos of the archives, the mammies, the Jezebels, and the Venuses ("Venus in Two Acts"). Reflecting on her work with the poem *Zong!*, to which I will return at length, M. NourbeSe Philip remarks on the practice of describing nameless Africans in the slave ledgers: "Purchasers are identified while Africans are reduced to the stark description of 'negroe man', *[sic]* 'negroe woman', or, more frequently, 'ditto man', 'ditto woman'. There is one gloss to this description: 'Negroe girl (meagre)'. There are many 'meagre' girls, no 'meagre' boys. This description leaves me shaken – I want to weep" (Philip, 2008: 194).

One such nameless girl is Venus. She is everywhere and nowhere in the archives – a stand-in for every Black woman,

[5] For an elaboration of such challenges, see Hartman, 1997: 10–4.

every Black girl, every female slave, every meagre ditto ditto there ever was: "Variously named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally, she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world", Hartman tells us. "The barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship, the pest-house, the brothel, the cage, the surgeon's laboratory, the prison, the cane-field, the kitchen, the master's bedroom – turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus" (Hartman, 2008: 1).

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman recounts the events that took place on the slave ship *Recovery*, whose captain was tried for the brutal murder of an unnamed slave girl. Sick with gonorrhoea, she had refused to join the other women dancing on deck, as she was ordered to, under threat of the whip. This refusal to dance drove the captain to hoist her into the air, hanging her by her legs from the mast. For about half an hour she hung there, and while the women were dancing, their feet pounding on the deck, all you could hear was "the dull thump of the whip on the girl" (Hartman, 2007: 140). Strange fruit hanging, the unnamed girl appears only briefly in a "musty trial transcript", the few words of which constitute "the only defence of her existence, the only barrier against her disappearance" there ever was (*ibid.*: 138).

But alongside that girl was another, also sick with the pox: "The other dead one, Venus, which is what the crew called her, had it too", Hartman notes (*ibid.*: 141). When, in 1792, William Wilberforce stood before the House of Commons arguing for the abolition of the slave trade, recounting the events of the *Recovery* as a way of making the members of Parliament feel the burden of white shame, Hartman tells us that he "chose not to speak of Venus, the other dead girl". Her pet name, she notes, "licensed debauchery and made it sound agreeable" (*ibid.*: 143). When, in "Venus in Two Acts", she reflects on her own choice to write only these two brief sentences about Venus in her prior engagement with the case, thus "masking [her] own silence behind Wilberforce's", Hartman does so in order to name the potential pitfalls of her own methodological approach – the attempt to give voice to singularity in the face of oblivion: "I decided not to write about Venus for reasons different from those attributed to [Wilberforce]. Instead I feared what I might invent, and it would have been romance" (Hartman, 2008: 8).

This "might" is at the heart of Hartman's method of critical fabulation – the attempt to save Black girls and women from the fate of oblivion by offering counternarratives, imagining otherwise, attending to the gaps of the erasures of history – a subjunctive "might" that opens up a world of possibilities.[6] As such, it renders one susceptible to the desire for romance, since "the loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them" (*ibid.*). If Cavarero attended to a general desire to have one's story told (recall Emilia's weeping), Hartman invites us to think about the acute urgency of such desire when one's story – and the stories of all those who came before, the entire lineage of Black girls and women consigned to "the bottom of the Atlantic" (Hartman, 2007: 138) – has been reduced to silence, to oblivion, and to scenes of subjection that block from sight and audibility all that is wayward and beautiful and possible and irreducible to that very violence.

Her own hunger for such stories of intimacy renders her susceptible to romanticising and to providing closure where there can be none (and she is acutely aware of the risks this entails):

> If I could have conjured up more than a name in an indictment, if I could have imagined Venus speaking in her own voice, if I could have detailed the small memories banished from the ledger, then it might have been possible for me to represent the friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls. Shipmates. Then Venus could have beheld her dying friend, whispered comfort in her ear, rocked her with promises, soothed her with "soon, soon" and wished for her a good return.
>
> Picture them: The relics of two girls, one cradling the other, plundered innocents; a sailor caught sight of them and later said they were friends. Two world-less girls found a country in each other's arms. Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility (Hartman, 2008: 8).

[6] The subjunctive, Hartman explains, is "a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities" (Hartman, 2008: 11).

Our attempts to imagine the girls – shipmates – are burdened by the "ifs" and "could haves" and "might have beens" of a past that is not yet past but that also will never be fully present for us to bear witness to, in its lived uniqueness. Through the conditional temporality of "what could have been", Hartman tells us, she "intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling" (*ibid.*: 11). Yet beyond the "ifs" and "could haves" and "could have beens" there is also that "would be" and "might" of our own imagination, of critical fabulation, of the yet-to-come: glimpses of beauty, waves of possibility in an ocean of impossibility – indeed, the possibility that results from the very act of amplifying impossibility, through narration.

Hartman describes her method as "playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view" (*ibid.*). Her characterisation of critical fabulation as an attempt "to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (*ibid.*) brings it into immediate proximity with Cavarero's mimetic-repetitive method of stealing back and reclaiming lost female figures and voices at the very site of their discursive erasure. As Rosi Braidotti describes it in the "Foreword" to *In Spite of Plato:* "Cavarero turns this strategy into one of purposeful and deliberate conceptual theft: she steals back from the patriarchal imaginary female figures [...], she practices a merry version of conceptual pick-pocketing as a creative feminist gesture" (Cavarero, 1995: xiii).[7]

On the site of erasure that is the *Recovery*, Hartman sets out to engage with the impossibility inscribed in Venus's story. She wants to achieve "an impossible goal" by "redressing the

[7] Braidotti goes on to say that "Cavarero's writing is a direct application of the strategy of mimetic repetition. She questions the patriarchal order by trying to locate the traces of the feminine as a site of male projection but also as a site of feminist reappropriation of alternative figurations for female subjectivity" (Cavarero, 1995: xvi). Her telling was thus always already an un-telling. She returns in order to displace – renewing and perverting a tradition founded on her own exclusion.

violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captured and the enslaved" (Hartman, 2008: 3). This requires that we embody singularity while also respecting the opacity of singularity – that it cannot be properly known; that it defies the episteme of philosophical definition. That it is, by philosophical standards and measures, *inappropriate*. It requires the resurrection of "lives from the ruins" and the construction of stories from "the locus of impossible speech" (*ibid.*) – mandates that should be familiar to us from our reading of Cavarero's "Narrative Against Destruction".[8]

But such resurrection through narration – telling the untold stories and giving voice to those who have been muted, hearing their screams while attending to their silences – always also involves modes of un-telling. The making that constitutes narratives against destruction is also a form of unmaking. This is why such narratives are ultimately counternarratives, and sometimes even anti-narratives – they go against the grain of hegemonic archives and definitions, in an attempt to resist the violence such archives produce and reproduce.[9] Recall Hartman's claim that she "intended both to tell an impossible

[8] In this specific context, Hartman is not so much motivated by a privileging of biography over autobiography as she is trying to grapple with the silences conjured up when *there can be no* autobiography: "There is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage", Hartman notes (Hartman, 2008: 3). What to make of such erasure, such all-encompassing silence? Although I would note that at least one such autobiographical narrative is available to us, namely Phillis Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," which was first published in 1773 in her collection *Poems of Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, and which has achieved critical acclaim. For a rich engagement with this poem, see Jordan, 2006. For a discussion of how she got her name (Phillis) from the very ship (the *Phillis*) that took her from the coast of Africa to the United States, where the Wheatleys purchased her at the auction in which a girl became a slave (and also took the name of a ship), see Sharpe (2016: 42). It was the Wheatleys, Sharpe notes, who allowed and encouraged Phillis to become literate, to write poetry, to become "the first Black human to be published in America" (Sharpe citing Jordan, in Sharpe, 2016: 43). I would like to thank Val King for bringing Wheatley's poem to my attention.

[9] I would like to thank James R. Walker for convincing me of the importance of counternarratives.

story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling" (*ibid.*: 11). Her claim echoes that of Philip, who, in the brief essay published at the end of her poem *Zong!,* repeats, like a mantra, that her poetic writing is an attempt to tell the story that cannot, yet must, be told: "*Zong!* is the Song of the untold story; it cannot be told yet must be told, but only through its un-telling" (Philip, 2008: 207).[10]

If Hartman turned to a court case – one in which the murder of an unnamed girl on board a ship named *Recovery* was treated – to tell the impossible story of Venus, Philip's un-telling involves an earlier court case treating the massacre of some 150 African slaves who were thrown overboard as the captain of the *Zong*, a slave ship bound for Jamaica but lost at sea due to his navigational errors, sought to retrieve insurance money for those losses. Notably, the court case is not about a massacre, not about the murder of 150 Africans – indeed, it is not about *human losses* at all – but rather an insurance claim dispute in which those humans killed are reduced to cargo, to property, to nameless ditto dittos with a price tag but no inherent human value. It thus involves its own violent erasures and silences, obfuscating the fact that human lives were lost, and like Venus, the 150 men, women, and children who were thrown overboard became but footnotes in a legal dispute about property value.

Philip's poem was published in the same year as "Venus in Two Acts" (2008). We might say that her un-telling and Hartman's counternarrative are both attempts to wrestle with Cavarero's aporia: How to tell a story that cannot be told? How to tell it without reproducing the forms of violence that produced it in the first place? And how to tell it without offering closure (definition, meaning, salvation) where no closure can be had? Philip, like Hartman and Cavarero, cautions against any and all attempts to provide such closure. Writing in her journal about her writing process, she notes: *"my urge to make sense must*

[10] In an interview, Philip elaborates: "We can't tell these stories in the traditional way; or the Western way of narrative – in terms of a beginning, a middle, and [an] end. I think part of the challenge, certainly for me, was to find a form that could bear this 'not telling' [...] to bear this story which can't be told, which must be told, but through not telling" (Philip interviewed in Saunders, 2008: 72).

be resisted" (*ibid.*: 193), and, insofar as grammar is an ordering mechanism that in some sense mirrors the very logic of the slave trade as ordering force, her own writerly strategy becomes to disarm the ordering force of grammar, to make the random organisation of words on the page yield *nothing* (opposing the logic whereby the random picking of African slaves was expected to yield *something* – labour, profit, offspring).[11]

But like Hartman, Philip is aware of the power of romance, the tempting force of offering meaning in a context that was so brutally meaningless:

> I fight the desire to impose meaning on the words – it is so instinctive, this need to impose meaning: this is the generating impulse of, and towards, language, isn't it – to make and, therefore, to communicate, meaning? How did they – the Africans on board the *Zong* – make meaning of what was happening to them? What meaning did they make of it and how did they make it mean? This story that must be told; that can only be told by not telling (*ibid.*: 194).

Rather than imposing meaning where meaning cannot be had, then, telling the story that cannot be told becomes a matter of giving voice, of crying out, of attending to silence as a language unto itself, and it pulls the reader into these registers of the inappropriate: "I teeter between accepting the irrationality of the event and the fundamental human impulse to make meaning from phenomena around us. The resulting abbreviated, disjunctive, almost non-sensical style of the poems demands a corresponding effort on the part of the reader to 'make sense' of an event that eludes understanding, perhaps permanently" (*ibid.*: 198). Counter-narratives and un-telling – both are narratives against destruction (in the sense that they seek to make visible and audible singular uniqueness at its site of erasure), but they are also destructive narratives (in that they seek to amplify the impossibility of narration in the wake of

[11] As Patricia Saunders puts it in her interview with Philip, referencing her work alongside that of Hartman: "I feel like the work that you all are doing now is about asking, How have we become so comfortable in our knowledge and our comprehension of slavery? What does it mean to comprehend such a horrific experience?" (Saunders, 2008: 70).

violence). Like Cavarero's sitting with inexplicability (and Brand's sitting in the room with history) they require that we resist our desire for meaning, haunting and daunting as it might be.

Philip's poem is made up from the words contained within the 1783 legal brief of the *Zong* case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, reproduced in full at the end of her book. From the two-page document, Philip extracts words and reorganises them on the page, making up the nonsensical series of poems that is *Zong!* Explaining that she used the text of the legal report much like a painter would use paint or a sculptor stone, "the material with which I work being preselected and limited", Philip strives to fragment and mutilate her source, "forcing the eye to track across the page in an attempt to wrest meaning from words gone astray" (*ibid.*). She works consciously to contaminate the report, to turn it into "half-tellings and un-tellings" (*ibid.*: 199), cutting it up and picking it apart, and just as the Africans on board the ship had been randomly captured to serve as slaves – and then again were randomly thrown overboard in order for the captain to collect insurance money – Philip randomly selects words from the report and spreads them across the page like drops of water. She describes this dis-organisation of a legal document that took itself to be "certain, objective, and predictable" (*ibid.*: 191) as a destructive act: "I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object – create semantic mayhem" (*ibid.*: 193). Monstrosities abound. The legal archives mimic those of philosophy – certain, objective, predictable… and lethal – whereas the counternarratives require our un-telling (or, with Cavarero, un-weaving) to the point of murder.

And yet, Hartman's "playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story" (2008: 11) signals the creative side of such un-telling – that it opens the door to a "might" and that the disjunctive is always already also a subjunctive. As Hartman un-tells the story of Venus and her friend, she cautions against romance and closure, but she also deliberately turns her attention away from the violence of their being murdered and focuses instead on the care that might have defined their

relation. In what follows, I want to attend to such forms of care, and bring us back to Cavarero's claim that narration might be the oldest form of care understood as attention to the accidental.

Narrating as an Act of Care: Intimacy, Relationality, and the Excess of Uniqueness

In the imagined horizon of the "might" of critical fabulation, Venus holds and beholds her dying friend, not the way the two of them were held in the hold of the ship, captured and subjected to the brutal violence of white men and to the holding patterns of history, which frame them as nothing but victims of that violence, but rather the *holding* and *holding on* that form the condition of freedom, the "hold on" (an imperative?) that appears in the final line of Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (to which I will return at length), or the *"I am held, and held"* that Christina Sharpe reads as a mark of resistance that defies the multiplying holds of the archive – holds in which deaths have accumulated, the ditto dittos filling "the archives of the past that is not yet past" (Sharpe, 2016: 73).[12] It is the holding and beholding of Brand's "map to be held; to behold" – a ruttier pointing to the anywhere and everywhere of possibility and of Black being exceeding "all of the violence directed at Black life" that Sharpe attends to on the final page of *In the Wake* – a book in which she chronicles Black life and resistance in the wake of slavery through a series of counternarratives: the un-telling that is wake-work (*ibid.*: 134).[13]

Both Hartman and Sharpe thus arrive, in the culminating moments of their work, at this imperative to hold and be held, through the image of two Black girls holding one another, despite and against the logics of the hold. And this holding/being held carries an enormous promise of intimacy and resistance, outside of the restrictive frames of the archives.

[12] For a more elaborate discussion of the hold of the slave ship, and its connotations for thinking Black life in the wake of slavery, see Sharpe, 2016: 68–101.
[13] See also Brand, 2011.

It is narrative as care and salvation; wake-work as care-work. It is what Sharpe has called "an ordinary note of care" (Sharpe, 2017: 132),[14] and what Hartman refers to as "a love letter to all those who had been harmed" (Hartman, 2021: 129). It is narrative – and counternarrative – as reparation, in the wake of all-too-much violence and destruction. As Hartman notes, "[i]t would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparation, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive" (2008: 4).

Her work is thus a meditation on the urgency (but also the dangers) of tracing the *whoness* of Venus in the act of holding and being held (dangerous, as we have seen, because potentially romanticising, and prone to seeking closure where there can be none, which is why we must refuse such closure, or practise what she calls *narrative restraint*, or what Philip referred to as the necessity to resist the urge for meaning). It is also a meditation on the impossibility of that urgent task. It is not a matter of "giving voice" to Venus, but rather of imagining "what cannot be verified [...] an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak)" (*ibid.*: 12). It is, as Philip keeps reminding us, a story that cannot, yet must, be told. If Oedipus proved unable to ask "who am I?" when faced with the monstrous sphinx, it seems impossible to ask "who is Venus?" when faced with the monstrosity of slavery and white supremacy:

> One cannot ask, "Who is Venus?" because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults or crass jokes. The archive is, in this sense, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a

[14] See also Sharpe, 2018: 173.

> few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history (*ibid.*: 2).

Nevertheless, Hartman does not give up trying: "I want to say more than this. I want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story about *two girls* capable of retrieving what remains dormant – the purchase or claim of their lives on the present – without committing further violence in my own act of narration" (*ibid.*).[15]

I want to suggest that this search for what is "more than" is what motivates Hartman's project as a whole, and that it amounts to something very similar to Cavarero's attempts at narrating singularity. The "more than" gives us a *who* rather than a *what*. It tells the story of *these two girls* (as Cavarero often puts it: *this* and not another).[16] And this desire for the "more

[15] This fear of reproducing the violence of the archive is expressed time and again in Hartman's work. "How," she asks in "Venus in Two Acts", "does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" (2008: 4). Her first book, *Scenes of Subjection*, is motivated by a desire to turn *away* from the violence that otherwise floods the archives: "rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned" (Hartman, 1997: 4).

[16] Note that if Cavarero was concerned with our desire to have our story told to us by others, Hartman gives voice to a desire to tell *their* story – the story of *the two girls*. Perhaps these desires are not all that different in the end. Hartman's desire to tell *their* story is arguably also tied to her desire to understand her own. Like Stein's biography of Toklas, which turned out to be an autobiographical account of her own life, Hartman clearly also turns to the archives in search of herself. As she listens to the silence of the dungeons in West Africa, trying to discern stories of uniqueness in the depths of that silence, she notes that such a search was motivated by autobiographical desires: "Hovering in an empty room was my attempt to figure out how this underground had created and marked me" (Hartman, 2007: 130). Her project "is personal because this history has engendered [her]" (Hartman, 2008: 4). And her telling of her journey to Ghana begins with a discussion of her own name, Saidiya, which she chose while in college to assert her African heritage, instead of Valerie, which had been chosen by her mother as a gilded golden name with the potential to erase all that her mother did not want to be, and that she wanted to save her daughter from becoming (*ibid.:* 8).

than" motivates her most recent work, too: "*Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* lingers in the space of this *more* and attends to what exceeds the frame, *the something else* and the *what-might-be*" (Hartman, 2021: 131). It is "an archive of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise" (Hartman, 2019: xv). It is an attempt to read the wayward as possibility:

> Wayward, related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, wilful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild. [...] Wayward: the unregulated movement of drifting and wandering; sojourns without a fixed destination, ambulatory possibility, interminable migrations, rush and flight, black locomotion; the everyday struggle to live free. The attempt to elude capture by never settling. [...] Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. To claim the right to opacity. To strike, to riot, to refuse (*ibid.*: 227).

The wayward is what cannot be captured by the force of a definition. It is what, on Cavarero's account, has always haunted and troubled philosophy – its eternal remainder, what undoes it from within, what renders it monstrous and what resists this monstrosity. Cavarero and Hartman alike insist on the need to make visible and audible what otherwise would exceed the frame. They seek to be with that very excess, while tarrying with the violence that has produced it *as* excess. In Cavarero's words: "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" (Cavarero, 2000: 3). And in Hartman's: "The experiment in prose and the construction of a serial, recursive narrative enabled me to tell stories that exceeded, even as they did not [...] escape, the ditto ditto of archival violence" (Hartman, 2021: 131).

I take it that Sharpe tries to get at something like this excess too, as she reflects, with Hartman, on care as an antidote to violence (Sharpe, 2018: 174). She meditates on the beauty that her mother brought into her life – her own small note of care if you will – whereby she insisted that there be "more" than the acts of violence and humiliation that she and her siblings were

subjected to on a day-to-day basis: "even as we experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected" (Sharpe, 2016: 4). The beauty of her mother's acts of care, her small note of care to see them off as they went out into the world, made space for the "more than" and the possible, in the midst of impossibility. It is this excess that marks the wake as a space of disaster *and* possibility – it is, we might say, what makes poetry possible after the Middle Passage. Against the dehumanising force of the hold, to hold and to be held is to appear as unique, as "more than" a victim buried in the archives. Sharpe ends her book with an oft-cited image of such excess, an image that echoes her mother's ordinary note of care: "while '*we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to this overwhelming force, we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force*'" (*ibid.*: 134).[17]

[17] It is of course no coincidence that Sharpe attributes such care-work to her mother. Cavarero often reflects on the fact that care has been framed as maternal, but rather than rejecting such associations, she works with the stereotype, insisting that we revisit the maternal to reclaim care not as self-erasure but as an invitation to grapple with structures of dependency (Cavarero, 2016: 14). Keguro Macharia references Sharpe's closing line from *In the Wake* to highlight the devaluation of such ordinary notes of care in a society that privileges abstract thought: "Care pays attention to how we *are known to ourselves and to each other*. Care lingers at the *ordinary*: notices it, names it, creates it, inhabits it, pursues it, practices it. [...] There might be something *theoretically uninteresting* [and we might add, with Cavarero, *epistemologically inappropriate*] about care. It is feminized work, so devalued. It is also, frequently, tedious, repetitive, unglamorous work: feeding the vulnerable, cleaning up shit and puke, washing bedpans, changing nappies, cooking, cleaning, medicating. Repeat. And repeat" (Macharia, 2018). Elsewhere (Söderbäck, 2018), I have engaged with Cavarero's work on maternal care at greater length, including the implicitly white perspective of that discussion, and the subsequent lack of attention to the specific experience of Black motherhood, and how that experience (in the wake of slavery) necessarily complicates assumptions Cavarero makes about the relationship between motherhood, vulnerability, and care. For a brilliant engagement with my work in this area, which extends beyond it to involve a close reading of Hortense Spiller's seminal essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," see Huzar, 2021. Huzar ends his essay with a discussion of Hartman on these issues, citing her analysis in *Lose Your Mother* on the imperilments Black mothers have suffered in order to provide care, not only for their own children of course, but also for those of their white masters and, in our own times, of

In her commentary on Hartman's work, Sarah Haley insists on the scholarly value of such attention to that which exceeds the frame, and ties it to Hartman's methodological approach:

> If the founding violence of the archive is obliteration, the founding truth of the speculative and close narrative forms is that there is more, we might call it life, interiority, vision, imagination, desire [...] that exceeds archival documentation *and* that this *more* is a legitimate subject of history and scholarly writing. This conviction both requires deep archival excavation and scratches at the archive's hubristic limits; intimate history demands a public and scholarly consideration of the historical import of the more/excess that has often been rendered inconsequential or impossible, deemed *exorbitant* (Haley, 2021: 105–6).

Exorbitance as scholarly guidepost. The "more than" most certainly is epistemologically inappropriate. Hartman's "close narrative" and "intimate history" are manners of entering the archive while refusing the archive. If historians have tended to "see numbers, refusing to see how those numbers unhuman [*dehumanise*]" (Macharia, 2018), and if philosophers have sought out a universal "that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one" (Cavarero, 2000: 9), Hartman and Cavarero offer their intimate history and philosophy of narration, respectively, to refuse such anonymity, to insist on embodied uniqueness and on the exorbitant in the wake of – and despite – violence, silence, and erasure.

They bring into focus living breathing bodies in lieu of frozen images of a past marked by violence and victimisation. Rather than "thinking through and along lines that reinscribe [their] own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter [...] has called [the] 'narratively condemned status'" (Sharpe, 2016: 13) of those buried in the archives, they

white folks in general (Huzar, 2021: 21). That maternal care-work is overdetermined by forms of racialisation (and therefore all but symmetrical) is a crucial fact that Cavarero by and large overlooks.

aspire instead to "become undisciplined" (*ibid.*), which is Sharpe's way of turning the epistemologically inappropriate into a methodological imperative. Their work is thus aspirational in Sharpe's sense of the term – they keep and put breath in the body that has been emptied of breath, and as such they seek to counter "the violence of abstraction" by way of "*care* as shared risk", between disaster and possibility (*ibid.*: 130–1).[18] They do this through an impossible narration and with the firm conviction that narration is the only path to the possible.

Such work entails intimate encounters over time with those whose lives one is trying to narrate, which in turn renders one capable precisely of seeing and hearing more than one otherwise might have – what falls outside of the frame. As Hartman puts it in terms of her own scholarly process: "I had lived in the raucous company of Mattie and Esther and Mabel and Gladys and Loretta and Edna, listening to them speaking with me daily. [...] I believe that living with them for so long enabled me to hear *something else* in the compelled biographies and meager stories of the case file and the state archives" (2021: 128). And, as we have seen in our discussion of Cavarero, the narratable self can only be understood in relation, through the constitutive "with" that marks each and every life story: "At once exposable and narratable, the existent always constitutes herself in relation to an other" (Cavarero, 2000: 40). It is to this constitutive relationality, and this living with, that I now want to turn, as I think about the kinds of relations that can be forged when singular uniqueness comes to the fore.

Narrating Wayward Lives: A Choral Ode to Women and Girls

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman sets out to tell the untold story of the first generation of Black women and girls born after emancipation. Creating an "errant path" through the streets of Philadelphia and New York (Hartman, 2019: 15), these

[18] As Cavarero puts it: "Uniqueness is not a characteristic of Man in general, but rather of every human being insofar as he or she lives and breathes" (Cavarero, 2005: 4).

women and girls are depicted as revolutionaries of their time, struggling to realise their dreams and to resist the many forms of violence that riddled their path and shaped their intimate relations. In search of the wayward, Hartman traces the footsteps of nameless girls, single mothers, queer dancers, passionate lovers, window shoppers, flaneuses, and incarcerated women (among many others) – many of whom were newly arrived in the city, seeking free love and emancipation in the workplace, refusing to be governed.

Commenting on a photograph of the "minor figure" to whom she devotes one of the opening chapters of the book – an unnamed, naked girl child reclining on an arabesque sofa in a famous Thomas Eakins photograph from around 1882 – Hartman notes, in a parenthetical remark: "The only thing I knew for sure was that she did have a name and a life that exceeded the frame in which she was captured" (*ibid.*: 15). What that name was she cannot know, and this in turn makes it impossible to trace her story beyond what the photo itself – and the speculations it has already garnered – tell us:

> From these bits and pieces, it has been difficult to know where to begin or even what to call her. The fiction of a proper name would evade the dilemma, not resolve it. It would only postpone the question: Who is she? I suppose I could call her Mattie or Kit or Ethel or Mabel. Any of these names would do and would be the kind of name common to a young colored woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. There are other names reserved for the dark: Sugar Plum, Peaches, Pretty Baby, and Little Bit – names imposed on girls like her that hint at the pleasures afforded by intimate acts performed in rented rooms and dimly lit hallways (*ibid.*: 14).

Again, "Who is she?" is an impossible question, yet one that Hartman insists on nevertheless asking, as she tries to trace "the singular life of this particular girl" (*ibid.*: 15). For this Venus, "a name is a luxury that she isn't afforded", and "without a name, it was unlikely that [Hartman] would ever find this particular girl" (*ibid.*), *in her singular uniqueness*. She is thus forced to fabulate, to "move beyond the photograph and find another

path to her," and this moving beyond the image, this looking for what exceeded the frame in which the girl was captured, ultimately becomes an invitation for Hartman to "retrace her steps through the city and imagine her many lives" (*ibid.*: 30). If Cavarero warned that "'Man' is a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one" (Cavarero, 2000: 9), and if Hartman, too, worries that this very monstrosity is what has served to expel Black girls and women from history, she is nevertheless interested in thinking about how this one nameless girl – this minor figure whose story will remain forever unknown to us – "can stand in for all the others" (Hartman, 2019: 16–7). Having stared at the photo for a full year, Hartman felt compelled to write "not the story of one girl, but a serial biography of a generation, a portrait of the chorus, a moving picture of the wayward" (*ibid.*: 31).

Her analysis echoes that of Sharpe, who also spent a full year staring at a picture of a Black nameless girl. In the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010, Sharpe comes across the photo, mostly blurry, but where the face of a small Black girl comes into focus. She is lying on a stretcher, eyes open, she is wounded and wearing a hospital gown. What catches Sharpe's attention is the note affixed to her forehead: "a piece of transparent tape with the word *Ship* written on it" (2016: 44). In this girl she comes to recognise herself, indeed, she recognises "the common condition of Black being in the wake" (*ibid.*: 45). Sharpe explicitly compares her with Venus (*ibid.*: 51), and with myriad other Black anonymous and nameless girls whose singularity has been drowned in the archives. If the ships on which they arrived all had names – the *Recovery*, the *Phillis*, the *Zong* – these girls themselves were nameless, sometimes they came to be named after the ship that had carried them across as cargo (like Phillis), and sometimes (and this Sharpe identifies in the girl from the photo, by no means a slave, but a Black girl inhabiting the wake) they came to stand in for "ship" in general, for all girls in general, for the many meagre girls, the part for the whole.

We have seen that Philip – whose poem tells yet another tale of trans-Atlantic namelessness – wept as she encountered the meagre girls of the archives. Reflecting further on this epithet in an interview, she observes that "there is a whole story

in that word, "meagre". Where was her mother? Her father? Whom did she turn to when scared?" (Saunders, 2008: 77). These final questions are attempts at exceeding the frame. They mark a search for uniqueness. And they are what drive Sharpe to look further, look again, and to include the girl at the centre of her work, trying to position herself *with* her, in the wake: "My attention to her was an attempt to make visible, audible, sensible a life that was there and being lived. A life that is in excess of the photograph" (Sharpe, 2018: 176). Returning again to the note on her forehead she cannot but ask: "What can one see beyond that word that threatens to block out everything else?" (*ibid.*: 118). How to annotate otherwise, despite and against the anonymity of the archive? How to take care, where none has been offered? Sharpe finds her answer in a small note of care that exceeds the frame, that allows us to look elsewhere, to see something *more*:

> I was looking for more than the violence of the slave ship, the migrant and refugee ship, the container ship, and the medical ship. I saw that leaf in her hair, and with it I performed my own annotation that might open this image out into a life, however precarious, that was always there. *That leaf is stuck in her still neat braids.* And I think: *Somebody braided her hair before the earthquake hit* (*ibid.*: 120).

In these girls – one on a couch, the other on a stretcher, each navigating their own disaster while trying to also look beyond the frame of possibility – Hartman and Sharpe find opportunities for imagining otherwise, and for imagining a life beyond the frames of disaster. *Somebody braided her hair before the earthquake hit. Whom did she turn to when scared?*

It is by way of her very anonymity that Hartman's minor figure – the nameless girl on the couch – "yields to the chorus" (Hartman, 2019: 17). The desire to tell *her* story amounts to a desire to tell a *collective* story, and to tell it *as* a Black woman: "I endeavored to regard Black life from inside the circle and to recapture the wild thought and the beautiful recklessness capable of imagining the *with* and the *us* and the *we*" (Hartman, 2021: 131). If historical research – like so much research – is expected to be conducted by an individual from nowhere, Hartman instead insists on her locatedness and on establishing

bonds of intimacy with the individuals and communities she is engaging with: "Making new narratives entails a creative practice untethered [from] or indifferent to the rules of the historical guild, and directed by the assembly, the ensemble, the multitude, the chorus" (*ibid.*: 130). Becoming undisciplined – wrestling with the epistemological inappropriateness of the "more than" – entails becoming plural. But if Cavarero tended to approach this plurality on the scene of narration as an encounter between two – me and you – Hartman's close narration is more akin to the plural scene of the Arendtian imaginary: the assembly, the ensemble, the multitude, the chorus…[19]

The relationality of the self is here taken to its extreme. In the nude girl on the couch, not a singular life but an era comes into view, one "defined by extremes" – imperial wars and democracy, segregation and emancipation, incarceration and liberation, sexual violence and pleasure, enclosure and possibility, dutiful silence and rambunctious noise (Hartman, 2019: 31). So, Hartman ventured to follow her from Philadelphia to New York, and she "spotted her everywhere – on the corner, in the cabaret, on the boardwalk at Coney Island, in the chorus", but also, at times, she "failed to notice her" (Hartman, 2019: 33).

Seamlessly sliding from "she" to "they" and "we", Hartman tries not to render *universal* the unnamed girl (as Oedipus had done by offering "Man" as the answer to the sphinx's riddle), but to insert her into a chorus of Black girls and women whose lives were, and are, inevitably interwoven, both in terms of the violence they have endured (their disasters), and in terms of the wayward resistance that has become their response to and respite from such violence (possibility as excess). They are characterised as embodying a "beauty that propels the experiments in living otherwise", and they are depicted as harbouring a "love of *too much*" (*ibid.*). Her attempt to retrieve "minor lives from oblivion" by way of "redressing the violence of history, crafting a love letter to all those who had been harmed" (*ibid.*: 31), required her both to seek out the *who* of singular uniqueness, and the *we* of shared experience. The

[19] For an extended analysis of the Arendtian aspects of Hartman's book, see Honig (2021: 72–108).

unnamed girl on the couch comes into focus by bringing into view the many girls and women that surround the frame from which she looks out at us – holding one another, dancing together, screaming alongside one another: "The singular life of this particular girl becomes interwoven with those of other young women who crossed her path, shared her circumstances, danced with her in the chorus, stayed in the room next door in a Harlem tenement, spent sixty days together at the workhouse, and made an errant path through the city" (*ibid.*: 15).

If the monstrosity of the archives was to lump together all the Venuses as cargo and property and victims of sexual violence, Hartman's attempt at weaving the threads of their untold stories to sketch a serial biography of a generation that is anything but generalising. The anonymity of the unnamed girl, a minor figure on a couch, is radically undone by the stories that follow in Hartman's choral portrait. *Her* namelessness is not glossed over or taken for granted – it is thematised to the point of singularisation, even as she does inevitably remain nameless. And the blurry and redacted image of her, reproduced as the backdrop of the written text, comes into focus in a new way once we enter into proximity with the women who formed the backdrop of *her* lived reality. Through the lives of Ida Wells, Mattie, Mamie Sharpe, Harriet Powell, Esther Brown, Eva Perkins, and Mabel Hampton – their struggles and victories, their sexual defeats and pleasures, their fugitivity and errant paths through the slums and tenements, their maternal dispossession (*ibid.*: 74), their singing and roaring (Hartman, 2019: 282–3), their dancing within an enclosure but also with the world at their feet (*ibid.*: 303, 347), their insistence that they could be both ladies *and* Black at once (*ibid.*: 37–42) (despite the "oceanic ungendering" that Hortense Spillers has identified in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"[20]), their explorations of what might be and what could have been otherwise (*ibid.*: 46, 227–8), their trying to live while not being meant to survive (*ibid.*: 228), their ungovernability and open rebellion against the world (*ibid.*: 235, 237), their desire and defiance (Hartman, 2019: 260), and what Sharpe might have described as their living on the

[20] See Spillers, 2003: 214. For further discussion of this matter, see also Sharpe (2016: 50).

threshold between disaster and possibility (Sharpe, 2016: 134), or what is captured for Hartman in the questions pounding inside their heads: *Can I live?* and *How can I live?* (*ibid.*: 10, 349) – an unnamed minor figure comes into focus in her living breathing uniqueness, and in the company of all these girls and women whose worlds are also hers.

The untold stories of the archives are the untold stories of each Black girl and her lifeworld (in Cavarero's terms, *this* and not another). And telling such stories, as Philip points out in relation to her poem, "is totally subversive in the face of the kind of broad-brush brutalizing where people just get reduced to Negro man, Negro woman, and ditto, ditto, ditto. You pay attention to one, and it is such an amazing act – and one that spills over to all the other ditto dittos – *paying attention and taking care with just the one. Because that's all we can do is care one by one by one*" (Saunders, 2008: 78, emphasis added). Narration – and counternarration – are the oldest forms of care for the accidental, unique, and unrepeatable, in that they refuse the violence of generalisation by tending to the irreducible singularity of each life story, *taking care with just the one*. As Cavarero reiterates: "Every human being is unique, an unrepeatable existence," and no human life "leaves behind the same story" (Cavarero, 2000: 2).

It is this spilling over to all the other dittos, then, that allows Hartman to give voice to the unnamed girl, even as her story is riddled with the silence of anonymity, by way of telling the stories of Mamsie Sharpe and Esther Brown and Eva Perkins and the others. And while Hartman is acutely aware that "being black and female" has "licensed every brutal act" there is – lynching, mutilation, beating, burning, rape – she wants to insist that the way to respond to such violence is to do what one of the characters in her book, Mabel Hampton, did: simply "refuse the categories" (Hartman, 2019: 339). Refusing the categories is to be in excess of those categories: to be more than, to exceed the frame. This is what seeking out a *who* amounts to. This is how embodied uniqueness takes the place of the abstract universality of whatness.

But taking care with just the one, tending to the uniqueness of each one, always entails a relation – indeed, a web of relations. As Hartman put it in her discussion of Venus: "We

begin the story again, as always, in the wake of her disappearance and with the wild hope that our efforts can return her to the world" (Hartman, 2008: 14). To return Venus– and all the other unnamed girls – to the world, is to put them back into the web of human relations that is the condition of possibility for their singularity. It is to refuse the isolation and loneliness imposed on them by their captors, but also to reject the fantasy that their lives and deaths are historical events of a past that is distinct from our present. "If this *story of Venus* has any value at all", Hartman contends, "it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers", given "the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril" (*ibid.*: 13). To return Venus or the nameless girl on the couch to the world is part of an effort to wrestle with our own world – not to reduce them to it but to invite reflection on the ongoing effects of slavery and the violence that haunts the afterlife of property that is our own present – but also, and perhaps more importantly, to set the stage for future possibility.

Conclusion: Vocalising Relational Embodied Uniqueness

Mabel Hampton, who, like the other women in *Wayward Lives*, had experienced her fair share of the dehumanising force of generalisation, felt the power of her own embodied uniqueness on stage, dancing and singing, alongside other Black women pursuing their dreams against all odds – a choral ode to the waywardness of their fragile singularity. And while no one was there to tell *her* story, just as she herself was unable to put it into a narrative, she would attend concerts and performances and let the music flood her to the point of feeling seen and heard in her uniqueness: "Music conveyed and echoed all the stories she never told anyone, the secrets she would never disclose, the cruel things she had endured, everyone she had lost. *Remember me*. All the queer endings. In the opera house, Mabel was not a domestic, not a prisoner, not a stud, not a woman, not colored, but a big, open heart" (Hartman, 2019: 333).

Much of Cavarero's work is devoted to the power of music – and vocalisation – to express embodied uniqueness. In an interview with Elisabetta Bartolino she declares: "I am

convinced that the best antidote to metaphysics is singing" (Cavarero and Bertolino, 2008: 161).[21] If philosophy has plugged its ears to tune in solely to the inner voice of reason, this "is a symptom of a problem that has to do with the philosophical affinity for an abstract and bodiless universality, and for the domain of a word that does not come out of any throat of flesh" (Cavarero, 2005: 8). Much like narration, vocalisation provides an alternative to the monstrous-disembodied project of Western philosophy. And like narration, vocalisation is constitutively relational: "In the emission of sound that comes to penetrate the ear of another, thus evoking another voice in response, the reciprocity of communicating is a revelation, a relation, and an (inter)dependence" (Cavarero, 2012: 81). Here again Cavarero attends to themes that are central to much Black thought about the afterlife of slavery, yet she never explicitly engages with such work.[22]

For Cavarero, voice and song become properly political when taken up plurally, and in this context she does seem to venture beyond the chiasm between "me" and "you" so prevalent in her narrative theory, to a more collective "we". In the final section of *For More than One Voice*, she elaborates on a "politics of voices", wherein she draws from Arendt to articulate a view of the political whereby it is less about *what* we say and more about *who* appears in the act of vocalising (whether it be speaking or singing). In her most recent book, *Surging Democracy*, Cavarero grapples with the state of democracy in our present as it relates to past forms of democratic government. Here she devotes much of her analysis to the question of voice, and of speaking or singing in concert. Distinguishing between the soundscape of the masses and that of plurality, she proposes that the phonosphere of the former is characterised by forms of vocal unison where the uniqueness of each voice melts away and the singularity of each person dissolves into the unity of the crowd (national anthems, on this reading, have the function of giving voice to the unity of the nation), whereas the

[21] See also Dohoney, 2011.

[22] Elsewhere, I have attended to the links between Cavarero's work on voice and contemporary Black discourse on vocalisation and music in the context of trans-Atlantic slavery (Söderbäck, 2018: 7–9).

phonosphere of the latter is characterised by a sonority of plurality capable of expressing singularity and difference without deteriorating into mere cacophony – what she names pluriphony (Cavarero, 2021: 67, 70, 75). To distinguish undemocratic from democratic gatherings, then, we have to listen, attentively, to the sounds they omit.

As she traces the steps of the newly emancipated women of the turn of the last century in Philadelphia and New York, Hartman most certainly tunes into the soundscapes they produced. From Harriet Powell's revolution in a minor key to Esther Brown's riotous assembly and Mabel Hampton's choral line, Hartman narrates through sound and chronicles the role sound came to play for women whose lives were narratively condemned, lacking chroniclers, deemed unfit for history. Even the sounds they produced have by and large been buried in archival silence, consigned to oblivion: "Nobody remembers the evening [Esther Brown] and her friends raised hell on 132nd street or turned out Edmond's Cellar or made such a beautiful noise during the riot that their screams and shouts were improvised music, so that even the tone-deaf journalists from *The New York Times* described the black noise of disorderly women as a jazz chorus" (Hartman, 2019: 232).[23]

It is, as the title of the book's final chapter indicates, the chorus that opens the way for Hartman. Taking as her cue the Greek etymological meaning of chorus as *dancing within an enclosure*, Hartman identifies in the choral line an image of refusal and rebellion, "the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero" but of a collective of women, one girl standing in for any of the others, serving as "the placeholder for the story" (*ibid.*: 345, 348). Here, "particularity and distinction fade away", yet at the same time, it is in this very moment, as they are "engulfed in the crowd", that these women can be seen, perhaps for the first time, in their glorious waywardness, exceeding all frames, "an assembly sustaining the dreams of the otherwise" and "an incubator of possibility" (*ibid.*). Their unison is one of rebellion within an

[23] The sheer act of singing while captured or in the wake of capture is, undeniably, a feat. As June Jordan asks in a commentary on Black poetry: "Come to this country a slave and how should you sing?" (Jordan, 2006).

enclosure, improvisational and dissonant, yet deeply collective. The singular and the relational merge completely in the image of the chorus, no mass with a leader, but a group of wayward women longing for freedom beyond predetermined frames.

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