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In this paper I develop the notion of “relational space” by drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Adriana Cavarero, Julia Kristeva, Peter Sloterdijk, and Judith Butler. The paper itself was written before my arrival at the Santorini Voice Symposium, but I believe that the relational space created there allowed the paper to gain much force. I therefore reflect on the visceral experience of presenting the paper, not as a typical academic reading, but rather as my embodied interaction with the audience. In a very real sense it was the relational space created in Santorini that brought the paper to life and, in this process, allowed its conclusions to be revealed.

## Voice as “Relational Space”: Agency beyond Narcissism or the Loss of Self

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MOLLIE PAINTER-MORLAND

**T**he question that this paper wants to address relates to a very personal journey of discovering my own voice. It is a journey that started in my mother’s womb and continued in and through multiple relationships with others in different contexts over the many years of my life. It has been a process of discovering my many voices, and the various people and contexts that give me voice. It helped me understand who I am and why I sound the way I do, why I do the things I do, and why I sometimes lose my voice and my capacity to act. This awareness has led me to understand the importance of place and the relational dynamics afforded by place. This notion of “place” was a theoretical hunch that became a startling reality during the Santorini Voice Symposium. I offer here more-or-less the original paper that I intended to present, but the actual presentation differed in many ways. For example, this personal introduction would not have been deemed appropriate before Santorini, but I offer it here as a gesture towards the possibility of a different philosophical voice, which I am still not sure can be sustained.

The relational space that emerged during the course of the workshop in Santorini changed the ideas I brought to the island and influenced the way I presented the paper. For example, I had asked the audience to give me visceral feedback at a number of points, so that throughout the paper there would be hums of understanding, groans of confusion, clicking noises if I was speaking too quickly. At one point I invited audience members to add their own personal narratives; at another, they turned their chairs to face away from me, to observe the difference that changed spatial orientation makes. I expanded certain parts of the paper, glossed over others, and moved sections around. All in all, “presenting” the “paper” felt more like an improvisational theatre performance—I thought I knew the character I had to play, but the ideas and emotions that emerged were in many ways quite surprising. I was left amazed at how the interactive space allowed me to discover what I had to say in new ways.

Following the cues of Peter Sloterdijk, Adriana Cavarero, Gayatri Spivak, and Julia Kristeva, I move in this paper from the question of *who* we are to understanding *where* we are and how the *who* and the *where* come together in the emergence of what I will call “relational space.” I argue that the agent does not come into existence through the employment of autonomous reasoning, nor through the inculcation of community norms. Agency emerges in the in-between, in the various spaces one occupies when moving from one’s earliest origins in one’s mother’s womb to where one meets others, lives, loves, and works. As such, agency is always a work in progress, but not one that is without structure, recognizability, or parameters. I attempt to describe the process of this coming into being of relational space, drawing on its sonorous, historical, and physical dimensions. I argue that voice, history, and location play a role in the emergence of a sense of agency that is neither solely committed to self-assertion and self-affirmation, nor to self-effacement or self-destruction.

One of the best examples I can find when trying to explain the notion of relational space, and of how voice, history, and physical location play a role in agency, is a reflection on how it is to come back to South Africa and interact with my father. During the Santorini workshop, I decided to try to “embody” my father by mimicking his typical behaviors. For instance, I pulled up a chair and attempted to stand the way he does, hands on hips, leaning back in self-confidence, or folding his arms on his knees as he leans forward to make his point. I realized that I am not at all comfortable mimicking my father. Not only do I have no idea how it feels to be in a man’s body, but also I am so incredibly tied to mine. The relational space between us remains an embodied space.

When I get back after months of living in the United States, it is as if I notice every detail of the relational space that embodies my father’s agency, and my own. My father’s voice changes in character within certain episodes—for instance, it has a distinctly

different tonality with me than it does when he speaks to men. I am of course his little princess, but also one who challenges his authority. With me he has an argumentative voice, a fatherly voice, a priestly voice. With him I become a very specific kind of agent, who negotiates the tone of voice and the physical location of his home, which is, when I am there, our home. I navigate these tones and this space while all the while negotiating various narrative strands and histories of loyalties, conflicts, and carefully negotiated truces. My father's relational space—and, as such, his agency—is equally distinctive and differentiated when in interaction with others. For instance, when speaking to men, he elevates his one leg, places his arms in his sides, and lowers his voice. He typically prefers being and conversing in spaces where his ownership is clearly established—like his car, or his study. In a reflection on who, what, and where I am with my father, we can see the importance of sonority, the effects of shared narrative and of physical space—the interaction of which I describe as relational space. Since relational space is always dependent on context, interactions with others, and history, it describes the emergence of a sense of agency over time, literally, a work in progress.

**T**o create a narrative space for our explorations of agency, I would like to draw on the myth of Narcissus and Echo. The myth relates how Echo withered away because of her unrequited love for Narcissus. Echo has an interesting history. She was originally a nymph who had a way with words. She was said to be the one tasked with distracting Juno while the other nymphs bedded Jupiter. Such inequities of course never go unpunished, and upon discovering Echo's betrayal, Juno curses Echo with an inability to muster her own words. From then on, Echo can "exist" only as a voice repeating the utterances of others. Narcissus can of course love only himself, but he finds his love as unattainable as did Echo, and that ultimately leads to his demise, and to Echo's woeful future. Narcissus dies because of a curse of one of his many rejected lovers, and Echo retreats to the caves, where her body becomes the hollows and rock surfaces that afford her a solely sonorous existence.

In moral and political terms, we can draw on Narcissus to locate the dangers of the extreme of radical individualism. Individualism has been one of the important side-effects of Western thought's postulation of the transcendental subject. This subject exists as the supreme individual, "managing" the subject/object relationship between itself and others quite successfully as long as he can manage to locate his agency primarily in autonomous terms. This position can be challenged from various fronts. Many of what are assumed to be the rational, autonomous decisions of such a subject are in fact the result of that subject's reading of his own desires, needs, and interests back into those of others, thereby assuming that the other is in fact always a

mirror of the self. Preferably, the mirror—which in the Narcissus myth is the stream—must be clear, and undisturbed by movement; therefore, no murkiness, ambiguity, or troublesome otherness is allowed! Because self is fully transparent to itself, others should of course be fully transparent too. In Sloterdijk's reading of the myth, it is important to note that Narcissus is initially in love not with himself, but with what he thinks is an other. Of course the other is in this case a mirror image of the self. This insistence on the self-identical as the only way to conceive of normal, rational, civilized humanity has remained prominent in the history of Western thought. What does not fit into the mirror image must necessarily be crazy, irrational, mad, or object.

In her book *For More than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Adriana Cavarero describes Narcissus's gaze as the "autocircuit of the eye," which announces the narcissistic self-referentiality of the modern subject, or the modern figure of self-consciousness (176). For this kind of individual subject, relationships to others are mostly instrumental; they provide the applause and feedback that act as mirrors and remind the subject why he loves himself. In its most radical iteration, this is the subject that is caught up in a solipsistic universe from which there is no escape. As such, this individual subject is bereft of those relational dynamics that inform any sense of self. In much of the Western philosophical tradition, we see attempts to ground the individual subject in transcendental reasonability, to establish his autonomy and negotiate the terms in which the interactions with others are to be conducted. Especially in modern literature, authors value independence of mind, autonomy, and self-assertion. Of course, the individual subject has to be able to live with others, and hence many authors grapple with how this subject enters a society and how he is to negotiate the contracts that govern this space. Within the libertarian tradition, this subject's self-love is contained in and through an appeal to the rights, duties, and principles that govern societal stability. In most of eighteenth and nineteenth century thought, the isolated, rational, individual subject precedes all interactions with others. In fact, relationships often have to be actively severed in order for this form of subjectivity to function.

Could the preoccupation with severing relationships in order to voice one's thoughts in an "autonomous" manner suggest why delivering academic papers can sometimes be such a frustrating experience? This thought occurred to me because of the experience I had of my Santorini audience's visceral participation in the presentation. I had asked the audience to start making clicking sounds when I spoke too fast, and of course, as the nerves set in, I did exactly that. The clicking sounds were a reassuring sign that my audience was still with me, but more importantly, that they *cared* to listen. I apologized for the speed, and we laughed. The body did its work, and somehow the thought that I was sharing felt validated. I had voice.

This is not a new insight. Feminist authors have long criticized the effect of the isolated sense of subjecthood on the establishment of agency. For example, Carol Gilligan has offered an interesting analysis of the phenomenon of hysteria among women in the early 1900s. As part of becoming an “adult,” young girls were taught to become “selfless,” which in many cases entailed severing relationships. Gilligan argues that women lost their voices, literally becoming dumb, when they lost their sense of relationship. She develops these insights into an “ethics of care,” which is contrasted with the male-dominated “ethics of justice.” In this paper, I would like to go beyond this distinction, which certainly displays essentialist gender biases. Gilligan does provide some clues that are helpful though. She identifies the problems that emerge if one operates from the assumption that an autonomous, rational subject constitutes moral maturity. Furthermore, she points out that this account of our subjecthood cannot deal with precisely those aspects of the subject’s relational experience that make subjectivity itself possible. Neither can it deal with those relational realities that never reach our consciousness.

Interestingly, I did not mention this during the Santorini Voice Symposium presentation. It simply did not come to me that day. There were a few factors that may have subconsciously influenced this choice. One that is worth mentioning here is my experience of gender during the workshop. I had the distinct sense that the intimacy shared by the participants transcended the gender biases and ritualized habits of “appropriate” interaction with others. The exercises in which we participated required the kind of eye contact and physical proximity that may have made me uncomfortable in other settings, but what remained of this discomfort in the first few days quickly vanished. I believe this had something to do with discovering one’s body, not in a gendered sense, but in a space that allowed whatever relationship one found oneself in to emerge. I have since thought about this quite a bit, and I believe that this reframing of gendered realities is a unique result of exploring the relationship between voice, body, and others.

**W**e turn now to the second character in the myth, the one who is often left out of the various receptions that the myth has received in psychoanalysis and philosophy. Echo can be figured as the subject who comes into existence only in relation to others, and who “finds” herself being totally spoken by others—and, as such, spoken for. The importance of relationship in establishing agency has been explored by many different schools of thought. The most prominent in this regard is Communitarianism, a reinterpretation of Aristotelian virtue-ethics. The Communitarian subject tends to function within a communal straightjacket, because role responsibilities generally

restrict the fluidity of identity formation. Echo is typically interpreted as the subject who loses her agency as a result of being doomed to repeat certain patriarchal “truths” in and through her conceptions of self and world. This “echoing” can be seen in the way in which women’s voices have come to repeat the logocentric canon of Western rationalist thought. Within moral and political philosophy, generalized principles or rights form the scope of what it is possible to say about what motivates one’s intentions. And, as we shall see later on in this paper, in this echoing much remains foreclosed.

One should immediately acknowledge the limitations of a model that works with this kind of gendered dualism. In fact, it is precisely when one starts exploring the riches of the interpretations of the Echo and Narcissus myth in psychoanalytic thought, feminism, and postcolonialism that one gets a sense of the variety of perspectives on agency that the myth offers in and through its engagement with sexual difference, transformation, and intentionality.

In psychoanalytic theory, the Narcissus myth is a popular narrative framework to draw on in depicting various kinds of psychic phenomena. Sigmund Freud’s description of narcissism is insightful for any study of agency, since he locates the emergence of this condition in the processes through which the ego is developed. In Freud’s description, narcissism emerges from, in, and through the Oedipal struggles of early childhood development. It relates to processes of dealing with the struggles of the id and ego with paternal authority, by which the super-ego is established. The narcissist has a high self-regard, and when he is met with criticism in the world, he resorts to the safe calibration against his own idealized self. The narcissistic individual seeks the self as love object, which is idealized as possessing every perfection (30). Because the narcissist needs to be loved, s/he withdraws libido from other objects and focuses it on the self as object. Freud explains that a perverted form of narcissism arises through “the drawing in of object-cathexes which is superimposed upon a primary narcissism” but remains obscured by a variety of influences (19). Most importantly, the narcissistic individual loses the capacity to be in relationship with others and retreats to a solipsistic universe of self-love and affirmation.

Interestingly, Freud argues that the proclivity to narcissism is most common in homosexuals, and of course, women—more particularly, attractive women (31–32). This leads Freud to see in narcissistic women the mirror-image of the male nymph Narcissus. Reading women through the figure of a man is in itself a strange narcissistic tendency that we encounter in Freud’s thought. Postcolonial feminists are quick to point out the ironies and paradoxes inherent in Freud’s reading of the myth. In her essay “Echo” and her text “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Gayatri Spivak points out that

Freud entirely ignores the character of Echo in his reading of the myth. He also neglects to take the context of the myth into consideration. She argues that it is important to note that all of the characters involved in this myth are immersed in a complex web of divine violence, punishment, vengeance, transgression, suspended sexual difference, and transformation.

Spivak offers an interesting alternative reading of the Echo myth that goes beyond simplistic understandings of intentionality. She explores the significance of the fact that in the case of Echo, voice remains in effect without the logos and alludes to possibilities that go beyond the conceptual, thus problematizing the conceptual functions (Hiddleston 624). In Spivak's analysis of the *sati* practice (practices of widow burning), she explores the two extremes: a) condoning the Western rejection of the practice, which she views as patronizing ("White men saving brown women from brown men"); or b) condoning cultural legitimizations of the practice, which she views as equally problematic, as these typically give no voice to the women involved at all. Instead, such a condoning draws on a Western understanding of these women's agency to explain and defend their behaviour. Spivak offers an alternative reading of Echo's resonance to highlight the limitations in our understanding of intentionality. She points out that the words that Echo repeats are open to multiple interpretations. Ovid merely reports that Echo repeats the last few words of Narcissus's frustrated words to his disappearing image in the pond. Narcissus cries, "Why do you fly from me?" but Ovid does not actually quote the repetition. The echo could have been "Fly from me!," which could have many possible meanings. For instance, Echo may have been issuing a warning despite, and maybe precisely through, her inability to utter her own words. Spivak here explores the possibility of repetition without imitation. Her analysis also speaks of an intentionality that cannot be traced by merely reading the words in Ovid's account. One has to imagine the context, the framing, and the performativity that accompanies the utterance that Ovid chooses not to report verbatim. What becomes clear from Spivak's account is the fact that the voice as resonance, as gesture, as embodied reality has a potential for agency that works with a different notion of intentionality, one that goes beyond the logocentric constraints that philosophy typically places on it.

Sharing Spivak's wonderful reading of the myth allowed me to explore the dramatic component of this philosophical insight because it encouraged me to "act out" the interaction between Echo and Narcissus at the pond. For Spivak's thoughts to make sense, I had to say the words and use my body. Isn't that what "voice," "my voice," is all about? I suddenly felt elated, comfortable. And yes, the audience, and I, all "got it."



Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* and *Tales of Love* also have much to contribute here. Through her distinction between the semiotic and symbolic, Kristeva traces the sonorous, embodied roots of subjectivity in the maternal function that precedes the Oedipal understanding of the development of our subjectivity. Our earliest sense of self has to do with our exposure to the semiotic (i.e., the rhythms, sounds, and other sensory experiences in the mother's womb that precede and form the ground of any symbolic or linguistic engagement with the world and with others). The semiotic and symbolic have to be brought into relationship with each other if we are to have a sense of meaningful agency later in life. Unfortunately, Western society privileges the symbolic and all but forecloses any engagement with the semiotic. It therefore makes it impossible to account for the embodied realities of love, loss, and pain that have to do with the semiotic.

What Kristeva's account also makes clear is that the development of our sense of self has as much to do with our need to separate ourselves as with our need to stay in relationship. The infant's semiotic capacities are related to the presymbolic, primitive moments of separateness and connectedness in the struggle with the maternal entity (Beardsworth 65–66). Kristeva explains narcissism as the incapacity of the infant to develop a sense of self that is separate from the mother. She points out that the subject is formed already in the womb, in the bodily exchanges that take place between mother and preverbal infant (Beardsworth 64). She therefore disagrees with Freud on the breeding ground of narcissism. Where Freud describes it as something essentially related to the paternal function, she argues that the maternal function is central in understanding the ability or inability of the individual to form social bonds. The infant's embodied dependence on the mother is a given, yet it is also important for the infant to come to perceive itself as a separate entity from the mother if it is to have a capacity for relationship later in life. The semiotic allows us to account for the inevitable corporeal relationality that must always be thought together with the development of one's sense of being a separate entity. Sara Beardsworth calls this Kristeva's ability to bridge the nature-versus-culture divide by highlighting how the two are bound up with one another in our earliest experiences of ourselves (67).

I owe the suggestion to incorporate Kristeva's ideas here to my South African colleague Bert Olivier, who suggested this early in 2009 when I presented my early explorations of the topic at the Philosophical Society of South Africa conference in Hogsback, South Africa. It was, however, during the Santorini workshop that I realized how valuable the distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic is for tapping into a fully embodied sense of agency. The exercises allowed us to experience the sonorous sense of self that we all possess. We are always already voicing, but this voice



is often a far cry from the elated cries of young children as they play together. Kristin Linklater calls this the “natural” voice, and we had long debates about whether such a thing exists. I guess my hesitation about this term lies in my discomfort with the nature/culture distinction. Before Santorini even this objection was merely theoretical. It was the experience of my own body at Santorini that made me see how “cultured” my “nature” was—so much of my body was denied in my “cultured state.” The exercises also made me experience how simple things like breathing, signing, and more difficult things, like “dropping down my spine,” could bring me back into my body. This is nature, for sure, but was this not brought about by a whole series of disciplines and exercises during the workshop? And if so, is rediscovering this “nature” not just yet another form of culture?

Agency as such requires an ego, but one that is at the same time fully embodied and capable of relation. As relationships change, agency requires transformation, or as Kristeva would describe it in her text with the same name, a “subject-in-process” (133). This subject-in-process is perhaps not quite the intentional, individual, rational subject, but rather a sensing, exploring, responding subject that is capable of transformation in and through relationship. The agency that emerges is not devoid of intentionality, but “intention” morphs into whatever is required for responsiveness. There is, however, a lot of work that needs to be done to explain what such a form of

agency would look/sound/be like. To explore this question, we may have to reconsider the terms within which it is typically phrased.

Jean-Luc Nancy describes the shift that has to take place to approach not a proper self (I), nor a self as an other, but the form or structure of self as such (9). This form or structure is one of infinite referral, of ongoing resonance. By tracing the relationship between the French words for *referral* and for *meaning*, Nancy argues that meaning and sound share the space of referral (8). They also refer to each other, and this becomes the space that can be referred to as “self,” as a “subject.” The self is therefore no other than the form and function of this referral, which always takes place within a relational context. Said more simply, Nancy proposes we stop thinking about “I” and “other” and start seeing the self as the space that allows for the processes of referral, and therefore for meaning.<sup>1</sup> Processes of referral can be echoing, debating, disagreeing, but also dancing, singing, engaging with art, all of which would actually allow some negotiation between the semiotic and the symbolic.

The mirror exercise that we did in Santorini was an incredible experience. We had to stand face to face with another person, mirroring each other’s actions. One of course had no idea how one’s partner would move, or how one’s movements would reflect in her “mirror.” It was a process of anticipating the other’s action while also allowing yourself to actively participate. You were simultaneously an agent and a mirror of someone else’s agency. In this way, it became more of a dance, where both led and followed. I was myself, yet also her. And the world didn’t fall apart when I happened to be unsure of who I was at any specific moment. In fact, it was strangely reassuring.

This echoes some of the insights of Sloterdijk, who explores the question of where agency originates, rather than what it is. Relational space offers us an alternative understanding of what informs agency. There are various ways in which we can approach this relational space. First, we can explore the sonorous spheres that exist between human beings. Second, we would have to acknowledge the constraints of history and the narratives through which history is conveyed. Finally, our construction of physical dwelling-places within a certain landscape is important. Authors like Cavarero, Kristeva, Sloterdijk, and also Butler help me to develop an understanding of agency as an experience of relational space. Each of them makes a significant contribution to understanding the importance of voice, physical location, and history when it comes to agency. What we will come to see is that relational space allows for autonomy and intentionality that has nothing to do with isolation. As such, it provides a viable alternative to both extreme solipsism and a straight-jacket form of role-based relationalism. It creates the opening for a unique sense of understanding of our own agency.

Last December while driving in Holland, a comment made by my host at the time suddenly struck me as pivotal in understanding agency. I was switching back and forth between my native Afrikaans and my weird breed of South African/American English when he remarked how completely different I sound in my mother tongue. “Your voice is deeper, you sound like a different person,” he said. Why do I sound so very different in Afrikaans? Of course it has to do with the fact that the Afrikaans language is produced by different parts of the body than English—it comes from the back of the throat, whereas English always seems to be on the tip of one’s lips. In *The Grain of the Voice*, Roland Barthes argues that one’s unique voice is the result of the “grain” from which it originates. The materiality of the body therefore plays an important role in offering a pathway between the body and speech, between language and community.

Context is important, especially in Afrikaans. Given its relatively limited vocabulary, resonances are used; the same word is employed differently in various contexts and may even be used “wrongly,” to elucidate a different shared experience, subculture, or sense of humour. As such, the word is used less as a “concept” and more as a gesture towards shared experiences or shared cultural knowledge. Its specific use is related to the uniquely shared experiences, to local knowledge and histories that are limited to a certain time and place. This language is related to life-worlds that are in a sense always already passing away.

One of the most important aspects that has been overlooked or deliberately undermined and ignored by Western thought is the importance of voice or sonority. Cavarero documents in great detail the process by which voice has been systematically excluded from Western thought. Against someone like Jacques Derrida, who would argue that speech has been privileged over writing, she offers an alternative reading of the development of Western thought, one that describes how voice has been systematically relegated to the margins. Since philosophy pursued the universal impartiality of the logos, voice, with its display of embodied particularity, has been distinctly unwelcome. Philosophy has been preoccupied with language, with the logos, and as a result it has always been tied to the “disciplined and the disciplining” structure of language.

Cavarero draws on Roland Barthes to argue that the priority of language dooms us to certain worldviews and a certain understanding of agency. Barthes points out that the primary unit of language is the sentence, and that sentences are always hierarchical—“they always imply subjection, subordination, and internal regencies” (198). Voice, on the other hand, reveals the particularity of the embodied experience, of pleasure or pain, and hence tends to subvert the order of language and also of the politics procured through language. The suppression of voice within Western metaphysics

also eliminates the pleasures of the spontaneous rhythm and drive, which results from the reciprocal interaction of unique voices. This is a relational uniqueness that allows for an agency that goes beyond individualism without succumbing to the effacement of the individual within a community. According to Cavarero, the first meaning of *vocare*, as seen in the etymological roots in the Latin *vox*, is to invoke, to call, which means that voice is always addressed at the other and trusts that it will be received (169). The voice signifies from the very first instance the relationality of the vocalic. This is already implicit in the first invoking cry of the infant. It is this “acoustic relationality” that gets lost in philosophy’s overemphasis on the *logos*. It is a relationality that can be rediscovered only through sonorous performances, and can be brought to our attention only after the voice has been used, after it has had its effect. It gives new meaning to the phrase “after all that’s been said and done”—much of the “meaning” was in how the voice was used in saying and doing, not in *what* was actually said.

Cavarero explains how this happens in sonorous terms by exploring the history of the Muses and the Sirens as counterpoints to Western thought’s preoccupation with the *logos*. Here we see the importance of sensory relationships and transformations: the Muses were mute, but they could enthuse the poet to enable an account that goes beyond that of the philosopher or scientist. The history of the Muses is tied to tales of transformation that attempt to take account of loss. According to the myth of the origin of cicadas, the song of the Muses so distracted a certain type of people that had been alive before the birth of the Muses that these people forgot to eat and hence withered away. Out of compassion, the Muses transformed these men into cicadas, giving them the privilege of being able to sing, without food, until they die. The cicadas come to mediate the relationship between the philosopher and the Muses in and through their delirious song. The Sirens, in the Homeric rendition, were half-women, half beasts who sang in tones that resembled animal cries and hence made the feminine song something quite disturbing. In some Western receptions of these figures, other possibilities emerge: the beast-like Sirens turn into beautiful songstresses who cannot speak but can bring forth pleasing sounds, moans of pleasure. The demise of the oral culture led the Sirens to be retained only as image of the feminine libidinal pleasure. In René Magritte’s artistic rendition, the Siren does not even sing; her fish mouth is mute but her body is the epitome of sexual desirability.

In Cavarero’s reading of the Echo and Narcissus myth, Echo is described as the divinity that by means of resonance reminds of the relational vocality that always remains linked to the infantile pleasure when infants hear the mother’s unique voice (172). Cavarero explains that the principal function of these emblematically female figures is to emphasize the sonorous, libidinal, and pre-semantic materiality of the

logos (102). An account of agency that does not take account of the sonorous aspects of our existence, and of the transformations that take place within our sensory capacities and psychical embodiment, cannot help us understand our own intentionality.

Psychoanalytic explanations like that of Kristeva would underscore the importance of these sonorous aspects of our earliest sense of being a subject. When Kristeva describes the newborn infant as an already “highly altered” human animal, she emphasizes the fact that we are “sensing” ourselves and the world before we are even born (*Powers* 10). This is possible because we have bodies. In “The Subject in Process” Kristeva explains that “signifiante” (i.e., “the process, dynamic or movement of meaning that cannot be reduced to language”), is just something that our bodies do naturally (140). It helps us through experiences of love, loss, suffering, and death even when we have no concepts to help us explain or come to terms with these experiences. The semiotic describes a kind of embodied sensing, which include the rhythms, tones, and movements of which the mother’s womb is the first source. It forms the basis, but also exceeds the symbolic or linguistic aspects of, signification that make reference possible. It will therefore always be the case that our narrative constructions are incomplete accounts of all that informs our sense of being a subject, and hence our agency. Kristeva explains that though the semiotic can never be subsumed by the symbolic, it remains important that there is an interaction between the semiotic and the symbolic in our societal, cultural, and political institutional lives. Without it, these institutions fail to take account of the maternal authority that forms the basis of our capacity for relationship, and, as a result, it makes something like ethical or political responsiveness impossible. As we shall see in the next section, narration can only go so far in establishing this connection.

**O**ne area that has been most thoroughly explored in the philosophical canon is the role that history and narrative play in the construction of identity. Many philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists acknowledge that the way we relate to people, objects, and language has to be understood in the context of particular histories or narrative constructions. What is, however, important in terms of the account that I hope to offer here is the fact that the histories and narratives that inform our sense of self are never completely transparent, knowable, or reconstructable. This is the case precisely because of its relational character. As such, these limits have to inform our understanding of the emergence of agency as a relational space. Butler helps us understand this opacity of the self to itself. She highlights the impossibility of finding the origin or essence of the self. The pre-ontological existence of the conditions for subjectivity implies that my own history always exceeds my own attempts at narration. Butler

argues that the “I” is always dispossessed of the social conditions of its own emergence, but that this dispossession has not robbed us of the subjective ground for ethics (8). In fact, she argues that this opacity may well be the condition for moral inquiry, the condition under which morality itself emerges. It is precisely the subject that is opaque to itself that is not licensed to do what it wants and ignore its obligations to others. Opacity is the consequence of the relational character of the self. The context of these relations is partially irrecoverable, and as such the subject incurs and sustains important ethical bonds. According to Butler, through this opacity, relationality binds me more deeply to others. History ties in ways that we cannot foresee, manage, or reconstruct. Butler argues that the truth about a person may be revealed precisely at those moments when communication breaks down, in moments of interruption, when certain stoppages or impasses cannot be translated in a narrativizable form (64).

Butler contends that we are always recuperating, reconstructing, and fabricating our own origins and ends. We use language that in and of itself is burdened by histories and ideologies. Authors such as Antjie Krog, in her account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, constantly highlights the impotence and dangers of language. Krog’s access to the landscape of truth has been problematized as a result of her realization that her own mother tongue has become contaminated. Krog reflects on how naturally the story about what happened under Apartheid shifts from politics to language. The political reality has crept into the very syllables of the language she speaks and has made it impossible for her to give an account. It has robbed her of a real sense of agency. However, there is a way in which the employment of poetry succeeds in re-establishing her agency. Krog contends that concepts such as *truth* or *reconciliation* do not enter her mind when she writes poetry. She says, “Everything else fades away. It becomes so quiet. Something opens and something falls into this quiet space. [. . .] A tone, an image, a line, mobilized completely. I become myself” (50).

Throughout *Country of My Skull*, Krog draws on the role of music, poetry, and embodied experiences of sobs and cries to gesture towards another form of agency, equally potent, that goes beyond the narrativizable. We find an echo of this emphasis of the importance of the aesthetic in the work of Kristeva. Sara Beardsworth theorizes that Kristeva highlights the role of art and psychoanalysis in dealing with the “loss of loss.” This allows us to recognize the inability of Western cultures to tap into the embodied relationality that would allow us to deal with our embodied experiences of loss, love, suffering, and death. Though psychoanalysis is dependent on narration, the techniques of transference that it employs allow for a renegotiation of the maternal function that has been excluded from Western society’s sublimations of Oedipal

paternal authority. Therefore she emphasizes the importance of art, and specifically literature and poetry, in restoring the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, between what is nature and what is culture.

Here we find the need for a co-existence and interaction of nature and culture, individuality and universality. The body seems to be the space where these interactions always already take place. In Kristeva's reading, the mother's body is naturally connected to the infant's—life cannot be sustained otherwise. Yet the infant experiences the rhythms, sounds, nurturing, and rejections of the mother's body as an otherness that allows for its own separateness. The infant soon is thrust into the world, into a different medium, a radical transformation from an aquatic creature to that of a breathing creature. In his three-part opus *Spheres (Sferen)*, Sloterdijk highlights our ability to move from one medium to another as one of our most important capacities. But these transformations also entail anxiety. Spheres are extremely fragile and are constantly disrupted by their inner instability. Within them, our identities are always works in progress, in constant transformation. As this subject-in-process, we need to constantly negotiate with and refer back to others. Hence new narrative accounts that take the specificity of embodiment, voice, and space seriously are continuously required.

I was not very far into this part of my Santorini paper when the tears overcame me. In any academic context this would have been an unbearably embarrassing moment and I would have chastised myself for engaging in such unprofessional behavior. But at that moment, I just looked at the audience, sensed them being with me, creating a space that allows for emotion as not embarrassing or exposing, but a real effect of having voice. The irony is that most people's tears rob them of their voice. Mine did too. So Kristin Linklater stood up, walked to me, and put her hand on my stomach (I think she would say my diaphragm). She then instructed me, in her firm voice, to breathe and keep talking. I understood for the first time the relationship between breath and thought that Cavarero explains. If you do not breathe, you cannot think, and that is why you lose your voice. Not that I managed to get it right straight away; I was so used to experiencing tears as the shame of the body that robs one of both breath and thought.

Cavarero explores the role that the Muses and the Sirens play in practices of history and narration in order to give us a different perspective of what is possible if the embodied aspects of our subjecthood are taken into consideration (95–116). The immortal Muse sees, or rather knows, because she is present with all her senses. Whereas philosophy is concerned with the general, epic is concerned with the “embodied uniqueness of singular existents”—it is this particular existent that the





panoramic gaze of the Muse can capture (99). The specificity of each individual's composition is something that the Sirens also understood quite well. The sounds with which they attracted sailors to their dangerous shores "spoke" to the innermost desires of those hearing them. If the listeners' dream was to be famous, the sounds alluded to fame and honour. Sloterdijk points out that the Sirens produced noise, rather than singing (315–20). But because that noise alluded to the things that the sailors desired most, it was the kind of noise that every sailor wanted to hear. The Sirens had the capacity to sense the needs of the sailors, read their narrative as such, play into it, and then, paradoxically, bring it to an abrupt end. Sloterdijk makes the point that the Sirens used a kind of technique that allowed them to sing not so much to the sailors but in a sense from the site where the sailors were, that is, out of the site where the hearer was. Sloterdijk argues that to listen to Sirens involved entering into the nuclear space of an intimately enthusing kind of tone that soon becomes completely addictive. (326). The sounds Sirens produced were composed in the mind of the sailor, not somewhere else.

Dancing to the tune of the Sirens would be, paradoxically, to dance to your own tune, to enter your own narcissistic, solipsistic universe, which of course leads to death. This is an age-old pattern that we never seem to be able to resist. The reality is

that the modern subject, with all its pretensions of autonomy, very often dances to the tunes of others—especially those shrewd enough to tap into our own inner desires. As such, the right sounds can have a profound impact on the development of our agency. Subjectivity, music or tone, and desire are closely connected in our culture, Sloterdijk argues (326). For instance, the “noise” that marketing machines produce are seductive because they allow us to believe certain things about ourselves. This process is irresistible. Sloterdijk relates this in the end to the “fetal” ear: we are born in sonospheres—that is to say, our first birth is in the mother’s womb, and what we hear has a profound influence on the development of our subjectivity. We literally become what we hear, and we can often give no conceptual account of this becoming.

This brings us back to the role of voice in narration and memory. Kristeva argues that the self is constructed at the intersection of bodily, linguistic, and social forces. She adopts a term from Plato’s *Timaeus*, *chora*, to explain the spatial and temporal aspects of the relatedness of bodies that are always already socialized (see Margaroni). This allows Kristeva to locate the formation of the subject in the embodied reality that preceded the linguistic and the conceptual. She speaks of the maternal function as an authority that shapes our body and makes it a space that enables or forecloses certain social interactions. In *Powers of Horrors*, Kristeva writes, “Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a territory, having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted” (72). Here the link between voice and space becomes clear. To hear is one of the basic elements that inform one’s understanding of *where* you are, and as such, *who* you are. The who and the where cannot be thought separately. Your sense of self is the space for the meaning that determines who you have become and who you are constantly in the process of becoming. There is a historical and contextual texture that goes beyond the “environment,” which presents the external context within which agency takes place. Instead, it textures agency as such, makes certain resonances and therefore certain meanings possible, and others impossible.

In *Spheres* (Part 1), Sloterdijk develops a spatial understanding of human subjectivity. To the question “Where are we when we are together,” Sloterdijk presents the answer “We are in Spheres.” He describes a sphere as constituted by two parts, always polarized and differentiated, but still closely connected, a subjective living globe (in Dutch and Afrikaans, *bol*)—a two-part whole of mutual lived reality and experienced space (35). Being in spheres means living in mutual subtleness. As humans, we are constantly in the business of constructing and reconstructing these spheres. Sloterdijk argues that one of our most basic preoccupations in life is to recreate the immunological structure that we

lose when we leave the mother's womb (341). In the process, we undergo many changes of medium. We see fascination with the possibility of change in substance in Ovid, in Homer, in our own modern science-fiction accounts. In each case, a certain milieu, or structure, is created that provides an environment with implications for agency.

Understanding agency as relational space is an attempt to take account of the impact of voice or sonority, as well as of our fractured and incomplete relationship to history (through ritual, artifact, song, and mother tongue) in our sense of self. Physical space or dwelling place mediates, resonates, and hence co-creates both sonority and history. In order to explore the embodied implications of this insight, I asked the audience to change seats, or to look at someone else—to turn away from me as speaker so as to experience the difference that spatial orientation makes in listening, interacting, and understanding.

Much has been written about the meaning of architecture and physical organizational space.<sup>2</sup> In general terms, the built environment has been described as a "text" that can be read, and determining its meaning therefore requires hermeneutic skills. However, this understanding of how buildings "mean" has recently been challenged. It is far too simplistic to believe that buildings have a meaning, which can be reconstructed by exploring the intention of the architect and the symbolism that architect employed. In much the same way that textual hermeneutics was challenged by post-structuralists in the twentieth century, doubt has been cast on the existence of a circumscribable meaning of architecture. William Whyte follows Mikhail Bakhtin in arguing that "as a building is planned, built, inhabited and interpreted, so its meaning changes" (153). As such, one cannot read a building's "message" or determine its meaning. Instead, one can merely explore its multiple transpositions. Whyte cites Henri Lefebvre, who argued that we should be speaking of texture, rather than of texts, when interpreting the built environment. Architecture should be understood as *archi-textures*, and each building should be viewed "in its surroundings and context, in the populated area and associated networks in which it is set down, as part of a particular production of space" (167). In my opinion, this understanding of architecture as *archi-textures* echoes Sloterdijk's understanding of the establishment of spheres. It creates a relational space that is a combination of materials, relations, social interactions, and intensities. Not only does this view of architecture acknowledge the material qualities of the built environment, but it also attests to the ongoing layering (and destruction) of meaning that makes a space a place, or a non-place. Both imply agency.

The way in which architecture plays a role in creating a certain relational space can be illustrated by looking at Daniel Libeskind's design of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. In his analysis of this building, James Young poses the question "How does a

city ‘house’ the memory of a people no longer at home there?” (1). He explores Freud’s definition of the uncanny to explain how Libeskind’s design allowed the “familiar alien” to find a “home.” He designed a space that reveals the paradox of finding a “home” without “being at home” (1). In his design for the museum, Libeskind refrained from proposing a solution to the planner’s conceptual conundrum and instead provided its architectural articulation, a spatial enactment of the philosophical problem. The design envisaged a building that would be more “process than product,” in the sense that it is always on the verge of becoming, and unbecoming. It celebrates the oppositions and contradictions that constructing a Jewish museum in Berlin inevitably entails.

Libeskind cannot escape his own musical history in his designs. In a series called “Chamber Works,” subtitled “Meditations on a Theme from Heraclitus,” Libeskind combines music, art, architecture, and history. In these drawings, the complex lines exist only to create empty spaces in a way that highlights precisely the emptiness of the space, rather than the lines themselves. The lines seem like traces that tend to evaporate. Libeskind’s designs create disorientation as a physical embodiment of the historical and contemporary paradoxes to which the building attests. The Jewish Museum problematizes history as a “singular collective” and highlights the fractures, gaps, lost civilizations—the decomposition that always has to remain part of any composition (Young 19). The person one “is” in such a space is not the self-identical subject, nor someone who belongs to a distinct group or historical category, but someone who becomes who and what he/she is within a certain relational space full of paradoxes.

This understanding of the functioning of space has to be distinguished from the symbolism that is often used to discuss the meaning of buildings. A case in point here is the discussion of the design and decoration of the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg. Many accounts exist of the symbolic use of materials that were salvaged from the earlier prison buildings that stood on the site, or the incorporation of Cell Number 4 (the Old Fort Prison Complex), and parts of some other buildings where anti-apartheid activists were detained or imprisoned. Images of trees were incorporated to allude to the way in which African tribes effected justice under trees. The problem with all these accounts is that they do not speak to the capacity of space to allow for a certain way of being, and therefore a certain agency.

Maybe a more engaged process of thinking about oneself in the private sphere of one’s home can offer a starting point. A friend of mine is thinking through these issues with me in designing his own home, and it offers me the opportunity to think about the distinction between symbolism and its conceptual constraints and a built environment that could facilitate agency and the ongoing engagement with processes

of becoming, of narrative (albeit fractured and incomplete) and material constraints. What would such a home look like? How would it sound? And who will my friend, and those who visit, be in this space? I am not exactly sure, but this is the project that I hope to embark upon with friends, colleagues, and you.

In a very real sense, the theoretical paper with which I arrived in Santorini was rewritten in and through my experiences during the symposium. I would even say that Santorini as relational space made significantly different conclusions inevitable. The original paper ended with the typical “summary of main points” and “issues for future research,” but I soon realized that this by no means concluded the matter. What happened instead is that the Santorini experiences reframed the way I see philosophy and my role as teacher so fundamentally that they have changed the structure of the questions I ask and the way I can ask them. What has to be said here wants to move beyond the mould of the typical academic paper and the typical lecture. And I find myself willing and inclined to say it. But can our academic world and its institutions accommodate this? What would happen to my career if my students and I were to cry together in the classroom? Would I be called into the dean’s office because I exposed the university to all kinds of liabilities? Will my students and peers doubt my sanity and competency when I allow my body to actually voice what I am trying to teach? Most likely, yes. And as such, it proves the thesis of my paper (as stringent peer reviewers may be relieved to hear)! Who I am and what I can say, and how I can say it, has everything to do with where I am, how the voice vibrates in this specific body at that specific moment, and who I am with. And therefore, regretfully, the Santorini Voice Symposium is an unrepeatable yet irreplaceable part of me.

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#### NOTES

1/ Nancy describes the difference between the visual and the sonorous in the following terms: In the visual the self is revealed, sheds light, is “in view”; it is tendentially mimetic, focused on “traits” and unity of perception. In terms of the sonorous, the self escapes/ hides, resounds elsewhere, comes and passes, operates tendentially methexic (relational, open to contagion), explores the tacit, that which retreats, the modesty of Being. It is an entirely different philosophical sensibility (10).

2/ Foucault offers us a detailed account of how institutional dynamics and power relationships change the way we come to know the world as well as the way in which technologies of the self emerge in the process.

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