

Mariavita Cambria

“What’s in a name?” (Re)-Languaging Rosa Parks

ABSTRACT: By taking as its starting point Sojourner Truth’s speech, “Ain’t I women” (1851), commonly recognized as the founding anti-slavery female speech, the paper investigates the sedimentation of some linguistic features in Truth speech and in Rosa Parks autobiography. In particular, the looks at the role played by language in the framework of the intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) which is acknowledged for its potential to map hierarchies of power and privilege.

Keywords: discursive practices, intersectionality, naming, Sojourner Truth, speech

What’s in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet.

William Shakespeare

1. First movement: Exposition

It seems that William Shakespeare did not think that names should matter very much but many of us would disagree with him. In Shakespeare, Juliet is not allowed to associate with Romeo because he is a Montague; if he had other name, it would be fine and she is complaining that his name is meaningless. If the rose had any other name, it would still be the same. So with Romeo: he would still be the same man even if he had a different name. Hence, “what’s in a name?” and what is so special about a name? A rose, even if it were called something else would smell just as sweet.

Going beyond and behind names, trying to overcome the stereotyped version that those names have come to represent, erasing them in order to retrieve the “event”, has been one of K’s main concerns and underlying assumption since its no.0 issue in 2018. This is also the case of Rosa Parks whose name has undergone a series of metamorphoses leading to her unconditional incorporation in mainstream discourse on and around racism, feminism and Black history to quote just a few. One of the few striking examples is most likely represented by the production of a Rosa Parks Barbie in the “inspiring women series” which, as advertised on the Mattel website, “[...] pays tribute to incredible heroines of their time, courageous women who took risks, changed rules and paved the way for generations of girls to dream

bigger than ever before”¹. In this framework, Rosa Parks is hailed as the mother of the *Modern Civil Rights Movements* for her “quiet strength” (same website). Her act of refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger and move back to the back of the bus is defined as an “act of defiance” which became the catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Framing Rosa Parks with the halo of a “heroine” and “mother”, archetypes of a monolithic representation of women, epitomizes how the use of some linguistic categories can trap and crystallize a given figure. The use of semantic categories, lexical sets and wording create patterns in the way events are co-constructed, people are represented and the politics of naming is intertwined with such discourse practices. The genealogy of particular discourses has been explored and discussed (Foucault, 1978) and a discourse, though it may be unbounded, will nevertheless be describable, for example in its possible linguistic traces and features. It may have a name or be nameable. The first part of the title of this paper specifically addresses this issue and relates to the attempt to discuss (and partly destroy) the “social” imaginary – i.e. the set of values, institutions, laws and symbols through which people imagine their social whole and which, as maintained by Castoriadis (1997), creates for each historical period its singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence – surrounding Rosa Parks behind and beyond her name via some linguistic examples. An attempt to surpass the boundaries of a proper name that has inscribed itself into milestones of stereotyped nouns. Hence, Rosa Parks, remove your name because of the trap it has put you into, so that we can start re-thinking the meaning of your act, of your event.

But what’s in a name? And how can a name or a phrase be crystallized in a historical period? Language choices and practices may be considered an array of *loci* where destituent power (Agamben, Wakefield, 2014) is disclosed and revealed and Rosa Parks’ her-story may offer an opportunity to think about the possibility of a language of destitution that takes multiple forms and shapes. A language that it is closely linked to the requests we make of it and the functions we want it to perform. This crucial matter is at the basis of modern linguistics, i.e. the arbitrarily relationship occurring between the name and the object it describes (De Saussure, 1967 [1916]). The way in which someone or something is called or labelled is arbitrary compared to their intrinsic qualities; the name of a thing does not matter as much as the quality of the thing itself. Within this framework, naming is seen as a sociolinguistic practice, in part because the names we use always derive from our representations and categorizations but also because they also imply a certain position vis-à-vis the object being named. This position is inherent in naming, which, at the same time as it categorizes the object named also positions the namer/s in relation to this object (Siblot, 1997). The subjects, whether individual or collective, are central to the act of naming which is also an act

¹ <https://barbie.mattel.com/shop/en-us/ba/barbie-inspiring-women-series-rosa-parks-doll-fxd76>

of identity affirmation as well as an exercise of power. Recent developments that focus on naming, tend also to stress the collective responsibility for the act of naming in the social world, whether of individuals, places, or social problems. Patterns in the way events are named may emerge from large collections of texts as well as from a single speech or document; both quality and quantity may shed light on how discourses on events are created via naming. This happens through a process that diachronically overcomes variation, leading to a one-to-one relation with a single event, a crystallisation that goes hand in hand with the development of the socio-political and ideological framing of the event itself. This might apply to a single figure, as in the case of Rosa Parks who has been linked to the crystallization of that event but also to an expression such “ain’t I a woman?” which will be discussed below in connection to the power that certain naming practices have in freezing events.

Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism is a 1981 book by bell hooks (pen name for Gloria Jean Watkins who insists that it must be in lower case) named after Sojourner Truth’s speech commonly known as “ain’t I a woman”, a speech given in May 1851 during one of the first women’s rights conventions. In the book, hooks examines the effect of racism and sexism on black women, the civil rights movement, and feminist movements from suffrage to the 1970s. The volume has been critically acclaimed as groundbreaking in the study of feminist theory for discussing the correlation between the history of oppression that black women have faced in the United States and its effects on modern American society. One of the main issues in hook’s investigation is the acknowledgement that sexist oppression was as real as a threat to the freedom of black women as racial oppression. This meant that in public discourse “women” was often synonymous (= meant) “white women” while “black” meant “black men”, thus excluding the presence of black women.

The volume is praised for tackling the intersection of race and gender that marginalizes black women foregrounding intersectionality i.e. the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism and classism) combine, overlap or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups, such is the case, for example, of the many women working for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Since being coined by the African-American feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (2008), intersectionality is acknowledged for its potential to map the relation between the different systems of oppression. These are able to contract identities and locate ourselves in hierarchies of power and privilege (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995). Asymmetries between participants and their unequal capacity to control what is going on around them is a central concern in intersectionality. As a theory, method and practice, intersectionality explores junctures and crossroads of inequality and oppression. It is a sort of prism through which the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of

multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism and classism) combine, overlap or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups. Crenshaw maintains that the term ‘intersectionality’ was introduced to address multiple failures, first and foremost the failure to acknowledge the convergence of multiple discriminations.

In this framework, a little space has been reserved to the role that linguistically-oriented critical social research may play in investigating the overpowering ways in which language helps in intersecting and produce discursively societal inequalities and unjust social relations (Fairclough, 1995). It is necessary to adopt a dialectic view that allows for the investigation of language as reflecting but also shaping and maintaining social realities in order to raise awareness of the ideological frameworks that inform language choice and the construction, representation and positioning of its subjects in discourse. If one wants to know how many intersections matter, the context has to be examined alongside the individual words and phrases that have created those identities. It is important to highlight that intersectionality is not simply about identity but also about how power structures co-construct identities and how language plays a pivotal role in this. Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on the segregated Montgomery bus both started the Montgomery Bus Boycott and consolidated her place as an important historical figure, that gesture was expressed also via a linguistic opposition. However, it has become the only aspect of her activism that she is known for by the general public. It made her a symbol that separated her from her identity as an activist and leader in the movement but, most importantly, it has taken her away from the power and unpredictability of the gesture itself. It is not by chance that Rosa Parks’ autobiography oozes with references to her refusal to agree to be “stowed” within a single category. Rosa Parks is an example of the failure to intersect racism and feminism but is not the first in this line. The story around Sojourner Truth’s speech is another case in point in the controversial nature of how certain expressions, ways of saying co-construct discourses and are crystallized in society. Through the lens of linguistics and intersectionality, this papers investigates two examples in which linguistic patterns and naming practices have come to harden certain forms of behaviour.

2. Second movement: Development

Born into slavery in 1797, Isabella Baumfree, who later changed her name to Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), would become one of the most powerful advocates for human rights in the 19th century. Her early childhood was spent on a New York estate owned by a Dutch American named Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh. Like other slaves, she experienced the miseries of being sold and was cruelly beaten and mistreated. She was forced to marry a slave named Thomas, with whom she had five children. In 1827,

after her master failed to honour his promise to free her or to uphold the New York Anti-Slavery Law of 1827, Isabella ran away, or, as she later informed her master, “I did not run away, I walked away by daylight....”. After experiencing a religious conversion, Isabella became an itinerant preacher and in 1843 changed her name to Sojourner Truth. During this period, she became involved in the growing antislavery movement, and by the 1850s she was involved in the woman’s rights movement as well.

In May 1851, Sojourner Truth was invited to the podium at one of the first women’s rights conventions to address a largely female, white, privileged-class crowd of suffragists in Akron, Ohio. This national conference was organized around the issue of voting rights for women and Truth delivered what is now recognized as one of the most famous abolitionist and women’s rights speeches in American history: “ain’t I a woman?”. The expression “ain’t I a woman?” became so famous as to develop a sort of way of seeing the entire black women’s movement and, especially after the publication of hooks’ seminal book, it was seen as a motto for the various discriminations black women were experiencing for being not just black but women as well, a crossroads where discrimination about race and gender intersect.

Notwithstanding the diffusion of the renowned expression, there is some controversy regarding the speech, especially regarding the extremely famous rhetorical question. The oldest account of Truth’s speech was published by Marius Robinson on June 21, 1851, in the Salem «Anti-Slavery Bugle», a few weeks after the speech was given while the most well-known version of the speech was first published by Frances Gage in 1863. The most widespread version is the one based on Truth’s speech in Gage’s *History of Woman Suffrage* as it is published in Campbell’s *Man Cannot Speak for Her* (1989), in which Campbell revised Gage’s version of the speech, taking out the dialect. For the matters explored in this paper, below are the three main written versions of the text which include (in italics) comments on the part of the editors. For reasons of clarity, Gage’s and Campbell’s are reproduced side by side.

Robinson’s Version of Truth’s Speech (Robinson, 1851, p. 160)

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. She came forward to the platform and addressing the President said with great simplicity: “May I say a few words?” Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded:

“I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman’s rights. 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 have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is,

if a woman have a pint and a man a quart – why cant she have her little pint-full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, – for we cant take more than our pint’ll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and dont know what to do. Why children, if you have a woman’s rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble. I cant read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept – and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where is your part? But the women are coming up blessed be 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.”

Gage’s Version of Truth’s Speech (Gage, 1863, p.4)	Campbell’s Version as published in <i>Man Cannot Speak for Her</i> , vol. 2, 1989, pp. 99-102)
<p><i>Slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had hardly lifted her head. “Don’t let her speak”, gasped a half-dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front; laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below.</i></p> <p><i>I rose and announced “Sojourner Truth”, and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments. The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eye piercing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the door and windows.</i></p> <p>“Well, chillen, whar dar’s so much racket dar must be som’ting out o’kilter. I tink dat, ’twixt de niggers of de South and de women at de Norf, all a-talking ’bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon.</p>	<p><i>I rose and announced “Sojourner Truth”, and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments. The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eye piercing the upper air, like one in a dream. At her first word, there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows:</i></p> <p>Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out o’ kilter. I think that ’twixt the Negroes of the South and the women of the North all a-talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon.</p>

But what's all this here talking 'bout? Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place;" *and, raising herself to her full hight [sic], and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked*, "And ar'n't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm", *and she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing its tremendous muscular power*. "I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me – and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much as eat as much as a man, (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well – and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chillen, and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard – and ar'n't I a woman? Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head. What dis dey call it?" "*Intellect*", *whispered some one near*. "Dat's it, honey. What's dat got to do with woman's rights or niggers' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have a little half-measure full?" *and she pointed her significant finger and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud*. "Den dat little man in black dar, he say woman can't have as much rights as man 'cause Christ wa'n't a woman. Whar did your Christ come from?"

Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eye of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated, "Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with him". *Oh! what a rebuke she gave the little man. Turning again to another objector, she took up the defense of Mother Eve. I cannot follow*

But what's all this here talking about? That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles or gives me any best place (*and raising herself to her full height and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked*), and aren't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! (*And she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power.*) I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me – and aren't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear the lash as well – and aren't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen them almost all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard – and aren't I a woman? Then they talk about this thing in the head – what's this they call it? ("*Intellect*", *whispered someone near*). That's it honey. What's that got to do with woman's rights or Negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? (*And she pointed her significant finger and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud.*)

Then that little man in black [a clergyman] there, he says women can't have as much rights as man, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from? (*Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated*), Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with him. (*Oh! what a rebuke she gave the little man.*)

<p><i>her through it all. It was pointed and witty and solemn, eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause; and she ended by asserting “that if de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all her one lone, all dese togeder”, and she glanced her eye over us, “ought to be able to turn it back and git it right side up again, and now dey is asking to, de men better let ’em”. (Long continued cheering). “Bleeged to ye for hearin’ on me, and now ole Sojourner ha’n’t got nothin’ more to say”.</i></p> <p><i>Amid roars of applause she turned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her great strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor.</i></p>	<p><i>(Turning again to another objector, she took up the defense of mother Eve. I cannot follower [sic] her through it all. It was pointed, and witty, and solemn, eliciting at almost every sentence deafening applause; and she ended [sic] by asserting that) If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone, these together (and she glanced her eye over us), ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again; and now they are asking to do it, the men better let them. (Long-continued cheering.) ’Bliged to you for hearing on me, and now old Sojourner hasn’t got anything more to say.</i></p> <p><i>(Amid roars of applause, she turned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty, turning the whole tide in our favor. I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day and turned the jibes and sneers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration. Hundreds rushed up to shake hands, and congratulate the glorious old mother and bid her God speed on her mission of “testifying again concerning the wickedness of this here people”).</i></p>
---	--

The speech given by Truth has become the symbol of her power as a speaker and is considered a powerful example of women’s rhetoric so much so that it is regularly included in anthologies of women’s literature, women’s rhetoric and textbooks on history and women’s studies. Today, Gage’s version is the most widespread while the version that was first published in the «Anti-Slavery Bugle» (Robinson, 1851, p. 160) is largely forgotten.

Two shorter reports of the speech can be found in the «New York Tribune» on June 6, 1851, and in «The Liberator» on June 13, 1851 (Fitch, Mandziuk, 1997, p.18). However, Marius Robinson’s interpretation of the speech as found in the «Anti-Slavery Bugle» and the other contemporary reports were not the same as the speech that was composed twelve years later by the presiding officer of the convention, Frances Gage, and published in the «National Anti-Slavery Standard» on May 2, 1863. The main difference was in the reporting of the line “ain’t I a woman?” or, as the «National Anti-Slavery Standard»

stated it “ar’n’t I a woman?”. None of the reports picked up this line, although they did record many of the same content points that the Gage versions of the speech contained. Certainly, if this line was repeated over and over, as Gage claimed in the actual speech, it would have appeared in the other reports.

As obvious as it may seem, the versions of the speech are only versions as Truth, unable to read or write, could not offer written words. The words contained in the two speeches are representation of Truth’s words or, better still, a recollection of what happened by whoever transcribed them. In this framework, it is pivotal to point out that the people transcribing the speech were aware of their own audience and purpose and this may account for some of the differences in the versions which are so distinctive as to look like two different texts. They stand out as a clear example of the politics of language analyzed from multiple perspectives, they connect gender and race issues in ways that can be ambivalent. This ambivalence clearly emerges in the comments by the editors: in Gage’s first edition, it is reported that the white feminists did not want Truth to speak for fear of confusing the causes of abolition and that of suffrage (Bacon, 2002). Her speech was introduced by a “hissing sound of disapprobation” which was followed by a “profound hush” while in Robinson’s account Truth is described as an “emancipated slave”. A closer linguistic analysis of the two versions makes it possible to investigate the presumed veracity of witnesses and their memories. From a systemic-functional standpoint, it is essential to derive text features from those emerging from the context of situation. Following this model, Halliday and Hasan (1976) propose the three headings “field”, “tenor” and “mode” which read as follow:

The FIELD is the total event, in which the text is functioning, together with the purposive activity of the speaker or writer; it thus includes the subject-matter as one element in it. The MODE is the function of the text in the event, including therefore both the channel taken by the language – spoken or written, extempore or prepared – and its genre, or rhetorical mode, as narrative, didactic, persuasive, “phatic communion” and so on. The TENOR refers to the type of role interaction, the set of relevant social relations permanent and temporary, among the participants involved (Halliday, Hasan, 1976, p. 22).

“Field”, “mode” and “tenor” collectively define the context of situation of a text and the linguistic features which are generally and typically associated with a set configuration of situational features (particular values of the field, mode and tenor) constitutes a register. Following the above quote, we can definitely affirm that the field of the two versions of the speech include the same subject matter i.e. women’s emancipation but with differences that are created by the use of some particular lexical items. Clearly Gage’s speech comes from Sojourner’s original 1851 speech; the reasons for so many changes may be traced in the different aims that Gage had in terms of audience and which noticeably affect tenor. It is also noteworthy that Marius Robinson (a journalist who apparently was in the audience at the

Woman's Rights Convention in Akron) and Sojourner Truth were good friends and it is recorded that they went over his transcription of her speech before he published it (Butler, 2006). One could infer from this 'pre-print' meeting, that even if he did not capture every word she said, that she must have "blessed" his transcription and given permission to print her speech in the «Anti-Slavery Bugle». Still, regardless of what may seem to be an inaccurate version, the "ain't I a woman?" question does not appear. The closest phrase to "ain't I a woman?" to be found in Robinson's version is a sentence in the first paragraph of Truth's speech: "I am a woman's rights". This sentence differs substantially from Gage's version both in terms of field, tenor and mode. In Robinson's version, Truth is declaring that she is a woman's right, she is not questioning if she is a woman: the statement implies that Truth stands for rights for women as she has carried out several tasks, she has physical strength and power to assess that she stands for the rights of women. Conversely, the repeated question "ain't I a woman?" implies that she is asking her audience to be seen as a woman instead of simply a female ex-slave. Gage was a white feminist and might have needed to push the feminist issue over the abolitionist cause which seems to be the heart of Robinson's version. Tenor plays a crucial role in this as Gage is aware of the type of audience she is addressing, i.e. one that is rejecting the cult of the "true womanhood" as it was perceived by white conservatives as a response to the suffragist movement. Bacon claims that at the time "public argument was removed from proper female behaviour" (Bacon, 2002, p. 35), so Truth is positioning herself as one who sits outside that position and speaks directly to the audience.

Both Gage and Robinson comment on Truth's powerful physical presence in their versions of the text. She is described by Robinson as possessing "powerful form, her whole-soled, earnest gestures [...] strong and truthful tones". For Gage, she has an "almost Amazon form", she can raise "herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder" and can show a "muscular power". From the transcriptions one comes to understand that Truth's physical presence, the power of her voice and body are meaning making mechanisms in the process of persuading the audience.

Tenor is also affected by the use of dialect in Frances Gage's version as she seems to have changed most of Sojourner's words and falsely attributed a Southern slave dialect to Sojourner's 1863 version. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1989) argues that the dialect Gage is representing is a white woman's version of how a Southern, uneducated black woman would sound. In Campbell's words "because Truth grew up speaking Dutch in upstate New York and had no contact with southerners, whites or Afro-Americans until her teens, it is unlikely that, although illiterate, she spoke in substandard Southern dialect, in which the speech was recorded by Mrs. Gage" (Campbell, 1989, p. 99). Robinson's representation of Truth's words in Standard American English (SAE) provides for a framing of Truth which is not trapped into stereotyped

versions while Gage's seems to use dialect to make the text more effective for her audience by creating a racially romanticized ex-slave picture. The versions of the speech co-construct an image of Truth who, according to Fitch and Mandziuk "throughout her rhetoric [...] employed her characteristic sharp wit and her engaging narrative style as she sought to influence her hearers" (Fitch, Mandziuk, 1997, p. 89). A narrative style seen as a means to influence hearers, a feature linking Truth to Rosa Parks' attempt to recount 'her story'.

3. Third movement: Recapitulation

Rosa Parks encompasses multiple forms of the discrimination that intersectionality talks about. On the whole, scholars have mostly focused on her role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and less on her other contributions as an activist. Rosa Parks is well known for refusing to obey a bus driver's order to give up her seat in the 'colored section' to a white passenger after the 'whites-only' section had been filled. Although her act helped initiate the civil rights movement in the US leading to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, several episodes in her life have been omitted. There is more to the story. For the reasons discussed in Section 1, this paper investigates the linguistic evidence relating to two episodes generally considered as 'facts': 1. Rosa Parks was not the first woman to refuse to give up a seat on a bus and was somehow 'selected' to become an icon and 2. she was not simply tired.

Rosa Parks' early writings and her autobiography reveal her "determination never to accept it, even if it must be endured" which led her to "search for a way of working for freedom and first-class citizenship"². After joining the Montgomery branch of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1943 and becoming the branch secretary, she spent a decade pushing for voter registration and seeking justice for black victims of white brutality and sexual violence. She supported wrongfully accused black men and pressed for the desegregation of schools and public spaces and was committed to direct nonviolent action and the moral right to self-defence. Under the leadership of Raymond Parks and Edgar Nixon, the branch focused on voter registration, youth outreach, pursuing legal remedies for black victims of white brutality and sexual violence and defending the wrongfully accused. After years of such efforts, Rosa grew increasingly discouraged by the lack of change. Her writings reveal that she was well aware of the marginal role that women were given in the NAACP with Edward Nixon commenting that "women should be in the kitchen but I need a secretary and you are good at that" (Parks, 1999, p. 81) when she offered to volunteer for the organization. She was also well aware that the

² <https://rosaparksbiography.org/bio/>. Related primary source "early childhood incidents and experiences and family", Rosa Parks' recollections, Library of Congress, courtesy of Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. Last accessed 12th October 2021.

NAACP was looking for the right person to stand up and work as an example; they were looking for a person who was a representative of “exemplary virtue”. It is not a case that the 15-year-old Claudette Colvin who, nine months before the Rosa Parks incident, refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus and was arrested, had not been considered ‘fit for the role’ as she got pregnant with an illegitimate child. Rosa Parks did not have any criminal record, or any illegitimate children, nor was she an illegitimate child herself. Nothing about her was “reproachable” – apart from being black. In her autobiography Parks defends her refusal as an autonomous gesture, one which evokes an unimagined political charge:

People have asked me if it occurred to me then that I could be the test case the NAACP had been looking for. I did not think about that at all. In fact, if I had let myself think too deeply about what might happen to me, I might have gotten off the bus. But I chose to remain (Parks, 1999, p. 116)

When her arrest on December 1, 1955, sparked a community bus boycott, Rosa Parks worked hard to maintain the protest, contributing to the boycott’s duration which lasted for more than a year through an elaborate car-pool system and for one month, she served as a dispatcher. The leaflet distributed for the protest created among others, by Jo Ann Gibson Robinson in collaboration with people of the Women’s Political Council (Garrow, 1987) is a clear example of the role that women played in the protest (Fig. 1).

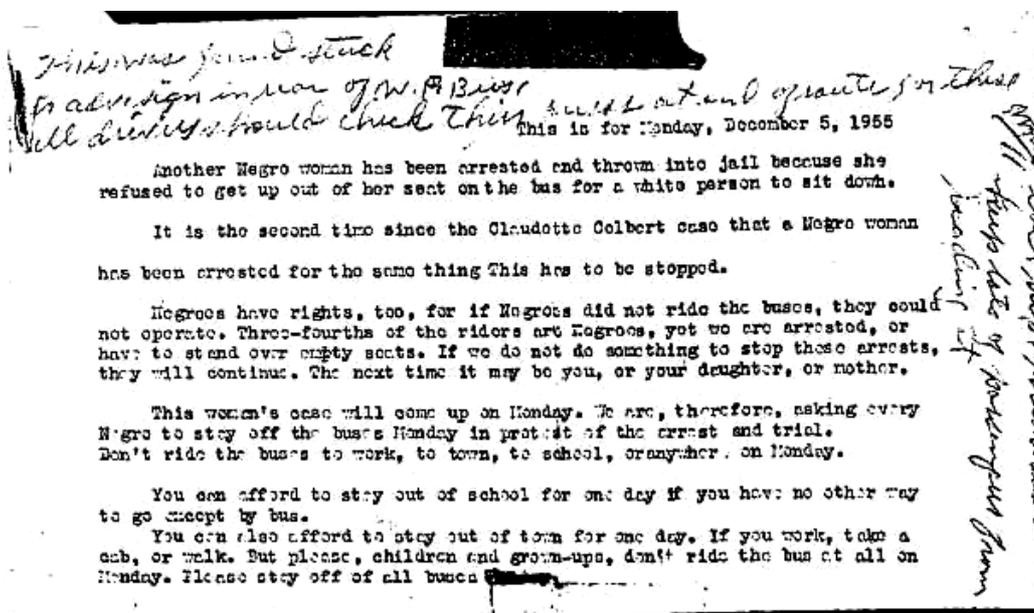


Fig. 1 – “Leaflet calling for boycott”, December 2, 1955³

³ <https://journal.alabamachanin.com/2020/08/thosewhoinspire-jo-ann-robinson/>, last accessed 25th September 2021

In the leaflet, the tenor plays on the interpersonal metafunction of a text, i.e. the way the addresser and the audience interact, the use of language to establish and maintain relations with them, to influence their behavior, to express the authors' viewpoint on things in the world and to elicit or change those of the audience. In addressing the participants in the communicative event, the text is directly addressed to females: "The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother". The case is not reported as a racist case but as a "woman's case" thus underscoring the prevalent role of women in the audience. The leaflet makes a specific reference to *another Negro woman* and to the above mentioned Claudette Colvin. As a note of detail, the flyer incorrectly called Claudette Colvin "Claudette Colbert", the latter being the name of a famous film star at the time. Rosa Parks was aware that she might be "manhandled" but she was willing to take the chance. In addition, it can be argued that it is through the working texts of the boycott that the presence of women emerges with all its relevance and forcefulness. Her efforts, alongside other women in Montgomery, helped turn a local struggle into a national movement even if there was an attempt to downgrade her (and other women's actions) as activism. Another example of the tendency to downgrade her role as an activist is the emphasis given to her giving up the seat only because she was tired. In her autobiography she claims:

People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in (Parks, 1999, p. 116)

This image of Rosa Parks as tired of giving in, and not simply as a "tired woman", emerges in several junctures in the autobiography. She clearly remembers examples of black people tired of being marginalized by white people. The historical mis-remembering of Rosa Parks merely as a black woman whose feet were tired after a long day of work exemplifies the sidelining of black women's role in advancing the cause through the Montgomery Bus Boycott – despite male leaders' dismissal of the tactic. A dismissal emerging on several occasions such as the participation in the Selma March (21-25 March 1965) when she remembers that women were not given a voice during the march unless they went on stage to sing and concludes by saying that the feminist cause "was not popular during those days" (Parks, 1999 p. 165).

Parks' use of language in her autobiography reveals an awareness of the sterile motivations behind segregation. In recollecting the event she writes: "The driver of the bus saw me still sitting there, and he asked was I going to stand up. I said 'No'. He said, 'Well, I'm going to have you arrested.' Then I said,

‘You may do that.’ These were the only words we said to each other” (Parks, 1999, p. 116). She replied to the bus driver’s request with a harsh, direct “no”, she did not add any justification using the modal *may* in reply to the driver’s threat that he was going to have her arrested. The employment of *may* is not casual, it implies a possibility on the part of the speaker. Modality is about a speaker’s or a writer’s attitude towards the world, it expresses a vision on the world not on a certain fact; the employment of “may” stresses the fact that the driver is given a choice, he is not obliged to do so. The uncertain outcome and the political awareness of Rosa Parks clearly emerges later in the same account when she adds:

Eventually two policemen came. They got on the bus, and one of them asked me why I didn’t stand up. I asked him, “Why do you all push us around?” He said to me and I quote him exactly, “I don’t know, but the law is the law and you’re under arrest. (Parks, 1999, p. 117)

The imbalance in the power relationships and the awareness of this being so, is reinforced by the use of the language employed in recounting the events of that famous 1st December, her story, her narrative. In the autobiography Rosa Parks is trying to reappropriate the value of that gesture.

4. Finale: coda

In the 17th century when masses of Africans were brought to the Americas on the slave ships they were forbidden from doing anything that might be considered a threat to European control. It was a long list that included anything from wearing African clothes to playing African drums, to practicing African religion. One of the most paralyzing restrictions was forbidding enslaved Africans to speak their own languages which hindered their ability to conspire for escape or counter-attack. As a result, out of necessity, black people in North America developed their own style of speaking, a blend of English and African languages often wrapped in code. That is the language the enslaved would use to communicate with each other so that their masters, the white community, their mistresses, their overseers would not be able to readily tell what they were saying or the messages they were giving to one another.

That language they used was a way to reappropriate agency and is nowadays called African-American vernacular English, Black English or Ebonics. Cadences, phrases and expressions demonstrate a unique approach to the English language, an ability African-Americans have to turn a phrase, express a sentiment, and merge a sense of grammar and vocabulary with the English language. The slaves who learned to speak English learned to speak it from English people who were considered themselves as

neglected: they were marginalized white people coming from the British Isles, Scotland and Ireland who were the overseers on the concentration camps that they called plantations.

Rosa Parks spent years investigating sexual violence against black women, collecting testimonies from those who had been assaulted and advising them to speak out against sexual violence. She was part of a vocal grassroots movement to defend black women subjected to racist sexual assaults – an intersection of oppression unique to black women historically in the United States. Yet she was asked to leave the Claudette Colvin case because it was not possible to get justice for the young girl. As argued by bell hooks, sexist oppression was a real threat to the freedom of black women as much as racial oppression. A context in which black women must “adjust, adapt and cope” (hooks, 1981, p.7). And this was also the case in Truth’s speech where it becomes clear that white women liberationists did not seem to challenge sexist practices but agreed to continue them. Josiah Wedgwood’s image of an enslaved African, kneeling, manacled hands outstretched, with the title *Am I not a man and a brother?*, is viewed as the symbol of the struggle for abolition and eventual emancipation. It has been used by British abolitionists since the late 18th century and has become a symbol to commemorate the 1807 *Abolition Act* (Dabydeen, 1987). This male motto appeared in its female version in 1830 in the American abolitionist newspaper «Genius of Universal Emancipation» with an image of a slave woman asking “Am I not a woman and a sister?” (Garrison and Garrison, 1971 p. 320) and was then used in 1833 by African American activist Maria W. Stewart in her speeches (Cooper 2012).

We will probably never know what Sojourner Truth said on that day in 1851, it is not that important or crucial. Naming her should not necessarily imply associating the expression “ain’t I a woman?” with even though a recent Google search for this exact expression returns about 152,000,000 results, 85% of which are related to Sojourner Truth. William Shakespeare was probably right: names should not matter. But naming in creating and constructing discourse does. A historicist approach to Parks and Truth’s gesture may drive us far away from what their gestures call for: an unpredictability which is at the heart of the matter of any form of resistance, regardless how it is recounted and acknowledged. Gestures which do not answer to a programme, gestures embodying a practice of refusal, gestures that exist in their radical repetition by the ‘unknown’, by the ‘un-named’ as acts of resistance.

Bibliography

Agamben, G., Wakefield, S., 2014, *What is a Destituent Power?*, in “Environment and Planning D: Society and Space”, vol. 32, n.1, pp. 65-74.

Bacon, J., 2002, *The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetorics, Empowerment, and Abolition*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press.

Butler, M. G. (ed.), 2003, *Sojourner Truth. From slave to activist for freedom*, New York, Rosen Publishing Group.

Campbell, K. K. (ed.), 1989, *Sojourner Truth. Speech at The Woman’s Rights Convention Akron, Ohio, 1851*, in Id., *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists*, vol. 2, Westport (CT), Greenwood, pp. 99-102.

Castoriadis, C., 1997 [1987], *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K. Blamey, Cambridge, MIT Press.

Cooper, V. C. 2012, *Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible and the Rights of African Americans*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press.

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., Kendall, T. (eds.), 1995, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, New York, The New Press.

Crenshaw, K., 2008, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color*, in Bailey, A., Cuomo, C. (eds.), *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, New York, McGraw-Hill, pp. 279-309.

Dabydeen, D., 1987, *Hogarth’s Blacks: Images of Blacks in eighteenth-century English art*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

De Saussure, F., 1967 [1916], *Corso di linguistica generale*, Bari, Laterza.

Fairclough, N., 1995, *Language and Power*, London, Longman.

- Fitch, S., Mandziuk, R. M., 1997, *Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song*, Westport (CT), Greenwood.
- Foucault, M., 1978 *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, New York, Vintage/Random House.
- Gage, F. D., 1863, *Sojourner Truth*, in “The Independent” [New York], 23 April.
- Gage, F. D., 1863, *Sojourner Truth*, in “National Anti-Slavery Standard”, 2 May, p. 4.
- Garrison, W. P., Garrison, F. J. 1885, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of his Life Told by his Children*, 4 volumes, New York, The Century co.
- Garrow, D. J. (ed.), 1987, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It. The memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K., Hasan, R., 1976, *Cohesion in English*, Harlow, Longman.
- hooks, b., 1981, *Ain't I a Woman? Black women and Feminism*, Boston, South End Press.
- “Rosa Parks Barbie Inspiring Women Doll” in <https://barbie.mattel.com/shop/en-us/ba/barbie-inspiring-women-series-rosa-parks-doll-fxd76>, last accessed 13th September 2021.
- Parks, R., 1999, *My story* (with Jim Haskins). New York, Puffin
- Painter, N. I., 1996, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol*, New York, W. W. Norton.
- Robinson, M., 1851, *On Women's Rights*, in “Anti-slavery Bugle”, 21 June, p. 160.
- Siebler, K., 2010, *Far from the Truth: Teaching the Politics of Sojourner Truth's “Ain't I a Woman?”*, in “Pedagogy”, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 511-533.
- Siblot, P., 1997, *Nomination et production de sens : Le praxème*, in “Langages”, vol, 127, pp. 38-55.