Thinking Sexual Difference with (and against) Adriana Cavarero: On the Ethics and Politics of Care

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This article engages with Adriana Cavarero's framing of sexual difference, specifically in terms of how this displaces "bodies that queer" (Volcano 2013). For Cavarero, the narratable self is inescapably relational and characterized by vulnerability, which is how ethics arises in the form of a decision between caring and wounding. At the same time, Cavarero's deconstructive method of appropriating stereotypes restricts the scope of sexual difference to dimorphism. In examining the implications of this, I build on the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler by looking to the intersexed life of Adélaïde Herculine Barbin, whose suicide in 1868 at the age of twenty-nine was precipitated not through malice or cruelty, but through concerted care. This mode of care is anchored in the apparent self-evidence of how we see and how we think with and through narratives that sediment in orders of power/knowledge. While agreeing with Cavarero's critique of the autonomous "I," the article nevertheless argues for authorial audacity—the courage to name oneself—as a way of subverting asymmetrical power relations, including those that make it possible to inadvertently generate suffering through care.

Is the birth of a child a "scene" that can serve to figure ethics, or is the appearance of *this* child in the world a unique event that can never be contained by ethical certainties? Fanny Söderbäck has gone some way toward tackling this question in her analysis of natality in the work of Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero. If Cavarero takes the concept of natality further than Arendt by bringing the maternal inclination of the mother into the scene of birth, then Söderbäck aims to "push" Cavarero to go further still by giving "life to birth in all its complexity," meaning the material inequalities that can make birth a life-threatening situation for mothers and their unborn children (Söderbäck 2018, 282). These constructive criticisms notwithstanding, Söderbäck supports the way that Cavarero uses the scene of birth to figure

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a relation of vulnerability that serves to "distinguish and normatively differentiate acts of care and love from acts of wounding and violence" (283). In what follows I want to "push" Cavarero even further while also pulling back from Söderbäck's normative distinction between caring and wounding, thereby following Söderbäck's own advice concerning the complexity of life as a critical vantage point on philosophical abstraction. I begin with some remarks on how the scene of birth as Cavarero presents it also sets the scene for her approach to sexual difference.

During an interview with Cavarero published in 2008, Elisabetta Bertolino opens out the question of sexual difference by noting that the women's collectives that Cavarero was involved with during the 1980s—among these the Diotima collective in Verona—borrowed from the work of Luce Irigaray, with sexual difference "interpreted as a question of experience, not of identity," and thereby put to work in developing a theoretical and political approach conceived as "strategic essentialism" (Bertolino 2008, 129). During the interview, Cavarero says a number of things that have a bearing on strategic essentialism: that "it is necessary to use words with bad intentions," and that she "works on stereotypes, seeking to decontextualize and reposition them in a game of resignification through unscrupulous and irreverent decodifications" (134, 137). One such stereotype—of particular importance to Cavarero—concerns "the feminine essence," which she unravels and recodifies, thereby making it ironic (143). At the same time, Cavarero explains that "feminine sexual difference is a corporeal difference. In saying that, I am asserting a banality, because this is not just confirmed by biology, medicine, and anthropology, but it is also evident when a baby is born; one can see it is a boy or a girl" (143–44). It is not difficult to picture a professed gender outlaw like Kate Bornstein responding with a question along the lines of "and what about the rest of us?" (Bornstein 1994). Cavarero offers an answer of sorts to such a question, but before presenting it I need to back up slightly.

The interview with Bertolino is published under the title: "*Beyond* Ontology and Sexual Difference"—the emphasis is mine, and I am drawing attention to it because although Cavarero takes her philosophical project beyond metaphysics by grounding her relational ontology in the materiality of embodied relations, this claim to extend the scope or range of thought (or perhaps "beyond" should be understood in the more radical sense of exceeding?) appears to reach its limit as Cavarero takes up the theme of sexual difference and adds something to her earlier remarks on the banality of corporeal difference:

> The human being is sexed, in one way or another; that is, the human sex is either masculine or feminine and the intermediate stages are most rare. It is not possible to consider the hermaphrodite a third sex. The hermaphrodite exists, but one cannot say that human sexuation has three prototypes. In other words, the hermaphrodite is a rarity. (Bertolino 2008, 154–55)

I am aware of the need to tread carefully here because this quote has been plucked out of its context, and yet whether read within the context of the interview or in isolation as presented above, there is something amiss here. These words are spoken by

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a philosopher devoted to the uniqueness of each person, a thinker who builds on Hannah Arendt by insisting on the *who* as opposed to a *what*. And yet, in the above quote, this affirmation of plurality, which operates at the level of the "who" (who are you?), is corralled at the level of the "what." Moreover, there is surely a lack of parity among the words Cavarero uses to name the *whatness* of human sexuation: masculine, feminine, and hermaphrodite. Insofar as this serves to commence the task of subverting the hierarchical relation between masculine and feminine, it does so at the risk of diminishing "bodies that queer" (Volcano 2013), which raises the question: why? Is this a minor slip, a temporary blind spot, a forgivable *faux pas*, or does it suggest something more strategic, perhaps a tactical move that has something to do with the appropriation of stereotypes and the technique of using words with bad intentions? This is the question I will use as a point of entry into the discussion to follow, which begins with an outline of how Cavarero's rendering of sexual difference relates to the theme of vulnerability, culminating in an ethics of care.

Natality and Vulnerability: On the Ethics and Politics of Care

As mentioned above, the image of a newborn child features prominently in Cavarero's writings, grounding her approach to sexual difference in a vivid and deeply relational "scene" that serves to figure an "originary paradigm of human vulnerability" (Cavarero 2016, 104). In presenting this scene, Cavarero reformulates a concept borrowed from Hannah Arendt that I will use here as a way of approaching the ethics and politics of care. The concept in question is *natality*.

Arendt uses this concept to trace the source of plurality and politics to birth: each of us comes into the world as a new beginning, and each one of us, throughout our lifetime, is uniquely capable of beginning something through words and deeds enacted in the public "space of appearance" (Arendt 1958/1998, 176–78). This is Arendt's distinctive understanding of politics that, as she sees it, is staged in spaces of mutual exposition where it is possible to *begin* something or set something unpredictable and unforeseen in motion, though it is important to stress that once this process begins then it is no longer a matter of individual will or intention. Natality and action combine to inaugurate the new, but whatever emerges from such initiative arises *between* people who coexist in a conditioned/conditioning web of relationships.

Cavarero makes the point that "what is at stake on the interactive stage on which the fact of natality is actualized and the phenomenology of beginnings is realized is not only the authentic form of politics, as Arendt intends it, but the human itself," and hence we are, as Arendt suggests, "born twice: the first time as new-borns; a second time, and then time and again, as 'actors' on the political scene that confirms us as unique beings and as beginners" (Cavarero 2014, 14). However, and here is the sharp edge of her critique, Cavarero continues by excavating Arendt's rendering of natality:

> [E]ven the most distracted reader would note that the Arendtian newborn, totally engaged in his/her being a beginning, does not evoke any

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> tenderness. To say the least, Arendt's is a *highly* abstract representation of natality, that is, in the end, an algid picture, difficult to believe, almost a tribute to the old philosophical vice of sacrificing the complexity of the real world to the purity of the conceptual one. (18, original emphasis)

Coming from Cavarero, who routinely expresses her indebtedness to Arendt (see, for example, Bertolino 2008, 147), this is strong criticism indeed. However, we should not lose sight of the tentative "almost." Caverero's assessment is in fact a blend of criticism and gratitude, and the latter comes to the fore when she remarks that though natality "remains substantially underinvestigated" in Arendt's writings, this "provides the advantage of leaving a rather unusual theme at our disposal" (Cavarero 2014, 17). Cavarero thus finds something "promising" in the concept of natality, using this to orchestrate a subtle yet important shift by enlarging the frame so that natality becomes a "scenario," thereby bringing the figure of the mother into relief. In her *For More Than One Voice*, for example, Cavarero presents the mother/child relation as a "vocalic dialogue," hastening to add that the word "dialogue" is not quite right, because the "cadence of demand and response," or the "reciprocal invocation" in which the voices of mother and child "convoke one another" is not yet within any system of language. Cavarero continues by describing this cadence as exhibiting a temporal rhythm, with its "communicative soundtrack" being a "la-la melody" that configures a reciprocal dependence. The "relationality of the voice" thus takes the form of "a sharing" that has a "musical quality," with "the maternal language of vocalizations and gurgles" presented as a "sonorous texture *for* two voices, which are structurally for the other" (Cavarero 2005, 170–71, original emphasis).

There is an almost visceral quality to Cavarero's use of language in picturing the scene of birth for her readers; after all, even if one has never held a newborn baby in one's arms, this experience of naked vulnerability is still within reach—indeed it is something all of us might remember if memory stretched back to the beginning. That our own beginning is not in fact something we can recall from memory (in picturing our own birth, we rely on the memories of others or the material traces they bequeath to us, such as a photograph) has a crucial bearing on the question of the self, and I return to this in more detail later. For now I just note that the larger significance of this scene becomes apparent when Cavarero presents the figure of the newborn child as "archetypical in a double sense, both because life begins with infancy, and because the principle of infancy returns whenever, in the course of life, one happens to find oneself defenseless" (Cavarero 2016, 104).

Importantly, at no point does Cavarero suggest that the mother is somehow programmed to care for her newborn child. Rather, the asymmetrical relation of vulnerability that characterizes the scene precipitates a *decision* (Bertolino 2008, 142). It is the contingency of this decision—to care for the vulnerable child or to harm/neglect her—that generates the ethical dimension of Cavarero's phenomenology of natality, which itself is proximate to politics, because the axiomatic asymmetry that appears through the scene of birth is also a power relation. Otherwise put, the vulnerability of the newborn child as she makes her appearance in the world is, for

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Cavarero, an "essential figure, first for ontology and politics, and then for ethics" (Cavarero 2016, 104).

By evoking this deep asymmetry and originary dependency, Cavarero presses the theme of vulnerability upon us in a way that strikes an emotional/experiential chord. To picture the new-born child as being "absolutely and unilaterally dependent on others"—meaning "the mother or whoever stands in for her"—is to clear the way for the human condition to be comprehended as a "subjectivity structurally marked by exposition and dependency," which in turn enables us to grasp how "vulnerability and relationality intertwine… in an inexorable knot" (Cavarero 2014, 24). For Cavarero, natality is not merely about the appearance of a child in the world, and nor (as in Arendt's formulation) is it the human capacity to begin—to *act* in unexpected and unpredictable ways—rather it is first and foremost the appearance of a *relation* that is structured by vulnerability, thus serving as a "paradigm for the human" (Cavarero 2016, 13).

Embodying the ethical decision, the figure of the mother is the centerpiece of Cavarero's *Inclinations*, and here she also has some interesting things to say about method, specifically that she will "imitate" Arendt's method of "exaggeration," attributing this characterization of Arendt to Hans Jonas while at the same time suggesting that Jonas himself may have been exaggerating (Cavarero 2016, 10–14). Cavarero toys with the reader on this point, and one is left wondering whether, and to what extent, she is again using words with bad intentions, yet she does provide a trail of breadcrumbs for the reader to follow: the book will present an "emphatic forcing of maternal inclination"; it will "overstate, exaggerate, and accentuate… the maternal stereotype" so that it might be "reinterrogated and exploited to its fullest potential"; and to accomplish this task—"to exploit it properly"—it is necessary, writes Cavarero, to "accentuate the emotional and sentimental baggage of this figure so as to fix and crystallize it into a form—a simple, oblique line, the relational sign of a specific posture" (11). It is this inclined figure that enables Cavarero to orchestrate a thoroughgoing critique of the "phallogocentric tradition" and "social contract paradigm," along with its accompanying "individualistic ontology" and "egocentric verticality," meaning the individual who is "self-sufficient," "self-referential," "radically autonomous, closed, and encapsulated in himself" (Cavarero 2016, 2–14, 22; Bertolino 2008, 147–48). By formulating the maternal stereotype in this way, Cavarero engages in a type of procrustean intellectual labor that gives geometrical form to the "banality" of a corporeal sexual difference as referred to earlier. But if this is a philosophical game of ironic recodification, a way of displacing the myth of Man and deconstructing the phallogocentric tradition, then what do we make of Cavarero's decision to play this game to the tune of dimorphism? Moreover, an important question remains unanswered in this maternal figuring of care, posed by Sarah Burgess and Stuart Murray when they note that Cavarero does not tell us how the figure of the "good mother"—the mother who responds to the demands of her infant through love and care—"translates to political relations between strangers" (Burgess and Murray 2006, 168). In other words, Cavarero "begs the structural question of how two unique existents could appear to each other in the first place," and is thus "unable to

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account for *how* this relational politics appears or takes place" (169, original emphasis). It is this question of *how* that I want to grapple with in the next section, which, as Burgess and Murray suggest, as Burgess and Murray suggest, takes us beyond the intimate scene beyond the intimate scene that Cavarero uses to ground her philosophical project.

To be clear from the outset, it is not my aim to engage in negative critique. Instead I want to exert pressure on Cavarero's approach to sexual difference in the hope that this might prove productive. When I read Cavarero, and most especially her perspective on uniqueness, relationality, and vulnerability, and then reflect on the earlier quote from the interview with Bertolino, then something seems out of joint. The word "hermaphrodite" grates and reads like an anachronism. Moreover, similar to the way in which Cavarero's strategic essentialism is formulated, it conceals a form of procrustean effort (or "emphatic forcing," to echo Cavarero) within a language game of medical classification and scientific objectivity, as though the naming of difference is not also the exercise of power. Indeed, to follow the thread of Cavarero's rendering of sexual difference is to confront precisely this dimension of the power/knowledge nexus, which is what the artist and activist Del LaGrace Volcano engages with through the act of self-naming:

> As a gender variant visual artist I access "technologies of gender" in order to amplify rather than erase the hermaphroditic traces of my body. I name myself. A gender abolitionist. A part time gender terrorist. An intentional mutation and intersex by design (as opposed to diagnosis), in order to distinguish my journey from the thousands of intersex individuals who have had their "ambiguous" bodies mutilated and disfigured in a misguided attempt at "normalization." I believe in crossing the line as many times as it takes to build a bridge we can all walk across. (Volcano 2005)

"I name myself"—this is crucially important to the present discussion, not least because (potentially, if not also actually) Volcano is speaking from a position of vulnerability. Put in Arendtian terms, Volcano names "hermself" by appropriating the history of hermaphroditism, thereby staging a deeply political act in the public arena by appearing to others on herm's own terms. This type of frank and fearless speech, whereby Volcano exposes hermself to judgment by others, might also be seen to exhibit features of the ancient ethical practice (*askēsis*) that Foucault examined through the lens of *parrhēsia* (Foucault 2010; 2011). To lace these Arendtian and Foucauldian threads together: Volcano actualizes natality by setting something in motion, thereby also exhibiting the type of courage that Foucault distills from *parrhēsia*, and which he used to formulate an ethics that commences with care of the self. In other words, this is about walking the talk—saying it as one sees it, experiences it, wishes it to be, knowing that this may trouble, disturb, perhaps even offend others, and knowing also that staging this type of intervention may come at personal cost.[1] Crucially important, and I return to this in more detail below, this particular imbrication of ethics and politics does not culminate as an attitude of solitude or solipsism whereby the self becomes an encapsulated entity concerned only with personal pleasure, self-

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improvement, individual achievement, and so forth. Instead, as Volcano demonstrates by publicly naming hermself, practicing care of the self might also queer the historically and linguistically constituted spaces where we appear before one another and relate to one another.

What I want to propose then in response to Cavarero's ethics of care is first an inquiry into the politics of care, and subsequently to present an outline of an alternative ethics derived from Foucault. This will require shifting the focus of analysis away from the kind of texts that characterize Cavarero's writings (philosophy, mythology, literature, art), and toward the (auto)biographical. I want to take a step back from care as an ethical inclination on the part of the mother "or whoever stands in for her" (Cavarero 2014, 23), thereby examining care as a socially scripted practice that is conditioned by power/knowledge.

As to how to do this, I am going to look initially to a person whose life (story) was shaped by the discourse of hermaphroditism: Adélaïde Herculine Barbin (or Alexina to friends and family).[2] Alexina is now reasonably well known thanks to Foucault, who published hir memoir along with a collection of associated documents (Foucault 1980), yet I think we still have much to learn from Alexina, in part because when we read hir story we encounter the *who* before we are presented with a *what*, but also because Alexina's story can help us to think critically about the politics of care. In short, it is not sufficient to ground the decision to care or to harm in a relational ethics of vulnerability, as though the decision were solely a matter of one's inclination (maternal or otherwise). There is also the *political* decision that sets the scene for the actualization or enactment of care, and it maps onto Cavarero's notion of banality—a type of decision that is also a division drawn through the apparent self-evidence of how we see, how we experience through the senses, and how we think with and through narratives that sediment in orders of power/knowledge.

The Normalizing Grip of Concerted Care

As noted above, a collection of documents relating to the life of Alexina was published by Foucault as *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Hermaphrodite* (Foucault 1980). Among these are Alexina's memoir, written in the style of a romantic tragedy, and several medical reports that cohere as a judgment concerning Alexina's "true sex." Taken together, the texts span the auto/biographical, with Alexina's life narrated through the distinctive registers of literary representation and "objective" (objectivizing) language of science, both of which are examined here. (Readers already familiar with the primary text may want to skip to the last paragraph of the subsection below titled "My Memoir… ")

Alexina was born in 1838 and raised primarily in convent schools along the west coast of France south of Nantes. Hir father died when Alexina was an infant, and unable to support her seven-year-old child alone, Alexina's mother placed hir in the local hospital, which served as an orphanage. Alexina was later transferred to a

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convent of the Ursulines of Chavagnes to receive an education. At fifteen, ze moved to a house in La Rochelle where hir mother worked as a housekeeper. Here Alexina served as a maid to one the family's daughters, before entering another convent institution: a normal school run by the order of the Filles de la Sagasse. From 1858–1860 Alexina held a live-in post as a schoolmistress in a boarding school, where ze embarked on a passionate affair with the headmistress's daughter. In 1860, following a medical examination, Alexina was deemed to be "hermaphroditic... with an obvious predominance of masculine sexual characteristics." Consequently, the presiding judge of the civil court in Saint-Jean d'Angély decreed that the child registered as Adélaîde Herculine would henceforth be "designated as being of the masculine sex." Alexina was renamed Abel, and on the advice of the prefect of La Rochelle, moved to Paris to seek work and commence a new life. Alexina/Abel committed suicide eight years later, in 1868, while living alone in abject poverty.

If these are the bare facts, they tell us very little of Alexina's life or how hir life has been narrated by others, and by others I mean hir medical biographers.[3] What I want to focus on in discussing these texts is how a *decision* was reached concerning Alexina's "true sex." By decision I mean an event that results from a process whereby a judgment is actualized. Moreover, if we want to understand how the *who* is transformed into a *what*, at least in this case, then it is necessary to trace the decision to its sources in the authority of religion, medicine, and law, paying close attention to how this was orchestrated not through malice or cruelty, but through concerted *care*.

"My Memoir..."

Alexina opens hir memoir by announcing that "although I am still young, I am beyond doubt approaching the hour of my death." With barely a pause, the reader is transported back to the beginning, with Alexina explaining that "my childhood and a great part of my youth were passed in the delicious calm of religious houses. Houses that were truly pious, hearts that were pure and true, presided over my upbringing" (in Foucault 1980, 3). What stands out very clearly in Alexina's account of these early years is the fondness expressed for many of the people who occupied positions of authority in hir life, as well as a gradual awareness on Alexina's part of being physically different relative to hir peers. Upon entering teacher-training college in 1856, for example, Alexina mentions feeling "ashamed at the enormous distance that separated me from them, physically speaking." Later, while on a trip to the coast, ze recalls the "wild hilarity" of the other girls and teachers as they removed their outer clothing and raised their petticoats in order to wade out into the surf, yet Alexina hirself did not join them. Unsure as to why exactly ze had abstained, Alexina ruminates again on hir apparent difference: that it might "offend the eyes of those who called me their friend, their sister" had ze participated in the fun (39). This awareness of difference was by no means an obstacle to friendship, romantic liaisons, or sensual pleasure, however. Indeed, these early years

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of Alexina's life read like the chapters of a romantic novel documenting a young person's sexual awakening.

What would eventually derail this erotic adventure was not Alexina's sense that ze was physically different from hir peers, nor would it be because they rejected or excluded Alexina from their community. Instead there would be a series of decisive moments precipitated by physical pain and Alexina's desire to continue hir relationship with Sara. As noted above, Sara was the daughter of the principal who ran the boarding school where Alexina lived and worked from 1858. Their beds were in close proximity, separated by a thin partition and an unlocked door, and Alexina recalls getting into the habit of undressing Sara, of kissing her "naked breast" and lavishing attention on her as she fell asleep (49). It was also at this time that Alexina began to experience abdominal pain, interpreting this as "an imminent danger." Although urged by Sara to seek medical help, Alexina refused, instead using the situation as a pretext to invite Sara into hir bed, at which point ze describes hirself as Sara's "lover" (52). Aware that the relationship would cause a scandal should it become public knowledge, Alexina confessed to an abbot who served as pastor to the school. It is unclear from the memoir what exactly ze confessed, though it seems possible that Alexina's relationship with Sara was perceived to be a lesbian affair. In any case, what transpired was that the abbot "heaped scorn and insults" on Alexina, who responded in kind by "abandoning" his guidance, as did Sara.

Subsequent to this event, Alexina was invited to go on retreat with hir former normal school colleagues, using the opportunity to again seek spiritual guidance by confessing to a monk who was on hand to preach the sermons. On this occasion it seems almost certain that Alexina confessed more than hir love affair with Sara (62). Whatever the monk heard and whatever he was thinking, his advice was at once remarkably frank and frankly remarkable—that Alexina was "now entitled to call herself a man in society," and the problem was how to "obtain the legal right to do so." The only solution, as he saw it, was "to withdraw from the world and become a nun," but in order to do so Alexina would have to be careful never to repeat what ze had confessed, otherwise "a convent of women would not admit you" (62). Alexina would soon discover, however, that confession takes different forms. The abdominal pain returned with an intensity that caused hir to capitulate to Sara's pleading to seek medical help. A doctor was summoned, and Alexina remembers him saying "good-bye, *mademoiselle*" when he was finished with his examination, accentuating his stress on the "miss" by uttering the words through a "half-smile" (69). The doctor shared the results of his examination with Sara's mother—Alexina's employer at the boarding school—who subsequently forbade Alexina and Sara from sharing a bed and, in a decisive move, by informing Alexina's mother and surrogate family at La Rochelle of the situation.

Alexina thus arrived home for the summer holidays with the expectation that it would again be necessary to confess, both to hir mother and hir "benefactor" (which is how ze describes the household patriarch) who had been given Alexina's letters to Sara. Alexina procrastinated, delaying the inevitable, until finally hir mother urged Alexina to break hir silence. On this occasion, ze sought guidance

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from the Bishop of La Rochelle, one Monseigneur J. F. Landriot, whose response Alexina recounts as follows:

> My poor child, I don't yet know how all of this is going to turn out. Will you authorize me to make use of your secrets? For, although I know what to think in regard to yourself, I cannot be a judge in such a matter. I shall see my doctor this very day. I will come to an understanding with him about what course of action to take. So, come back tomorrow morning, and be at peace. (77)

Here we see the decision coming into focus, though it must be noted that it is rooted in a process of longer duration. In one way or another, each of the episodes noted above shaped the trajectory of Alexina's life, yet it is as though the pastoral power of religion and the authority of medical science remained indifferent to each other until the moment Landriot uttered these words. Upon learning of Alexina's "secret," he declared that he must seek counsel from his own physician before advising Alexina, and when *ze* returned as instructed, the bishop asked Alexina to present hirself to this doctor for examination. As the exam commenced, the doctor explained that Alexina must think of him "not only as a doctor but also as a confessor"; that in order to be able to "answer for" Alexina, both before the bishop and before the law, he must not only "see for himself" by conducting a physical examination; he must also "know" (78). In order to know as well as to see, it was imperative that Alexina confess—*ze* must tell him what he cannot know through his eyes alone. In this way Alexina was recruited into the labor of producing the judgment as to hir "true sex"—a judgment, moreover, that precipitated the decision as to hir future place in society.[4] Though enjoined to speak, Alexina was to have no say in hir fate. Medical science would answer for hir by deciphering hir words and decoding hir anomalous body: by reading the signs and ruling on the "dominant sex." The decision was thereby forged dialogically, both at the intersection of science and religion and through the lacing together of examination and confession, while in the background—in the wings, as it were—waiting to be summoned, was the law. But note how this is orchestrated, because apart from the abbot who verbally abused Alexina following the initial confession, there is no evidence of malign intentions. To be sure there is a tacit agreement of sorts that a scandal be avoided because reputations were at stake, but what actualized the decision was a concerted effort to *care* for Alexina.

"... Knowing What You Are..."

The heading used for this section is taken from Alexina's recollection of hir second medical examination. According to Alexina's account, the doctor conducting this exam expressed incredulity that his colleague (the one who uttered the words "goodbye, *mademoiselle*" with a knowing smile) had "compromised himself to the point of letting you stay [at the boarding-school] for so long, *knowing what you are*" (in Foucault 1980, 78, emphasis added).[5] Whether or not this exact phrase was used is

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impossible to verify, yet it gets to the heart of the matter regardless, because this is exclusively what the medical reports are focused upon: making a judgment as to the *whatness* of Alexina. Toward the end of the memoir is a passage that would prove prophetic in this regard. Written in anticipation of hir death, Alexina describes hirself as an "outlaw" who has been "exiled from the world," and ze looks to the "oblivion" of death as a "homeland," adding:

> When that day comes a few doctors will make a little stir around my corpse; they will shatter all the extinct mechanisms of its impulses, will draw new information from it, will analyze all the mysterious sufferings that were heaped up on a single human being. (103)

This is indeed what happened, though not all of the doctors waited until Alexina was a corpse before creating a stir. Dr. Chesnet, who examined Alexina after ze confessed to the bishop, published his report in the *Annales D'Hygiène Publique* in 1860, the same year the civil court in Saint-Jean d'Angély decreed that Adélaîde Herculine was to be renamed Abel. Dr. Goujon's report, which is based on his autopsy, incorporated this earlier text in unaltered form, and it too was published—in 1869, the year after Alexina's suicide—in the *Journal de l'Anatomie et de la Physiologie de L'Homme*. Goujon had seen Alexina's memoir, loaned to him by Auguste Ambroise Tardieu—a specialist in forensic medicine—and used it to contextualize his report. As for Tardieu, he had been given the memoir by a Dr. Régnier from the civil status registry office, who accompanied the local police superintendent to Alexina's room after hir body was discovered. Tardieu later included parts of the memoir in a book he published in 1874 titled *Question médico-légale de l'identité: Dans ses rapports avec les vices de conformation des organes sexuels*.

As to the question of why there was so much interest in Alexina, according to Goujon, it was because hir memoir could be combined with the autopsy, adding up to "the most complete [record] that science possesses of this kind, since the individual who is the *object* of it could be followed, so to speak, from *his* birth until *his* death" (Foucault 1980, 129–30, emphasis added). Alexina's medical biographers reduce hir life and life-story to a "mistake" that medical science must strive to correct. Moreover, Alexina must have a "true sex" because "hermaphroditism does not exist in man" (139). This is what Foucault means when he says that, from the medical point of view, "hermaphrodites were always 'pseudo-hermaphrodites'" (ix). Alexina was a hermaphrodite only for the purpose of writing about hir and, in the flesh, only for as long as it took to decide that hir life prior to the examination was an "error," and that post-examination, Alexina's "true sex" was male. To borrow from Judith Butler, hermaphroditism turns out to be a "regulatory fiction" (Butler 1990, 33, 141)—a way of staging and enacting the idea of a true sex.

The medical texts span fourteen years, and exhibit an undecidable relation to their object, or rather their subject as Alexina is gradually transformed into an object. Otherwise put, there is something of a puzzle as to how to locate the actual person within this body of texts. At least one doctor who wrote *about* hir actually met with Alexina (Chesnet). Beyond this encounter is a process of distancing and abstraction

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as the memoir supplants the person—a shift from life (Chesnet's examination), through death (Goujon's autopsy), to disembodied textuality (Tardieu's book). It might be suggested that what holds this corpus together—what gives it coherence and enables the category of hermaphroditism to function despite its allegedly fictive qualities—is not so much a category of person as a way of posing a question that tolerates nothing short of a definitive answer concerning a true sex. The question is not really a question at all; it is instead a judgment born from the assumption, easily replaced by dogged insistence, that there are no exceptions, and that the question must be answered emphatically in each and every case. Indeed the judgment that poses as a question maps onto Cavarero's notion of a banality that is affirmed by biology, medicine, and anthropology, evident when a baby is born: that "one can see it is a boy or a girl." This is how effortless it is to actualize the decision as to a person's "true sex." How then does all of this bear down on the issue of care?

. . . Interlude..

From Alexina's memoir we have a detailed account of how the decision as to hir "true sex" emerges from a circuit of power/knowledge that connects church-science-state, religion-medicine-law. This triangular configuration is not discernible from the medical reports, which read as though they exist in a purely autonomous realm, but in any case, when Alexina asked for help—to guide hir conscience and treat the physical pain ze was experiencing—ze spoke from a subordinate position relative to the authority of hir confessors. And when Alexina communicated through the written word, hir memoir was read in the same way—as a confession—at least by those intent on finding evidence that would support their judgment concerning hir true sex. If we track the process backwards, from outcome to the confluence of events that precipitated the decision as to Alexina's "true sex," then we arrive at a compact web of relations that takes the form of concerted care. If, as Cavarero suggests, an ethics of care arises from a decision—to care for or to wound/neglect the vulnerable other—then what do we make of a situation such as this where it is the decision to help rather than harm that ends in suffering? It hardly matters that Alexina's confessors were inclined to help, because this is what sealed hir fate by foreclosing on the life that ze would have lived if free to do so. Furthermore, those who were positioned to help (and who were also willing to help) embodied that part of the relation that Cavarero associates with maternal inclination.

I am aware that what I am suggesting here—that Alexina was subject to concerted care—is contestable, and I will attempt to substantiate the claim by responding to two questions: first, is this in fact a care relation or something else entirely? Second, if it is a care relation, then how can we account for the failure of care to deliver a positive normative outcome for Alexina?[6]

My response to the first question stems from my earlier reference to Burgess and Murray, and it concerns socially conditioned *practices* of care. If we follow Cavarero and use the scene of birth to figure the care relation, then we arrive at a compelling account of

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relationality and vulnerability, but this also culminates as a rarefied ethics that fails to engage with the ways in which the practice of care is shaped by power/knowledge.

Following from this, and in response to the second question, we need to consider whether the sexual-difference approach of Cavarero can account for the failure of care in this case. In other words, is this failure to be explained by mapping it onto the hierarchical gender order? There may be no simple or straightforward answer to this, which is perhaps why Alexina's memoir is such an important lens through which to examine the power dynamics at play when we care for others and are cared for by others. Alexina was clearly in a subordinate position when ze confessed and agreed to be examined, yet the decision as to hir "true sex" was still pending—poised as it were, albeit briefly, on the arc of contingency, until the moment when hir "true sex" was announced and recorded. This is surely crucial, because the enactment of care aimed to alleviate Alexina's physical pain and spiritual torment, while at the same time resolving the predicament that hir very existence posed for others (such as the reputation of the school where Alexina worked), and this *irrespective* of which side of the binary the decision was to land. If a name is required to grasp this imbrication of power/knowledge/care, then the best fit would seem to be *paternalism*, though it requires no leap of the imagination to think of comparable situations that arise through maternal inclination—think, for example, of situations where parents (mothers as well as fathers) look to doctors and psychiatrists for help and advice when a child they love and cherish exhibits gender-variant or gender-fluid behavior.[7]

To stay with this last point is to situate Alexina's memoir in the here and now, which might be read *against* the grain of the judgment that grounded the decision concerning hir "true sex." This is what Foucault does in his introductory essay to *Herculine Barbin*, and in the next section I follow Foucault with the aim of engaging with Cavarero's relational account of "the narratable self." As alluded to earlier in quoting Volcano, there are situations where evading or refusing the normalizing grip of care requires a certain authorial audacity: the courage to name oneself. What remains to be added to this claim is a social dimension, because this type of authorial audacity is rendered mute unless there is an attentiveness and receptiveness on the part of others.

To Queer a Sexed Thought?

> My mother only once asked me, "Who are you?" It was about a week before she died… I told her the truth: I was her baby, I always would be. I told her I was her little boy, and the daughter she never had. I told her I loved her.
>
> —Kate Bornstein

In his introductory essay to *Herculine Barbin*, Foucault opens with a question that engages explicitly with the medical reports on Alexina:

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> Do we *truly* need a *true* sex? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a "true sex" in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures. (vii, original emphasis)

A decade later, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler responded, using this question to stage a critical exchange with Foucault by juxtaposing his essay in *Herculine Barbin* (1980) with his earlier work, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (1976/1990). As Butler interprets it, Foucault's earlier analysis—where he examines what he refers to as "the repressive hypothesis" (Butler 1990, 93)[8] —leads to a paradoxical conclusion in that "the culturally contradictory enterprise of the mechanism of repression is prohibitive and generative at once and makes the problematic of 'liberation' especially acute." So how to square this with Foucault's essay in *Herculine Barbin*, where he presents Alexina as an "indeterminate individual" who—until the moment when ze was subjected to the decision concerning hir true sex—experienced "the happy limbo of a nonidentity" (Foucault's 1980, viii, xiii)? According to Butler, this amounts to a "romanticized appropriation and refusal of [Alexina's] text." Not only does Foucault fail to register the relations of power that both construct and condemn Alexina's sexuality, he also reads an "emancipatory sexual politics" *into* hir memoir. In other words, he apparently uses the memoir to "show how an hermaphroditic or intersexed body implicitly exposes and refutes the regulative strategies of sexual categorization," such that Alexina comes to represent a "prediscursive libidinal multiplicity" (Butler 1990, 94, 96, 97). Hence we arrive at something of a performative contradiction. On the one hand (against the repressive hypothesis), by saying yes to sex we do not say no to power. On the other hand (the happy limbo of a nonidentity), it is in fact possible to escape or evade the repressive effects of power impressed upon the "sexed" body. In contrast to Foucault's reading of Alexina's memoir, Butler interprets it as an account of "fatal ambivalence"—that hir confessions and hir desires are "subjection and defiance at once" (105).

Between Butler and Foucault we have what might be characterized as a textual dispute concerning the (mis)reading of Alexina's memoir. But this is merely the surface level of a more deeply political convergence. Whereas Foucault's question (do we truly need a true sex?) reaches for the freedom of "indeterminacy," Butler gestures toward an "open future of cultural possibilities" (93). Different readings of Alexina's story to be sure, yet they *converge* as a subversive mode of immanent critique. To elucidate this point: in her preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler explains that her objective is "not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might serve as a model for readers" but rather "to open up the field of possibilities for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized" (Butler 1999, viii). Is this fundamentally different from Foucault's question? I don't think it is, and neither do I believe that we have reached a point where we can say that this question has been consigned to the past.[9] This brings me back to Cavarero's rendering of

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sexual difference, which exhibits a fugitive quality. On the one hand, Cavarero appropriates stereotypes and uses words—including "essence" and "ontology"—with bad intentions (Bertolino 2008, 141). On the other hand, it is apparently a banality to note that "there is a corporeal morphology in the feminine and in the masculine" (144), and that a newborn baby is "visibly sexed" in one of two ways (Cavarero 2000, 38). So where does this framing of sexual difference place Alexina? To *see* the "visibly sexed" body in Alexina's case was to enact a particular way of seeing that conditioned and constrained the life ze was able to live.

Let us suppose then that the question of sexual difference is formulated as a genuine question rather than being a generalization or strategic assertion. In other words, to borrow from Foucault and Butler as previously discussed, let us suppose that the question of sexual difference is posed from a position of indeterminacy, such that it opens up the field of possibilities without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized. Otherwise put: if we were to *listen* to Alexina, might this alter, disturb, unsettle the preconceptions that make it possible to insist upon or to posit—strategically or otherwise—a "true sex"? For the question of sexual difference to be posed in this way, as an open question, the relation between Alexina's autobiography and the texts produced by hir biographers would need to pivot, and this has a bearing on Cavarero's theory of the narratable self: "Autobiography and biography, while being different genres of the story, do not seem to be able to manage without one another within the economy of a common desire. But what exactly is desired by this desire?" (Cavarero 2000, 37). Cavarero's answer to this question is "unity," which returns to the scene of birth as discussed above. Cavarero maintains that "from the beginning, *uniqueness* announces and promises to identity a *unity* that the self is not likely to renounce" (37, original emphasis). Yet this unity of self, though desired, is elusive:

> [T]he reality of the self is necessarily intermittent and fragmentary. The story that results therefore does not have at its center a compact and coherent identity. Rather, it has at its center an unstable and insubstantial unity, longed for by a desire that evokes the figure—or rather, the unmasterable design—of a life whose story only others can recount. (63)

The *desire* for unity is thwarted by a relationality that both separates and joins the biographical and the autobiographical. As Arendt argued long before Cavarero, we are not the authors of our own story. We coexist with others in what Arendt called a "web of human relationships," and we have no way of knowing, nor of controlling, how others perceive us, judge us, and narrate our actions and our lives (Arendt 1958/1998, 97, 181–88). In Cavarero's hands, Arendt's argument that the "world"—or the interweaving of life stories and that larger story we call history—arises *between* people, serves to structure the relation between biography and autobiography such that it culminates in a hierarchy. It turns out that the experiential substance of autobiography—no matter how fine-grained the detail—conceals within itself an inescapable lacuna. As discussed earlier in the context of Cavarero's phenomenology of natality, each of us was present at our (and as our) own beginning, yet nobody can recall the beginning of their life story, hence autobiography is dependent on biography to fill in

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the gap. As Cavarero puts it, "The beginning of the narratable self and the beginning of her story are always a tale told by others.… Autobiographical memory always recounts a story that is incomplete from the beginning" (Cavarero 2000, 39). The upshot of this, as a twist that suggests a form of conscious self-deception, is that "memory claims to have seen that which was instead revealed only through the gaze of another. The memory of every human being is indeed characterized by this structural mistake, which makes it untrustworthy" (40).

The relation between biography and autobiography—two ways of narrating the uniqueness of a life—proves to be complex: they are codependent "within the economy of a common desire," and yet they do not coexist as equals. Autobiography is in a subordinate position. Indeed, it must be, otherwise Cavarero's relational ontology is undermined by the reappearance of a sovereign individual who is the author of her own story, the master of her own life, and encapsulated by a magnificent autonomy that severs the relational tie to others. The autobiographer has no need of a narrator, merely an audience. And yet, speaking at the first nationwide conference of Women's Cultural Centres in Siena in 1986, Cavarero reflected on the importance of autobiography in formulating a "sexed thought," explaining to her audience that "I must become somewhat autobiographical and tell you my own subjective truth… my own personal experience" (Cavarero 1991, 182). Cavarero continues by noting that "My feminism, or rather my stubborn feeling of rebellion, grew out of the daily experience and passion of sexual difference. This is to say that I came to wish for a theory which would conceptually represent my being a woman." What necessitates this frankness on Cavarero's part—this exposition that is strikingly similar to Alexina's wish to confess—is her experience as a woman in the field of philosophy, and the way this is "dominated by strange asexual subjects: 'the self,' 'the one,' 'the being,' 'the cogito,' 'the idea,' and so on. A monstrous 'man'… unrepresentable, neutral, universal and, at the same time, of the male sex" (182). Cavarero's "need for a sexed thought" thus emerges as a response to being "forced" into the "neutral-objective theoretical cage" known as "Man," whereas what she reaches for through her rebelliousness is the freedom "to be and think of ourselves as we are" (183, 184). It seems to me that Cavarero is here practicing something that overlaps with my earlier remarks on Volcano's audacious act of self-naming, thereby also approximating the ancient practice of *parrhēsia*, or as Foucault presents it, the courage to speak frankly and to tell it as one sees it and experiences it. To bring this Foucauldian thread into conversation with Arendt, this is a world-making gesture on Cavarero's part—an *askēsis* or ethical labor that commences with the self and one's life in its relationality, while also enacting natality in the Arendtian sense of beginning or inaugurating something. If, following Foucault, we were to think of this attitude, stance, and mode of criticality as an "aesthetics of existence," then perhaps this can also be thought of as a site where Cavarero and Volcano meet, each in her/herm own way putting their self on the line and to the test by staging "battle in this world against this world," thereby opening out possibilities for an *other* world to emerge (see Foucault 2011, 244–45, 338–40).

This connects to what Cavarero has to say about unique lives being narrated and remembered as stories, such that the birth of a "sexed *who*" marks the appearance of

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a narratable self (Cavarero 2000, 38–39). As Butler has argued so convincingly—and as Alexina's story reminds us—particular lives are not merely narratable but also narrated, which is how the ethics and politics of care mesh through the power/knowledge nexus. In other words, the discursive filters that frame and color the field of perception matter a great deal in terms of which lives count as "normatively human" (Butler 2006, xv). In a situation where the scope of sexual difference is corralled by what it excludes, then perhaps a first-person account can shift the boundaries of the frame. As noted above, by self-naming I am not suggesting a radically autonomous self. Rather, to borrow from Jacques Rancière, self-naming is an act of "dis-identification" through the appropriation and/or catachrestic reworking of language (Rancière 1992, 61). By saying "the hermaphrodite," Cavarero names a *what* that, in the realm of social practice—or again, as seen from Alexina's story—is consigned to the margins of a hierarchical order of places and parts. To disidentify with such a classification is to transform the outcast into the name of a subject who is more than a self-naming individual. Volcano exemplifies this ethico-political stance. By naming hermself, Volcano crosses identities, names, and categories that authorize the relation between inclusion and exclusion. If this crossing doesn't entirely erase the authority of those identities, names, and categories, it can at least trouble the power they wield, In short, by naming hermself, Volcano stages a critical intervention in the order of discourse that is also a gesture of solidarity that reaches out to other Others.

As to the question of why this matters, and to return to the question of what happens should we listen to Alexina, thereby encountering a *who* before being confronted by the *whatness* of this person, William Connolly offers a compelling answer to both questions when he reflects on the effect Alexina's story had on him:

> As I read *Herculine Barbin*… I experienced turmoil in my gut. That is, I sensed vaguely how my visceral understanding of normality and morality delimited my theoretical judgements. I was a carrier of judgements that contributed to a life of hell for Alex/ina, and many others too. I felt pressure to work on the images of normality, biology, ethics, freedom, and politics with which I was imbued. (Wenman 2008, 204)

Connolly seems compelled to assume responsibility, not for what happened to Alexina exactly, but for his *self* as a carrier of preconceived judgments. To infer, as I did earlier, that the autobiographer is encapsulated by a magnificent autonomy is thus way off the mark. Cavarero is absolutely correct in her view that life-stories, in both senses of stories lived and stories told, are inescapably relational. What is at stake then is a willingness or reluctance to go to work on the self, to excavate and interrogate the contingent conceptions of normality and contestable moral judgments that shape the identity/difference relation into an asymmetrical power relation. Perhaps in this way the autobiographical mode of address instantiates a subversive intervention in the orders of power/knowledge. In other words, Connolly's encounter with Alexina affords a glimpse of how a life-story narrated from a first-person perspective can become a catalyst for change. If a story compels you and me to go to work on the self, then it also acts upon our interactions with each other. In this way it might—

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though this is a deeply contextual and thus fundamentally contingent possibility—subvert socially sedimented narratives that sustain asymmetrical power relations, including those that make it possible to unintentionally generate suffering through the enactment of care.

Notes

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1. I am referring specifically to Foucault's analysis of the Cynics here. Presenting this as the "reversal" of Platonism, Foucault traces the guiding principle of Cynic *askēsis* to the story (or myth) of Diogenes of Sinope, who traveled to the Oracle at Delphi having been exiled with his father, where he was advised to "change the value of money" or "alter the currency." Noting the linguistic play between the Greek for money (*noumisma*) and law (*nomos*), Foucault examines how the Cynics sought out opportunities to alter the currency of conventions, norms, rules, and laws. Cynic *askēsis* can thus be understood as a game of transfiguration that spans self and society (Foucault 2011, 231–338).

2. Foucault adds a footnote to his introductory essay to *Herculine Barbin* concerning "the play of masculine and feminine adjectives that Alexina applies to herself" in hir memoir, much of which is lost to the English translation (Foucault 1980, xiii). In what follows I use the gender-neutral pronouns "ze" and "hir."

3. A more complete analysis would include Alexina's literary biographer, Oskar Panizza, who published a short story based on Alexina's life in 1893, the English translation of which is titled "A Scandal at the Convent" (reproduced in Foucault 1980).

4. On confession as a technology of power that is also a ritual that stages the production of truth, see Foucault 1976/1990, 58–65.

5. This is consistent with the original French "sachant ce que vous êtes," as published by Tardieu in 1874 (Barbin 1874/2002, 62).

6. I am grateful to both anonymous referees for pressing me on this point in their reports on the original version of this article, and to *Hypatia* for the opportunity to respond to their remarks.

7. For a moving autobiographical account of how fraught it can be to come to terms with diagnostic labels such as "gender dysphoria," see Fury 2017.

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8. Foucault uses the repressive hypothesis to pose three questions (presented as "doubts"), which together set the scene for his analysis of the "will to knowledge regarding sex" (Foucault 1976/1990, 65, 82). First doubt (a "properly historical question," according to Foucault): Is sexual repression truly an established historical fact? Second doubt ("historico-theoretical question"): Do we adequately understand the workings of power if we associate power exclusively with repression, prohibition, and censorship? Third doubt ("historicopolitical question"): Does a critical discourse that stands opposed to repression break with the past, or is this "in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it "repression"?" (10).

9. If it appears that I am conflating sex and gender here, I would defer this issue to the thinkers under discussion. Foucault's notion of "effective history," or history "without constants," strips the self and the body of "any reassuring stability of life and nature," which would appear to dissolve the nature/culture distinction that is typically mapped onto sex and gender (Foucault 1984, 87–88). This is to a greater or lesser extent conversant with the way that Butler's work on performativity "exposes the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power" (Butler 1990, viii). Cavarero's position is different, in that she sees the sex/gender distinction as "internal to the English-speaking debate," explaining that in the field of Italian feminist theory, "speaking of sex (*sesso*) or sexual difference (*differenza sessuale*) does not imply a mere biological level, but rather a mode in which biological, cultural, material, symbolic, morphological, and imaginary elements traverse one another" (Bertolino 2008, 149-50).

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