5.

Transcendence in the
Existential-Transversal Landscape

Fortunately for contemporary rhetorical theory (given the implications of the Lévinasian critique) there's still one kind of value that acts in tension with, rather than in subservience to, the greater good. It concerns the non-finessable, non-negotiable, indeed non-rational claim of every human being upon a free, authentic, and responsible existence. To understand the sort of agency that could accrue to such a claim, we'll visit a place where theorists are continually (re)territorializing rhetoric’s power to make things otherwise. According to the locals, rhetoric’s productivity, or efficacy, belongs to an agent whose very manner of being is emergent. That’s why, in this third landscape of agency, a claim like “I am a woman’s rights” will be heard as valorizing the “am.”

Existence, Transcendence, and Transversality

Some rhetorical-theoretical investigators have pursued the senses in which responsibility (Schrag, 1997), conscience (Hyde, 1994), and questioning (Turnbull, 2004) all become sites of rhetorical transcendence. For these writers, responsibility, conscience, and questioning are among not the potential, but the actual and inalienable affordances available to what might be called — here to borrow again from Anton and Peterson (2003) — the existential self. This latter, as implied in the work of, say, Georges Gusdorf (1965), Hans Blumenberg (1987), or Ernesto Grassi (2001), is by now presupposed in projects like that of Thomas Rickert (2013).

Since “existentialism” is a constituent of the stance in question, we'll note that this is a philosophy according to which existence precedes essence, with existence understood not as a prior category but as a “self-making-in-a-situation” (Fack-
teinheim 37). However, existentialism additionally holds that “human beings came into existence through natural, evolutionary processes, and then created myths and religious beliefs to explain their unique importance” (Hall 132). Of course, the term “natural” implies “contingent” rather than “inevitable,” since existentialist writers are likely to include biological determinism among the “myths” to be rejected. Even so, if vitalism is the assertion that life exceeds reduction to the pre-determined, to the mechanistic, then existentialism ought to be vitalism, too—and presumably occasionalism as well. What’s crucial, after all, is the contrast whereby existence proceeds from life, but essence from social determination. Therefore, existentialism, insofar as it does tie human existence to “evolutionary processes,” should probably consider the sine qua non of this existence to be our living materiality as such.

However, in preparation for an upcoming local pitfall—namely, the existential-transversal forgetfulness of materiality—let’s proceed by consulting some existentialism proper, that is, with reference to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre’s close ally, Simone de Beauvoir. In The Ethics of Ambiguity (1948), Beauvoir argues that the only absolute value is that of existence, willed into being whenever we take a stand in favor of the life-affirming over against the life-denying. Thus Beauvoir illustrates the way in which transcendence can be said to remain ontologically independent of everything else. For she presents “freedom” as a recurrent return “to the positive,” a return which gives existence “a content through action, escape, political struggle, revolution: Human transcendence then seeks, with the destruction of the given situation, the whole future which will flow from its victory” (31). Clearly, this transcendence involves an endless breaking-up of whatever social conditions are currently in place.

From a generally existentialist viewpoint, it’s always that “man must…assume,” i.e., both posit and embrace, “his finiteness: not by treating his existence as transitory or relative but by reflecting the infinite within it, that is, by treating it as absolute” (Beauvoir 130–31). Yet there are cases in which freedom takes on a negative or reactive complexion. For, while “liberation” is “a movement” which “realizes itself by tending to
conquer,” action cannot “seek to fulfill itself by means which would destroy its very meaning” (131). Thus, in “certain situations there will be no other issue for man than rejection.” Such rejection might include militancy, “action,” “political struggle,” “revolution.” But it will always contrast with “political realism,” where everything is compromise — precisely as in that viewpoint on rhetorical agency where shared values do, in manufacturing the greater good, keep trumping the freedom of any group member.

After all, there is genuine, transcendent “rejection only if man lays claim in the present to his existence as an absolute value,” in which case “he must absolutely reject what would deny this value” (Beauvoir 131). Nowadays, as the author explains, that is, “in the name of such an ethics,” we’d “condemn” all those Vichyites who were trying “to make the best of things,” for that ought to have been a matter not of “rationalizing the present such as it was imposed by the German occupation,” but of “rejecting it unconditionally”:

The resistance did not aspire to a positive effectiveness; it was a negation, a revolt, a martyrdom; and in this negative movement freedom was positively and absolutely confirmed. (131)

So, regardless that political realism does look synonymous with existentialist suicide, transcendent agency must still, on this view, be conceptualized as ethical, though in the way of the authentic rather than the socially-determined.

For example, in the illustration provided by Beauvoir, we can be sure that, once upon a time, appeasement really did constitute the most rational if least authentic course of action. For, if such an expedient could ever have made sense, that would have been after reality itself had proven unreasonable, as when a certain Vichyite commonsensicality and a certain Nazi irrationality were co-constructing a “state of affairs” just as real as it could be (Schrag 91). As for us today, if we were to collect enough such cases of local (dis)ordering, we’d be confronted with the universal principle underlying them all — which is that, as one of our own contemporaries has observed, there’s
an “absence of reason inherent in everything” (Meillassoux 53). Under the circumstances, all that’s left, as an alternative to the abyss, is our incalculably human claim to life, to an authentically free and responsible, if also counter-rational existence.

It’s no surprise that the rhetorical theorist Calvin Schrag (henceforth treated as an ambassador for the existential-transversal position) would wish to draw so bright a distinction between, on the one side, responsitivity and, on the other side, responsibility. To the extent that we’re managing to get by, negotiating our pragmatic “being-with-others,” we’re best described as responsive (Schrag 91). But we shift into genuine responsibility by adopting an insistently “ethical stance” — that which is, more properly, “an ethos, a way of dwelling in a social world that gives rise to human goals and purposes, obligations, duties, and concerns for human rights.”

Yet, as investigators, we should further contextualize Schrag’s affirmation of responsibility by considering the manner in which existentialism proper would explain the origins of transcendence. It would frame transcendence as arising not out of, say, the agent’s capacity for rational deliberation, much less out of any traditions the agent may have inherited, but, rather, out of nowhere: out of an inexplicable motivation for exceeding whatever there is.

After all, the claim to life, arising in what Beauvoir calls “the original helplessness from which man surges up,” must itself be what generates the existential imperatives otherwise missing from the world — including the ethical stance to which Schrag refers as responsibility (Beauvoir 12). For, building on Sartre, Beauvoir notes that there’s “no external justification” whatever for this self-warranting claim upon existence: “no outside appeal, no objective necessity permits of its being called useful. It has no reason to will itself. But this does not mean that it can not justify itself, that it can not give itself reasons for being that it does not have.” This is a way of saying that the transcendent claim to a free, responsible existence is prior to everything, preceding any social overlay that could ever come to mask it.

So, in treating Schrag as exemplifying the existential-transversal perspective, and in tracing his discussion of transcen-
dence back to its support system, we can begin to see that rhetorical transcendence is being constructed, on the one side, as if it’s anchored in nothing (arising from nowhere), but then, on the other side, as if it’s anchored in Sartrean philosophy. And now that we have a stronger sense of what’s “existential” about Schrag’s position, we can turn to what’s “transversal” about it.

Transversality, at least in its Sartrean variety, is the construct which rhetorical theorists like Schrag (and, more implicitly, Michael Hyde or Nick Turnbull) are invoking whenever they imply that transcendence must be operationalized exclusively within consciousness, where it creates “unity” as “a coefficient” of all “thought and communication” (Schrag 129). And Jean-Paul Sartre — as the author of *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness* (1937) — is indeed among the philosophers to whom such rhetorical theorists continue pledging fealty: “it was the genius of Sartre to recognize” that “consciousness achieves unification by dint of a built-in “transversal function, an extending across and revisiting of past moments of consciousness without solidifying into an identification with any particular moment” (Schrag 128-129). So, on this account, transversality becomes the royal road for rhetorical transcendence, the latter traveling epistemically.

Schrag, for his own part, seeks to validate this rather subjectivist train of thought by also appealing to another sort of transversality, that to be found in Félix Guattari’s *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics* (1984). Yet there is a pivotal distinction between the transversality theorized by Sartre and the transversality theorized by Guattari. Since Schrag overlooks the distinction, we should note that Guattari is actually talking about the interaction between subjective and non-subjective resources, so that his version of transversality bespeaks a linkage between minds and non-minds — not only, as in Sartre, between minds and minds. Guattari’s conception of transversality arises from his critique of “transference,” that psychoanalytic way of explaining how feelings and desires are redirected (3). But, in Guattari’s view, transference has become a tool of the status quo. It perpetuates normativity through impositions from above, as well as through institution-wide inertia, such that it forces “things and people” to “fit in as best they can with
the situation in which they find themselves” (17). By contrast, “transversality” denotes a “dimension” that may “overcome both the impasse of pure verticality and mere horizontality,” as by permitting “maximum communication among different levels and, above all, in different meanings” (18).

Perhaps Guattari’s transversality does so closely resemble Sartre’s as to explain how an existential-transversal insider could miss the distinction. Yet, from an outsider’s point of view, Guattari’s emphasis on the non-conscious, non-determined, and non-representational aspects of transversality sticks out like, well, a sore thumb. For Guattari argues that the “best safeguard” against the “danger” of normalization is “to bring to the surface” not, for example, the group’s brightest ideas, but, here in a phrase invoking Marx, Freud, and Darwin simultaneously, the group’s “instinctual demands” (21). These latter, in requiring “everyone” to “consider the problem of their being and destiny,” can render any group (or institution) “ambiguous.” In some respects, the collectivity does remain “reassuring and protective, screening all access to transcendence, generating...a mode of alienation one cannot help finding comforting.” At the same time, though, “there appears behind this artificial reassurance the most detailed picture of human finitude, in which every undertaking of mine [becomes] caught up in the existence of the other, who alone guarantees what reaches me via human speech.”

A passage like that may sound life-affirming in precisely the style of Sartre, of Beauvoir, of Lévinas. Yet “instinctual demands” (which Guattari here associates with our transversal “access to transcendence”) turn out to evade social determination altogether. They inhere in that which is irreducible: our materiality, our corporeality, our embodiment. For Guattari, as a matter of fact, transcendence informs the transversal movement from one presence, regardless how finite, to another. By contrast, Sartrean (and, by extension, existential-transversal) transcendence is so immaterial as to be making its way exclusively among absences, that is, entirely within the “no-thing” which Sartre proclaims consciousness to be (Zahavi 136).

Actually, during our visit to the existential-transversal landscape, we have so far been examining the local production of
rhetorical transcendence in an *ontological* sense—the way in which it's theorized as inherent to every existential self. Now we'll consider the local manufacture of rhetorical transcendence in a *methodological* sense—the way in which it's theorized as an intra-psychic sub-routine.

Thus we reach a fork in the road. Whereas the ontological explanation derives from Sartrean existentialism (declaring that transcendence is prior to everything), the methodological explanation, by contrast, derives from Sartrean phenomenology (whispering that transcendence must remain contingent upon subjectivity). Taking quite the wrong turn, though purely for investigative purposes, we'll follow the local theorists of rhetorical agency as they drop right into the rabbit-hole of human interiority. While we're in free-fall (through a chamber still echoing with ever so many rumors about the subject's discursive construction), we, too, may begin to wonder why even transcendence shouldn't be socially determined, after all.

*Philosophizing for the Living by Getting Rid of Their Materiality*

Unfortunately, what Sartre is offering rhetorical theory with the one, existentialist hand is the same as what he's taking away with the other, phenomenologist hand. He's observing, as is well known, that social productions are to be overcome when they exacerbate the material constraints upon human freedom. But then he's insisting they're to be overcome through the force of an interiority lacking in any material dimension at all. To grasp that the project of the existential Sartre is trivialized in the project of the phenomenological Sartre, we'll review the steps through which the latter repurposes such tenets as he's taken over from Edmund Husserl. For Sartre proposes to bring philosophy back to earth by etherealizing it. As a result, it's a retro-fitted, de-corporealized kind of phenomenology, carried over from Sartre, which the existential-transversal theorists are now parlaying into the study of rhetorical transcendence.

Husserl's major contribution, reportedly, is to have opened the way to the things themselves. But his first step has been to get rid of the things themselves, lest they complicate his open-
ing the way to them. So he brackets all “questions of fact,” even questions concerning the “evidence for one’s own existence as a particular person” (Williams and Kirkpatrick 16–17). Husserl is then addressing only the “intended” or “intentional” objects of consciousness. These are always thoughts figured as objects, without regard to whether they correspond to anything existing independently of the thinker. Indeed, the “things” to which Husserl refers are, in every respect, inherent to “the content of a person’s thought” (Coates). And then Sartre remains “essentially in agreement” with the “phenomenological program” as laid out by Husserl (Williams and Kirkpatrick 17). He takes for granted, in other words, that the category of “object” is exclusively filled out by objects of intention. All he discards is the Husserlian premise that there’s some sort of transcendental ego whose task is to intend the objects themselves.

But what else, if not an “I,” shall there be to intend all those objects? Sartre’s response is to point out that the question would block the way to the answer:

nothing shall constitute contents of consciousness into intended objects, for the important reason that consciousness has no contents. All content is on the side of the object. Consciousness contains neither transcendental ego nor anything else. It is simply a spontaneity, a sheer activity transcending toward objects…a great emptiness, a wind blowing toward objects. (Williams and Kirkpatrick 20–21)

In that case, however, the hard-boiled Sartre, the one rolling up his sleeves against the “practico-inert,” must be saying the opposite of what the Husserlian Sartre has in mind (see Campbell 4).

Sure, if the objects are already there, with all of the content on their side, then that sounds like a version of philosophical realism: objects are real, and objects are everything. Meanwhile, if consciousness is content-less, then that sounds like a refutation of subjectivism. Yet the only objects that can possibly be left in the picture are intended objects, in short, ideas. So, if ideas are everything, and if they’re already there, then
this is, in fact, idealism, and quite the subjectivist idealism at that. Thus we arrive at the explanation as to why these existential-transversal theorists of rhetorical agency, having founded their views upon a no-thing inherited from Sartre, would keep forgetting that human embodiment does count for something, anyway.

*The Two Styles of Transcendence*

It’s no wonder that, in the tradition following from Sartre, *everything* looks immanent to subjectivity. True, “immanence” is regularly contrasted with “transcendence,” as if these are mutually exclusive or diametrically opposed. Yet writers such as Schrag, Hyde, and Turnbull do understand, and all too well, that transcendence itself can be described as immanent: as enclosed within consciousness. So these existential-transversal theorists, what with their belonging to an assemblage for shoring up rhetorical transcendence, are faced with an embarrassing predicament. Given their commitment to life (existence, authenticity, responsibility, and the like) they have to keep showing that speech really can make things otherwise. Then again, given their commitment to Sartrean phenomenology, they have to concede that transcendence, as a sub-routine within a socially-conditioned consciousness, might, in reality, just be shoring up whatever would have needed transcending to begin with. Their current exit strategy, i.e., from out of this double-bind, is to claim that there must be two styles of transcendence. There’s an ordinary transcendence that stays “immanent” within subjectivity, but there’s also an extraordinary transcendence that irrupts into rhetorical transaction from nowhere.

So here’s a statement from Grøn and Overgaard (2007) to contextualize the manner in which philosophers today can try to rescue transcendence from the very clutches of immanence:

One prominent trend has been to conceive of…the movement of transcendence as being constitutive of subjectivity…Recently, the seemingly opposite point has been made: subjectivity is to be understood from
the transcendence of the other that breaks subjectivity open. (4)

Of course, transcendence as “constitutive of subjectivity” refers to the humble factory-work that normally goes on inside human interiority, with immanence as subjectivity’s default condition. But that’s hardly enough in a world where rhetoric’s will to matter has turned into the will to make transcendence matter. Here, the transcendence that breaks subjectivity open must be conceptualized as coming from outside of immanence, the problem becoming that of wishing such an “outside” into existence.

So far as concerns rhetorical theory, the synergy between those two philosophical trends is most clearly instantiated in Calvin Schrag’s The Self after Postmodernity (1997), where communicative interaction is said to be informed sometimes by an ordinary, constitutive, Sartrean transcendence, and sometimes by an extraordinary, irrecuperable, Lévinasian transcendence. In the writing of Lévinas, to be sure, the opposition is between “rhetoric,” which is by nature oppressive, and conversation, which is inexplicably receptive (70). Obviously, the rhetorical theorists can’t settle for exactly that, not even when they’ve found it “prudent” to side with Lévinas, the philosopher who has so fully addressed the relation between speech and transcendence (Schrag 100, 114, 137–8). Yet it’s the same libretto (enlivened differentially by the fancy footwork) in Schrag, Hyde, and Turnbull as in Lévinas. Always, there’s a miraculous intervention keeping rhetoricity transcendent despite itself. It’s this unmotivated intercession from beyond, meriting the label of fideism, which we should hold not simply to characterize, but indeed to vitiate the existential-transversal account of rhetorical agency.

To begin with, writers like Schrag, Hyde, and Turnbull would readily accept that there can be a (limited) sort of transcendence within immanence, for their basic position can be formulated casuistically enough: “Radical transcendence operates transversally, and…the grammar of transversality replaces that of universality” (Schrag 130). Yet there’s still the task of protecting the whole mechanism (grammar, transversality, and
all) from those who could show it to be socially determined in the first place. And it’s on this count that Schrag in particular sounds intractable: we can hardly expect genuine, authentic, radical transcendence to arise from “internal” or immanent critique, which latter would of course recirculate the immediately-given constraints upon subjectivity (126–129). Instead, the only critique adequate to the self after postmodernity will be “external,” calling for a certain leap of faith.

The Fideistic Appeal

So let’s consider the allure which Lévinasian phenomenology must hold for a thinker like Schrag. We’ll turn to an argument quite central for Lévinas:

When I perceive objects, I am their condition of manifestation, and they consequently appear as my creations. In contrast, my encounter with the Other is not conditioned by anything in my power, but can only offer itself from without, as an epiphanic visitation. (Zahavi 144)

That’s to inaugurate the recent trend of splitting transcendence into two different styles. There’s an ordinary, workaday transcendence, as is to be found in most other phenomenology, and yet there is, in addition, an extraordinary, radical transcendence, the “absolute experience” of which “is not disclosure but revelation” (Lévinas, qtd. in Zahavi 144).

Similarly, though not by coincidence, Schrag is also having to split transcendence into two. One of its styles, the Sartrean, is forever to risk recuperation into social logic. And the other, the Lévinasian, is forever to be protected by fideism. That’s how Schrag can help rescue communication from immanence-in-disguise, that is, from the workaday kind of transcendence constructed by Husserl and Sartre, and then presupposed by writers like Jurgen Habermas.

Henceforth, communication will be animated by that excessive, uncontainable kind of transcendence so often registered, no matter how dimly, in the religious. And then the self
(or agent) after postmodernity can be conceptualized in terms of that openness to radical alterity presented as theology in Augustine, but reclaimed for philosophy in Kierkegaard and Lévinas.

Schrag’s task, therefore, is to establish a fideistic, Lévinasian exit from immanence-in-disguise. And here’s a passage in which he begins doing so, declaring that what’s no longer at issue is a transcendence-within-immanence, a transcendence within the economies of the human subject understanding itself in its discourse, action, perception, and communal involvements, but rather transcendence…understood as residing on the other side of the economies of human experience.

Isn’t it paradoxical to maintain that our merely human interactions can be animated by some power residing on the other side of everything? Well, if that’s paradoxical, says the existential-transversal theorist, then so be it: the “grammar of faith is the grammar of paradox” (120). In that case, however, communication must be more or less synonymous with grace. For a transcendence so paradoxical as that (flouting our own “configurations of experience,” our own “forms of life”) would have nothing to do with us at all (Schrag 138–139).

The real mystery, however, is as to why the existential-transversal perspective on agency, with its concern for life, responsibility, conscience, questioning, and the rest, would be appealing to the grammar of paradox rather than to the structure of human embodiment. Thus we, as assemblage-theoretical investigators, find ourselves in the position of having to reinforce a certain stance on agency by recorporealizing it, and all on behalf of some of the local theorists themselves. Yet there’s no reason, not even in this case, to posit any miracle: we can instead deploy an additional affordance of the existential-transversal perspective as such.
Correcting Forgetfulness through a Material Phenomenology

As it turns out, the other existential-transversal writers do have an ally who could help protect transcendence from social determination. It's the phenomenologist Michel Henry, whose outlier status may well be due to his recalcitrant treatment of transcendence as immanent. Yet Henry introduces an understanding of embodiment which (while correcting the generally idealist forgetfulness of materiality) ought to allow the other local theorists to see that rhetorical transaction really doesn't need to access any extrinsic, faith-based resources in order to effect genuine social change.

In his translator's introduction to Material Phenomenology (1990/2008), Scott Davidson portrays the late Michel Henry as articulating a “nonbiological concept” of “life” as a “transcendental auto-affectivity” (ix). Here, it's the pioneering work of Husserl (and, by implication, of Sartre) that becomes the target of critique: “There are many problems with Husserl's account of intersubjectivity, but for Henry all of these problems can... be traced to Husserl's decision to promote transcendence over the immanence of life” (Henry, Material, xiii). The analysis thus identifies the fatal limitation for not just Husserlian, but very much of post-Kantian thinking, a tradition in which even something so central as materiality has to be hypothesized rather than experienced.

In marked contrast to Schrag, Hyde, or Turnbull, Henry maintains that transcendent responsibility is grounded in human embodiment, preceding intersubjectivity and persisting within it. Indeed, the “intersubjective community...is joined together not through a shared perception of the world...but through the pathos of life” (Henry, Material, xiii). For, according to Henry, “there exists a more fundamental mode of being, immanence, which is the origin of all transcendence whatsoever” (xi). And this philosopher offers an uncompromisingly gapless account of immanence, where “an affection of life by life” becomes the “condition for any actual existence” (Williams, “Critical Contrasts,” 266). In this view, “affect B” isn't transcendentally “caused by external cause A, or determined by
condition A.” For example, it’s not that empathy is transcendentally constructed by consciousness. Instead, life inheres or insists in the affects of life, such that “affect B” is “determined by affect B.”

As for the question of responsibility, Henry’s answer will, as always, be that it’s animated by pathos. This pure affectivity, primitive and invisible as we might take it to be, is accessible to us all, linking us regardless of our sociality. Indeed, much of Henry’s “political and ethical work” is to “re-establish the primordial status of life as auto-affection,” to “revalue affects—suffering, alienation, bewilderment—in political debate,” and to contest the wrongful as “carried by the distinctions, goals and implications of the turn away from life” (Williams, “Critical Contrasts,” 274).

We might then say that Henry is holding forth the clearest promise for de-subjectivizing rhetorical agency. In respecifying transcendence as immanent before consciousness (though, by implication, still operating transversally—in the auto-affectivity linking all of the existential selves) he neither ties it to any “historical idea,” nor invites it into the world by fiat, but rather, refers it to human corporeality (Beauvoir, qtd. in Gothlin 54).

Borrowing now from Michel Henry’s Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body (1965/1975), we can do our part to restore the corporeality that’s otherwise missing from the existential-transversal perspective. Because Henry’s argument may be misconstrued if quoted too aphoristically, we’ll view one of the relevant passages at length:

Man is not essentially an historical being. He is always the same. Since it is here a question of the body…it will be objected that the human body presents…characteristics which have varied throughout the course of history…However, this is not the original body, but various ways in which man represents this body to himself and behaves toward it. What is historical are the cultural or human objects and the different human attitudes related thereto. But the ontological basis which founds both objects and attitudes is indif-
ferent to this evolution; the latter always presupposes the ontological foundation. (4)

Thus Michel Henry really is advancing a philosophy for the living human being, not for the cerebrating subject of the social, or the transcendental jackalope, or some similarly neo-Kantian construct. Whereas other contemporary thinkers assume that consciousness must be the (grounding) determination of materiality in re-presentation, Henry views consciousness as the (figural) continuation of materiality by other means.

At this point, having worked hard enough at it, we can say we’re in a place where rhetoricity, if it ever does conduce to the life-affirming (even for no necessary reason), must be accessing an agency that’s intrinsic to the human being to begin with. This is an agency which arises not from conventionality or sociability or identity, but instead from a claim upon existence which inheres, irreducibly so, in everyone’s embodiment. After all, in this particular landscape, if nowhere else, the agent’s imperative is to ek-sist, which means to “stand out” against absence. Lewis R. Gordon (2006) makes that point quite clearly. He argues that, for persons of color, what precedes even the problem of representation (including in the political sense) is the task of emerging beyond “indistinction”—of coming to stand out as present, visible, participating in the world (20). Yet Gordon also emphasizes that this is the task not just for certain, specially-designated social groups, but for everyone. It’s our sharing in ek-sistence (and, let’s add, in the original body, this latter’s condition of possibility) that’s actually connecting us all.

So, yes, as Schrag or Hyde or Turnbull ought to agree, this is the sort of sharing that unifies us by way of a transversal linkage, passing through any number of social or cultural or historical compartments. But transcendence now begins with auto-affection. It’s authorized by the original body, and it’s manifested (as Guattari would say) in these “instinctual demands” that travel everywhere, right along with the existential selves who transport them.
Rhetorical Agency and the Existential Self

Let’s rejoin the now-recorporealized company of Sojourner Truth, who has carried her speech (the claim “I am a woman’s rights,” plus the package made up of race, gender, work, mind, biblical precept, and embodiment, as well as the metaphor of the pint and the quart) all the way into the existential-transversal landscape of agency. Clearly, in a place like this, there’s nothing pivotal about the “I” of “I am a woman’s rights,” for the human claim to exist is already universal. Meanwhile, the “woman’s” can hardly be central, since it’s never the original body, but only the latter’s secondary determinations that will have any gender. As for the “rights,” they, too, must refer to something peripheral, to those collectively-held values that keep coming and going with every shift in the social. This time, therefore, it’ll be the “am” which is salient. In that case, let’s start asking how communication about an “am” could ever, even as far back as 1851, afford an opportunity for certain existential and ethical imperatives to come into contact, to begin interacting synergistically, and then to give rise to just the sort of rhetorical agency that would conduce to genuine social change.

For an approach to an answer, let’s consider that, from the existential-transversal perspective, Sojourner Truth’s famous speech must be designed to connect certain forms of social identity (or of essence) by demonstrating these always already to be linked at the level of the original body (or of existence). We do know, from the work of Michel Henry, something about that original body, and now we need to find out something about those forms of social identity. If we turn to the work of the historian Nell Irvin Painter, we’ll soon see that, in this case, the two most relevant social identities are those of feminist and abolitionist.

In the following passage, Painter is explaining the historical significance of Sojourner Truth’s message, her statement. She writes,

One of only a few black women regulars on the feminist and antislavery circuit, Truth…was the pivot that linked two causes — of women (presumed to be
white) and of blacks (presumed to be men) — through one black female body. (Sojourner Truth, 171)

Upon reflection, we realize that the passage is already demythologizing the presumption that Sojourner Truth's rhetorical agency could derive from her social identity as a woman, or even as a black woman. So far as concerned the mid-nineteenth century status quo, someone who wasn’t white couldn’t be a woman, anyway, not in the public forum. Perhaps such a figure might be a female, or maybe a quasi-woman, but not much more than that. Besides, as Painter does explain in detail, not even the feminists of the day could have arrived at any consensus on black women's social identity. Some of the most important such activists were then advocating gender-egalitarianism exclusively within the familiar constraints of race and class. In recognizing the interests of white women only, these (non-abolitionist) feminists would effectively frame all others as non-women. So it's not that Sojourner Truth could just show up at some feminist convention of 1851 and already be, for example, a woman.

Meanwhile, in the speech that we're studying, the speaker is front-stage and center, submitted to all sorts of scrutiny — and not by just anyone, but specifically by those seeking to work out the rights of gender. Could her self-disclosures then be for the patriarchs (so very few of whom would be attending, or even attending to, any woman's rights convention of 1851)? Of course not: her speech must, instead, be for the undecided among the feminists, those still wondering whether it'd be an error to allow an abolitionist like Sojourner Truth (threatening, by association, to bring along with her the “blacks” who are “presumed to be men”) into the women's movement at all (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 171).

Under such circumstances, even the gender of the speaker's voice becomes an issue. After all, the historical Sojourner Truth is known for speaking in a voice so “robust” and “deep” that “that some of her enemies” have “suspected” she's “a man” (Campbell 12). But, in that case, we're left with a figure even less categorizable as a woman than before. It’s perplexing enough that being black disqualifies the speaker from any
self-evident status as a woman. And now there’s the very timbre of her voice to take into consideration.

So we’ve arrived at a puzzle. It’s unclear how Sojourner Truth, this difficult quantity, could possibly accomplish what the historian Nell Irving Painter would claim, that is, by becoming the “pivot” that links the “feminist” cause with the “antislavery” cause (Sojourner Truth 171). And that’s to say nothing of what the rhetorical theorist Karlyn Kohrs Campbell would claim, i.e., with respect to the speaker’s stepping up to lead a monolithically black-and-feminist onslaught against the patriarchy.

To be sure, a commentator like Schrag, or Hyde, or Turnbull might wish to respond that the speaker is benefiting from her ineffable Otherness, which must be introducing some radical (consciousness-raising) transcendence into the mix. Nevertheless, the more tenable existential-transversal answer would be that our exemplary rhetorical agent must, in the very process of speaking to the question of equal rights, have annihilated the presumption that social identity could matter in the first place.

**On Pivoting, Transcendence, and Emergence**

Indeed, if we retain from the Frances Dana Gage account of the speech whatever is corroborated in the Marius Robinson account, we find that the Sojourner Truth who speaks in 1851 is, in some respects, outside all of the then-salient social categories, and yet, in some other respects, inside all of them, too. Thus it becomes evident that she must be dramatizing, in her own person, the capacity of the existential self not only to exceed any of the contemporary essences, but also to pass through them (transversally) along the way.

To begin with, the speaker describes a seeming state of diremption among the salient socio-political groups, with the implication that any genuine change would require some reconciliation among those alienated parties. In the process, however, she also reveals herself to be *exempt* from that sort of partisanship, and all on account of her not belonging (at least not intrinsically so) to any of the factions in question. Indeed, in
portraying division or alienation as a secondary condition, as an effect or outcome of social relations, she's suggesting that there might very well exist a form of connection or consubstantiality that's prior to any collective determination whatever.

According to the Robinson version of the speech, which historians and biographers do consider quite reliable, Sojourner Truth observes that “the women are coming up blessed by God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 126). Meanwhile, according to the less reliable Gage, what the speaker says is this: “Well, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be somethin’ out o’ kilter. I tink dat ‘twixt de niggers of de Souf and de womin at de Norf, all talkin’ ‘bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon” (Campbell 9). So where's the state of socio-political diremption that we're seeking? Well, it's disclosed in the separation of the terms “man,” “woman,” and “slave.”

On the one side, there might perhaps be “man” and, on the other side, there might perhaps be “woman” and “slave” (folded into a sort of phalanx). Even so, while we can see that “man” and “slave” form one clear-cut binary, just as “man” and “woman” form another, we cannot see any clear-cut relation between “slave” and “woman.” The hawk is a different entity from the buzzard, and, yes, each of the two may be mounting its own assault. But it's not that “man” is having to contend with a hawk-buzzard, or with an alliance between buzzard and hawk.

Indeed, the men, the slaves, and the women are described as occupying separate compartments within the social. The distance is geographical as well as ideational; it's literal, physical, regional, and not only cultural and political. The men are everywhere, so there's no need for the speaker to specify their location. But “de niggers,” come to think of it, would be quite definitively in “de Souf.” And “de womin”—the feminists—would be quite definitively “at de Norf.” At this moment, then, it's diremption wherever we turn. It's alienation betwixt the (white) men and the (white) Northern feminists, and it's alienation between the (black) Southern slaves and the (white)
men, and it's also, though independently, alienation among the (white) Northern feminists, the (black) Southern slaves, and, of course, the (white) men, too.

Nevertheless, as we reflect on the state of separation depicted in both the Gage and Robinson versions of the speech, we realize that the speaker has presented herself as missing from all of the social classifications at issue. While the white men, the black slaves, and the white women each belong to some prepared-for place, the speaker doesn't. After all, the place of the white men is everywhere, unlike the place of Sojourner Truth. Yet this speaker is not a slave, for she has famously been “freed by New York law” some twenty-five years earlier (Campbell 8). Furthermore, she can't be one of “de niggers of de Souf,” since she isn't even where they are. To the contrary, she's up North, and among the “regulars on the feminist and antislavery circuit” (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 171). But, then again, the North is the place of “de womin,” and the jury's currently out as to whether the speaker fits into that category.

We must conclude that nobody, at the present moment, can say whether Sojourner Truth is a slave or not a slave, a woman or not a woman, or even, for that matter, a man or not a man, what with her voice so “robust” and so “deep” (Mabee and Newhouse, qtd. in Campbell 12). That's what it must mean for someone, circa 1851, to be constituting a liminal site. But regardless that it's impossible to assign Sojourner Truth to any of the contemporary categories, here she is, anyway. And if she's still affirming the possibility of some consubstantiality or connection with her auditors, then she must be declaring that everyone here can be conjoined in a manner somehow independent of any collectively-determined identity.

That's quite as we should expect in a world like the one we're visiting now. For the whole point of theorizing rhetorical transaction from within the existential-transversal frame is to construct speech as accessing transcendence (and in an transversal manner, at that). In this instance, what needs to be overcome is, on the one side, the category of gender and, on the other side, the category of race, and Sojourner Truth is overcoming these by not belonging to either.
But that’s only because our exemplary rhetorical agent, if she’s ever to become a pivot between the feminist movement and the abolitionist movement, has initially to speak as a person, and only later on as a woman and/or an African-American. To do that requires her to clear away any presumptions, on the one side, as to her gender identity and, on the other side, as to her racial identity, leaving in the middle (front-stage and center) only her ontologically prior claim to exist as a human being. That’s how she’s to dramatize that just any other existential self, whether currently essentialized as a woman, or an African-American, or something else, can also precede, occupy, and transcend its given social positioning. Indeed, while it’s clear from both Robinson and Gage that the speaker does testify from personal experience, we are still to discover, if we triangulate carefully enough, that the autobiographical references have nothing to do either with black or with being female.

To begin with, if we rule out of consideration all those emblems of femininity that are (a) so routinely sutured to Sojourner Truth’s statement (the mother’s grief, the thirteen children, the part about not being “helped into carriages”) and yet (b) so conspicuously absent from the Robinson version, appearing only in the fictionalized, melodramatic version from Gage, we find that the speaker’s claim, her advocating on behalf of the disenfranchised, cannot turn on her status as a woman.

According to Robinson himself, the speaker never includes any verification as to her gender identity at all. True, her strategy is to keep emphasizing that she’s not a man, so that she consistently proceeds by negation:

I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?...I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too...I am as strong as any man that is now. (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 125)

But if we isolate the key terms — muscle, work, plowed, reaped, husked, chopped, mowed, carry, eat, strong — we realize, as would so many a woman of the nineteenth century, that they
have only to do with being an embodied person authenticating her claim to existence.

So, having dismissed the possibility that Sojourner Truth's gender might be speaking before she does, we'll inquire into the possibility that her race might be exerting priority over her humanity. We do notice some markers of race in the Gage version of the speech, saturated as it is with dialect. But there's no time like the present to recall that the dialect is bogus:

Truth did not speak in the language that Gage attributed to her; even her most powerful arguments and apt metaphors were by this language deformed, even ridiculed. Note, too, that this is the only extant text or fragment in which Truth uses the n-word. (Campbell 13)

Consequently, if we, as investigators of the Gage account, agree to discount the fabricated dialect, we really can't hear any blackness at all.

Meanwhile, Robinson's account contains exactly no linguistic traces as to the speaker's racial identity. His Sojourner Truth doesn't sound even slightly black, not by any criterion of 1851. Instead, she sounds like anybody else, for she's speaking the "standard English" which, as Campbell divulges, so often characterized her public communication (Campbell 12).

More intriguing yet, if there's any hint in Robinson as to Sojourner Truth's racial identity, it's — at most — that the speaker is an "emancipated slave," which still doesn't tell us anything much. Here, we can refer to the work of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth's colleague on some of the same speaking tours. In Chapter 7 of his Narrative (1845), Douglass recalls helping the Irish laborers with their work on the docks. He's asked whether he's "a slave for life;" and this is for him to discover the reality of indenture. That's a practice in which almost anyone of less-than-modest means — say, an Irishman — might end up as a temporary slave, though perhaps for years at a time. So, for Marius Robinson to report on the speaker as an "emancipated slave" isn't, after all, for him to label her by race.
By now, we must rule out any linguistic markers that would define the speaker either as female or as black. So we can no longer maintain that her rhetorical agency would emanate from some social identity leaking through her words. But, in that case, if we’re eliminating or suspending so much of the language of the speech, then what’s left for us to talk about? Well, it’s not as if we’re abandoning everything that’s linguistic about the speech. We’re simply noting that, if Sojourner Truth is speaking without foregrounding either her race or her gender, then she can’t be speaking like an identity politician. It’s an existential, rather than ideological content that she’s communicating.

At this stage, our exemplary rhetorical agent has disclosed herself as a person, as standing, so to speak, prior to the social categories of “woman” and “black.” From this point on, she can almost effortlessly shift into either or both of those social categories, but while remaining herself in the process. And when she does shift into this or that familiar identity, what will be already be there, populating the categories of the day? The answer is that an array of other existential selves will already be there. These will be all of the persons, whether in the immediate audience or elsewhere, who are as capable as Sojourner Truth of stepping into all sorts of social identities, but without thereby doffing their personhood. So, collectively, the speaker and the audience will constitute the entire populace of the existential-transversal world, and then Sojourner Truth will speak for everybody in the same breath as she speaks for herself.

In sum, if Sojourner Truth really is a rhetorical agent, her auditors (existential selves, every last one of them) will recognize that “the signs to be interpreted” in her message, “however connected to still other signs,” are “nevertheless trying to convey something true” (Grondin 58). They will grasp her statement as an “event of speaking” in which “someone” is “saying something to someone” (Schrag 22). While the someone who does the saying will not be interchangeable with the someone who does the listening, and while the selves engaged in the transaction will, in any case, be “emergent” rather than fixed, each of the participants will nevertheless be an “I,” a somebody (Schrag 22, 26). And all of them will be linked through some-
thing prior to, and independent of, any socially-determined identity, something inherent in an irreducible (because emergent) “am.” It’s the human claim to exist, a claim which, even as it differentiates every speaking self, also hybridizes every “I” with the self of its other.

*The Rhetorical Agent and the Original Body*

Yet the question remains as to the mechanism(s) through which an exemplary rhetorical practitioner — having, as it were, preempted her own reduction to race or gender — could affirm the link between herself and her interlocutors. Surely the answer will have to concern human corporeality, which is, as Michel Henry would say, auto-affectively included within any social identity to which a listener may belong. Yet we shouldn’t jump to conclusions as to what the audience members would witness in fixing their disparate gazes upon the speaker.

For, when we ourselves scrutinize the intersection between our two sources, Robinson and Gage, all that comes into view is what Michel Henry calls the *original body*, which isn’t a matter of the speaker’s race or gender, or even of the merely verbal signs through which she’s announcing her existence. Indeed, while Gage and Robinson together assure us that the original body is quite actively involved in this transaction, they also confirm, each of them in a different way, that it cannot disappear into symbolization.

As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell points out, Gage does dwell on Sojourner Truth’s conversion of physicality into a non-verbal rhetorical device. So here’s the passage from Gage, including that reporter’s authorial intrusion: “‘Look at me! Look at my arm!’…and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power” (Campbell 10). Nell Irvin Painter analyzes the scenario as follows:

Gage shines a spotlight on Truth’s body: a massive, towering figure straining upward…undressed and on display…Gage describes Truth’s disrobing a part of her body. The naked limb is a mighty right arm,
the arm of a worker, the arm of a powerful woman.  
(Sojourner Truth 171)

According to Gage, at least, Sojourner Truth doesn’t vanish into some epistemic wrinkle, or into the recesses of the sign. We know it because Sojourner Truth is bypassing representation, baring her non-linguistic arm, and during no less than the process of affirming her existential claim.

Now, if we have read from Annemarie Mol (2002), we might remember that even arteries can acquire a gender, maybe a race as well, and we might concede that Sojourner Truth’s arm could quite possibly, at some ontically subsequent moment, take on just those determinations. We might further appreciate that Sojourner Truth’s arm does seem distinguished from that of someone who’d never lifted a finger. But how can this be the arm of a woman, or of a black woman, or of a black woman who’s a worker, before it’s the arm of a person?

It’s as a person, then — not as a social identity — that Sojourner Truth is speaking, and it’s the original body that’s manifested in her speech. Not everyone in the audience will be a black woman used to performing manual labor, or inclined to identify with the speaker on that basis. Yet everyone will have a share in the original body, whether instantiated by an arm, a face, or something else. If it’s an arm, though, the arm will be enough like Sojourner Truth’s for everyone to have something in common. Proprioception alone (returning us to Guattari’s conception of the “instinctual” demand) will mean that the speaker’s incarnation can’t be dismissed as theatricality, written off as signification, for this is now a body just as real as mine.

Yet Sojourner Truth’s original body precedes any particularly “social” attributes (any blackness, femaleness, whiteness, maleness, workerliness), just as it precedes any of the verbal signs wrapped around it. Therefore, if Gage is affirming that Sojourner Truth bares her arm as part of the performance, then Gage is affirming that there’s a layer to rhetorical agency which, though palpable, cannot be represented. Not even Gage can do more than gesture towards it, and only in an indication that redoubles, rather than interprets, the exemplary speaker’s
gesture: Here’s this material existence which we’re, all of us, sharing.

And then, if we do continue triangulating, we’ll discover that an unrepresentable embodiment is participating in the Robinson version of the speech as well. For, just as soon as we allow that account back into the archive, we discover some additional evidence that the original body, the one which Sojourner Truth is manifesting in her speech, cannot be black, or female, or both. Robinson verifies, even more clearly than does Gage, that Sojourner Truth becomes a rhetorical agent by virtue not of her social visibility but of her irreducible embodiment. So here is the preface to his version of Sojourner Truth’s statement:

One of the most unique and interesting speeches of the Convention was made by Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave. It is impossible to transfer it to paper, or convey any adequate idea of the effect it produced upon the audience. Those only can appreciate it who saw her powerful form, her whole-souled, earnest gestures, and listened to her strong and truthful tones. (Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 125)

And, in that case, we need to ask what’s happened to Sojourner Truth’s blackness and/or femaleness now.

As we’ve found earlier, the speaker’s racial and gender identity aren’t anywhere in the speech as Robinson presents it. But they’re not even in the editorial *preface* to the speech, considering that “emancipated slave” could, in the middle of the nineteenth century, refer to an Irishman. As for the speaker’s gender, well, the only traces are metadiscursive. They belong to the reporter’s “her” and “she,” which don’t in the least impinge upon the argument. In short, all we are being given to understand in Robinson’s introduction is that you’d just have to share in the original body — in that unrepresentable “form” which exists before any socially-recuperable content — to grasp what’s happening in the transaction. It’s the form of any person who is armed, so to speak, with some human corporeality. So it’s
the original body, auto-affectively shared by everyone, that emerges out of indistinction in Robinson’s account.

From this perspective, what goes for race and gender goes for “mind” as well, explaining the functionality of the pint-and-quart analogy. In both the Gage and Robinson versions of the speech, the speaker is portrayed as satirically engaging the question as to whether women and African-Americans should qualify for equal rights on the basis of their intelligence. But any bona fide argument along those lines would overlook that one’s fundamental claim is already self-validating. So, on the existential-transversal view, the metaphor of the pint and the quart would be to eradicate the preoccupation with “intellect,” leaving the audience in direct contact with the original body, for whom “mind” or “intelligence” is peripheral, anyway.

In short, the rhetorical agent to whom we can attribute this famous speech isn’t essentially black, or female, or both. To the contrary, she’s essentially human, mobile, and emergent. She’s as human, mobile, and emergent as her interlocutors, all of whom, sharing the original body of the existential self, are able, just like her, not only to take on but also to transcend any socially-given identities.

A Re-Corporealized Transversality

By now, the Sojourner Truth speech is less about patriarchy, pure and simple, than about the relation (or not) between race and gender. Yet we still need to find out how this speaker could ever emerge as a “pivot” between the “antislavery” movement, populated primarily by men, and the “feminist” movement, populated primarily by women (Painter, Sojourner Truth, 171). This practitioner couldn’t very well be a pivot beforehand, having, as it were, no self-evident leverage in either social camp to begin with, not at a time when “women” are “presumed to be white,” and “blacks” are “presumed to be men.” So she must be converting herself into a pivot during the rhetorical transaction itself.

Let’s examine the process through which Sojourner Truth manages to express her own personhood in just such a manner as (transversally) to link the socially recognizable figure
of the black person with the socially recognizable figure of the woman. Certainly, it’s in order to effect such a connection that the speaker is working “race” and “gender” into the speech to begin with. As it turns out, the avenue for transcendence opens up not at either of those sites, but, rather (and once again) at the site of biblical precept. We know it because both Robinson and Gage portray the speaker as continually referencing Jesus.

It’s true that Christ is associated with the very religion which happens, circa 1851, to be the most prevalent within the social dispensation. But, in addition to that, and separately from that, Jesus is emblematic of the existential self, which is why you don’t have to be black and/or female to respond to Him. For Jesus acts as an existential-transversal collector, and as an existential-transversal separator, too. He gathers what’s prior about the existential self, distantiating all of that from what’s secondary about sociality. By the same token, Jesus bespeaks, at one and the same time, such definitively existential-transversal preoccupations as finitude or lack, the original body, ek-sistence, revolution, emancipation, the absolute if counter-rational rejection of arbitrary constraint, and, above all, the reality of transcendence.

In that case, “biblical precept” functions primarily as a vehicle for bringing Jesus into the conversation. And then Jesus (sharing the original body, too) becomes a middle term, a mediator, translating the speaker into existential commensurability with her auditors — black, white, feminist, abolitionist, whatever. This is how Sojourner Truth demonstrates, in person, that anybody can be an advocate simultaneously for women’s rights and for African-Americans’ rights. After all, if she is concerned for African-Americans and women, then she (like Jesus, and like the followers of Jesus) must existentially be not only an African-American but also a woman, emerging as such because of her concern for anyone.

What is, shall we say, crucial about the interchange is that it redistributes the speaker’s care, quite in keeping with the thesis which Elaine Scarry (1985), evidently another of these existential-transversal thinkers, advances with regard to the workings of mediation more generally. But it’s Sojourner Truth’s own claim to exist, and to share in the personhood of her auditors
(who, again, might accidentally be positioned within just any social classification), that familiarizes everybody with the new, blended category of the “black female.” It’s a category, after all, which any other existential self may enter or exit as readily as she can. That, finally is how the speaker becomes a “pivot” between the initially-alienated constituencies. For she’s at least doubled the set of agents who, in their consubstantiality both with black people (plus abolitionists) and with women (plus feminists), are prepared to accept this transversal advocacy for extending equal rights to everyone.