# DOING "VOICE" DIFFERENTLY: ADRIANA CAVARERO ON NARRATIVE AS ETHICAL ENCOUNTER

Michelle Powell
Indiana University

Voice has become a common goal of educational research and pedagogical practices aimed at equity and social justice. That is, bringing marginalized groups *to* voice, allowing diverse students to *have* a voice, and setting up classrooms that privilege silenced voices are frequent goals in educational research and practice. This desire to listen to new voices has merit given the history of US education in which the perspectives of the powerful few (read: white, upper class, male, straight), speak for the whole.[1] The interjection today of counter stories, histories, and events that speak to marginalized existences and bring to visibility the experiences of those who have been historically omitted, overlooked, and diminished is viewed as a critical tool in the quest to correct these oppressive pasts.[2]

Qualitative inquiry in education, for its part, has a particularly salient relationship with voice. As a methodology, researchers and scholars often seek to represent traditionally marginalized perspectives in order to expand the canon of knowledge that informs educational practice. Centralizing the voices of silenced subjects is common in research influenced by critical theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory.[3] Such work positions itself as a direct

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[1] Frederick Erickson, "Qualitative Methods in Research on Teaching," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, ed. Merlin Wittrock (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1986), 121.

[2] For a vivid example of the marginalization of minoritized groups in the field of philosophy of education, see Thomas E. Spencer's paper from the 1968 OVPES meeting, which denounces the validity of contributions by people of color within US history. It is worth noting, too, that the introduction to the Proceedings shows that efforts to counter this kind of marginalization are not new; the historiographic accuracy of his argument was challenged from the floor and the editors felt they had to remark on the contentiousness of the paper. But, the presence of his paper confirms the struggle that people of color and other minoritized perspectives have faced against what is thought to be "objective" philosophical work. Spencer, "On the Place of the Negro in American History," in *Proceedings of the 1968 Annual Meeting of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society: The Relation of Philosophy of Education to Social Processes*, ed. W. Richard Stephens (Terre Haute: Indiana State University, 1969), 15–26.

[3] Often these works have been influenced by key figures such as Patricia Hill Collins, Derrick Bell, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Gloria Ladson-Billings. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education and the Practice of Freedom* (New

challenge to positivist, scientific research methods that value "objectivity"[4] at the expense of lived experience.[5] In the attempt to account for the knowledge that can be drawn from lived experience, storytelling, and story collection in the form of narrative inquiry are prominent research devices in qualitative methods.

How to ethically and effectively use voices collected in qualitative research remains a central question, however. Some researchers advocate the importance of allowing the voices of the research subjects to speak for themselves, resisting the temptation to interpret over them. Here, experience is treated as a privileged form of knowledge that the researcher should not overwrite. For example, allowing "women," "people of color," "queer people," "people with disabilities" and so forth to tell their own stories is presented as a means of challenging patriarchal, racist, homophobic, and ableist power structures. Allowing for the proliferation of voices, according to these methods, makes it possible for marginalized perspectives to gain critical traction and enter into educational discourse. Attempting to maintain democratic, socially just, and ethical practices when attempting to correct a history of oppression becomes challenging work.

But methods rooted in voice are not without their critics. In particular, scholars working in poststructuralist traditions have often challenged the focus on voice. In the 1990s, educational scholarship experienced a wave of scholarly work centered on these critiques, and in direct response to the move toward "student voice" work. Drawing on the insights of theorists like Derrida, notions of the truth, the subject, and the real were brought into question. Critical pedagogues, in their own work, began to question the full possibilities of voice in the classroom.[6] The primacy of "experience" was turned on its head[7] and the possibilities of self-definition were called into question.[8]

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York: Routledge, 1994); Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory* (New York: New Press, 1995); and Ladson-Billings, "Just What is Critical Race Theory and What is it Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?" *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, no. 1 (1998): 7–24.

[4] Patti Lather, "Against Empathy, Voice, and Authenticity," in *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging Conventional, Interpretive and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*, eds. Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (New York: Routledge, 2009), 17.

[5] Catherine Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1993).

[6] Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't this Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297–325; Mimi Orner, "Interrupting the Calls for Student Voice in 'Liberatory Education': A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective," in *Feminism and Critical Pedagogy*, eds. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 74–89.

[7] Lather, "Against Empathy, Voice, and Authenticity," 17–26; Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–797.

[8] Wanda Pillow, "Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 2 (2003): 175–196.

During the 1990s wave of poststructuralist critiques of presence and voice that landed in educational scholarship, scholars tried to reckon with the desire to account for the marginalization of certain subject positions within the academy alongside poststructuralist assertions that the "authenticity" of the sort that research data often seeks is impossible. These critiques were leveraged, in particular, in places like qualitative inquiry where methodologies that rely heavily on narrative—such as ethnography, case studies, and grounded theory—occupy a prominent role. While these critiques still surface today in the late 2010s,[9] they seem to have lost traction in favor of wholesale adoption of the promise of voice. Voice has emerged as the privileged site of agentic subject possibility. The practice of looking to "voice" as a social corrective in education has become so prevalent that it is assumed to be inherently liberatory and often remains immune to sustained philosophical critique.

In this article I look to the work of Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero for what she might contribute to the possibility of voice work. Cavarero's philosophy both takes seriously but also critiques poststructuralist skepticism concerning presence and the subject. I will suggest that Cavarero's account of narrative and relationality offers a powerful way to think about the ethical stakes of voice work. Cavarero offers a philosophically rigorous articulation of voice that I would like to suggest can contribute productively to debates on voice in educational research and practice. Cavarero's position is helpful because on the one hand she draws on poststructuralist thought, often viewed as the tradition offering the sharpest critique of "voice"; yet, on the other hand, she locates "voice" in the form of narrative or the narratable self as the location of ethical possibility.

### Summary Of Thought: Cavarero And The "Who"

Cavarero may be unfamiliar to many scholars of education working in the US. She is particularly known for her work on voice, relationality, and ethics. Indeed, she comes out of a feminist tradition where consciousness raising circles are a common practice.[10] Consciousness raising circles use voice, an important component of allowing the concerns of marginalized peoples to be expressed. Thus, her work has much in common with conversations happening around voice in education.

The crux of Cavarero's ethics lies in the consideration of the interdependence of narration and relationality. Narration requires the coming together of two subjects.[11] Cavarero's intervention asserts the importance of the

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[9] Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei, eds., *Voice In Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging Conventional, Interpretive, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[10] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul Kottman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 59–60.

[11] As I later discuss, Cavarero conceives of the subject in ways that differ from the Anglo tradition, and which lead to her general challenge to the sort of identity politics that is most commonly practiced in the American academy.

uniqueness of these two subjects, drawing specifically on Hannah Arendt's notion of "uniqueness." According to Arendt, the unique is related to the *who* of each of us. While much of Western philosophy has been concerned with the question of *what* is Man, or the essence of Man, the result has been a failure to take note of *who* Man is. As Arendt claims, "the moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him . . . with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us."[12] This shift from *what* to *who* is significant and accounts for Cavarero's general critique of identity politics. Identity politics, in her estimation, focuses on *what* someone is at the expense of the unique. For Cavarero, human experience is not about categories. Identity categories, in other words, while they can offer us some useful information about a person, always fail to account for the specific uniqueness of a single person. This is not to say that categories of identity do not have consequences or that they do not account for ways that individuals might be located within social structures. While Cavarero invokes the *who* as singular, she is not then considering the *who* to be without collective belonging. The critical element is that Cavarero locates political and ethical possibilities in the unique, the *who*, as opposed to the *what*.

Crucially, Cavarero does not adhere to canonical modes of thinking about subjectivity and self-other relationships. In fact, she challenges the very idea that one can only become intelligible through the category of the subject. In contrast to the psychoanalytic tradition that considers self-other relationships to be built upon a primary trauma, Cavarero presents what some scholars describe as a more altruistic possibility of sociality.[13] Psychoanalytic accounts of the subject all rely on the encounter between self and other to constitute subjectivity, but while traditional accounts given by Hegel and Nietzsche describe this entry into subjectivity as violent, Cavarero's work challenges the notion that it is a traumatic entry into subjectivity that drives self-other relationships.[14] Instead she argues for a politics and ethics that looks to friendships and love relationships as the site where people navigate their subjectivity through their shared vulnerability.

Similarly to her critique of psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity, she takes issue with the idea that subjectivity is textually based, disagreeing with theorists like Barthes. She says:

> Taking writing as a paradigm—making every language into a text—also turns every "real" existent into something definable as "extra-textual" or "extra-discursive." In this way

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[12] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 181.

[13] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 13–14, 31–32.

[14] Paul Kottman, translator's introduction to Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, xii.

the text, or the traditional form of the biographical and autobiographical genre, wins out over life.[15]

Poststructuralism's strong textualism, in her view, is in conflict with the unique. In other words, the uniqueness of each individual's story is overlooked when subject constitution is considered merely something that arises intertextually.

Like Arendt, who locates narration as the site of uniqueness, Cavarero's argument focuses on what she calls the narratable self.

> The narratable self—as the "house of uniqueness"—is for this reason not the fruit of an intimate and separated experience, or the *product* of our memory. It is neither the fantasmic outcome of a project, nor the imaginary protagonist of the story that we want to have. It is not a *fiction* that can distinguish itself from *reality*. It is rather the familiar scene [*sapore familiar*] of every self, in the temporal extension of a life-story that is this and not another.[16]

This narratable self should not be confused with the individual or as pointing to interiority, psychology, or agency.[17] Rather, the narratable self, as Cavarero describes, is an inherent condition of being human.[18] That is, we are each aware that we have a life story and that each person we come in contact with does as well, even if we do not know the details of his/her life or even who they are. As she says, "what is essential is the familiar experience of a narratability of the self, which, not by chance we always perceive in the other, even when we do not know their story at all."[19] The narratable self, for Cavarero, is at its core relational. Because one comes into the world without language and without memory of her birth, in order to fulfill her desire for her autobiography, she requires the assistance of a biographer to help her fill that gap.[20] It is through this relationship—between biographer and autobiographer—that the narratable self emerges.

Cavarero thus locates the answer to the question of *who*, the unique, as discernable in narration. Narratives, she asserts, are the instrument that delivers and discovers the "who." But the delivery of this narration requires the help of another. Because of this we are all fundamentally vulnerable and dependent on another to achieve the telling of our life story. The ethics of the encounter lie in the fact that these two come together, not necessarily as fully intelligible to

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[15] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 42.

[16] Cavarero, 34.

[17] Kottman, translator's introduction to Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, ix–x.

[18] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 33.

[19] Cavarero, 34.

[20] Cavarero, 37.

each other or with the goal of intelligibility; rather, two come together based on the assumption that each is unique.[21]

In this next section I will venture a few suggestions for ways that Cavarero's thought might help us gain insights into the ethics of voice work in education. Doubtless, much of the educational research that focuses on voice and narrative is driven by a desire to create and foster greater justice and ethical relationships. Indeed, Cavarero's work leads us to suspect that when educational scholars use "voice," and "narrative," they may in fact be impelled by a desire to recognize the unique, the *who* of others. But voice work tends to drift towards a focus on "what"—to look to voice and narrative as the site of a true, stable, fixed self and as the index of identity. In other words, when narrative research aims to map identities and code uniqueness as data, it risks resolving that uniqueness. Cavarero instead asks us to shift our understandings of what voicings can do and what stories can tell us. If we look at narration as Cavarero suggests, as the site of the discovery of the *who* and founded in relationality, we can begin envisioning a different kind of voice project, one that looks not to resolve ethical ambiguity, but instead seeks to directly engage with it. Cavarero's work suggests focusing, or re-focusing, on the ethical orientation of research. Qualitative research, on this reading, would not be conceived of as the site of the researcher's uncovering and publication of others' stories—this is hubris. Cavarero's focus on the sites of friendship and love relationships should not be taken to mean that researchers should simply shift the focus of their study to these relationships, but as a more radical stance that brings that ethical charge to each of us and also humbles us. Cavarero's point is that we are all in relationship in formal and informal ways, and that there is a critical call to ethical engagement in the seemingly simple fact of these relationships. Stories do not need to be brought into the public forum to be important, or to be real. Encounters do not require recording or coding to be ethical and authentic. Thus, qualitative research must resist the temptation to forestall or create clarity out of the messiness and responsibility of ethical engagement. Qualitative research usually seeks conclusions that aim to *solve* relationships, to declare what one is *supposed* to do, how one is *supposed* to act. A great deal of recent research that focuses on identity and identity politics, moreover, risks making "products" out of encounters and "brands" out of people. Studying people's stories in efforts to uncover and map identity obscures and diverts from what Cavarero argues is the ethical responsibility to engage with the radical uniqueness of each person and each relationship. The kind of research that informs "diversity training" is an example of the way that the desire for relationship and recognition can be "resolved" into highly prescriptive solutions to relationality. Cavarero's emphasis on the "who"

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[21] Kottman, translator's introduction to Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, x, xv.

should not be confused with the current cultural climate that is obsessed with "self-identification," personal branding, and so forth. Cavarero's is a radical politics, as it is grounded in the contingent encounter of people. Instead, Cavarero's work serves as a reminder that "identity" is only ever something encountered in ever increasingly complicated human interactions.

If we take seriously Cavarero's centering of the question of *who* as the primary philosophical task, how might this shape classrooms and research practices? Importantly, *who* is fundamentally a question that can only be answered through relationships. As Cavarero states, "a unique being is such only in relation, and the context, of a plurality of others, which, likewise unique themselves, are distinguished reciprocally—the *one from the other.*"[22] Although Cavarero does not look to education in her own work, education is a perfect site to consider the ethical implications of encounter. Cavarero looks to Greek epic, especially the Odyssey, as paradigmatic of the desire to have one's story told.[23] She could also have looked to classical theorizations of the teacher-student relationship. Plato, for instance, insisted in the *Phaedrus* that authentic learning occurred only in in-person dialogue between student and teacher; he was suspicious of speech that was fixed, stable, and written. Thinking about voice and narrative in Cavarero's terms might help us, too, remember that teaching and learning is a site of ethical relations. When we can only see the "what" of students and teachers—focusing, for example, on mapping identities as sets of data points—we may be losing out on the chance to deepen and honor our relationships. What if, for example, we envisioned student-teacher relationships as one of Cavarero's sites of ethical encounter. That is, like friendships and love relationships, which she uses to center her argument, the relationship between teacher and student—that of mentorship—might be an equally powerful location to do the ethical work of the discovery of the *who*.

If we locate ethics in these relationships, our teaching and our scholarship might appear less "productive." This might mean that scholarship slows down, as the development of relationships happen across time, not according to schedules or academic calendars. It is easier to schedule "what" than "who." It might also change the ways we think about training teachers. It might cause us to question the extent to which our current practices center the "what's" of quantifiable identities at the expense of the *who's* of unique characters. Similarly, this could bring the focus of researchers back to what is happening in the classroom, where the teacher-student relationship is the primary site of ethics, and remind scholars that ethics exists not in the collection of stories or mounting of data, but the being there, in relation. Research imagined as the "togetherness" of the discovery of the "who" would point to seeing the relationships in which "voices" and "narratives" are

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[22] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 43.
[23] Cavarero, 17–45.

produced and collected not as consumable data, but as the essence of what education should be about.

Moreover, this also changes the way stories, storytelling, and narrative might be collected. And, more radically, Cavarero forces us to consider what these stories *are* and what they can *do*. If for Cavarero the story, "is not a *fiction* that can distinguish itself from *reality*" then the details that are captured in interviews or autobiographies are not actually the most important element of a story.[24] And in many ways, trying to pin it down, make it intelligible, and to transform it into the *what* of a person avoids the ethical task at play in the *who*. As Kottman explains, "the text (whether written or oral) or the script of this life-story, is not the most important thing. Indeed, *what* the life-story contains—its discursive manifestations, its contents, its style, even its particular language or idiom—is from [Cavarero's] perspective; inessential."[25] Instead of an end point, engaging with stories, then, becomes the beginning of a larger political and ethical project.

Cavarero's displacement of the content of narration in favor of the ethical encounter in which storytelling takes place should make us ask more specific questions about how to best represent voices collected in qualitative research. Some researchers advocate the importance of allowing the voices of the research subject to speak for themselves, resisting the temptation to interpret over them. One might read Cavarero as suggesting this method, but that would be a mistake. Such a method oversimplifies the ethical stakes and risks assuming that speaking for oneself points to a stable "reality." Cavarero does not think narrative speaks for itself. It does not speak identity or essence. The narratable self is not to be equated with the content of a story.[26] We can recall Arendt's warning that it can be easy to slip into the *what* of a person when trying to account for the *who*. When we do this, we lose sight of the unique.[27] People, for example, must confine their stories—be "what"—in order to be legible—as queer, woman, and so forth. Thus, when Cavarero centers the uniqueness of *who*, she is not suggesting that one's story simply "speaks for itself," alone, but rather, is disclosed in relationality, not something to be "identified" in the details of the narrative.

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

Cavarero's insistence on relationality as the ethical ground of narration can also be read implicitly perhaps in recent feminist arguments in favor of "slow scholarship."[28] Slow scholarship advocates resisting

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[24] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 34.

[25] Kottman, translator's introduction to Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, xxi

[26] Kottman, xvi.

[27] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 181.

[28] Alison Mountz, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Lloyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, Risa Whitson, Roberta Hawkins, Trina Hamilton, and Winifred Curran, "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through

"deliverables" demanded by a neoliberal university system and educational order. Instead it privileges the invisible work of relationships. By slowing scholarship and paying attention to the work of engaging in relationships, ones that require facing the ambiguity of life, we might become more in tune with our own unique lives and those that we closely encounter. We might need to add to the slow scholarship movement the idea of slow voices. That is, while the proliferation of voices has been helpful in offering a variety of perspectives grounded in diverse experiences, it has not necessarily brought an increased depth of engagement. "Voice" easily becomes about having the *loudest* voice or the newest voice.

Cavarero's work seems especially relevant to our current era, marked by social media, the proliferation of information, and what we might just call "noise." Political theorist Wendy Brown has warned of the hazards of this fetishization of coming into voice.[29] While she was writing only at the dawn of the explosion of social media, her questions seem even more relevant today. She pointedly asks, "are we so accustomed to being watched that we cannot feel real, cannot feel our experiences to be real, unless we are watching and reporting on them?"[30] The demand that voices and stories be incessantly commodified—in the form of tweets, posts, and so forth—sidelines the difficult work of authentic relationships. When one can easily exchange one friend for another, we dispose and consume, instead of work at and engage.

If educational researchers and practitioners are going to do voice-work at all, then it is important to take account of the work of those like Cavarero, because it forces a richer engagement with the ethical dimensions of research and teaching. Her work helps remind us that ethics can't merely be about quantifying and mapping identities and relations of power—it has to also be about specific relationships. "Voice" of the sort that Cavarero discusses, does not need to be published to be heard, does not need an "author" to be hers, and does not need to be quantified to be indicative of a life worth living.

Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1235–1259.

[29] Wendy Brown, "Freedom's Silences," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 83–97.

[30] Brown, "Freedom's Silences," 95.