Narrating Trauma:
Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and the Political Ethics of Self-Narration

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of
Staffordshire University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2019

For Mum,

for believing in me before I did

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As for what motivated me, it is quite simple; I would hope that in the eyes of some people it might be sufficient in itself. It was curiosity – the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself?

Michel Foucault

I can never provide the account of myself that both certain forms of morality and some models of mental health require, namely, that the self deliver itself in coherent narrative form. The "I" is the moment of failure in every narrative effort to give an account of oneself. It remains the unaccounted for and, in that sense, constitutes the failure that the very project of self-narration requires. Every effort to give an account of oneself is bound to encounter this failure, and to founder upon it.

Judith Butler

Recovery no longer seems like picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative). It's facing the fact that there was never a coherent self (or story) there to begin with. No wonder I can't seem to manage to put myself together again. I'd have to put myself, as the old gag goes, "together again for the first time."

Susan Brison

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

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Parts of Chapters 2, 3 and 4 will be published as "Foucault, the Politics of Ourselves, and the Subversive Truth-Telling of Trauma: Survivors as Parrhesiasts," (forthcoming);

Parts of Chapter 3 have been published as a review of Stuart Elden's *Foucault's Last Decade* in *Foucault Studies* no. 22 (2017): 263-268;

Parts of Chapters 5 and 6 have been published as "Narrating Trauma: Judith Butler on Narrative Coherence and the Politics of Self-Narration," *Life Writing* 15, no. 3 (2018): 447-465, republished in *Philosophy and Life Writing*, eds. D.L. LeMahieu and Christopher Cowley (London: Routledge, 2019), 141-159.

Other publications which make use of ideas presented in this thesis are:

"On Friendship and Mourning the Death of a Friend: Reading Brodu's Debut Album," *antae* 4, no. 2-3 (2017): 180-191;

"The CounterText Interview: Judith Butler," *CounterText: A Journal for the Study of the Post-Literary* 3, no. 2 (August 2017): 115-129 (with Aaron Aquilina);

"Narrating Disability, Trauma and Pain: The Doing and Undoing of the Self in Language," *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* VIII (2018): 169-186;

"'the unconfessable remains unconfessed': Reading Gender, Mourning, and Relationality in *In the Name of the Father (and of the Son)* through the work of Judith Butler," in *"Jiena [X'] Jien?: Is-Suġġett fin-Narrattiva Kontemporanja Maltija*, ed. Stephen Bonanno (Santa Venera: Klabb Kotba Maltin, 2018), 57-70.

Abstract

This thesis presents a multi-disciplinary analysis of the ethics and politics of narrating trauma in institutional contexts. Drawing on the philosophical works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this thesis studies the norms, discourses and power relations that impact survivors' narrations of trauma in, for example, medical and legal settings. Through a use and application of Foucault's ideas, it is argued that while self-narration is a diversified activity, discourses and power relations function to regulate, circumscribe and constrain the forms in which traumatised individuals must narrate trauma in order for their narrative to be favourably treated by institutions who encounter trauma. Building on Foucault's views and feminist applications of his work, it is shown how possibilities of resistance – or, of narrating otherwise – are co-existent with exercises of power, despite the power imbalance that typically characterises the encounter of traumatised individuals with institutions. This thesis also focuses on Butler's work as complementing Foucault's views on how self-narration is entangled with discourses and power relations, and considers how her ideas on vulnerability, precariousness and relationality inform her account of self-narration. Butler's critique of the conception of self-narration based on the sovereignty, coherence and mastery of the narrating subject is elaborated further in relation to issues in trauma theory, where it is argued that narrative coherence often functions as a hegemonic norm. This analysis of narrative coherence is pursued by a study of how survivors' testimonies of sexual trauma in legal and political contexts is circumscribed, facilitating certain forms of self-narration while silencing others. Narrative coherence is also shown to be a dominant norm in the psychological sciences, whose theories and practices have an influential bearing on how trauma is narrated by traumatised individuals. This thesis also presents an analysis of the different levels of inequality that determine the worth and currency of trauma narratives in the asylum seeking process. Tying together the different concerns pursued throughout this work, the thesis concludes with a critical consideration of the discursive and socio-political factors that govern the narration of trauma in contemporary times.

Introduction: Narrating Trauma

This thesis is an interdisciplinary study that, although rooted in philosophy, draws on works from sociology, psychology, critical legal studies and political theory to analyse the philosophical, ethical and political implications of narrating traumatic experiences in institutional settings such as medical and legal contexts. The starting point of the study is the recognition of the centrality of the activity of narrating one's self in human life. One narrates aspects of one's life, freely or under coercion, in a variety of contexts. Such practices of self-narration constitute a significant part of human social interaction, and occur in different forms, for different reasons, and with different stakes and outcomes, ranging from revealing one's thoughts to a friend, to justifying oneself in the courts, or speaking to a doctor or psychologist. The different contexts within which self-narration happens raise specific analytical concerns that need to be analysed in their specificity rather than in a general way. Not all kinds of practices of narrating one's self are analysed in this study; fundamentally, the scope of this thesis is the encounter between self-narration and medical and legal institutions.

An analysis of the institutional take-up or treatment of self-narratives considers how the activity of narrating oneself happens in dialogue with and through the various *discourses* that are available to the individual, and within a network of *power relations* where institutions (such as the law courts or the clinic) employ techniques to shape the activity of self-narration in specific ways. Of course, non-institutional forms of self-narration do exist, and it may be the case that in such contexts the effect of power relations and discourses is less pronounced. However, such non-institutional settings of self-narration are not completely outside of the realm of discourses and power relations. The point is not to strictly differentiate between institutional contexts where power relations exist and non-institutional contexts that are free from social pressures. While the grip of discourses and power may be stronger in some contexts, there is no area of social life which lies completely outside the realm of discourse and power relations, if discourse and power relations are that which enable social reality and govern the realm of the intelligibility of objects, concepts and, ultimately, human subjects.

With the emphasis on institutional settings, the thesis will adopt a primarily – though not exclusively – philosophical approach to *traumatic self-narration*, that is, the narration of trauma by traumatised individuals or survivors. Trauma can be defined in a preliminary way as a momentary or prolonged experience that presents intense suffering to the individual. Trauma can happen to an individual or to a group, or even to individuals because they form part of a particular group. The source of trauma can be another human or non-human. The kind of traumas I will consider include human-caused traumas that can be but are not necessarily tied to political, religious or gender-based persecution, such as sexual violence, physical and psychological abuse, and torture. Thus, trauma is not being considered as a uniform category, and it is not always easy or necessary to distinguish between traumas that are politically motivated and those that are not. Indeed, this study often problematises the political/non-political distinction by calling attention to the socio-political dimensions that influence narrations of trauma that may not be immediately regarded as political.

The activity of narrating one's experiences is a significant component of social life that enables the individual to understand oneself, to make oneself understandable to others, and to survive and flourish in a society. Without seeking to negate the richness of this activity, this thesis foregrounds the various ways in which the activity of narrating oneself is limited, circumscribed and constrained, or demanded in specific forms. In this regard, this thesis adopts a theoretical outlook broadly influenced by the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's works are drawn upon to analyse how the various limitations that operate on practices of self-narration do not primarily, necessarily, or essentially function by overtly censoring or prohibiting an individual from narrating oneself. Neither do such limitations operate by restricting the activity of narrating oneself only to certain individuals. The accessibility of the activity of self-narration is not the primary issue being debated; although some narrations do receive more attention than others, self-narration is a pervasive activity that is performed by individuals irrespective of their position of power. This thesis considers self-narration at the level of discourse, that is, of how the production, dissemination and reception of utterances and statements occur and are controlled in a

society, also taking into account the function ascribed to self-narration. Furthermore, following Foucault's work, this thesis recognises that discourses and the rules that govern them are historically formed and transformed. Self-narration too is a practice informed by historically transforming discourses; although the activity of narrating oneself has existed in one form or another for millennia, is not a monolithic activity that has always existed in the same way. Rather, it has been constituted differently in history by various techniques, practices and aims, and has been governed by different norms that enabled it to happen in different ways. Such norms do not simply include socially accepted ways of behaving and of being but also, on a deeper level, discursive and conceptual conditions that allow the narrating self to speak in certain ways and to conceive of itself in certain ways.

The effects or products of discourses – what they enable, what they disable, what they encourage, what they discourage – are, ultimately, manifestations of power relations. For Foucault, power is not simply a quality that is possessed by an individual or a group, or that functions primarily in a negative way by setting and enforcing prohibitions; rather, power operates in a more widespread way by producing and regulating the spheres of the thinkable, the speakable, the conceivable, the intelligible, the acceptable, the normal. Self-narration as an activity is not being considered as a site where the individual freely presents itself, but as an activity which, to a great extent, is enabled by the discourses and power relations that frame what constitutes self-narration, how the self must be presented, and how narrations are socially received. Discourse and power, then, are two crucial dynamics that shape the analysis of self-narration in this thesis. However, they are not the sole factors. As Foucault argues, there are three axes or domains through which an experience can be analysed.[1] Discourse and power feature in the first two axes. The first axis is the domain of knowledge, that is, the statements and concepts of the sciences and knowledges that refer to a particular experience and explain its historical development. Since the experience being studied is that of self-narration, this domain broadly

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[1] See Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992 [1984]), 4 and Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 262.

corresponds to the discourses that encroach on the activity of self-narration, such as discourses of autobiography, psychology, and law. The second domain is the axis of power relations, including actions which enable the categorisation of an experience as normal or deviant, and practices that operate on one's field of possible action and that inform the way in which one may conduct oneself. In this regard, an analysis of self-narration would consider the ways in which institutions (medical and legal, for example) make use of scientific knowledge, and how they contribute to the shaping and moulding of the linguistic resources that one employs when narrating oneself. The third axis through which an experience could be analysed is the domain of ethics or subjectivity, which Foucault understands as the way one relates to oneself.

An analysis of self-narration could easily take this latter axis of subjectivity as its starting point by assuming that it is the most significant axis having a bearing on the activity of narrating oneself. However, doing so would result in presenting a unilateral analysis that misses the important insights that the notions of discourse and power relations afford to this analysis. While the first-person perspective, where the individual actively shapes his or her own life narrative, is a crucial component of the activity of self-narration, the part it plays should not be overstated at the expense of neglecting the domains of discourse and power. This point is especially relevant since this thesis analyses practices of self-narration not just as *acts*, but also considers the ways and means in which self-narration is *acted upon*, shaped and transformed by norms, practices and discourses. Such norms, practices and discourses are not only outside the individual's domain of choice but constitute what and how an individual might choose to narrate. Even when discussing what he calls "'techniques' or "technology of the self,'"[2] by which he means practices whereby the individual actively participates in his or her own self-fashioning and self-determination, Foucault always emphasises that such techniques are not and cannot be dissociated from the effects of power with which they are entangled.

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[2] Michel Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, eds. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini, trans. Graham Burchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 25.

Despite the intricate effects of normalisation that power relations generate, self-narrations are not to be treated solely as scripted products of power, which would thereby eliminate the domain of subjectivity. However, neither are self-narrations autonomous productions of narrators, despite the personal and intimate nature of some of the content which the individual may choose to narrate. One might be tempted to say that self-narration is an activity over which the individual has the utmost control; after all, it is one's own experiences that one is narrating. This is, to an extent, true. However, this thesis contends that because self-narration is situated within the domain of the discursive – and it must be for communication to occur – there are discursive rules that structure and shape how this activity takes place. Given this structuring and shaping, particularly in evidence when self-narration encounters institutional settings, narration is clearly situated within the realm of power relations. However, following Foucault, I emphasise that power co-exists with possibilities of resistance. No matter how limited and precarious, narrations of trauma are not entirely engulfed by power relations that seek to normalise and homogenise narratives. The possibility to *narrate otherwise* exists, even if it is from a subaltern position, and this possibility is a possibility of resistance and subversion – what Foucault calls *parrhesia*, or courageous truth-telling.

The thesis also turns, in its second part, to the work of Judith Butler, and for two reasons. First, her account of subjectivity supplements Foucault's ideas on how power and norms function, particularly in processes of subject-formation. Butler's use of the notions of performativity, precariousness, and corporeal vulnerability inform the analysis of self-narration and trauma in this study. These notions afford further insights into the way power relations affect the way trauma is spoken about and narrated. Butler's work also emphasises that the self is vulnerably exposed to and constituted by norms, discourses and relationships that exceed the self. Her work challenges conceptions of self-narration that are linear, coherent, self-sufficient and closed, and instead highlights the relational constitution of the self.

This leads to the second main reason why Butler's work is considered at length. Butler's account of self-narration suggests that *narrative coherence* is, at best, an impossible

fantastical ideal and, at worst, a hegemonic norm. This thesis pursues this line of inquiry to analyse why and in what ways the demand for narrative coherence can function hegemonically. Butler's critique of narrative coherence is read in relation to narratives of sexual trauma to highlight that, despite the fact that most trauma survivors seek a form of coherence in their life in reaction to the deep rupture that traumatic episodes leave in their wake, survivors often feel that narrative coherence is an impossible expectation that is placed upon them. This is analysed, for example, in cases where rape survivors have to repeatedly narrate their traumatic experience in court. In such instances, the demand for narrative coherence is shown to function as a powerful and problematic norm, perpetuated also by the psychological sciences, that influences how trauma narratives are received by the institutions that are in place supposedly to listen to and respond responsibly to trauma survivors. Butler's work is also drawn upon to propose a critical analysis of narrations of trauma in medical and legal institutional contexts, as well as in the asylum seeking process.

Multiple analytical and disciplinary perspectives could have been adopted in such a study of the narration of trauma. Philosophically, such a study can take the form of an inquiry, inspired by phenomenological or hermeneutical approaches on accounts of narrative selfhood, including the radical criticisms of such accounts from, for example, feminist and poststructuralist-informed approaches.[3] The question of the degree to which selfhood

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[3] In the philosophical literature on the 'narrative self', works that consider the extent to which the self is constituted narratively, along with the implications and criticisms of this view of selfhood, include Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation," *Signs* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 335-361; Jakub Čapek, "Narrative identity and phenomenology," *Continental Philosophy Review* 50, no. 3 (September 2017): 359-375; Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000 [1997]); Steph Lawler, "Stories, Memories, Identities," in *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2014 [2008]), 23-44; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1981]); Catriona Mackenzie and Kim Atkins, eds., *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Corporeal Selfhood, Self-Interpretation, and Narrative Selfhood," *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action* 17, no. 2 (2014): 141-153; Jacqui Poltera, "Self-narratives, story-telling, and empathetic listeners," *Practical Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2010): 65-79; Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," *Philosophy Today* 35, no. 1 (1991): 73-81; Marya Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 394-415; Margaret R. Somers, "The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 605-649; Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* XVII (2004): 428-452; Dan Zahavi, "Self and Other: The Limits of Narrative Understanding," in *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, ed. Daniel D. Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 179-201.

is narratively constituted, or the extent to which the human is "essentially a story-telling animal"[4] is not a primary concern in this thesis. Although storytelling is a crucial human activity that accounts for a significant part of what humans do or how they think, I do not subscribe to a privileging of narrative as *the* feature through which subjectivity is to be understood. This thesis approaches practices of self-narration in their diversity as historically transforming technologies of the self that are significantly entangled with power relations. Narration is indeed a pervasive technique that sheds significant light on what it means to be human; however, what interests me more about self-narration in this thesis is its amenability as a tool of power and a means for the governing of conduct.

Alternatively, a study of traumatic self-narration could root itself in the psychological sciences, engaging with the abundant work on narrative, trauma and psychology that argues that identity-formation and development are akin to a developing story, where the cohesion of the self-story corresponds to the suitable development of the self.[5] Of course, there are dissenting voices within this same literature that contest the possibility and desirability of the 'narrative model' of the self, and argue that comparing the self to a story does not do justice to the constitutive fragmentation of selfhood.[6] This thesis draws on such literature, particularly in relation to Butler's critique of narrative coherence.

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[4] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

[5] In the literature of the psychological sciences, which will be discussed more directly in chapter 7, works that discuss the role of narratives in the formation of subjectivity, as well as the role of story-telling in therapy, include Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); Michele L. Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology: Self, Trauma and the Construction of Meaning* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000); Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990); John McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy* (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); Theodore R. Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," in *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*, ed. Theodore R. Sarbin (Connecticut: Praeger, 1986), 3-21; Roy Schafer, *Retelling a Life: Narrative and Dialogue in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Brian Schiff, "Fractured Narratives: Psychology's Fragmented Narrative Psychology," in *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative*, eds. Matti Hyvärinen, Mari Hatavara, and Lars-Christer Hydén (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013), 245-264; Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982).

[6] See, for example, Mark Freeman, "Identity and Difference in Narrative Inquiry: A Commentary on the Articles by Erica Burman, Michelle Crossley, Ian Parker, and Shelley Sclater," *Narrative Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (2003): 331-346; Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2000 [1991]); Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christer Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo, and Maria Tamboukou, eds., *Beyond Narrative Coherence* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010); Dan P. McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19, no. 2

Yet another approach that such a study of self-narration could have taken is a sociologically-attuned approach that recognises that self-narratives, like most narratives, are influenced by cultural practices – and are, indeed, themselves cultural practices – and thus need to be understood in their social situatedness and emergence.[7] Moreover, such a study could also have drawn on the ample literature on social research methods that collect and analyse narratives in order to study how different narratives are socially received and adjudicated.[8]

This thesis is inspired and draws upon different aspects of these various theoretical, disciplinary and methodological approaches to the ways in which power relations bear on practices of narrating trauma, particularly within institutional settings. One might even say that in an analysis of trauma, a degree of eclecticism is unavoidable – even a cursory look at the extensive literature (academic and otherwise) shows how engagements with trauma feature in psychiatry and the psychological sciences as much as in cultural studies, political and literary theory. This broad range of academic disciplines that engage with trauma is reflected in Dominick LaCapra's contention: "No genre or discipline 'owns' trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it."[9] Roger Luckhurst echoes this sentiment when he maintains that "[t]rauma is also always a breaching of disciplines."[10] Therefore, although this thesis is rooted in philosophy as a 'discipline', it

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(2006): 109-125; Jefferson A. Singer and Blerim Rexhaj, "Narrative Coherence and Psychotherapy: A Commentary," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19, no. 2 (2006): 209-217.

[7] In the sociological literature, research that has emphasised the social character of narratives, and how narratives are differentially treated in a society includes Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews, eds., *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004); Catrina Brown, "Women's Narratives of Trauma: (Re)storying Uncertainty, Minimization and Self-Blame," *Narrative Works: Issues, Investigations, & Interventions* 3, no. 1 (2013): 1-30; Paul John Eakin, "Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narration," *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 113-127; Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Matti Hyvärinen, "Narrative and Sociology," *Narrative Works: Issues, Investigations, & Interventions* 6, no. 1 (2016): 38-62; Francesca Polletta, Pang Ching Bobby Chen, Beth Gharrity Gardner, and Alice Motes, "The Sociology of Storytelling," *Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (2011): 109-130; Ken Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[8] See, for example, Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, and Maria Tamboukou, eds., *Doing Narrative Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008).

[9] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 96.

[10] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

cannot avoid looking at other disciplines. While this study is rooted in philosophical ideas, particularly those of Foucault and Butler, in order to flesh out the implications of their respective accounts of self-narration, it considers their views in light of social scientific and psychological studies of trauma. In this way, the ideas of Foucault and Butler are brought to bear on concrete situations and the studies on trauma in other disciplines are subjected to critical scrutiny.

Reflecting on trauma in this way presented methodological challenges, most of which were not anticipated in advance. I came to this study with a *philosophical* interest in practices of self-narration, attuned to the fact that such practices are entangled with ethical and political considerations. I approached the activity of self-narration with an outlook that holds that both the 'self' and 'narration' are historical and discursive correlates, and my interest in this activity is to explore this entanglement. Thus, in the spirit of genealogical inquiry inspired by Foucault's work, I seek to understand the history of the present configuration of trauma and its narration, and, in so doing, I aim to allow considerations of power relations to come to the fore of this inquiry. This concern with power relations that impact the narration of trauma in contemporary times led, quite early on in this analysis, to consider more closely the discursive conditions that are presently shaping what can be narrated, which and whose trauma is to be narrated, and how such narration must happen. To do so means to deeply consider trauma from multiple analytical vantage points, from philosophical and psychological to sociological. With that said, however, I feel that a more philosophical approach is the one most capable of achieving the critical distance from dominant discourses required in order to gauge how such discourses exert dominance over narrating subjects as well as other disciplines that study trauma. This implies that, while in-depth exploration and use of empirical studies from other disciplines – such as social scientific studies, anthropological fieldworks, psychological literature – is an important task, the critical aims of this thesis cannot be entirely determined and constrained by discipline-specific norms of inquiry, namely the social sciences. This is because certain norms and prejudices replicated in empirical social scientific studies themselves are the object of this study. Throughout this research, I felt that the 'methodological flexibility' afforded by philosophical inquiry was equally a curse

and a blessing. The 'epistemic profile' of philosophy can be critiqued as inferior especially when it seeks to confront authoritative discourses that present themselves as having superior scientific credentials. But, although philosophy may no longer claim to be the epistemological 'mother of all disciplines' in the contemporary university, it can nonetheless present a unique discursive space in the contemporary economy of knowledge. Not being pinned down to a strict methodological outlook can enable, as I hope this thesis does, critical reflection on the politics of knowledge itself, that is, on how the creation, regulation and use of knowledge is contributing to contemporary processes of government in the wide sense of the term. The way in which trauma as an object of study was approached in this thesis recognises the importance of social scientific methods but insists that aspects of philosophical and conceptual theorising cannot be – and perhaps ought not to be – reduced to such methodologies. Rather than posing this issue as requiring a choice between a 'theoretical' approach and an 'applied' one, the method adopted throughout this thesis seeks to problematise any neat division between the two while appreciating that critical work requires facets of both outlooks.

It is for these reasons, therefore, that this thesis switches from philosophically-informed analyses, for example of power and subjectivity, when theorising self-narration to more empirical studies of the narration of trauma in courts or the asylum process. No amount of *theorising* about Foucault or Butler is sufficient for a study how contemporary power actually functions on survivors in institutional contexts in which trauma is narrated; in the same way that no social scientific approach or 'data collection' allows one to theorise narrative identity or think through the effects of discourses and power relations on processes of subjectification. Besides theoretical rigour, it is also a responsibility of this study to pay attention to occurrences of actual narrations of trauma, and not solely rely on theorisation, in order to analyse what actually influences and affects narrations of trauma, and the manner in which these influences work upon traumatised individuals. The different analytical gestures that constitute this thesis highlight the plural ways in which power functions on survivors of trauma, influencing how trauma is narrated, determining how narratives of trauma are socially received, and privileging notions of subjectivity and self-narration as more acceptable than others. However, in the same way that Foucault

analysed resistance as co-existent with power, and explored non-normalising techniques of the self, this thesis too explores the critical potential within narratives of trauma. This possibility of trauma survivors to narrate otherwise is emphasised throughout since these other forms of traumatic self-narration may trouble the way in which dominant discourses obfuscate the activity of self-narration.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Chapter 1 provides a genealogical overview of trauma from the mid-19th century onward, highlighting the key figures and phases in the modern history of trauma up to contemporary trauma theory. In so doing, this chapter presents the background against which the theoretical concerns of the thesis can be understood, both to highlight continuities and also to emphasise the specific interests of this study. **Chapter 2** identifies the different references Foucault makes to practices of self-narration in his early works up to the late 1970s, particularly through his ideas on discourse, power and confession. Through an analysis of the cases of Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin, and a consideration of Foucault's motivation in publishing their dossier, this chapter shows how self-narration is caught up in a struggle of discourses and power relations, which also implies co-existent possibilities of resistance inherent in practices of self-narration. **Chapter 3** explores Foucault's references to practices of self-narration in his 1980s work, especially his lecture courses, to delineate his genealogical account of practices of confession, spiritual direction and techniques of self-examination from classical antiquity to early Christian practices. This chapter also considers Foucault's work on self-writing and parrhesia as presenting an alternative to a normalising and confessional truth-telling. **Chapter 4** considers how feminist analyses of practices of self-narration, such as consciousness-raising techniques, have fruitfully extended Foucault's views on self-narration. Such analyses are used to highlight the relation between the private and public dimensions of traumatic self-narration, showing how although narratives of trauma can be swayed toward hegemonic truth-telling they can also harbour a critical and subversive potential. **Chapter 5** turns to Butler's views on performativity, precariousness, vulnerability and relationality to show that her ideas complement and enrich Foucault's account of the relation between power relations and subjectivity. Butler's work is also discussed in relation to her critique of the

conception of self-narration based on the sovereignty, mastery, unity and coherence of the subject. **Chapter 6** sustains this critique by reading Butler's ideas on self-narration, particularly her critical account of narrative coherence, in relation to issues in trauma theory. This chapter argues that narrative coherence functions as a possibly hegemonic norm in legal and political contexts, facilitating the reception of some forms of narrating trauma while making it harder for other forms of traumatic self-narration to be considered as viable or legitimate. **Chapter 7** further analyses the norm of narrative coherence by considering its role in the psychological sciences, focusing on the ways in which the relation between the self, narrative and trauma is theorised in different approaches to psychology. Narrative coherence is shown to be a privileged norm that operates not only at the level of theories of psychology, but also on how trauma is narrated by traumatised individuals. **Chapter 8** brings together the concerns pursued in the thesis by analysing the narration of trauma in the asylum seeking process, a process in which psychological, legal and political discourses function alongside each other. This chapter explores the different levels of inequality and power relations that govern self-narration in the asylum process, and determine the worth and currency of trauma narratives in contemporary times.

Chapter 1 Theorising Trauma: From Railways to Camps to the TV

This chapter provides an overview of the modern history of trauma from the mid-19th century onward by considering – in the form of an engaged literature review – the major sources and commentaries on the genealogy of trauma. The books discussed in this chapter include those by (in the order of publication) Judith Herman,[1] Allan Young,[2] Ruth Leys,[3] Roger Luckhurst,[4] E. Ann Kaplan,[5] and Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman.[6] This review is not exhaustive since what is attempted here is not a detailed account of the history of trauma, and does not enter into the debates on 'what trauma is' or try to adjudicate on competing models of trauma. Rather, by indicating the key episodes, players and issues in the history of trauma, this chapter highlights the major phases of trauma theory through key literature on the topic. In doing so, this chapter presents the background against which the concerns in trauma pursued throughout the thesis can be understood, both to highlight continuities and also to emphasise the specific interests of this study.

1.1 The Modern Births of Trauma

As a study that hopes to be Foucaultian in spirit, this thesis is sensitive to the genealogical origins of trauma, and its rich and animated history. For this reason, this study cannot settle for an understanding of trauma as prescribed by contemporary scientific knowledge which, in the latest fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), is codified in the diagnosis of Post-

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[1] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015 [1992]).
[2] Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
[3] Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
[4] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*.
[5] E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
[6] Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009 [2007]).

Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[7] Rather, a genealogical approach to trauma is undertaken in order to foreground the politics of trauma; that is, the multifarious social and political factors that have determined and regulated the meaning of trauma in different historical contexts. Such a genealogical approach enables a better understanding of the complex dynamics – medical, psychological, political, economic – that lay behind the development of contemporary understandings of trauma, such as those inscribed in the PTSD diagnosis. A genealogical approach, that is, an approach that regards developments in thought or knowledge as necessarily implicated in struggles of power, to the historically shifting categories of mental disorders enables an analysis of the social and political implications of being diagnosed. A genealogical approach considers medical, legal and political discourses in their multiple interrelations as they come to bear upon trauma as an experience and object of inquiry. Such an approach to trauma shows how, more often than not, no matter how deep-rooted they may seem, concepts have a history, and did not always mean and imply what they do now. In this regard, trauma is no exception.

The etymological lineage of the word 'trauma' is from the ancient Greek word that means "to break, cut, hurt, injure, scathe, sear or (most commonly) to wound."[8] The medical meaning of the term 'trauma', introduced in English in the 17th century, signifies a physical wound, typically a severe blow caused by an external agent.[9] The contemporary use of the term 'trauma' emerged later, more precisely in the late 19th century, when the meaning of trauma "shift[s] from *soma* to *psyche*"[10] following what Ian Hacking calls "the

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[7] The latest (fifth) edition of the DSM defines PTSD in terms of eight distinct diagnostic criteria, these being: A. Direct, vicarious or repeated extreme exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence; B. Presence of at least one intrusion symptom associated with the trauma, such as distressing memories, nightmares, flashbacks or triggering; C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli, memories or reminders associated with the trauma; D. Negative alternations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event, such as amnesia, persistent negative emotional states, inability to experience positive emotions, and distorted cognitions; E. Marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the trauma, such as irritable behaviour, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, and sleep disturbance; F. Disturbance duration of longer than one month; G. Disturbance causing distress or impairment in social and occupational functioning; H. Disturbance not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance, such as medication or alcohol. See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 271-272.
[8] Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 15.
[9] See Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 2.
[10] Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43.

psychologization of trauma."[11] Leys presents a characterisation of this dominant understanding of modern trauma; a characterisation which persists in contemporary times:

> owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories.[12]

Various commentators on the history of trauma have noted a significant relation between trauma and modernity; there is something particularly modern about trauma. Lerner and Micale suggest that the concept of trauma, particularly its expansion to capture physiological phenomena and, eventually, psychological experiences "was simultaneously responsive to and constitutive of 'modernity.'"[13] Emblems of modernity, Luckhurst argues, are the city, urban activity, technology, machinery and, most notably, the railway. Besides being "the icon of British modernity" and a piece of "engineering genius,"[14] the railway became notorious for its dangers and accidents. In fact, Ralph Harrington contends, if the steam engine on a railway can be considered as a symbol of the 19th century, "a steam engine running *off* a railway and dragging its train to destruction behind it might serve equally well."[15] For this reason, the work of British physician John Erichsen from the 1860s on railway injuries, or 'railway spine', is often taken to be a significant reference point in the modern history of trauma.[16] Erichsen's work sought to

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[11] See Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 183-197, cited in Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity*, 43. See also Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 2-3.

[12] Leys, *Trauma*, 2.

[13] Paul Lerner and Mark S. Micale, "Trauma, Psychiatry, and History: A Conceptual and Historiographical Introduction," in *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930*, eds. Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10.

[14] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 21.

[15] Ralph Harrington, "The Railway Accident: Trains, Trauma, and Technological Crises in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930*, eds. Mark S. Micale and Paul Lerner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 31 [emphasis in original].

[16] Although Erichsen's work on railway spine is often cited as highly influential in the development of the modern notion of trauma, Leys – following Young – cautions against tracing a linear relation between his

study the causes of physical and psychological disorders developed by seemingly healthy individuals in the aftermath of a railway accident in which they were uninjured. Erichsen theorised railway spine as a condition brought about by the violent jolt to the spinal cord during the incident, the physical and psychological effects of which developed in the days following the incident. Symptoms of railway spine included: "'giddiness, loss of memory, pains in the back and head', 'tingling and numbness of the extremities, local paralysis, paraplegia, functional lesions of the kidney and bladder', and even 'slowly ensuing symptoms of intellectual derangement'."[17]

Besides the medical community, Erichsen's work was influential within legal contexts, particularly in litigation cases. Discourses of trauma flourished not only in the psychiatric literature, but especially in medico-legal settings amid the scientific disciplines associated with forensic medicine that were emerging at the time.[18] In fact, Fassin and Rechtman report that "Erichsen himself battled with railroad companies to force them to compensate the injured, even when they presented no physical injuries."[19] Since its modern origins, the entanglement between medical and legal discourses has characterised conceptualisations and perceptions of trauma. The protestations of powerful institutions – in this case, railway companies – who wanted to dismiss the claims of the victims contributed to the development of scientific knowledge of trauma. The drive to utilise scientific knowledge in order to dismiss the narrative of the trauma survivor is an impulse that has been present since the modern births of trauma. Interestingly, Foucault's point on the reversibility of power relations and the co-existence of resistance and power finds

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work, later work by Freud, and later developments of trauma as PTSD, since trauma does not constitute a timeless intrinsic unity. Interestingly, despite the centrality ascribed to Erichsen's work in most histories of trauma, Leys only mentions him once in her book on trauma, and only to make her point on erroneous approaches to the history of trauma. See Leys, *Trauma*, 3-6. In her genealogy of trauma, Leys offers a detailed analysis of the history of trauma and its conceptualisation. She discusses the role of Freud's work in the history of trauma, Morton Prince's work on traumatic dissociation through the case of Miss Beauchamp, as well as Sándor Ferenczi's views on psychic trauma and Pierre Janet's work on traumatic memory and dissociation in the context of the First World War. She then considers the work of Abram Kardiner and William Sargant in the context of how trauma was conceptualised in view of the Second World War. The book culminates in a rather polemical engagement with contemporary trauma theories, principally Bessel van del Kolk's neurobiology of trauma and how these views were taken up by Cathy Caruth's deconstructionist works on trauma.

[17] Harrington, "The Railway Accident," 40.
[18] See Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 24.
[19] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 35.

clear support in the history of trauma and how medical knowledge was used to defend as well as dismiss trauma victims, as can be seen in the reception of Herbert Page's work on trauma. In the 1880s, Page responded to Erichsen's work, and whereas Erichsen was ambiguous on whether the causes of railway spine were organic and somatic or not, Page focused more on the mind by arguing that "the emotion of fear alone was sufficient to inflict severe shock on the nervous system, and he saw the psychological effects of involvement in a railway accident as quite capable of inducing nervous illness and collapse."[20] However, although Page's motivation was to dissociate the condition of railway spine from its reliance on an organic cause, his work was used as a defence by railway companies to justify their claim that this condition "had no basis in actual injuries."[21]

Importantly, these debates on railway spine were happening contemporaneously with the debates on hysteria (which were debates of medical interest, but also had great socio-political implications), and efforts were made to distinguish between the two conditions despite their apparent similarities. Fassin and Rechtman write: "The clinical signs [of such railway and other industrial accidents] were similar to those of hysteria: fatigue, nightmares, pseudo-paralysis, and diffuse pain with no neurological basis."[22] However, the equation of railway spine and similar conditions (whose victims were typically male) with the feminising diagnosis of hysteria was not warmly received. In response to such a suggestion, Erichsen wrote:

> In those cases in which a man advanced in life, of energetic business habits, of great mental activity and vigour, in no way subject to gusty fits of emotion of any kind, – a man, in fact, active in mind, accustomed to self-control, addicted to business, and healthy in body, suddenly, and for the first time in his life, after the infliction of a severe shock to the system, finds himself affected by a train of symptoms indicative of serious and deep-seated injury to the nervous system, – is

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[20] Harrington, "The Railway Accident," 50.
[21] Harrington, "The Railway Accident," 52.
[22] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 37.

it reasonable to say that such a man has suddenly become "hysterical" like a love-sick girl?[23]

This is an early manifestation of the politics of trauma, which highlights that the way in which trauma was conceptualised was greatly determined by socio-political factors and discourses that added a normative dimension to the medical definition of trauma. In fact, the development of the term 'traumatic neurosis' in the late 1800s by Berlin neurologist Hermann Oppenheim was an attempt to distinguish it from hysteria despite the similarity of symptoms.[24] Despite working independently of one other, with only a few being aware of the others' work, different theorists of trauma in the late 19th century all emphasised the shattering of the personality due to extreme terror or fright. Jean-Martin Charcot was among the first to contest the prejudice against hysteria, and his work was highly influential on Sigmund Freud's early work on hysteria and Pierre Janet's work on traumatic memory and dissociation. In their work, trauma was theorised as an experience that shattered the victim's cognitive-perceptual capacities, making the traumatic scene unavailable to a certain kind of recollection. Hypnosis was used as a therapeutic technique to retrieve the forgotten, repressed and dissociated recollections by bringing them to consciousness and into language.

The centrality of Freud's work in the history of modern trauma is often noted.[25] Around the 1890s, Freud's work on 'hysterical females' revealed that sexual exploitation, or 'seduction', was at the heart of hysteria. Freud and Josef Breuer outlined the seduction theory in their 1895 book on hysteria in which they posit: "*Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.*"[26] Freud reiterated this theory in a 1896 paper on the aetiology of hysteria when he wrote that "at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are *one or more*

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[23] Harrington, "The Railway Accident," 52.
[24] See Young, *The Harmony of Illusions*, 20.
[25] For a comprehensive account of Freud's views on trauma, see John Fletcher, *Freud and the Scene of Trauma* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), as well as Young, *The Harmony of Illusions*, 36-38, Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 25-32, Leys, *Trauma*, 18-40 and Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 45-49.
[26] Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, "On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication (1893)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 2*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 7 [emphasis in original].

occurrences of premature sexual experience."[27] After 1897, Freud abandoned the seduction theory and instead focused on the effects of repressed erotic infantile wishes and fantasies, thereby denying (or, at least, heavily underplaying) the significance of actual trauma on the individual psyche. Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory is often explained in terms of the development in his psychoanalytic framework. However, Herman provides a further explanation: Freud acknowledged and listened to the life stories of his female 'hysterical' patients but "[w]hat he heard was appalling."[28] Herman claims that Freud was shocked by the implications of his own discovery, namely that sexual acts with children, particularly girls, were pervasive. However, Freud "was increasingly troubled by the radical social implications of his hypothesis,"[29] and opted not to investigate them. Leys contests such an interpretation by arguing that Freud rejected from the outset a straightforward causal analysis of trauma.[30] She points out that Freud's position was that trauma arose in the *delayed* revival of the experience as memory after the individual had entered sexual maturity and could grasp the actual sexual meaning of the event; Freud termed this *nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action.[31] For Freud, traumatic memory is inherently unstable and mutable owing to the role of unconscious motives that confer meaning on it. Leys contends that Freud's rejection of trauma as a direct cause and his emphasis on psychosexual meaning has to be understood in the context of a tendency within psychoanalysis to interiorise trauma, according to which the external trauma derived its force solely from internal psychic processes shaped by earlier psychosexual desires and fantasies.

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[27] Sigmund Freud, "The Aetiology of Hysteria (1896)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 3*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 203 [emphasis in original], quoted in Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 13.

[28] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 13.

[29] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 14. For more on this point, see Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984).

[30] "Freud's theory of seduction was never the simple causal theory of trauma that contemporary critics, such as Van der Kolk, Herman, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and others have portrayed it to be." Leys, *Trauma*, 19.

[31] See Leys, *Trauma*, 20.

1.2 Trauma at War

The World Wars were important episodes in the history of trauma and its conceptualisation. The First World War marked a return of interest in the significance of 'the event' in trauma. Psychologists and psychiatrists endeavoured to understand the emotional reactions (flashbacks, shell shock, military neuroses) of veterans who returned traumatised after being exposed to military combat. The traumatic neuroses of war forced Freud to reconsider his position on the primordial importance of infantile psychosexual drives: "Were not the thousands of cases of combat hysteria observed in apparently healthy men the direct result of external trauma of trench warfare?"[32] This made it clearer, against tendencies of the time that tried to locate the cause of such suffering in organic damage, that victims of shell shock fell ill not from organic lesions but from psychical causes.[33]

The condition of 'shell shock', a term coined by the British psychologist Charles Myers, highlights the gendered history of trauma. Myers observed that prolonged exposure to warfare and death was resulting in men – honourable and glorious soldiers – breaking down and manifesting a neurotic syndrome with symptoms that were similar to hysteria: "many soldiers began to act like hysterical women. They screamed and wept uncontrollably. They froze and could not move. They became mute and unresponsive. They lost their memory and their capacity to feel."[34] Since, in the male-dominated spheres of medicine and warfare, it was inconceivable to admit that soldiers were behaving like hysterical women, notions such as war or combat neurosis developed to differentiate it from hysteria. Nonetheless, the gendered politics of hysteria was still replicated in cases of combat neurosis where "the moral character of the patient"[35] was emphasised and attacked. The British psychiatrist Lewis Yealland, for example, "advocated a treatment

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[32] Leys, *Trauma*, 21.
[33] Many medical professionals at the time turned to the therapeutic methods of catharsis developed by Freud and Breuer. However, these events also challenged Freud to combine experiences of shell shock with his theoretical system of libido theory and the theory of psychosexual origins of neuroses; his notion of the death drive, through which he explained a human instinct for aggression beyond the pleasure principle, was a move in this direction. See Leys, *Trauma*, 21-27.
[34] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 20. See also Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 49-52.
[35] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 20-21.

strategy based on shaming, threats, and punishment,"[36] threats of court martial, and extraordinary treatments such as electric shocks. More progressive and liberal figures, such as William H. R. Rivers (whose most famous patient was the poet Siegfried Sassoon) advocated more humane treatments that acknowledged "that combat neurosis was a bona fide psychiatric condition that could occur in soldiers of high moral character."[37] The American psychiatrist Abram Kardiner – whose 1941 work *The Traumatic Neuroses of War* was, according to Herman, instrumental "to develop[ing] the clinical outlines of the traumatic syndrome as it is understood today"[38] – acknowledged that war neuroses was a form of hysteria. The gendered dimension of the history of trauma can also be seen in the way this change of outlook on war neurosis prompted a change of attitude with regard to the term 'hysteria' itself. Kardiner argued against the tendency to use the term 'hysteria' in a pejorative sense, and contested the use of the term 'hysteria' to discredit patients.[39]

After the two World Wars and the Vietnam War,[40] interest in trauma persisted through the work of figures such as Adolf Meyer, William Sargant, Herbert Spiegel, Roy Grinker, John Spiegel, Lawrence Kolb and Robert Jay Lifton, who identified and studied trauma-related conditions such as chronic 'concentration camp syndrome', 'survivor syndrome' and 'Post-Vietnam Syndrome'.[41] However, these scientific efforts were not enough to arouse widespread interest in trauma since, for Leys:

> it was largely as the result of an essentially political struggle by psychiatrists, social workers, activists and others to acknowledge the post-war sufferings of the Vietnam War veteran that the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1980) accorded the traumatic syndrome, or PTSD, official recognition for the first time.[42]

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[36] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 21.
[37] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 21. Young contests Herman's reading of Rivers as a progressive figure in the history of trauma. See Young, *The Harmony of Illusions*, 82-84.
[38] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 24.
[39] See Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 24. For a similar account of the role of Myers, Yealland, Rivers and Kardiner in the history of trauma, see Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 53-58.
[40] See Leys, *Trauma*, 190-228.
[41] See Leys, *Trauma*, 5 and Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 59-61.
[42] Leys, *Trauma*, 5.

The inclusion of PTSD in the DSM was a turning point in the social recognition of trauma since it meant that veterans who returned home traumatised could no longer be accused of malingering or cowardice because the symptoms of PTSD signified a 'real' condition that deserved attention and treatment. Moreover, the possibility of such a diagnosis had economic implications, as PTSD sufferers could claim compensation money for damages suffered as a result of the war. This economic entanglement at the birth of the PTSD diagnosis is a significant one within the genealogy of trauma, especially in view of the fact that issues surrounding the economic utility of PTSD are still very much alive today.[43]

Leys claims that PTSD "is fundamentally a disorder of memory,"[44] complementing Young's succinct characterisation of PTSD as "a disease of time."[45] Various studies, particularly from the fields of anthropology and critical psychology, have adopted a genealogical approach to PTSD itself as an object of inquiry. Young's *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* is among the most prominent in this regard. Young argues that although "[a]s far back as we know, people have been tormented by memories that filled them with feelings of sadness and remorse, the sense of irreparable loss, and sensations of fright and horror,"[46] the modern view of trauma as PTSD does not represent a timeless intrinsic unity. For Young, the conception of trauma underlying PTSD "is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources."[47] In this regard, Leys notes how Young follows Hacking's work in arguing that "PTSD is a way of 'making up' a certain type of person that individuals can conceive themselves as being and on the basis of which they can become eligible for insurance-reimbursed therapy, or

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[43] See Barbara Bottalico and Tommaso Bruni, "Post traumatic stress disorder, neuroscience, and the law," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 35, no. 2 (2012): 112-120.
[44] Leys, *Trauma*, 2.
[45] Young, *The Harmony of Illusions*, 7.
[46] Young, *The Harmony of Illusions*, 3.
[47] Young, *The Harmony of Illusions*, 5, quoted in Leys, *Trauma*, 6.

compensation, or can plead diminished responsibility in courts of law."[48] Luckhurst echoes this genealogical point when he claims that "every version of trauma, from railway spine via traumatic neurosis and shell shock to PTSD, has always been in major part a medico-legal concept bound up with economic questions of compensation, its treatment determined by medical and welfare costs."[49] Fassin and Rechtman also adopt a genealogical approach in their study on trauma when they claim that the premise of their book:

> is not whether or not an individual who has experienced or been exposed to a dramatic event is suffering from post-traumatic stress, and hence whether he or she merits psychological care and financial compensation. Our goal is rather to understand how we have moved from a realm in which the symptoms of the wounded soldier or the injured worker were deemed of doubtful legitimacy to one in which their suffering, no longer contested, testifies to an experience that excites sympathy and merits compensation.[50]

Common to these major sources (Leys, Young, Hacking, Fassin and Rechtman) on trauma theory and history is their – implicit or explicit – reliance on and adoption of Foucaultian approaches, particularly genealogical approaches to history, the power of discourses and processes of subject-formation. Although these different sources have their respective research aims and directions, they all inform this study insofar as they illuminate what a genealogical approach to trauma involves. It is in relation to these studies that this thesis situates its concern with how trauma is narrated and how trauma narratives are treated, received and recognised by the institutions that encounter and interact with them. However, although this thesis builds on such a Foucaultian approach to critical issues surrounding trauma narration, it has to be noted that trauma theory within the humanities has been largely dominated by other theoretical approaches, as the next section shows.

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[48] Leys, *Trauma*, 6. The Hacking source she cites is Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, eds. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 222-236.
[49] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 211.
[50] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 5.

1.3 Trauma in the Academy

Before delving deeper into what motivated the move of trauma theory into the humanities, it is useful to situate this move within Leys' genealogy of trauma theory (itself a contribution to trauma theory in the humanities). Leys' main claim in relation to the history of trauma is that, despite the non-linearity and singularity of events, it has always been structured by tensions or oscillations between what she calls the mimetic and antimimetic tendencies or paradigms.[51] The mimetic and antimimetic tendencies cannot be strictly separated from each other; for Leys, the contradiction between these tendencies has continued to shape psychology and psychoanalysis: "from the moment of its invention in the late nineteenth century the concept of trauma has been fundamentally unstable, balancing uneasily – indeed veering uncontrollably – between two ideas, theories or paradigms."[52] The mimetic theory of trauma accords a central position to "*the problem of imitation, defined as a problem of hypnotic imitation*."[53] This approach to theorising trauma foregrounds the hypnotised subject as the template for early psychoanalytic theories of traumatic memory, due to the tendency of the hypnotised individual to *imitate or repeat* (hence, mimesis) what is suggested to them. The association of trauma with mimesis was troubling since it threatened to destabilise the modern ideals of individual autonomy, sovereignty and responsibility.[54] Leys summarises the mimetic theory as follows:

> [It] holds that trauma, or the experience of the traumatized subject, can be understood as involving a kind of hypnotic imitation of or regressive identification with the original traumatogenic person, scene, or event, with the result that the subject is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it. Trauma is understood as an experience of violence that immerses the victim in the scene so profoundly that it

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[51] See Leys, *Trauma*, 8-10.
[52] Leys, *Trauma*, 298.
[53] Leys, *Trauma*, 8 [emphasis in original].
[54] See Susannah Radstone, "Trauma Studies: Contexts, Politics, Ethics," in *Other People's Pain Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics*, eds. Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 72.

precludes the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what has happened. The mimetic theory explains the tendency of traumatized people to compulsively repeat their violent experiences in nightmares or repetitive forms of acting out by comparing the traumatic repetition to hypnotic imitation. […] An aspect of the mimetic theory that should be stressed […] is that mimesis or unconscious imitation leads to doubts about the veracity of the subject's testimony, since the identificatory process is thought to take place outside of, or dissociated from, ordinary awareness.[55]

The rival antimimetic paradigm of trauma regards traumatic memories as linked not to the unconscious processes of the subject's inner world, but as the unmediated (and unassimilable) records of traumatic events that come from outside the subject. These memories come to occupy an area of the mind that precludes their retrieval. According to this model, rather than the psychical dissociation from the self, trauma is the record of an unassimilable *event* which is dissociated from memory. According to antimimetic theory, victims of trauma are not blindly immersed in the scene of shock but, argues Leys:

> remain aloof from the traumatic experience, in the sense that he remains a spectator of the scene, which he can therefore see and represent to himself. […] [T]he trauma is a purely external event that befalls a fully constituted if passive subject. Whatever damage there may be to the victim's psychical integrity, there is in principle no problem about his eventually recovering from the trauma, though the process of bringing this about may be long and arduous.[56]

With this prelude in mind, how is the migration of trauma theory to the humanities, particularly in analyses informed by Derridean deconstruction, to be understood? The migration of trauma theory to the humanities, although more prominent in the 1980s, was stimulated by an interest in issues surrounding the Holocaust. Many studies of trauma within non-medical fields centre on the question of bearing witness to a traumatic event.

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[55] Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 8.
[56] Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, 9.

For example, a lot of academic work has drawn on issues raised in the autobiographical works of Holocaust survivors, such as Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Charlotte Delbo, Jean Améry, and on other works on survivor literature from this era by Terrence Des Pres, Giorgio Agamben and, in the world of cinema, by Claude Lanzmann.[57] The key issues that emerge from this 'phase' of trauma theory revolve around the difficulties of bearing witness to such a terrible event, or the possibility of representing this event in a just manner. Kaplan suggests that the unexpected consideration of trauma in the humanities in the late 1980s took place "perhaps because trauma theory provided a welcome bridge back to social and political concerns in an era when high theory had become abstract."[58] Susannah Radstone suggests a similar explanation when she writes that trauma theory "aimed to help the humanities move beyond the crises in knowledge posed by poststructuralism and deconstruction […] without abandoning their insights."[59]

An important episode that marked the migration of trauma theory to the humanities was the formation of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University in 1979. The aim of this project was to create an archive of recorded eyewitness accounts from Holocaust survivors. Dori Laub, a psychiatrist, child survivor of the Holocaust and co-founder of the video archive, explains how the archive played an important role because "survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell*."[60] Associated with this Archive was also Geoffrey Hartman, a

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[57] See Primo Levi, "If This Is a Man," in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi, Volume I*, ed. Ann Goldstein, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015 [1947]), 1-205; Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, Day*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008 [1958; 1960; 1961]); Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, trans. Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995 [1965; 1970; 1985]); Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (London: Granta Books, 1999 [1966]; Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999 [1998]); *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (New Yorker Films, 1985).
[58] Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 25. For a discussion of the late 20th century interest in trauma theory in the humanities, see Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 32-41 and Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 1-15.
[59] Radstone, "Trauma Studies," 68.
[60] Dori Laub, "An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 78 [emphasis in original].

professor in the comparative literature department at Yale and a member of the Yale School of deconstruction influenced by Derrida's work. This project brought together figures from the medical realm (such as Laub) and the humanities (such as Shoshana Felman, a literary critic at Yale) to collaborate on questions of trauma and testimony. One important project of this collaboration was the publication of *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* in 1992.[61] In this collaborative book, Laub, building on his training as a psychiatrist and his experiences as a survivor, reflects on the notion of bearing witness, on testimony and surviving, and on the imperatives to tell and listen to trauma testimonies. In her contributions to this book, Felman recounts the effects on her students of a university class on trauma testimonies, as well as providing readings of texts by Albert Camus, Paul de Man and Paul Celan, and Lanzmann's documentary on Shoah witnesses.

Another significant contribution to trauma theory in the humanities is the work of Cathy Caruth. Caruth is a product of the Yale school of deconstruction who received her PhD from Yale University in 1988, amid the flourishing of the Yale School of deconstruction with which de Man was associated when he went to Yale in the 1970s until his death in 1983. Caruth's view, elaborated in her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, is that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on."[62] Caruth's claim, which she proposes through a series of readings of Freud's texts in relation to works of literature, is that the force of trauma does not lie in the event itself but in the event remaining 'unclaimed' at the time it happens which results in traumatic repetitions. This leads her to argue that it is the belated arrival of the memory of the event itself that renders a particular memory traumatic. Radstone argues that Caruth's views distance her from alternative re-interpretations of Freud – such as that of Laplanche and Pontalis – that suggest that, rather than the belated *memory* of the event, it is the meanings

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[61] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[62] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4 [emphasis in original].

conferred on the event *afterwards* that traumatises, that is, the unconscious production of associations clustering around a memory, and not the qualities intrinsic to certain events. Radstone summarises such re-interpretations of Freud, in tension with Caruth's, as holding that "a memory becomes traumatic when it becomes associated, later, with inadmissible meanings, wishes, fantasies, which might include an identification with the aggressor."[63] Luckhurst writes that it is for this reason that "Laplanche has translated Freud's term [*nachträglichkeit*] for belated or deferred action as 'afterwardsness', a deliberately awkward word that foregrounds the odd temporality of an event not understood as traumatic until its return."[64]

For Leys, the emphasis on the unclaimed nature of the traumatic experience is a problematic aspect of the antimimeticism that, according to her, influenced trauma studies in the humanities. She reads the rise of antimimetic trauma theory as fuelling the defence of an ideological commitment to the sovereignty and autonomy of the subject. As an example of how the tension between the mimetic and antimimetic approaches to trauma manifests itself, Leys cites the APA's 1987 decision to remove survivor guilt (explained by mimetic theory through the assumption that identification is always ambivalent, structured by hate and love, rivalry and guilt) from the criteria of PTSD. For Leys, this move exemplifies the antimimetic dimension that enforces a strict dichotomy between the autonomous subject and the external trauma, preserving the coherence of the individual subject. She argues that a similar antimimetic tendency "lends itself to various positivistic interpretations of trauma epitomized by the neurobiological theories that have won widespread acceptance today."[65]

Radstone similarly criticises the trauma theories of Caruth and Felman and Laub for arguing that it is the unexperienced nature of the event that traumatises since, for her, this leads to a depthless topography of the mind, which entails the abandonment of Freud's emphasis on the mediating role of unconscious processes in the production of memory.

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[63] Radstone, "Trauma Studies," 17.

[64] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 9. See also Cathy Caruth, "An Interview with Jean Laplanche," *Postmodern Culture* 11, no. 2 (January 2001), https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.2001.0002.

[65] Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, 9.

She claims that although proponents of trauma theory in the humanities base their ideas on theoretical approaches such as psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism and deconstruction, they nonetheless seem to downplay the emphasis on the subject's lack of sovereignty that is central to such theories. She argues that these theoretical approaches "all problematize, in different ways and to different degrees, those very notions of autonomy and sovereignty which lie at the heart of bourgeois constructions of subjectivity."[66] Consequently, Radstone thinks that it is paradoxical that contemporary trauma theorists, such as Caruth, rely on an antimimetic emphasis on catastrophic events which seems to present a theoretical defence of a model of subjectivity critiqued by the very same theoretical approaches they use. Radstone argues that there are tendencies within contemporary trauma theory that attempt to determine whether "one has either been present at or has 'been' traumatized by a terrible event or one has not."[67] She claims that this distinction is avoided in psychoanalysis, which emphasises a continuum of psychical states and which "takes the 'darker side of the mind' for granted, emphasizing the ubiquity of inadmissible sexual fantasies."[68] She refers to the work of the clinical psychologist Caroline Garland who argues that in psychoanalytic theory and practice "there is no such thing as an accident, there is no such thing as forgetting and there is no such thing as an absence of hatred, rage or destructiveness […] in spite of the urge in survivors to attribute all badness to the world outside them that caused their misfortune."[69] Radstone concludes – and this is a conclusion that is explored in more detail in subsequent chapters – that despite going beyond modernity's supposition of a coherent, autonomous, knowing subject (without rendering subjectivity incoherent, unknowing and fragmented), contemporary trauma theory still holds onto – in a relatively hidden way – a notion of a sovereign yet passive subject.

Although such theoretical debates on trauma in the humanities in the 1980s, particularly reliant on psychoanalytic theory, are central to the history of trauma theory, they lie outside the main scope of this study. While this thesis is situated within such

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[66] Radstone, "Trauma Studies," 76-77.
[67] Radstone, "Trauma Studies," 78.
[68] Radstone, "Trauma Studies," 78.
[69] Radstone, "Trauma Studies," 78.

contemporary debates on trauma theory, it aims less to theorise trauma, but is more interested in the social and institutional reception and dissemination of survivors' trauma narratives. In this regard, the feminist movement and feminist analyses of trauma reached outside the confines of academia to develop a more socio-politically grounded approach to trauma and its narration.

1.4 Trauma and Sexual Violence

The widening of the term 'trauma' to recognise sexual trauma, domestic violence and child abuse was an impactful episode in the history of trauma and trauma theory. Herman notes how the women's movement in the 1970s highlighted "that the most common post-traumatic disorders are those not of men in war but of women in civilian life."[70] Herman's contribution to trauma theory is primarily as a psychiatrist but, as she makes clear, her book *Trauma and Recovery* "is written from a feminist perspective […] in a language […] that is faithful both to the dispassionate, reasoned traditions of my profession and to the passionate claims of people who have been violated and outraged."[71] It is for this latter reason that the history of trauma she provides is a political history that is attuned to how (gendered) power played a significant role in how trauma has been theorised and spoken about. Herman emphasises the important role played by feminist consciousness-raising groups to create safe spaces – physically and discursively – where women could talk about their struggles to sympathetic others and, in virtue of this collective sharing, instigate socio-political transformations. It is within such contexts that more work was done, primarily by female psychiatrists and researchers, on the psychological effects of sexual trauma. Such research gave rise to notions such as 'rape trauma syndrome' and 'battered women syndrome'.[72]

Despite the heightened awareness that this movement brought about, the tendency to dismiss and discredit trauma victims, particularly female victims, persisted in this period

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[70] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 28.
[71] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 4.
[72] See Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 31-32.

(and, it could be argued, remains with us today as can be seen in how survivors who speak out about their past traumas are met with a general aura of suspicion). The 1990s brought with them the so-called 'Memory Wars' regarding traumatic memories, particularly of incest, that had been forgotten by the victim only for such memories to be retrieved later in life. The vigorous debates about such matters involved victims, medical professionals as well as individuals accused of sexual abuse. One side argued that traumatic memories could be retrieved through therapeutic techniques, thus lending support to individuals who were claiming to have retrieved memories of sexual abuse that had occurred, for example, in their childhood. The other side argued that memories are malleable and subject to therapeutic suggestion and confabulation, thus contributing to the development of organisations such as the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in 1994 which created "an alliance of sceptical psychologists and fathers accused of abuse."[73]

It is therefore not a coincidence that a proliferation of autobiographical writing and a memoir boom, including traumatic life writing, could be seen around the same time.[74] Luckhurst identifies five spheres in which trauma narratives flourished in the late 1980s and 1990s:

> *feminist revisions of autobiography* and the particular impact of recovered memory on the memoir form; the *AIDS diary*; the rise of the *illness memoir*, christened 'pathography' in the early 1990s; the trend for *confessional journalism*; the metastasis of *celebrity confession across media*, from the autobiography focused on revealing 'private' trauma to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.[75]

Leigh Gilmore too analyses the 'boom' in traumatic autobiographical works. She points toward the shaping force of the literary market as well as academic work (and genres such as personal criticism) in stimulating the attention turned onto autobiographical writing.

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[73] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 73.
[74] See Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 117-134.
[75] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 120 [emphasis added].

She also identifies social and political movements that since the 1970s "have made it possible for a broader range of people to publish accounts of their life experiences."[76] Besides, Gilmore refers to the permeation of contemporary culture by the media confessional, with interventions that include celebrity confessions as well as the proliferation of talk shows which featured "the dysfunctional and downtrodden, the cheated-on and cheating, the everyman and everywoman of the bad times that keep on coming."[77]

The proliferation of discourses and narratives of trauma in memoirs, TV shows and academic criticism can be clearly traced back to the 1960s feminist consciousness-raising practices whose aim was to sensitise the public and politicise seemingly private matters of abuse. However, paradoxically, the proliferation of trauma narratives also had the reverse effect. Rather than facilitating the credibility of survivors, this culture of trauma hardened the aura of suspicion that has always haunted traumatised individuals. This is because, critics of the trauma culture argue, the signifier 'trauma' was widened so much that it lost its significance. In addition to criticism of this kind, more likely to proceed from critics of feminism, Luckhurst notes that there was also damning criticism of the trauma culture by feminist critics who observed that "[w]hat had been an exercise in situating women's utterances within social and political problematics in order to expose patriarchal logic now risked being reduced to private therapeutic acts of self-improvement."[78] Susan Sontag – whose work on the politics of photography[79] has been influential in strands of trauma theory – reiterates this sentiment (albeit in a different

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[76] Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 16.

[77] Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, 17. Other analyses of 'the TV talk show' in relation to trauma theory are presented in Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 2 (1993): 274-279 and Susan David Bernstein, *Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), x-xi, 13.

[78] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 74-75.

[79] See Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1979) and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2004). Sontag's views on the politics of photography are discussed and extended by Butler in view of the Abu Ghraib photographs of torture; see Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 63-100.

context): "Politics […] has been replaced by psychotherapy."[80] These words by Sontag were written for *The New Yorker* issue of 24th September of 2001, three days after 9/11, and were intended to highlight how the reaction of various politicians to the terrorist attacks was aimed at restoring confidence in the United States and grief management, thus privatising rather than politicising the trauma.[81] The study of the relations between trauma, media and politics, clearly highlighted in 9/11 and analyses of it, marks a significant episode in the history of trauma theory.

1.5 Trauma on TV

While the link between trauma and TV had already been explored in the context of talk shows, the televised trauma of 9/11 in the age of the Internet enabled the exponential growth of footage, witness accounts and live on-the-spot news reporting.[82] As Kaplan writes, "9/11 was perhaps the supreme example of a catastrophe that was experienced globally via digital technologies (Internet, cell phone) as well as by television and radio."[83] The trauma of 9/11 was, consequently, encountered from different positions with more or less proximity and immediacy:

> At one extreme there is the direct trauma victim while at the other we find a person geographically far away, having no personal connection to the victim. In between are a series of positions: for example, there's the relative of trauma victims or the position of workers coming in after a catastrophe, those who encounter trauma through accounts they hear, or clinicians who may be *vicariously traumatized* now that increasingly counseling is offered to people who survive catastrophes. People encounter trauma by being a bystander, by living near to where a catastrophe

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[80] "Tuesday, and After," *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2001, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/tuesday-and-after-talk-of-the-town.
[81] For related but more far-reaching analyses of the political mobilisation of grief in reaction to 9/11, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004) and Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014 [2004]), 144-167.
[82] For a pre-2001 analysis of trauma and TV, see Avital Ronell, "Trauma TV: Twelve Steps Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The ÜberReader: Selected Works of Avital Ronell*, ed. Diane Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 63-88.
[83] Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 2.

happened, or by hearing about a crisis from a friend. But most people encounter trauma through the media.[84]

Vicarious traumatisation – that is, being traumatised in an indirect, second-hand or derivative way – is also referred to by Fassin and Rechtman who report that "the proportion [of people suffering from post-traumatic stress] was higher among those who had had prolonged exposure to television coverage of the attacks on the Twin Towers."[85]

This marks a further expansion of the realm of trauma to capture not just victims and survivors but a broader cultural imaginary, explaining why the last two or three decades saw a boom of trauma studies within cultural studies. In fact, Kaplan opens her book on trauma, titled precisely *Trauma Culture*, by suggesting that "[t]his book is about the impact of trauma both on individuals and *on entire cultures or nations*."[86] Trauma culture is what brings together under the expansive category of 'trauma' radically different concerns ranging from Holocaust survivors, Vietnam veterans, victims of genocides and terrorist attacks, domestic violence survivors, narratives of domestic abuse, the culture of psychotherapy, self-help books, best-selling memoirs, celebrity confessions or deaths, illness memoirs and much more.[87] For Mark Seltzer, this constitutes a 'wound culture', which he defines critically as "the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound."[88] Ann Cvetkovich expresses the ambivalence surrounding the notion of a culture of trauma, with some embracing it while others are more sceptical:

> Sometimes people say we're living in a trauma culture – that it's a time of crisis, and that the crisis is manifest in people's feelings, whether numbness or anxiety, lack of feeling or too much feeling. And sometimes they say that calling it a trauma

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[84] Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 2 [emphasis added].
[85] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 1.
[86] Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 1 [emphasis added].
[87] See Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 2.
[88] Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (1997): 3.

culture is a symptom rather than a diagnosis, a quick-fix naming of the zeitgeist that misrecognizes a structural condition as a feeling.[89]

Others have noted that it is not just the 'pathological public sphere' (in Seltzer's words) that perpetuates this wound culture, but also works of academic criticism, specifically so-called 'trauma theory', and the proliferation of studies on historical and cultural traumas, and non-fictional as well as fictional and cinematic portrayals of trauma. John Mowitt critiques such academic work on trauma by pointing to its moralistic and "troubling contemporary tendency to displace the political with the ethical; a tendency – though hardly unique to Trauma Studies – that, to my mind, speaks volumes about the failure of its institutional success."[90] Mowitt contends that studies on trauma are ridden with "trauma envy,"[91] transforming trauma theory into "a discipline envious of the specifically moral advantages imaginatively extended to anyone who can lay claim to a significant wound; it is an envy of the wound as possessing the power to silence the demands or resentments of all others."[92]

LaCapra too discussed the possible dangers of an all-encompassing culture of trauma which results in problematic conflations and prevents necessary distinctions from being made: "the significance or force of particular historical losses (for example, those of apartheid or the Shoah) may be obfuscated or rashly generalized. As a consequence one encounters the dubious idea that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a 'wound culture'."[93] LaCapra cautions against the appropriation of other people's traumas

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[89] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 15.
[90] John Mowitt, "Trauma Envy," *Cultural Critique* no. 46 (2000): 272-273. For another critique of the presumed ethical and political purity of trauma theory, see also Radstone, "Trauma Studies," 82-88.
[91] Mowitt, "Trauma Envy," 273.
[92] Devorah Baum, "Trauma: An Essay on Jewish Guilt," *English Studies in Africa* 52, no. 1 (2009): 21. In his analysis, Mowitt relies on and adapts Wendy Brown's notion of wounded attachments. See Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 390-410.
[93] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 64, quoted in Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag, "Introduction: Other People's Pain – Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics," in *Other People's Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics*, eds. Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 7.

by granting the one who listens to the trauma survivor the same status of victim. Instead, regarding secondary traumatisation brought about by exposure to survivors' narratives of trauma, he writes that "desirable empathy involves not full identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims."[94] Whereas it might be plausible to concede that people who have had direct contact with traumatised individuals have a claim to vicarious traumatisation, LaCapra contends that:

> it may be hyperbolic to argue that all those who come into contact with certain material, such as Holocaust videos, undergo at some level secondary or muted trauma. […] [I]t is blatantly obvious that there is a major difference between the experience of camp inmates or Holocaust survivors and that of the viewer of testimony videos.[95]

LaCapra's position seems to be at odds with views expressed by psychiatrists such as Laub who argue that "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself."[96] Colin Davis voices concerns with such co-option of trauma which, for him, can be ethically problematic; he claims that "we do not participate in or co-own the other's trauma; and the sense or desire that we do should be resisted because it gives us the potentially self-serving illusion of empathic understanding."[97] Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi presents an even more radical view of the impossibility of co-owning others' trauma when he writes:

> Let me repeat that we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is a troublesome notion that I became aware of gradually by reading other people's

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[94] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 102.
[95] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 102-103.
[96] Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57.
[97] Colin Davis, "Trauma and Ethics: Telling the Other's Story," in *Other People's Pain Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics*, eds. Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 20.

memoirs and rereading my own years later. We survivors are an anomalous and negligible minority. We are the ones who, because of our transgressions, ability, or luck, did not touch bottom. The ones who did, who saw the Gorgon, did not come back to tell, or they came back mute. But it is they, the "*Muselmänner*," the drowned, the witnesses to everything – they are the ones whose testimony would have had a comprehensive meaning. They are the rule, we are the exception.[98]

Thus, Joseph Farrell argues that even Levi, "who had a deep sense of his obligations as a witness-survivor, was aware of the paradox, developed by Agamben, that the real witness was the *Muselmann*, who by definition could not deliver testimony."[99] For this reason, Levi himself was hesitant and unsure about his status as an authentic witness who can speak on behalf of the perished.

This section has highlighted another dimension of the ethical and political conundrums surrounding trauma and trauma theory, particularly thorny issues pertaining to the representation of trauma, and claims and responses to it. However, as this whole chapter suggests, these intricate entanglements with power and hegemony have been inherent in trauma at least since its modern births in the 19th century. The next section considers a further strand of contemporary research on the ethics and politics of trauma which traverses the humanities to include political, anthropological and sociological analyses of trauma. These studies highlight the contemporary political and hegemonic currency of trauma in its entanglement with international power relations.

1.6 The Humanitarian Empire of Trauma

The multi-layered pervasiveness of trauma culture indicates that trauma is constantly present among us. The American psychoanalyst Robert Stolorow writes: "I describe our

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[98] Primo Levi, "The Drowned and the Saved," in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi, Volume III*, ed. Ann Goldstein, trans. Michael F. Moore (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015 [1986]), 2468; a different translation of this excerpt is quoted in Joseph Farrell, "The Strange Case of the *Muselmänner* in Auschwitz," in *New Reflections on Primo Levi: Before and After Auschwitz*, eds. Risa Sodi and Millicent Marcus (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 97.
[99] Farrell, "The Strange Case of the *Muselmänner* in Auschwitz," 97.

era as an *Age of Trauma* because the tranquilizing illusions of our everyday world seem in our time to be severely threatened from all sides – by global diminution of natural resources, by global warming, by global nuclear proliferation, by global terrorism, and by global economic collapse."[100] Indeed, trauma has become the lens through which contemporary international affairs and global politics are viewed. As James Brassett and Nick Vaughan-Williams highlight in their introduction to a journal issue on the government of traumatic events in contemporary times:

> it seems that trauma is fast becoming a paradigmatic lens through which the dynamics of contemporary international politics are framed, understood, and responded to [and] our understanding/understandings of trauma and the traumatic event tend to be dominated by the ascendancy of managerialist discourses of humanitarianism, psychology, and the newly emergent frame of resilience planning.[101]

This approach to theorising trauma considers notions such as 'trauma', 'victim', 'disaster', 'resilience', 'therapy', 'stress', 'PTSD' and similar vocabulary as techniques of governing in contemporary times whereby "trauma can be understood as a normalizing discourse of power."[102] In a genealogical and Foucaultian spirit, rather than taking these discourses as authoritative and neutral scientific knowledge, such analyses of trauma highlight the interplay of these discourses with other practices and institutions. This interplay works to crystallise ways of narrating traumatic episodes, modes of experiencing trauma, and measures of responding to traumatic events, as well as criteria that regulate how and which events are classified as traumatic in the first place. As Brassett and Vaughan-Williams put it: "power relations […] produce and are sometimes sustained by trauma;"[103] there is an "increasing incidence of events *produced as traumatic* […,]

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[100] Robert D. Stolorow, "Empathic Civilization in an Age of Trauma," *Psychology Today*, November 22, 2011, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/feeling-relating-existing/201111/empathic-civilization-in-age-trauma [emphasis in original].

[101] James Brassett and Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Governing Traumatic Events," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 37, no. 3 (2012): 183.

[102] Brassett and Vaughan-William, "Governing Traumatic Events," 183.

[103] Brassett and Vaughan-William, "Governing Traumatic Events," 183.

important historical markers […] and an established (and highly emotive) accompanying vocabulary of shock, devastation, anger, and blame;"[104] "traumatic events are always already 'governed' or known;"[105] "generalized knowledge/knowledges of the traumatic event […] overlap with – *and performatively produce* – particular experiences and subjects of trauma."[106]

The meaning of trauma is informed and determined by the powerful role played by Western psychological and psychiatric discourses. Other critics suggest that, despite the constructionist power of such discourses and practices to regulate the realm of the traumatic, the authority of the PTSD diagnosis is starting to wane. For Alison Howell, the demise of PTSD is being brought about by two factors: "first, the resurgence of biomedical models of trauma, and second, as a consequence of increasingly powerful models of resilience which privilege 'prevention' in the face of trauma."[107] Thus, significant changes are taking place in the contemporary governance of trauma not just in the military sphere – which has traditionally contested the politics of PTSD perhaps due to its politically charged origin in the aftermath of the Vietnam war – but also in "civilian contexts and institutions, including disaster preparedness, universities, schools, and national health systems."[108] This also complements the shift from a politicised collective claim for treatment *by* traumatised individuals to a depoliticised and individualised neoliberal "responsibilisation"[109] *of* traumatised individuals. The *omnes et singulatim* logic of simultaneous individualisation and totalisation described by Foucault[110] applies to the contemporary governance of trauma in the interplay between the assumption that everyone is to some extent at risk and susceptible to trauma and the moral economy of blame that obliges one to take responsibility for oneself by fostering adequate techniques of resilience.

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[104] Brassett and Vaughan-William, "Governing Traumatic Events," 183-184 [emphasis added]

[105] Brassett and Vaughan-William, "Governing Traumatic Events," 184.

[106] Brassett and Vaughan-William, "Governing Traumatic Events," 184 [emphasis in original].

[107] Alison Howell, "The Demise of PTSD: From Governing through Trauma to Governing Resilience," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 37, no. 3 (2012): 214.

[108] Howell, "The Demise of PTSD," 217.

[109] Butler, *Frames of War*, 35.

[110] See Michel Foucault, "'*Omnes et Singulatim*': Toward a Critique of Political Reason," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 298-325.

This concern with trauma is captured by a strand of research that critiques the role of trauma as a tool of global governance and highlights the ethnocentrism that characterises dominant conceptions of trauma and PTSD. Howell writes that the diagnosis of PTSD is presented as a universally applicable mental disorder rather than as a culturally and geographically specific phenomenon. This results in the diagnosis being applied to various populations experiencing disasters "despite resistance by those who question the application of Western concepts of trauma, and more broadly the validity of notions of PTSD, mental illness, or psychiatric expertise (especially given the active involvement of psychiatry in colonization)."[111] Luckhurst points toward the work of Patrick Bracken and Celia Petty on the dangers of 'exporting' Western discourses and conceptions of trauma and applying them uncritically to other populations; Bracken and Petty's work, he writes, "took aim at the ethnocentrism of terms developed for Western models of the self in which individual psychology and intrapsychic conflict predominated over the collective or sociosomatic self often found outside the West."[112]

The work of Fassin and Rechtman in *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* is a culmination of the concerns in trauma research discussed in this section. As their book title suggests, trauma is considered as "a major signifier of our age"[113] that instructs how we respond to suffering and violence. Fassin and Rechtman reflect on how the label of 'trauma' is a historical construction that is put to various political uses. Their scope is not to shed sceptical light on trauma to argue that trauma is a commodified object with political utility; rather their aim is to provide a "moral genealogy of trauma"[114] which they situate within "a political and moral anthropology of contemporary societies."[115] Fassin and Rechtman refer, for example, to the accepted ordinariness of having thousands of mental health specialists intervening to offer support to survivors, witnesses and residents in the wake of 9/11. They reflect on the shifts – at

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[111] Howell, "The Demise of PTSD," 216.
[112] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 212.
[113] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, xi.
[114] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, xii.
[115] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, xii.

the levels of discourses, practices, attitudes, perceptions and sentiments – that over time have led to this response to violence becoming the taken-for-granted reaction: "No one expresses surprise at the huge number of psychologists and psychiatrists present at the scene of tragedy."[116]

Fassin and Rechtman study how the contemporary moral economy has changed with regard to trauma and how it is reacted to, classified, narrated and governed. They select three events as emblematic of the contemporary politics of trauma: 1) an explosion at a chemical factory in Toulouse in 2001; 2) the boom in humanitarian psychiatry in the aftermath of disasters or wars, for example in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 2000; 3) the work of non-governmental organisations with asylum seekers and victims of torture. Through the first case study, Fassin and Rechtman study the politics of reparation and the development of psychiatric victimology, asking: "When the concept of trauma allows the survivors of an industrial accident to speak of their a priori right to compensation, regardless of any evaluation a posteriori of the facts in their individual cases, how are the management of damage and the administration of evidence altered?"[117] Through the second case study, the authors discuss the politics of testimony and humanitarian psychiatry through questions such as: "When witnesses testify publicly to the plight of the Palestinian people on the basis of cases reported by psychologists, how are the representation of their situation and the defense of their cause affected?"[118] Via the third case study, Fassin and Rechtman analyse what they call the psychotraumatology of exile and the politics of proof in the adjudication of asylum seekers and torture victims by posing such questions as: "When more credence is given to a medical certificate attesting to post-traumatic stress than to the word of an asylum seeker, what conception of the law and of the subject is operating?"[119] This question on the role of trauma narratives in the asylum process will be directly engaged with in the last chapter of this thesis.

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[116] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 2-3.
[117] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 8.
[118] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 8.
[119] Fassin and Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma*, 8.

Fassin and Rechtman's study brings together a number of concerns in trauma theory and its history: their interest in the historical development of trauma echoes genealogies and histories of modern trauma; their concern with the rise of PTSD and its utility echoes political considerations of trauma; their analysis of how modern media and news agencies frame trauma connects back to concerns with the contemporary culture of trauma. Indeed, the work of Fassin and Rechtman brings together several of the interests in trauma that this thesis pursues, ranging from the discourses that give meaning to trauma, to the power relations with which these discourses become entangled in institutional practices, to the influence that such discourses have upon how traumas are experienced, received and narrated, and, finally, to how such concerns point toward a broader political ethics of trauma.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The aim of this opening chapter has been to present the varying interests in trauma and trauma theory, both to give an account of the major sources and issues in the history of trauma and trauma theory, and to establish a contextual background for the issues pursued in the rest of the thesis. This chapter has identified major 'stages' in the history of trauma which stimulated different 'phases' in the history of theorising trauma. To summarise schematically: the modern births of trauma shed light on its links to modernity and psychoanalysis, while major wars prompted the development of novel notions of trauma and post-traumatic stress; in the 1980s, academic interest inspired by psychoanalytic and deconstructive approaches, in trauma focused on issues surrounding the representation and witnessing of trauma, while socio-political currents, heralded by feminist concerns, foregrounded the sexual and gendered dimensions of trauma. In the last two or three decades, trauma theorists have considered the culture of trauma from the memoir boom to the proliferation of trauma discourses and images in the digital age. The chapter ended by showing how aspects of these different concerns come together in analyses of the political and hegemonic currency of trauma in humanitarian and global contexts.

Some of the following chapters build upon some of these concerns in trauma theory, whereas others open up different problematics. For example, the next two chapters focus on Foucault's work and use his genealogical approach on discourse, power and subjectivity in order for these views to be later contextualised within trauma theory. As the history of trauma presented in this chapter shows, trauma has always been caught up amid conflicting (though, oftentimes mutually reinforcing) discourses of medicine and law that impose their classifications upon society, determining who qualifies as a properly traumatised subject or not. Since Foucault's work has been a significant contribution to studies of the constitutive power of such discourses, adopting a Foucaultian outlook to trauma yields critical results. Foucault's various approaches to self-narration – ranging from self-narration as subjugating confession to self-narration as critical self-fashioning – are read alongside feminist studies on self-narration (which, as this chapter has shown, have been crucial in the history of trauma) to highlight how practices of self-narration, including traumatic self-narration, are caught up with hegemonic discourses and practices but can nonetheless function as instances of critical subversion.

Subsequent chapters further develop this approach to trauma and traumatic self-narration through Butler's philosophical ideas. Butler's work extends Foucault's concerns with how discourses, power relations and norms bear upon subjectivity, determining who or what – in the context of gender, for example – constitutes a legitimate, real and recognisable subject. Butler's work on the activity of self-narration is also drawn upon to further enrich this study. Using her philosophical notions of vulnerability, precariousness and relationality, this study problematises the meaning of 'narrating oneself' by asking what it means to narrate oneself and what the inherent limits of this activity are. Since, as this chapter showed, the narration of trauma plays such a central role in the history of trauma and trauma theory, it is imperative to probe deeper into the opportunities and limitations of self-narration.

The final three chapters then are more 'applied' and utilise the theoretical approach developed in the earlier chapters to conduct an analysis of the ethics and politics of trauma. This is done specifically in relation to how trauma is narrated and how trauma narratives

are received by medical and legal institutions. Butler's work, complementing Foucault's, is used to critically consider the politics of narrating trauma in legal contexts. The narrative norms and expectations placed on sexual trauma survivors are analysed to highlight how hegemonic portrayals of trauma are upheld. Narrative coherence is one such expectation imposed on traumatised individuals – an expectation that will be philosophically and politically problematised through Butler's work. The hegemonic role of narrative coherence is also analysed in the context of the psychological sciences, and a critical review of psychological literature in a subsequent chapter highlights how narrative coherence is favoured when trauma is narrated by survivors. The final chapter considers critical issues surrounding the narration of trauma by asylum seekers, highlighting how norms and power relations circumscribe traumatic self-narration and determine the value of trauma narratives. The range of these various analytical gestures – from philosophical analyses of the ideas of Foucault and Butler on self-narration to a critical consideration of empirical studies on trauma narratives – is a move toward a holistic engagement with the wide range of critical issues, oftentimes poignant, that surround trauma and its narration.

Chapter 2 Foucault on Discourse, Power and Self-Narration: Rivière and Barbin Narrate

This chapter identifies references made by Foucault to practices of self-narration in his early works up to the late 1970s. Foucault's account of discourse is outlined to show that self-narration can be considered as a rule-governed activity, heavily structured and regulated by schemas of intelligibility that govern the plausibility and legitimacy of certain instances of self-narration over others. The chapter then turns to actual 'case studies' in self-narration considered by Foucault, namely the cases of Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin. Through an analysis of Rivière's case, and a consideration of Foucault's motivation in publishing his dossier, it is shown that discourses are entangled in different power struggles among the various realms (law, medicine, morality) that seek to impose intelligibility and meaning on human subjects. This chapter highlights how, despite its precariousness, Rivière's self-narration functioned, at least partially, as a form of resistance. Thus, resistance is co-existent with power, and in the same way that practices of self-narration are heavily regulated by power, there remain possibilities of resisting and narrating otherwise. This analysis of self-narration is extended by a consideration of Foucault's account of confession in *The Will to Knowledge* and his work on Barbin's memoir.

2.1 Discourse as Power

Foucault commences "The Order of Discourse", his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, by claiming that an anxiety surrounds discourse in its spoken and written material reality. This anxiety results from awareness that the conditions for the possibility of discourse are not of one's choosing, and the intelligibility and currency of discourse are determined "according to a time-scale which is not ours."[1] Discourse, he says, harbours "powers and dangers that are hard to imagine."[2] These powers are a result of the

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[1] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981), 52.
[2] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52.

unpredictability and uncontrollability of discourse, "despite its greyness and ordinariness."[3] In response to these powers of discourse, Foucault argues, an active effort toward ordering discourse is made. He proposes a hypothesis: "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events."[4] In the rest of the lecture, and indeed in most of his works, he outlines the various mechanisms by which the ordering of discourse happens. "The most obvious and familiar"[5] procedure of exclusion is the prohibition, the essence of which is to restrict and minimise what can be spoken of and how. Censorship and taboo would be means of this procedure of exclusion. Other forms of exclusion are the production of oppositions or divisions, such as the formation of discourses of madness resulting from its division from and opposition to reason,[6] and the opposition between truth and falsity, which – following Nietzsche[7] – Foucault considers as a historically constituted division motivated by a will to truth that "tends to exert a sort of pressure and something like a power of constraint […] on other discourses."[8]

Besides these procedures that control and delimit discourse by operating "from the exterior,"[9] Foucault also considers "internal procedures, since discourses themselves exercise their own control."[10] The commentary, that is, the mechanism of recounting, reciting, repeating or commenting on certain texts is one such internal procedure for controlling discourse that he refers to. A further mechanism that regulates discourse internally is the discipline, which "is defined by a domain of objects, a set of methods, a corpus of propositions considered to be true, a play of rules and definitions, of techniques and instruments."[11] The discipline implies that new propositions can be formulated

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[3] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52.
[4] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52.
[5] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52.
[6] See Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2006 [1961]).
[7] See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 114-123.
[8] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 55.
[9] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 56.
[10] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 56.
[11] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 59.

irrespective of its use; indeed, because of its anonymity, the discipline is available to whoever can use it. Foucault argues, however, that in order to be instated into a discipline, a proposition must complement the accepted theoretical horizon: "a proposition must fulfil complex and heavy requirements to be able to belong to the grouping of a discipline; before it can be called true or false, it must be 'in the true', as Canguilhem would say."[12] In this way, the discipline functions as a principle of control that polices the production of statements within discourses.

The notion of the author – which Foucault considers to be "a principle of grouping of discourses, conceived as the unity and origin of their meanings, as the focus of their coherence"[13] – is another procedure through which discourse is ordered. In "What is an Author?",[14] an essay from the same period as "The Order of Discourse," Foucault further develops his ideas on the author function, claiming that "the fact that the discourse has an author's name […] shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, […] but is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status."[15] Foucault's ideas on authorship and disciplinarity have a bearing on how to consider the activity of self-narration. Authorship of life writing – an autobiography, for example – raises issues regarding the author's identity and reliability. A published life account which does not identify the author would appear to be a strange one. In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault discusses precisely such a memoir: an anonymously-authored voluminous book of a Victorian man's sexual encounters titled *My Secret Life*.[16] He argues how, despite its anonymous authorship, the book reveals the anonymity of discourses, in this case of sexuality. Discourses precede and exceed the self in such a way that *My Secret Life* is more a work on how desires were

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[12] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 60.

[13] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 58.

[14] Foucault's essay on the notion of the author, based on the text of a lecture he first delivered in 1969, is to be understood in an implicit dialogue with Roland Barthes' classic essay on the topic, "The Death of the Author," published in 1967.

[15] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998), 211.

[16] See Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998 [1976]), 21-23.

problematised and spoken about in the 19th century than on the specificity of the anonymous author's desires.

Foucault again discusses anonymity in relation to authorship in a 1980 interview where he considers the notion of the author as having a constraining effect on the audience since it exercises control over how a written work is received and evaluated. It is in this spirit that he proposes, perhaps somewhat ironically, "a game: that of the 'year without a name.' For a year, books would be published without their authors' names."[17] He anticipates that the reaction to such a game would be a chaotic one, precisely because what would be missing is a crucial mechanism that enables critics to cope with the mass of discourse and that facilitates their reception of discourse. Writing on the condition of anonymity thus has the potential to trouble and expose the power that can be associated with the author function.

The notion of genre too functions as a principle of ordering discourse. Although not directly analysed by Foucault, genre can be seen as an organising principle of seemingly disparate works.[18] Works of life writing, particularly autobiography, are assessed and judged according to the extent to which they satisfy the institutional criteria for what constitutes an autobiographical work. In this light, reflecting on what is expected of an autobiographical work, Smith and Watson remark: "Are we expecting fidelity to the facts of their biographies, to experience, to themselves, to the historical moment, to social community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse identities, *to the norms of autobiography as a literary genre itself*?"[19]

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[17] Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 321.

[18] See Anis Bawarshi, "The Genre Function," *College English* 62, no. 3 (2000): 335-360.

[19] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 15 [emphasis added]. In this book, Smith and Watson consider how various theoretical approaches, including Foucault's, can inform the understanding of autobiographical works. They also account historically for the development of autobiography as a genre, and propose numerous genres of life writing.

Besides impositions on how a text is received, Foucault notes how discourse is also controlled through impositions being made on who can qualify to participate in certain modes of speaking and writing. This amounts to "a rarefaction […] of the speaking subjects; none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements."[20] In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault considers this issue by specifically referring to medical biographical accounts as enunciative modalities operating in the discourse of the 19th century. Such a discursive mode entailed restrictions on how it was made, and who could engage in it:

> who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language (*langage*)? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true? What is the status of the individuals who – alone – have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such a discourse?[21]

The rarefaction of speaking subjects highlights how individuals can be either disqualified from engaging in a particular discursive mode, or else, that participation in such discourse can only happen by submitting oneself to the authority of an authoritative agent who can channel or interpret what an individual says or does through the appropriate discursive rules. Thus, any discursive mode, including self-narration, is a domain that is regulated by external and internal mechanisms that control and order the remit of what can be intelligibly said.

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[20] Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 61-62.

[21] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972 [1969], 50. Interestingly, the probing questions Foucault asks in this 1969 book are echoed, almost exactly, in his late lectures on parrhesia. Although new emphases are added to the analysis, the fundamental concerns remain constant, as can be seen in this quote from a lecture he delivered in Berkeley in 1983: "Who is able to tell the truth? What are the moral, the ethical, and the spiritual conditions which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered as, a truth-teller? About what topics is it important to tell the truth? […] What are the consequences of telling the truth? […] What is the relation between the activity of truth-telling and the exercise of power?" Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (California: Semiotext(e), 2001), 169-170.

It is interesting to note though that in "The Order of Discourse", Foucault takes his cue from the implicit power of discourse, its capacity to destabilise and to defy easy ordering. Although Foucault's works are perhaps more easily associated with analyses of how speech and actions are circumscribed and regulated, he recognised their potential to subvert and be otherwise. The mechanisms employed to control disorderly discourse – what can be called mechanisms of *power* – come into effect precisely because of the uncertain terrain in which discourse freely flows. That is, the presence of stringent controlling mechanisms is not only a sign of repression but, equally, a confirmation that in that same regulated terrain lies the possibility of freedom. Foucault echoes this idea in an interview held in 1984:

> power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. […] [I]n power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance […], there would be no power relations at all. […] [I]if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere.[22]

This chapter will now extend the characterisation of discourse as intimately entwined with relations of power by turning to Foucault's engagement with Rivière's case. The publication of Rivière's medico-legal dossier and his memoir can be considered as a 'case study' through which Foucault exemplifies his views on discourse and power as well as, in this case, on self-narration. The central point being emphasised is that although restrictions that surround discourse powerfully function to circumscribe what the individual can say and how it is said, nonetheless, the possibility of resistance remains and, as attested by the Rivière memoir, self-narration can trouble the power relations that come to bear on discourse, and can thwart their intended outcomes.

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[22] Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 292.

2.2 Discourse, its Limits and Struggles

Foucault's publication of Rivière's memoir in 1973, in the midst of a dossier made up of medical, legal, journalistic and administrative documents, exemplifies his interest in the activity of self-narration as an operation of discourse and power relations. Foucault's analysis presents self-narration as an activity that is significantly regulated and circumscribed by the various discursive formations in a given historical moment. Such limitations amount to an exercise of power that controls the form that self-narration can take. However, the relation between self-narration and power is not an exclusively negative one; that is, power does not only diminish the possibilities of self-narration. Power also gives shape to self-narration, and can enable and create particular forms of narrating oneself. Subjects come to make sense and give an account of their life through the schemas of intelligibility that discourses and power enable.

Thus, although Foucault's account of self-narration may seem deterministic, suggesting a human subject who is passively constituted by predominant discourses, it is not the case. Discursive constitution is not a unilateral or infallible process. Moreover, construction is not equal to strict determination.[23] For the most part, discourses establish a smooth and ordered normalisation. Yet, perpetuated norms can fail, can be reversed and subverted. Were this not the case, then a phenomenon would be self-evident, unquestionable and inescapable, but discourses and power relations are more prone to function in unstable points where events and behaviours can sway in various ways. If, according to Foucault, the nature of power is that "it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less,"[24] then the aims of the supposed exercise of power can be frustrated. Self-narration can occupy this uneasy position too. Although the various discourses that describe – and, in so doing, create – facets of human subjectivity regulate practices of self-narration according to the desired criteria, there can be instances of self-narration that highlight the lack of fixity of

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[23] For a fine elucidation on the meaning of discursive or social construction, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"* (London: Routledge, 2011 [1993]), xi-xxx.
[24] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 341.

discourses and their inability to tie an individual to an identity. Foucault's approach to publishing Rivière's dossiers, and Rivière's own self-narration among them, was precisely to highlight how discourses and their entanglement with power facilitate processes of subject-formation, but also to show that subjection is a complicated phenomenon that can fail due to the individual's attempts, wittingly or not, to resist the imposed strictures. The failures of subjection, however, are not merely celebratory acts of resistance but can have catastrophic implications and, as Rivière's case shows, can result in institutional maltreatment or in making a life unliveable.

I The Story

On 3 June 1835, aged twenty, Rivière, the son of a peasant, killed his mother, sister and brother using a pruning bill (a sickle-like tool) in their home in Normandy. He fled to the woods and, after a month-long search, was arrested several miles away in Langannerie on 2 July 1835. In the preliminary investigation held on 9 July 1835, when asked what his motive was, his first replies were that they were persecuting his father. Presenting himself as a devoted reader of the Bible and sacred texts, he describes the murders – which he had premeditated for two weeks – as ordered by God. Rivière recounts how when his father consulted a priest, his father was told to pray to God to relieve him of his troubles. Therefore, Rivière assumed that had he not murdered his relatives, God's existence and justice would be put in doubt, so he took it upon himself to avoid this. Upon being told that God would never order such a thing, and that he should know that he could not avoid the punishment inflicted on parricides, and that he is deceiving the law by presenting contradictory stories (for example, claiming to not have read anything after he fled whereas he was actually seen with a book in his hands prior to his arrest), Rivière counters:

> I wish no longer to maintain the system of defense and the part which I have been acting. I shall tell the truth, I did it to help my father out of his difficulties. I wished to deliver him from an evil woman who had plagued him continually ever since she became his wife, who was ruining him, who was driving him to such despair that he was sometimes tempted to commit suicide. I killed my sister Victoire

because she took my mother's part. I killed my brother by reason of his love for my mother and my sister.[25]

The preliminary investigation ends with Rivière promising to elaborate in writing that which he had just said. In the dossier published by Foucault, this exchange is followed by a series of witness statements on Rivière. In these statements, Rivière is described in various negative terms: "a hothead, an obstinate fellow,"[26] "had no friend,"[27] "he was held to be an idiot in his village,"[28] "he seemed to have *a skew in his imagination*,"[29] "he sometimes swore at his horse for no good reason,"[30] engaged in "bizarre behaviour,"[31] "often made a game of frightening children,"[32] "often displayed cruelty towards birds and frogs, he flayed the frogs and nailed the birds alive to trees,"[33] "laughing without any reason,"[34] and, crucially, for one of the witnesses, "he was mad."[35] By the second interrogation, held nine days later on 18 July 1835, Rivière had presented a manuscript which, he claimed, contained the truth. In this second interrogation, the examining judge presses Rivière on his reported tendency to relish in animal cruelty and frighten children on multiple occasions, seeming keen to portray Rivière as a sadistic individual prone to behaving cruelly. Suddenly, the judge shows Rivière the instrument he had used in his crime and, noticing Rivière's lack of emotion, asks him how such a sight does not make him feel regretful. Rivière replies that he does feel remorse, and that "an hour after my crime my conscience told me that I had done evil and I would not have done it over again."[36]

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[25] Michel Foucault, ed., *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and My Brother: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century*, trans. Frank Jellinek (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982 [1973]), 23-24.
[26] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 24.
[27] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 24.
[28] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 25.
[29] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 25-26 [emphasis in original].
[30] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 27.
[31] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 30.
[32] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 31.
[33] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 33.
[34] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 33.
[35] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 33.
[36] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 38.

The subsequent document in the dossier confirms that "[t]he investigation has gone carefully into Rivière's past, and it has been found that from his earliest youth he had the cruellest propensities."[37] This highlights the tendency of the day, prompted by the birth of the discourses of criminology, to seek a psychological causality that unites the individual's past, present and predictable future. As Andrade puts it: "A psychological causality is sought that binds the offender to his crime by means of a bundle of complex threads: instincts, drives, tendencies, temperaments, character. With this, criminal and psychiatric discourses cross their borders."[38] Thus, when self-narration happens, priority is given not to the individual but rather to a whole set of factors outside of the individual's choosing through which the individual's speaking or writing about one's self and one's actions is made intelligible. Indeed, Foucault's account of power/knowledge rests on this point: "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."[39] The circumscription and regulation of the discourses available to the individual – that is, power relations – happen at the same time as the production of knowledge, in this case about the individual, is made possible.

The process, however, is not seamless. Rivière's memoir did not function to strengthen and confirm the profile that the various authorities tried to construct. The medical and legal authorities which Rivière encountered required that Rivière's actions and psyche be ordered in such a way as to permit their discourses to handle, explain and, therefore, punish him. Yet Rivière's memoir troubled this configuration. The memoir took the authorities by surprise since it could not be easily fit into their schemas. As described by the Royal Court in a pre-trial court, Rivière "could certainly not have been supposed capable"[40] of producing such an orderly and methodical account. The first part of the account, which Rivière presented in the form of a written memoir, describes how his mother continually harassed his father, and the second part provides an account of

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[37] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 40.
[38] Daniel Pereira Andrade, "Vidas paralelas Foucault, Pierre Rivière e Herculine Barbin," *Tempo Social* 19, no. 2 (November 2007): 245 [quotation translated].
[39] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1975]), 27.
[40] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 44.

Rivière's character. Regarding the second part of the memoir, the Royal Court comments that it was "drawn with a vigor which is simply astonishing and makes it most regrettable that Rivière has by an atrocious act rendered henceforth useless to Society the gifts so liberally imparted to him by nature without any assistance whatever from education."[41] The extraordinary nature of Rivière's memoir even made it into the newspaper coverage of his trial, with one source describing it as a "a very remarkable memoir […] wholly rational and written in such a way that it is impossible to say which is the more astonishing, its author's memoir or his crime."[42]

In the dossier, the documents of the preliminary investigation are followed by the memoir itself, which occupies almost half of the 170 pages of the dossier. Irrespective of its length, Foucault argues that "Rivière's own discourse on his act so dominates, or in any case so escapes from every possible handle, that there is nothing to be said about this central point, this crime or act, that is not a step back in relation to it."[43] The memoir performed different functions for different readers; for Foucault, the memoir was "a text in whose beauty some were to see a proof of rationality (and hence grounds for condemning him to death) and others a sign of madness (and hence grounds for shutting him up for life)."[44] Although it stimulated the interest of the authorities and was a crucial piece of evidence, the memoir contradicted the institutions' will to order and intelligibility, revealing limits to the power of discourses, and an inherent tension and struggle in how this power functions.

II The Limits and Struggles of Discourse

Rivière's memoir is succeeded by the medico-legal opinions that informed the trial and the jury. The judgements on Rivière's sanity reached by the various medical doctors conflict; whereas the witnesses tended to describe Rivière in terms of weirdness and imbecility, the doctors aimed to establish his madness or otherwise: "I observed no sign

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[41] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 45.
[42] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 52.
[43] Michel Foucault, "I, Pierre Rivière," in *Foucault Live (Collected Interviews, 1961-84)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996 [1989]), 203.
[44] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, xi.

of mental derangement,"[45] one argues; "I have never seen a more manifest case of insanity among the hundreds of monomaniacs I have treated,"[46] another contends. The trial concludes that Rivière is not mad because, apart from lack of evidence of brain damage, "his mental state cannot be classified in any of the categories accepted by the relevant authorities,"[47] and was thus sentenced to the penalty for parricides: death. However, this sentencing provoked a public outcry; even the jurymen protested "the excessive severity"[48] of the sentence, and started a petition calling for a royal prerogative of mercy. The presiding judge admitted that "the memoir seems to have had a considerable effect"[49] on its readers, troubling their ability to judge. The memoir seemed to acquire a literary life too; as indicated in one report: "The Memoir composed by Rivière in prison is on sale at Mancel's, bookseller at Caen, rue Saint Jean, 75 c."[50] The co-existence of Rivière's actions and his memoir produced conflicting opinions, "all equally trustworthy."[51] Despite attempting suicide around this time, Rivière agreed to appeal the sentence, and the Minister of Justice submitted a report to the King on 10 February 1836, asking whether he would commute the death penalty to life imprisonment which, as reported a week later, the King accepted. On the morning of 20 October 1840, five years and five months after he committed the murders, Pierre Rivière committed suicide by hanging while in isolation in prison. Referring to the effect that the press had on commuting his original sentence, one report claims that the manner of Rivière's death "completely confirms its opinion of Rivière's mental condition,"[52] thus supposedly confirming his madness.

In the foreword to the edited volume, Foucault claims that the volume is the outcome of a joint research project of a Collège de France seminar he conducted. The aim of the project was to the study the relations between psychiatry and criminal justice. In doing so, the research team came across Rivière's case. Various features of the Rivière case surprised the researchers: the full documentation about the case and, especially, "the

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[45] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 124.
[46] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 131.
[47] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 141.
[48] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 141.
[49] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 146.
[50] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 170.
[51] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 146.
[52] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 171.

beauty of Rivière's memoir."[53] The memoir "disconcerted the doctors and their knowledge,"[54] resulting in a conglomeration of discourses working on, with and against each other in a site of conflict, despite their aim to coherently account for and correctly judge Rivière. Referring to this conglomeration, Foucault writes:

> in their totality and their variety they form neither a composite work nor an exemplary text, but rather a strange contest, a confrontation, a power relation, a battle among discourses and through discourses. And yet, it cannot simply be described as a single battle; for several separate combats were being fought out at the same time and intersected each other.[55]

The aim of the publication of this volume, then, was not to establish a truth about Rivière which the medico-legal institutions of the 1830s could not capture. Rather, the volume enabled its compilers to show how the discourses that the institutions employed functioned as "weapons of attack and defense in the relations of power and knowledge."[56] Foregrounding this site of conflict in which discourses function shows how discourses, even discourses that speak about human subjects, "may be both tactical and political, and therefore strategic."[57] Whereas some discourses may manage to achieve the desired order and regulation, sometimes these aims are frustrated, deferred or suspended, and Foucault's presentation of Rivière's case is intended to manifest these possible failures of discourse. Hence, although Rivière's self-narration could have fitted the categories enforced by the dominant discourses of the day if presented in other ways (or, in this case, if not presented at all or in such detail), it instead destabilised these categories. It did so not by being radically incommensurable with the established categories. Were it so radical, it would have been rendered totally incoherent and undecipherable. Yet, Rivière's text was articulate enough in form and in content to be understood and analysed by the

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[53] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, x.
[54] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, ix.
[55] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, x.
[56] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, xi.
[57] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, xii.

authorities without being acceptable enough to fit into the role demanded and expected of the 'village idiot'.

It is this ambivalence which Foucault admired in Rivière's text. He writes how the research team "fell under the spell of the parricide with the reddish-brown eyes,"[58] and in his own piece within the set of seven notes that follow the dossier, he describes the memoir as singularly strange and beautiful.[59] What strikes Foucault is how, despite approaching the text a century and a half after the murders, the current knowledge makes readers none the wiser in understanding it and Rivière. It is for this reason that Foucault writes that in publishing the dossier and the notes, the aim is "not to interpret it and not to subject it to any psychiatric or psychoanalytic commentary."[60] This is because to do so would amount to relying on the same discourses – medical, legal, psychological, criminological – whose historical formation and whose investment in power relations was being manifested and, indirectly, investigated. Foucault describes this type of analysis in terms of entrapment. Had Foucault's research team attempted to analyse Rivière's discourse, they would have "brought it within the power relation whose reductive effect we wished to show, and we ourselves should have fallen into the trap it set."[61] Discussing his interest in Rivière's dossier in an interview following its publication, Foucault says:

> the book was a trap. […] [T]o publish this book was for me a way of saying to the shrinks in general (psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychologists): well, you've been around for 150 years, and here is a case contemporary with your birth. What do you have to say about it? Are you better prepared to discuss it than your 19th century colleagues? […] [T]hey were literally reduced to silence: not a single one spoke up and said: "Here is what Rivière was in reality. And I can tell you now what couldn't be said in the 19th century."[62]

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[58] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, xiii.
[59] See Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 199.
[60] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, xiii.
[61] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, xiii.
[62] Foucault, "I, Pierre Rivière," 203.

In another interview, Foucault reiterates that "what is astonishing is that this text, which left the experts silent at the time, has struck them equally dumb today."[63]

III Rivière's Memoir: Confessional, Resistant, Tragic, or Otherwise?

Foucault emphasises that, for Rivière, the text "was neither confession nor defense, but rather a factor in the crime."[64] For this reason, he describes Rivière as being an author in two different ways: an author of the deed and of the text. Rivière had prefigured the writing of the memoir, and intended to compose it before even committing the murders; in his own words:

> I intended at first to write down the whole life of my father and my mother practically as it is written here, to put an announcement of the deed at the beginning and my reasons for committing it at the end, and the way I intended to flout the law, that I was defying it, that I was immortalizing myself and so forth; then to commit my deed, to take my letter to the post, and then to take a gun I would hide beforehand and kill myself.[65]

This plan did not work because his sister found him writing one day and insisted on reading whatever he was writing. To avoid revealing the contents, Rivière burned his draft, and decided to write his parents' biographies overtly while hiding the section in which he explains his intended murders. This plan too was foiled, as Rivière was too fatigued to get the writing done. The plan he eventually followed was to write the memoir after committing the murders. According to Rivière, this is what explains the coldness of the memoir since most of it was committed to memory before the murders, and so the murders did not really introduce significant layers to the memoir – hence the lack of excessive guilt which the authorities expected to find. Foucault argues that Rivière managed to play by the rules of the (language) game of the law so well that his actions

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[63] Michel Foucault, "Prison Talk," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 49.
[64] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 201.
[65] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 107.

were deemed to be too intelligible and thus "monstrous rather than insane"[66] by the majority of the jury. Yet, Foucault realises that it is not only Rivière's discursive game that governed his case. This is because the speech of the accused did not have the same authoritative status as the discourses employed in the context of criminal justice and, moreover, "the discourses were not the same type of event and did not produce the same effects."[67] The discourse of Rivière's memoir was subjected to other discourses that spoke of and tried to account for Rivière's personality dispositions, his education, his behaviour, and his physicality.

For this reason, Rivière and his text had no strength in their encounter with institutions. Despite Foucault's fascination with the memoir, and his description of the memoir as beautiful and glorious, one needs to be cautious not to romanticise the odd nature of Rivière's case. Naturally, just because Rivière's memoir can be used, as is being done in this case, to highlight the instability with which different authoritative discourses operate and the tendency of these discourses to subjugate Rivière's own discourse, this does not imply that Rivière's text is any purer or his actions are in any way justified. Moreover, the subversive character of Rivière's self-narration too had its limits. After all, Rivière's case was an unremarkable one that was lost in the archives for years before Foucault and his research team decided to do something with it. Despite the transgressive trace that Rivière's memoir contains, it should be emphasised that Rivière's discourse was, to an extent, not meant to exist. It should have been, according to discursive schemas of the day, a priori impossible. Rivière was meant to be disqualified as a discursive agent, and what fascinated his contemporaries so much was that he in fact made some sense. It would have been easier for the apparata of power/knowledge of his day if Rivière had not spoken or, better yet, if he had spoken gibberish.

It should also be remarked that, despite the possibility of reading Rivière's text as an example of how resistance can sometimes be found in unlikely places, Rivière's life is a tragic one that ended in suicide, and rather than as a sign of agency to determine his own

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[66] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 209.
[67] Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière*, 210.

fate, his death was interpreted as a confirmation of the discourses that certified Rivière as mad. It is true that Foucault speaks and writes joyfully and in awe of the power of Rivière's text and its ability to, even if unwittingly, foreground failures, instabilities and tactical deployments of discourses. But also, on the other hand, the tragic nature of the memoir and the person involved cannot be overlooked: if Rivière's actions subverted the authorities' aims to impose intelligibility, at the same time his life was rendered unbearable.

2.3 Power as Confession: Victims of Identity

The previous section considered how discourses struggle against each other, resulting in either a human subject who is normalised into the dominant discourses or a subject who, by speaking, can subvert the impression of order and coherence (that is, an identity) that is imposed on it. This section examines the relation between speaking about oneself and power from another perspective, namely, by looking more closely into the practice of confession in its history and the different ways in which it came to determine how individuals think about themselves and their identities. Identity is, of course, a contentious and rich notion in philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology and cultural theory, and no discussion of self-narration can afford to disregard it.[68] Inherent in any activity of self-narration is at least a basic sense of a self who is narrating and a subject that is being narrated. To the extent possible, in a smooth self-narration, the two – the narrator and the narrated – coincide. When one is narrating oneself, one is employing an implicit understanding of what one is and what one is not, acknowledging what one *identifies* and wants to be *identified* as, while disavowing what one considers a *misidentification* or mismatch between what one feels one is and what one is understood to be by others. Much more can be said to further analyse the inter-related ontological, linguistic and political difficulties inherent in self-narration.[69] However, since this study places more emphasis on the socio-political formation, valence and mediation of self-narration, this section will

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[68] See Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman, eds., *Identity: A Reader* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000).

[69] See, for example, Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *MLN* 94, no. 5 (December 1979): 919-930.

pursue questions on how one comes to understand one's identity socially , or what facets of oneself are considered to be legitimate material for narration and how these must be narrated, and to whom.

This section will consider Foucault's discussion of identity within the history of modern sexuality that he puts forward in *The Will to Knowledge*, insofar as it brings together his insights into how subjectivity comes to be understood through power/knowledge mechanisms, and how one communicates one's self to others. Of interest in this respect is Foucault's account of *confession* and of how, over time, identity has increasingly become something that can be – if not ought to be – confessed to others. Whereas the previous section emphasised how, despite cracks and resistance, techniques of power/knowledge act in a totalising manner by seeking to give an exhaustive account of the individual, this section explores another facet of power/knowledge: the facet of power as individualising. As Foucault explains, "the state's power (and that's one of the reasons for its strength) is both an *individualizing* and a *totalizing form* of power."[70] Foucault contests the view that the notion of individuality as discrete and atomised is a natural and unchanging notion, and instead argues that it is a historically specific notion upheld by modern techniques of power/knowledge. The correlation of power and knowledge facilitated and propagated techniques of confession by which the individual manifests and confesses the supposed truth of their identity. This 'truth' is not just a neutral epistemological concern but plays a dominant social role, to the extent that schemas of truth can be used to justify intrusive or exclusionary measures that can have potentially hurtful and violent implications, as the below analysis of Barbin's case shows. By considering the relation between confessional practices and modern sexuality, Foucault identifies the confessional discursive register as a techniques of power that impacts practices of self-narration.

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[70] Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 332 [emphasis added].

I A Confessing Animal: Sexuality and Power

The first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, sub-titled *The Will to Knowledge*, is a particularly remarkable book. The shortest of Foucault's published monographs, it is an inexhaustible text that can be read in various ways: as an account of how power functions in modern societies, as a history of modern sexuality, or as – quite literally – the introduction of biopower as an analytical or sociological category. This section considers *The Will to Knowledge* for its ideas on the relation between power and identity, and for how it foregrounds confessional self-narration as a predominant technology of the self that shapes modern subjectivity. Moreover, a detailed consideration of Foucault's discussion of confession in *The Will to Knowledge* enables an understanding of the theoretical context which in the 1980s led him to turn from the historical periods he had tended to analyse (16th to 19th century) toward antiquity to broaden his analysis of subjectivity. This shift in Foucault's work, and the new ways of analysing practices of self-narration that this shift implies, are considered in the next chapter.

As is often noted, the introduction to *Discipline and Punish* – a gruesome 18th century account of the public execution of Damiens due to his attempted regicide, counterpoised by an early 19th century list of rules for a Parisian youth prison – is a memorable one.[71] The opening of *The Will to Knowledge* is similarly noteworthy, in which Foucault presents an account of what he calls "the 'repressive hypothesis.'"[72] This hypothesis is a historical narrative that Foucault challenges on a historical, political and philosophical level throughout the book. He introduces the repressive hypothesis with a hint of irony: "For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today."[73] For a writer with a strong historical sensibility, the terms "for a long time" and "the story goes" sound brash. Some have argued that this characterisation of the repressive hypothesis shows Foucault's inclination to present the

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[71] See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 3-7.
[72] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 10.
[73] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 3.

hypothesis as a kind of unquestioned received wisdom.[74] It is not immediately clear who or what is the source of the repressive hypothesis, although it is hinted that this position can be attributed to figures such as Freud and Wilhelm Reich. It may also be attributed to the Freudo-Marxist Herbert Marcuse who, despite his complete omission from *The Will to Knowledge*, is elsewhere criticised by Foucault for equating power with a solely repressive function.[75]

Foucault characterises the repressive hypothesis as the historical narrative that presents sexual practices and mores as becoming increasingly regulated, controlled and repressed from the 17th century. According to the repressive hypothesis, whereas sex was not excessively concealed or prohibited at the beginning of the 17th century, it came to be consigned to secrecy, assigned the stigma of indecency, and thus increasingly fell under prohibition. This 'Victorian' blanket of silence over sex is seen as easily fitting into a broader explanation of the rise of capitalism, where economic growth and production are favoured over the interruptions of sex. Moreover, the repressive hypothesis seems to have a certain allure. If power functioned by repressing, then the individual who speaks about the prohibited subject is automatically placing him or herself on the side of freedom and liberation. This is what Foucault called "the speaker's benefit,"[76] whereby the speaker stands at a distance from the repressive workings of power and through uttering a true discourse, guides oneself and other individuals to their liberation.

Foucault challenges this configuration of the relationship between sex and power. He raises three questions – historical, theoretical, political – with the aim of showing the shortcomings of the repressive hypothesis. These questions can be summarised as follows: Is it true that sexual repression is an established historical fact pertaining to the 17th century? Is it true that power has primarily functioned through repression in modern

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[74] See Mark G. E. Kelly, *Foucault's* History of Sexuality Volume I, The Will to Knowledge*: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 24; Richard A. Lynch, "Reading *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1," in *A Companion to Foucault*, eds. Christopher Falzon, Timothy O'Leary, and Jana Sawicki (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 157.
[75] See Michel Foucault, "Body/Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 59.
[76] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 6.

industrialising societies? Is it true that efforts that presented themselves as critically opposing repressive mechanisms have actually functioned in opposition to repressive power rather than facilitating the operations of that same power, wittingly or not? To these questions, Foucault answers negatively. This does not mean that Foucault subscribes to the opposite hypothesis, that is, the historical narrative of increasing liberation: "it is not a matter of saying that sexuality, far from being repressed in capitalist and bourgeois societies, has on the contrary benefitted from a regime of unchanging liberty; nor is it a matter of saying that power in societies such as ours is more tolerant than repressive."[77] Foucault's aim instead is to study the history of sexuality in a wider and more complex way, in which the repressive hypothesis would be just one component among others in the general economy of discourses that governed sexuality.

In Foucault's analysis, the term 'sexuality' itself would be an object of study rather than a conceptual tool with which to analyse history. True to Foucault's aims as discussed in previous sections, such an analysis would study the links between power and discourse, investigating the effects of power enabled by current discourses as well as the discourses enabled by the power relations of the day. Moreover, such an analysis sheds light on the knowledge that was formed as a result of the differing historical linkage between discourse and power. For Foucault, the modern notion of sexuality as implying a psychological unity of sex, desire and identity is itself shown to be a historical correlate rather than a natural given, enabling the proliferation (rather than the reduction) of discourses that profiled identities and etymologised categories such as "homosexual[s]," "perverts," "zoophiles," "auto-monosexualists," "sexoesthetic inverts," and "dyspareunist women."[78] This echoes Foucault's tendency to read power relations and knowledge together to study the extent to which and the ways in which they are correlative to and constructive of social phenomena, grids of intelligibility and human subjects.

Indeed, Foucault considers and defines sexuality as such a correlative; as an unnatural (or denaturalised) assemblage rather than as a natural phenomenon:

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[77] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 10.
[78] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 43.

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.[79]

The full scope of Foucault's argument on the nature or otherwise of sexuality will not be laid out here; important work has been done in this regard.[80] Of particular interest to this thesis is what Foucault calls "the '*putting into discourse* of sex',"[81] that is, how identity came to be a feature which can be deduced and investigated on the basis of what the individual utters. Foucault notes how, to facilitate this demand, a science of sexuality developed with the remit to determine the truth about sex. This presumed truth is thought to correspond to the truth about the individual that is deciphered by the authorities who employ this knowledge. All individuals in society became subject to this product of the will to knowledge which sought to categorise and classify individuals accordingly. For Foucault, this impulse to verbalise one's intimate matters in order to be classified and judged – thus, to confess – has a long history (to be discussed in the next chapter). As a technique, confession functioned within a broader complex organisation that contributed to the proliferation of discourse about sex. The incitement to speak about sex functioned both to produce greater amounts of information about sex in social circulation, and to instil the idea that what individuals utter reflects their true identity. This alleged truth is, in turn, rendered decipherable by the apparata of power/knowledge.

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[79] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 105-106, quoted in Lynch, "Reading *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1," 158.
[80] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1990]).
[81] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 12 [emphasis added].

These apparata developed as clusters within various disciplines, such as medicine, psychiatry, criminal justice, and other social controls of public and family health, the aim of which was to study, judge and classify sex and the sexuality of individuals. While their efforts oftentimes resulted in creating new unities and profiles, other times these struggled against each other. It is within this context that Foucault controversially discusses the case of Jouy, a "simple-minded"[82] farmhand from the village of Lapcourt whose "few caresses from a little girl"[83] landed him in the offices of doctors, judges and other experts whose task it was to decipher the "thoughts, inclinations, habits, sensations, and opinions [of] […] this village halfwit who would give a few pennies to the little girls for favors the older ones refused him."[84] Whereas such actions would at the time normally be overlooked as trivial matters requiring no further scrutiny, at a certain point in history, these matters were given more significance, even landing Jouy in a psychiatric hospital until the end of his life. Foucault decries: "What is significant about this story? The pettiness of it all; the fact that this everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality, these inconsequential bucolic pleasures, could become, from a certain time, the object not only of a collective intolerance but of a judicial action, a medical intervention, a careful clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration."[85] More can be said on the case of Jouy and Foucault's unfortunate choice of vocabulary to discuss this case.[86] Yet the point I wish to emphasise relates to how Foucault reads the history of how the modern individual came to understand and speak about itself as a sexual subject in terms of the exponential growth in the number of discourses pertaining to sex, and the interrelations between the different spheres which these discourses occupied, namely medicine, psychiatry, ethics and politics.

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[82] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 31.
[83] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 31.
[84] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 31-32.
[85] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 31.
[86] For a more detailed discussion of the Jouy case by Foucault, see Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador), 291-321. For commentaries on Foucault's discussion of Jouy's case, and for critical analyses of this case by feminist scholars, see Kelly H. Ball, "'More or Less Raped': Foucault, Causality, and Feminist Critiques of Sexual Violence," *philoSOPHIA* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 52-68; Merritt Rehn-DeBraal, "Translating Foucault: A Critique of Sexuality for Trauma Survivors," *philoSOPHIA* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 69-83; Shelley Tremain, "Educating Jouy," *Hypatia* 28, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 801-817.

These discourses existed within a culture of confession, thus crystallising the central role occupied by confessional technologies and practices concerning sexuality. Beyond the practice of religious confession, the logic of confession manifested itself in phenomena such as the development of scientific discourses on sex that obliged individuals to recount and reveal their 'true sex'. This drive toward establishing the truth of sex and sexuality – culminating in the work of people such as Charcot, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Hermann Rohleder in the 19th century – grounded what Foucault calls *scientia sexualis* (the knowledge of sex). *Scientia sexualis* formed the basis of an apparatus whose aim was the production of truth about individuals, identifying their true self and explaining their inclinations by appealing to the truth of who they were. Foucault contrasted *scientia sexualis* with another procedure of truth production about sex, namely the *ars erotica* (erotic arts) of societies in ancient China, Japan, India, Rome, and the Arabo-Moslem societies, which he characterised as centring on the intensity of sexual pleasure, its esoteric and unconfessional nature.[87] The contrast Foucault drew between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* is one that he later came to regret, perhaps because of its Orientalist undertones; as he says in a late interview: "I should have opposed our science of sex to a contrasting practice in our own culture."[88] Within the realm of *scientia sexualis*, "sex was constituted as a problem of truth,"[89] and the means to get to that truth was through confessional procedures. Self-narration, then, became the prime locus through which power functioned by deciphering and thereby creating governable identities. For Foucault, practices of confession are pervasive and central to the history of Western subjectivity at large:

> [T]he confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have since become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins,

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[87] See Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 57-58.
[88] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 259.
[89] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 56.

one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses – or is forced to confess. […] Western man has become a confessing animal.[90]

Foucault thus presents such confessional practices as being individualising (targeting the individual in their individuality and establishing 'the truth' of their identity) as well as totalising (encapsulating everyone within its logic); heterogeneous (can take various forms in different settings) as well as homogenising and normalising (seeking to reduce everyone to the same confessing ground). Such practices include religious confession, discourses of sexology, psychoanalysis, as well as autobiographical narratives.[91] Despite the dominant association of truth with freedom ('the truth will set you free'), Foucault inverts this association by arguing that a political history of truth reveals that the production of truth is "thoroughly imbued with relations of power"[92] and procedures of subjection. Confessional practices contribute to the subjection of individuals by necessitating an interlocutor (actual or virtual) who serves as an authoritative figure:

the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independent of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.[93]

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[90] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 59.
[91] For a good discussion of Foucault's account of confession in relation to Freud's psychoanalysis, see Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 116-166 and Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, "A Foucauldian Analysis of Psychoanalysis: A Discipline that 'Disciplines'," *Academy for the Study of Psychoanalytic Arts* (2002), www.academyanalyticarts.org/milchman-foucauldian-analysis.
[92] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 60.
[93] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 61-62.

This confessional technology obliges the individual (and the authorities who come into contact with him or her) to adopt a hermeneutic – and possibly suspicious – attitude towards him or her self. The self is constituted as a phenomenon to be interpreted and constantly deciphered. According to this scheme, the activity of self-narration is not just an activity that is heavily regulated by the apparatus of power/knowledge and the discourses through which it is formulated, but also an activity that exposes the individual to social regulation and normalisation, rendering the individual vulnerable to the surveilling gaze of society which classifies and orders individuals, and which results in the individual being tied – voluntarily or by the occasionally violent will to knowledge – to a fixed identity.

II Victim of Truth: Herculine Barbin

Within this context, Foucault's work on the memoir of Herculine Barbin sheds further light on his account of self-narration and confession. Barbin was a 19th century French intersex person (or what was referred to at the time as 'hermaphrodite') whose memoir Foucault published in 1978 alongside a medico-legal dossier about her.[94] His interest in 'hermaphrodites', seen also in *Abnormal*, his 1975 lecture course, led Foucault to consider publishing an additional volume or anthology on hermaphrodites which, however, never came to fruition.[95] I follow Gilmore in considering the Barbin dossier as a sort of case study of the ideas Foucault puts forward in *The Will to Knowledge*: "*Herculine Barbin* follows the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* almost as an illustration of Foucault's interest in sexuality."[96] The format of the Barbin publication resembles the Rivière one: Foucault does not let his status as editor of the text get in the way by imposing order on it. Besides his editorship, his only contribution to the Barbin book is a short introduction he wrote for the English translation of the volume, which is missing from the original

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[94] Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Vintage Books, 2013 [1978]). The memoir was originally published in French as *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.* in 1978, translated to English in 1980.

[95] See Stuart Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 65-66.

[96] Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, 37.

publication in French. The Barbin book opens with "My Memoirs", the memoir found in 1868 at the bedside of Herculine – by then called Abel – who was found dead in her home after committing suicide at age 30 by inhaling gas from a stove. The dossier then consists of a series of medical and legal documents, results of medical examinations, court documents, and press reports pertaining to her life. The book closes with "A Scandal at the Convent", a fictional story based on the life of Barbin written 25 years after her death.

Herculine was assigned the sex of female at birth but in her early twenties, after a series of 'revelations', was legally compelled to change her sex to male, resulting in complications and imposed expectations on her social life, love life and self-understanding. For Foucault, Barbin's suicide highlighted the violence and exclusion inherent in the will to knowledge which poses as an innocent and neutral quest for truth: "it can hardly come as a surprise that, eight years later, his-her corpse was discovered, a suicide or, rather, to Foucault's mind, the victim of a new passion for the truth of sexual identity."[97] As is apparent in her memoir, Barbin's experience of herself did not tally with the explanation of her identity given by 'experts' through the authoritative discourses in the spheres of medicine, law and morality. Her encounter with these discourses suggests that truth can serve as a coercive instrument that oppresses identities from being, and promotes particular identities over others. Through Barbin's writing, another form of truth appears; her memoir was a tool with which Herculine tried to come to terms with the different explanations that were given of herself, while countering some of these same explanations. Her own account of herself was not the authoritative one, but an account that competed with the others. Her act of accounting for oneself through writing can be seen as a final act of desperation, or desperate resistance, in response to how her sense of self was rendered incoherent and unliveable. As Aurora Laybourn-Candlish puts it: "Herculine Barbin can be interpreted as the champion of Foucault's theories and a tragic example of what it means to fall outside of intelligible norms."[98]

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[97] James W. Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics for Thought* (New York: Humanity Books, 1990), 165.
[98] Aurora Laybourn-Candlish, "The Discourse of the Scalpel and the Limbo of Non-identity: Doing Justice to Herculine Barbin," *Res Cogitans* 5, no. 1 (2014): 132.

As with the Rivière case, rather than engaging in a comprehensive interpretative and critical analysis of the case, Foucault gives centre stage to Barbin's memoir, allowing it to exist in a self-affirming way as well as in its vulnerability, frailty and, ultimately, in its tragedy. For the purposes of this study, the Barbin memoir (and Foucault's aims in presenting it the way he did) raises similar concerns as did the one by Rivière: the incompatibility between some people's sense of self and the discourses that proclaim to capture the meaning of their identity; the struggle between the different discourses seeking to impose their grid of intelligibility on the case; the ambivalence which the memoir itself introduces amid the discourses and power relations operating on it. While most of these issues were discussed in detail in relation to the Rivière case, what is specific to the Barbin case is the central role of sexuality and confession in this tragic ordeal. The time in which Barbin lived – the 19th century – corresponds to the time Foucault discusses in *The Will to Knowledge*, where scientific and cultural discourses intertwined to constitute a culture in which confessional technologies and practices were employed with the aim of establishing 'the truth' about individuals, especially about their sexuality, classifying and judging them accordingly. Barbin's memoir was written at a time, the 1860s, where investigations into the truth of sexual identities were carried out intensively.

This leads Foucault to open his introduction to the Barbin book in this way: "Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?"[99], hinting that an excessive concern with the truth of one's sexuality is both unnecessary and potentially dangerous. Foucault continues that in the realm of sex, "where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures,"[100] modern Western societies introduced a truth-producing apparatus which reduced individuals such as Barbin into problematic objects of fascination to medicine and law. He remarks mockingly: "Wake up, young people, from your illusory pleasures; strip off your disguises and recall that every one of you has a sex, a true sex. […] At the bottom of sex, there is truth."[101] Foucault sees Barbin's memoir as a testament to a mode of thinking where "everything took place in a world of feelings –

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[99] Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, vii [emphasis in original].
[100] Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, vii.
[101] Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, x-xi.

enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness – where the identity of the partners and above all the enigmatic character around whom everything centred, had no importance."[102] In this mode of thinking he describes – "a world in which grins hung about without the cat"[103] – the will to truth that characterises the modern understanding of sexuality as incorporating one's sex, gender, desires and psychological features did not hold, and actually marked a regress of sorts.

This evocation by Foucault, as well as his claim that what Barbin's memoir "evokes in her past is the happy limbo of a non-identity,"[104] have been contested and criticised, and some of these critiques even drew on Foucault's own ideas to make their critical point. Butler argues that "Foucault's theory of sexuality offered in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* is in some ways contradicted by his short but significant introduction to the journals he published of Herculine Barbin."[105] Butler criticises Foucault's tendency to romanticise "Herculine's sexuality as the utopian play of pleasures prior to the imposition and restrictions of 'sex'."[106] Marc Lafrance too claims that Foucault's introduction to the Barbin dossier can be challenged on the ground of his own ideas on sex and power. He contests Foucault's assertion that the sexual identity of Barbin's partners had no importance: "I submit that the identity of Barbin's sexual partners was highly significant: Barbin desired women. She did not desire men."[107] Furthermore, he questions Foucault's portrayal of Barbin's happy limbo of non-identity since, as per Foucault's own views, "one's sexual identity is inevitably embedded in technologies of power. And though one can resist the effects of power, one can never – according to Foucault – inhabit a subjective space outside power."[108] For Lafrance, what Foucault should have spoken about was Barbin's identity as a counter-identity rather than a non-identity. This leads him to conclude that while the introduction to the dossier "provides the student of Foucauldian thought with an outstanding crystallisation of his views on sex, power and knowledge, it

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[102] Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, xiii.
[103] Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, xiii.
[104] Foucault, *Herculine Barbin*, xiii.
[105] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 127.
[106] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 133.
[107] Marc Lafrance, "The Struggle for True Sex: *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B* and the Work of Michel Foucault," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 32, no. 2 (2015): 180.
[108] Lafrance, "The Struggle for True Sex," 180.

also provides that student with a unique and meaningful opportunity to read Foucault against himself."[109] One can reply to this critique by saying that, if anything, what Foucault might have meant by "non-identity" in that context is more of an absence of a *kind* of identity, namely the one enabled by the modern apparatus of sexuality, rather than that there was no other apparatus through which identities were regulated.

It is true, at least to some extent, that Foucault does tend to romanticise Barbin's pleasures – in the same way as he tends to romanticise the purity of madness in *The History of Madness*, the literature of Raymond Roussel, Nietzsche's spark, the revolutionary spirit of the 1978 Iranian Revolution, the beauty of Rivière's memoir, the *ars erotica*, and some ancient Greek and Roman practices. It must also be recalled that Foucault admitted various instances where he thought he had overly romanticised or uncritically embraced something.[110] However, I think that more can be said on this matter than simply examining his philosophical consistency. It is relevant to note that Foucault published the Barbin book in a series, published by Gallimard, which he titled *Parallel Lives*. The series title is a reference to Plutarch's 2nd century AD collection of short biographies with the title of *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*.[111] Plutarch's motivation was to present the illustrious and exemplary profiles and moral character of these lives to show their commonalities. Foucault counters this reasoning in his motivation to name the series *Parallel Lives*. In a brief note explaining the series title, he writes that in contrast to parallel lives that have a connecting thread, "[i]magine others that, indefinitely, diverge. No meeting place, no place to collect them. Often they had no other echo than that of their condemnation […]. It would be necessary to rediscover the flashy and instantaneous trail that they left when they rushed into obscurity where 'it no longer counts' and where all 'reputation' is lost."[112] Foucault is aware that the lives of both Rivière and Barbin faced

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[109] Lafrance, "The Struggle for True Sex," 181.
[110] See Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 259 on the ars erotica mistake, and Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 118-119 on the inadequacy of the notion of repression which he admits to have implicitly used in *Madness and Civilization*.
[111] Plutarch, *Greek and Roman Lives*, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough, trans. John Dryden (New York: Dover Publications, 2005).
[112] Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 1954-1988, tome III 1976-1979* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 499 [quotation translated].

similar tragic endings. They completely lost the struggle against power, and the predominant discourses managed to silence them and condemn them to obscurity. Yet, by acknowledging "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges,"[113] Foucault wanted to present the memoirs as they trouble and struggle with medical, legal and administrative discourses.

The memoirs Foucault studied and published are a nod to a hope that things can *be otherwise*. Therefore, the tone he sometimes adopts towards these memoirs can be interpreted as a gesture more rhetorical than philosophical. Moreover, as Andrade writes, Foucault's interest was in "the tactical productivity of these autobiographies,"[114] that is, in what they can enable or what they can dislodge despite the fact that they were completely dis-abled by the social order. Foucault seems to imply that there is something liberating in witnessing the authorities' inability to easily capture both Rivière and Barbin within the dominant schemas of identification. In their sometimes unwitting and unwilling confrontation with power/knowledge, both transgress the limits of what is acceptable, and they both performed this transgression by means of a written memoir. In both cases, then, although their lives were greatly suppressed, constrained and, ultimately, extinguished, they foregrounded the various mechanisms with which practices of self-narration are governed, regulated, facilitated or made difficult. Despite their tragic nature, the parallel lives of Rivière and Barbin highlight the lack of necessity in regularised narratives; they used and, on occasion, relied on the same norms that subjugated and subjectified them, yet with different aims.

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This chapter considered how Foucault's views on discourse and power can inform how the activity of narrating oneself can be theorised. By focusing on the rationale behind Foucault's publication of the medico-legal dossier and memoirs of Pierre Rivière and

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[113] Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.
[114] Andrade, "Vidas paralelas," 243 [quotation translated].

Herculine Barbin, this chapter highlighted the struggle inherent in discourses especially when competing authoritative discourses engage with each other. Moreover, Barbin's case enabled a more detailed consideration of Foucault's analysis of modern sexuality, particularly in relation to his views on confession as a form of power. The central insight guiding this chapter is that although practices of self-narration are entangled with techniques of power, they can also have a destabilising effect that can function as a form of resistance to dominant discourses that come to bear on the self-narrating individual.

This chapter discussed self-narration through Foucault's 1970s works; this 'period' of Foucault's works is typically associated with his genealogical 'phase', during which he studied connections between discourse and power relations as they manifest themselves, for example, in disciplinary practices and in conceptualisations of modern sexuality. Foucault's work in the 1980s is often said to have undergone a so-called 'ethical turn' to an engagement with Greco-Roman antiquity. While there are notable shifts in Foucault's later work, it is less correct to speak of 'breaks' or 'turns' than of fruitful developments.[115] In fact, the next chapter turns to Foucault's later works to trace how they introduce new (but complementary) dimensions to his account of self-narration. Foucault's later work on ethics and truth-telling contains insights that supplement the concerns of this chapter. The next chapter will dwell further on how self-narration can also function as an act of resistance and self-creation, emphasising how practices of self-narration can be, to some extent, dislodged from subjugating and normalising practices of power, and constitute more creative and self-fashioning techniques of the self. Whereas this chapter focused more on the *political* aspect of self-narration as it interacts with power, the next chapter relies on Foucault's understanding of *ethics* as "the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*."[116] As an integral part of his analysis of ancient ethics, Foucault introduces the notion of 'technologies of the self', which are practices that one

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[115] I argue that the relation between Foucault's work on power and ethics can be understood in terms of a continuity in his engagement with the question of the subject and *assujettisement* in Kurt Borg, "Conducting Critique: Reconsidering Foucault's Engagement with the Question of the Subject," *Symposia Melitensia* no. 11 (2015): 1-15.

[116] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 263.

draws on to effect change or transformation within oneself.[117] Practices of self-narration will be considered as technologies of the self which although culturally situated – and thus imbued with power relations – can be regarded as possible tools of self-constitution and critical transformation. The subsequent chapter will then apply Foucault's views on self-narration to analyse the narration of trauma by survivors.

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[117] See Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 18.

Chapter 3 Confession and Beyond: Self-Writing and Parrhesia

This chapter picks upon the previous chapter and explores Foucault's references to practices of self-narration in his later work, especially his lecture courses. It delineates Foucault's genealogical account of confessional practices and related technologies of the self, such as spiritual direction and techniques of self-examination, in Christian and pre-Christian pagan contexts. The chapter then traces an important gesture in Foucault's work that will guide subsequent chapters, namely the indication that there are alternatives to the confessional mode of self-narration; alternatives that may even counter the power relations at play in demands for confessional self-narration. This is explored through Foucault's views on self-writing and parrhesia, which show that practices of self-narration are not necessarily and always complicit with technologies of power that seek to normalise and subjugate individuals, but may themselves be a form of creative resistance. Inasmuch as self-narration can sway toward normalised homogenisation, it may also function subversively as a form of critique.

3.1 The Birth of Confession and Governing through Truth

I Turning to Antiquity

Although Foucault's engagement with antiquity in his later works is more of a 'return' than a 'turn' (since his first lecture course at the Collège de France had already dealt with antiquity), he considers ancient Greco-Roman philosophy and culture more systematically in his work from the 1980s. Different motivations surround Foucault's return to antiquity in the 1980s, and he himself proposes various reasons for this return, depending on the way he characterised his philosophical project in different interviews and lectures. At times, the return to antiquity is situated as part of his long-term engagement with the relation between subjectivity and truth;[1] at other times, as a continuation of the concern with government as the conduct of conduct;[2] at still other times, as an elaboration of the

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[1] See Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 281-282.
[2] See "The Subject and Power," 341.

third genealogical axis of ethics.[3] Moreover, Foucault's return to antiquity happened between the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* and the second and third volumes. In fact, one must look at *The History of Sexuality* series in order to better understand what prompted Foucault's engagement with antiquity. In this regard, Stuart Elden is right to argue that Foucault's last decade is characterised by a "long-standing interest in the question of confession,"[4] and that this question must be foregrounded if one wants to properly understand the multiple shifts and apparent digressions in *The History of Sexuality* series. In *Foucault's Last Decade*, which Elden describes as "a book about a book, a history of the *History of Sexuality*,"[5] he provides an intellectual history of this book series, paying particular attention to the question of confession in Foucault's later work.

While working on the different volumes in the sexuality series, Foucault often reconsidered when, where and how to publish the material he was working on. But no volume caused him to reconsider his whole plan for the series on sexuality more than the projected second volume, the volume that inadvertently led him to a detailed engagement with antiquity. In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault notes that the Christian emphasis on verbalisation will be the object of his study in the next volume of *The History of Sexuality* series, which at the time he titled *La Chair et le corps*.[6] Elden notes that Foucault was not satisfied with the material he was compiling on confession in the Middle Ages for the projected second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, particularly because "of the more sweeping claims [that] may not have been sustainable on more detailed examination," and Foucault's reliance "on relatively few sources, and primarily secondary accounts."[7] In August 1977, Foucault revised his manuscript of the projected book on confession by

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[3] See Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 262-263.
[4] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 204.
[5] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 5.
[6] See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1: La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 30. This title also appears on the back cover of *La Volonté de savoir*, alongside the titles of the other projected volumes, none of which were eventually published. In the English translation of *La Volonté de savoir*, the title of this volume on Christianity is given as *The Body and the Flesh*. See Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 21n.4.
[7] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 77.

working on the early Church Fathers, and this line of research occupied him throughout the subsequent years.

By early 1980, when Foucault returned to the question of confession, he drew on sources that had not been extensively considered in his earlier work, especially early Christian texts. This can be clearly seen in Foucault's 1979-80 lecture course, *On the Government of the Living* as well as in the 1980 lectures on the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self which he delivered at Berkeley and Dartmouth College, and in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, the 1981 series of lectures he gave in Louvain. Elden notes that through these lectures, one gets a glimpse of how the planned volume on Christianity (by then renamed as *Les aveux de la chair*) might have turned out at that time, that is, starting from a discussion of how the pagan obligation to know oneself in antiquity was radically transformed by an early Christian, monastic obligation to confess one's thoughts to a superior. In fact, Elden notes that "a draft of *Les Aveux de la chair* was completed around this time."[8] Foucault did not publish it around 1981 since he "remained unhappy with the introductory material to this volume, which he says discussed antiquity;"[9] as Foucault puts it, this was "because what I had said about pagan ethics were only clichés borrowed from secondary texts."[10] This would explain why all of Foucault's subsequent lecture courses dealt with antiquity. At the time of his death, he was in a position to publish the material on antiquity in the form of two books, and was almost ready to publish the book on Christianity.

Foucault's extensive engagement with antiquity resulted in a significant transformation of the order in which he wanted to present the volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Although initially intended as introductory material to the book on Christianity, his research on antiquity prompted the inclusion of a volume that focused specifically on antiquity. Foucault had a draft of this volume, titled *L'Usage des plaisirs*, ready by March 1983. This draft was intended as the second volume in the revised plan for *The History of*

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[8] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 133.
[9] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 133.
[10] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 254.

Sexuality series, and so, according to Foucault's plan in early 1983, *L'Usage des plaisirs* would be the book on antiquity that precedes *Les Aveux de la chair*, now intended as the third volume. At this time, Foucault also conceived of another book, on ancient practices of the self, which he planned to publish apart from *The History of Sexuality* series, under the title of *Le Souci de soi*. As we know, this is the title of the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* that was actually published in 1984. This happened because Foucault had yet again changed his mind on how the volumes would be presented.[11] In August 1983, Foucault decided to divide the manuscript of *L'Usage des plaisirs* into two volumes, retaining the title for the second volume, naming the third volume *Le Souci de soi*, and planning to publish *Les Aveux de la chair* as the fourth volume. Although this is the order with which he actually went, Elden notes that Foucault had "to be persuaded that this was the best plan, instead of the publication of *Les Aveux de la chair* first or all three parts together in a single volume."[12] After publishing *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, Foucault once again turned to his work on the book on Christianity, despite his deteriorating health. Less than a month before his death, he thought he had "one or two months' work left to do, expecting publication in October [1984]."[13] Foucault died in June 1984. Elden contends that, for this reason, *Les aveux de la chair* is the book that Foucault constantly deferred but never published.[14] Nonetheless, he holds that given how this book motivated several shifts in the overall project on sexuality, it "may well be the key to the whole *History of Sexuality* series."[15]

Foucault's consideration of Christianity as a significant episode in the history of Western subjectivity sheds important light on his account of self-narration. His analysis of the relations between power and confession must be understood in conjunction with his

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[11] In an interview with Dreyfus and Rabinow in April 1983, Foucault announces *Les aveux de la chair* as the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* that will follow *L'Usage des plaisirs*. Foucault later edited the transcript of this interview and revised the order of the volumes, and listed *Les aveux de la chair* as the fourth volume of the series after *L'Usage des plaisirs* was divided into two books, with *Le Souci de soi* becoming the third volume. Compare Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 1954-1988, tome IV 1980-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 385 and 611.

[12] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 171.

[13] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 189.

[14] *Les aveux de la chair* was eventually published in 2018. See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 4: Les aveux de la chair*, ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard, 2018).

[15] Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 78.

various discussions of Christianity.[16] Foucault explores the way elements from Christian practices form a historical background that contributes to the understanding of the history of sexuality. As part of this history, he analyses the development of a particular obligation that was developed by the Christian pastorate: that of "passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech."[17] This emphasis on confession and verbalisation led him to consider further the nature and history of this precept.

As a genealogist, Foucault's motivation is not only to show how modern technologies of the self that pertain to speaking truthfully about the self (in the spheres of psychology, for example) are derived from similar Christian technologies of the self, but also to show the transformations that occurred in earlier ancient practices of truth-telling. As Foucault says, "we do not have to wait until Christianity, until the institutionalization of the confession at the start of the thirteenth century, until the organization and installation of a pastoral power, for the practice of telling the truth about oneself to rely upon and appeal to the presence of the other person who listens."[18] Foucault was interested in the multiple ways in which avowal or confession as a technique of truth-production was problematised in different moments in history, be it in the relation between ancient and early Christian practices of truth-telling, or the role of torture in processes of justice, or obtaining sworn court testimonies, or confession being codified as a sacrament in the Middle Ages. These

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[16] Foucault analysed different facets of Christianity on various occasions: in *Abnormal* in 1975 (preliminary discussion of Christian confession); in *The Will to Knowledge* in 1976 (on the genealogy of the confessing subject); in *Security, Territory, Population* in 1978 (on the genealogy of pastoral power and its specific modes of individualisation, traces of which are also present in modern exercises of power); in *On the Government of the Living* in 1980 (on early Christian practices of baptism, penance and spiritual direction as prelude to confession), material from which is also presented in the 1980 lectures at Berkeley and Dartmouth (on the beginnings of the hermeneutics of the self); in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* in 1981 (on the function of avowal and confession in procedures of justice); in the "Sexuality and Solitude" lecture in 1980 (on Christian techniques of the self and the obligation to confess); in "The Battle for Chastity" essay in 1982, which Foucault announced as an extract from *Les aveux de la chair* (on Cassian and Christian techniques of the self); in the Vermont seminar in 1982 (on techniques of the self in early Christianity); in *The Courage of Truth* in 1984 (on contrasts between pre-Christian and Christian notions of parrhesia). *La chair et le corps* – the book that, according to Foucault's plan in 1976, was to be the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* – contained material on Christianity in the Middle Ages. *Les aveux de la chair*, the incomplete but recently published fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*, too deals with themes in early Christianity.

[17] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 21.

[18] See Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège De France 1983-1984*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 5.

same techniques remain present, in modified forms, in later history and are considered by Foucault as a constitutive feature of the experience of modern sexuality. Referring to the new apparatus of sex that developed towards the end of the 18th century, Foucault maintains that it "went back to methods that had already been formed by Christianity, but of course not without modifying them."[19] Thus, Foucault's late explorations of antiquity were prompted by his interest in practices of confession that predated the practices of Christian confession established in the Middle Ages, and practices that predated even Christianity itself, in order to analyse the origins of the obligation to speak the truth about oneself. This was the focus of Foucault's work in the early 1980s, which connects his earlier work on power/knowledge to his later "Greco-Latin 'trip'."[20] This chapter considers this genealogy of the obligation to speak the truth about oneself proposed by Foucault.

II On the Government of Truth-Telling

After the illuminating detours to concerns with governmentality and neoliberalism made by Foucault in his 1978 and 1979 lecture courses, Foucault returns to the question of confession in his lectures from the early 1980s. The 1981 Louvain lectures, published as *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*,[21] are a condensed version of insights from the previous year's Collège de France lecture course, *On the Government of the Living*.[22] For this reason, the two lecture courses – *On the Government of the Living* and *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* – as well as a pair of lectures Foucault

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[19] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 117.

[20] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 2.

[21] Between April and May 1981, Foucault delivered a set of lectures at the Catholic University of Louvain. See Michel Foucault, *Mal faire, dire vrai: Fonction de l'aveu en justice*, eds. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt (Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2012); Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, eds. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Both editions are co-published by the Presses universitaires de Louvain and the University of Chicago Press.

[22] One would have expected Foucault to deliver a set of lectures that draws from the Collège de France course he had just finished delivering. This is because the first Louvain lecture was delivered the day after the final lecture of *Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault's 1980-81 Collège de France lecture course, which dealt with the management of *aphrodisia* in Greco-Roman antiquity. However, as Elden puts it, "[i]t is almost as if, realising he had now embarked on a new historical period that would take his work in new and challenging directions, he wanted to have one last chance at providing the history of confession he had promised for so long." Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 130.

delivered at Berkeley and Dartmouth in late 1980 are considered in relation to each other since they deal with overlapping material, and represent Foucault's approach in his early 1980s work on truth-telling and subjectivity. The lectures exemplify Foucault's approach to practices of truth-telling before this analysis was more explicitly situated within the broader concern with ancient ethics of care of the self in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.

The Louvain lectures, like *On the Government of the Living*, point backward to Foucault's earlier theoretical concerns, and also point forward towards lines of research that Foucault pursued later in his final years. For example, his interest in crime, criminal psychiatry and imprisonment echoes *Discipline and Punish*. Concerns from *The Will to Knowledge* are echoed in his concern with how the apparatus of modern sexuality as an exercise of power entails governing individuals through various forms of truth, such as medical, psychiatric or legal discourses, as well as conceiving of sexuality as key to deciphering a truth inherent in the individual. However, this lecture course should not be read as the culmination of some of Foucault's earlier interests. This study of avowal was not meant to be published in this form but was tangential or, as he says, "purely instrumental for something else."[23] Thus, the material Foucault delivered in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* on confession may have been intended to be presented within the broader problematic of *The History of Sexuality* rather than as a study in its own right. Nonetheless, beyond Foucault's last published volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, these lecture courses offer a glimpse of another formulation of Foucault's analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and truth, the subject's relation to itself and techniques of the self. This is particularly noteworthy due to the centrality of the questions of confession and truth-telling about the self in these lecture courses.

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[23] Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 255. It is not definitively clear what Foucault means by "for something else" here. It could refer to *Les aveux de la chair*; however, the editors of *Wrong-Doing Truth-Telling* surmise that the material Foucault presented in the Louvain lectures echoes a project (on issues pertaining to the relation between confession and torture in, for example, Greek law) that Foucault had announced in a footnote in *La Volonté de savoir* with the title of *Pouvoir de la verité*. See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 271-272.

In the first of the Louvain lectures, Foucault maintains that the scope of his study is to analyse the relation between truth-telling and jurisdiction. Rather than truth-telling, Foucault prefers the neologism *véridiction*, translated as 'veridiction', in order to retain the two senses of the Latin *ver-* (truth) and *diction* (speaking, pronouncing, telling).[24] He specifies that he wishes to study the problem of avowal within the context of penality, thus analysing the relationship between veridiction and jurisdiction. Rather than tracing the history of avowal from its origins to the present, in these lectures he focuses on three particular movements within its history: Greek law, the medieval and Christian realm, and the early modern and modern periods.[25] Foucault first provides a reading of a Homeric text and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to highlight how the judicial avowal was conceived. This is followed by material taken from *On the Government of the Living*, on the transition from ancient Greek and Greco-Roman forms of the examination of conscience to early Christian forms of penance and veridiction in the monastic institutions of the 4th and 5th centuries. To conclude the lecture course, Foucault applies these insights to modern issues of criminal justice and penality. His guiding theme throughout this course is how exercises of power are related to and dependent upon manifestations of truth that regard the individual as both a subject and object of knowledge.

Foucault declares that the scope of these lectures is to elaborate on the notion of the *government of humans by truth*.[26] Foucault's interest in this notion complements his claim that what he would like to do is to "write a history of the force of truth, a history of the power of the truth, a history, therefore, to take the same idea from a different angle, of the will to know."[27] It could be said that such an engagement with the force and power of truth or, in other words, the history of the will to know, has been a guiding theme since his early work. Both "The Order of Discourse" and *Lectures on the Will to Know* (his first

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[24] See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 19, translator's note.
[25] See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 29-31.
[26] See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 24 and Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège De France 1979-1980*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 11.
[27] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 101.

lecture course at the Collège de France) contain references to this notion.[28] The title of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (*The Will to Knowledge*) attests to Foucault's continual interest in this theme. Moreover, in a footnote in *La Volonté de savoir*, the original French version of *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault had announced a separate study which he intended to publish as *Pouvoir de la verité* ("The Power of Truth").[29] Thus, Foucault's engagement with the will to knowledge is one of the ways in which his later works can be read as a continuation of his earlier theoretical concerns rather than as a break from them. This may lead one to conclude, not incorrectly in my view, that all of Foucault's works can be considered as a lifelong engagement with truth, its history and its powers.

In *On the Government of the Living*, Foucault elaborates on the analysis of government through truth by introducing the notion of alethurgy. He derives this neologism from the term *alethourges*, which is an adjective used by the 1st century grammarian Heraclitus to describe someone who speaks the truth.[30] Foucault describes alethurgy as "the manifestation of truth as the set of possible verbal or non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light what is laid down as true as opposed to false, hidden, inexpressible, unforeseeable, or forgotten;"[31] or, as he puts it in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, as "a ritual procedure for bringing forth *alēthes*: that which is true."[32] This study of alethugy, thus, is not limited to the kind of analyses – associated more with Foucault's earlier analyses of epistemes and power/knowledge – of the intricate ways through which forms of knowledge are institutionalised or legitimated. The study of alethurgy enables Foucault to consider how manifestations of truth are always tied up with the exercise of power, or the government of humans. Foucault's object of study in his lectures from the early 1980s

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[28] See Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52-56 and Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France 1970-1971 with Oedipal Knowledge*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 224.

[29] Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir*, 79. Reference to this publication is not included in the English translation. Compare Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir*, 79 with Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 59. On this issue, see also Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade*, 132-133.

[30] See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 7.

[31] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 7. This seems to be Foucault's first reference to the notion of alethurgy. He also explores this notion later in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 39 and *The Courage of Truth*, 1-3.

[32] Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 39.

is thus the history of the relation between government and truth. His interest lies less in how truth is used in order to exercise power but, rather, in how the 'I' is inserted in these procedures of alethurgy. This insertion marks the interlocking of truth-telling with subjectivity in such a way that the utterance of truth culminates in the manifestation of subjectivity. To emphasise the old history of the reliance of government on alethurgy, in *On the Government of the Living* Foucault considers the relation between truth and the exercise of power in *Oedipus Rex*. He argues that:

> Sophocles' play shows that […] the circle of alethurgy will be closed only when it has passed through individuals who can say 'I,' when it has passed through the eyes, hands, memory, testimony, and affirmation of men who say: I was there, I saw, I did, I gave with my own hand, I received into my own hands.[33]

Foucault uses this prelude on Oedipus and ancient Greek alethurgy in order to analyse the different historical configurations of this relationship between government and the manifestation of truth in the form of subjectivity. Doing so enables him to approach the question of how and why it is that in modern society, there is this crucial bond between exercises of power and the insertion of subjectivity within the procedures of manifestation of truth.[34]

To describe how the subject is inserted into procedures of alethurgy, Foucault employs an expression that was used by theologians of the Middle Ages: the truth act. According to Foucault, a truth act has three facets: the role of the subject as the operator, spectator, and object of the alethurgy.[35] The role of the operator of alethurgy is when, for example, through a sacrificial ritual, an act or a speech act, the subject reveals the truth of something to spectators. The subject may also occupy the role of the witness in the alethurgy by claiming that one was there in a particular episode and saw it with one's very eyes, and

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[33] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 73.
[34] Although, on various occasions, Foucault claims to be providing a genealogy of the *Western* subject, one can still argue that such an experience of Western subjectivity is not a homogeneous or clearly definable one.
[35] See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 81.

thus can recount and account for the veracity of a claim. Thirdly, and most crucially, the subject may be the object of the alethurgy. In such instances, the truth act is a reflexive one whereby the relations between power and truth bear upon subjectivity. In this lecture course, Foucault engages most with this latter sense of alethurgy as self-alethurgy through the question of confession, taking early Christianity as his focus for analysis.

Foucault emphasises his concern with confession in order to differentiate his approach to Christianity from analyses of the relations between government and truth in Christianity that focus primarily on the system of Christian dogma. Although the system of dogma, faith and belief make up a "regime of truth"[36] that occupies a central role in Christianity, Foucault favours the study of the truth act that is based on another regime of truth: "this is a regime defined by the obligation for individuals to have a continuous relationship to themselves of knowledge, their obligation to discover, deep within themselves, secrets that elude them, their obligation, finally, to manifest these secret and individual truths."[37] This is the regime of truth that is organised around the truth act as an act of confession. Foucault does not settle at the understanding of confession as the "verbalization of sins committed, a verbalization that has to take place in an institutional relationship with a partner, the confessor, who is qualified to hear it, to fix a penalty, [and] to grant remission."[38] He shows how this verbal organisation of confession is a setup that was established at the end of the Middle Ages. Although this modality has come to occupy a predominant role in Christianity, he argues that this is only one way among several other *earlier* ways in which the individual was obliged to manifest the truth about itself. Although Foucault is not always consistent in the use of terms, he employs the French term *aveu* to broadly signify various forms of confession and self-disclosure beyond that

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[36] See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 94-101. For an elucidation of this notion, see Daniele Lorenzini, "Foucault, Regimes of Truth and the Making of the Subject," in *Foucault and the Making of Subjects*, eds. Laura Cremonesi, Orazio Irrera, Daniele Lorenzini, and Martina Tazzioli (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 63-75.
[37] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 83.
[38] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 102.

institutionalised by Christianity since the end of the Middle Ages in the sacrament of confession (for which the French term *confession* is reserved).[39]

It is these earlier Christian practices which occupy Foucault in the early 1980s, such as *baptism*, *penance*, and *spiritual direction*. Foucault traces the genealogy of the obligation to speak the truth about oneself in Christianity through these practices by outlining: i) the role of baptism in early Christian practices, ii) the development of *exomologesis* as an early Christian practice of penance, iii) practices of spiritual direction in the first Christian monasteries in the 4th century that placed emphasis on *exagoreusis*, that is, the verbalisation of sins within the monastic institution, culminating in the institutionalisation of confession. The next section considers each of these in turn, although given the focus of this thesis, it is the latter practice that will be given most prominence, due to the central role it accords to practices of self-narration.

III Baptism, Penance, Spiritual Direction

Baptism

With regard to baptism, Foucault considers the transformations that Tertullian made to this practice in the 2nd century. Foucault notes how the changes made highlight the movement towards the individual's obligation to recognise itself as an object of knowledge. Prior to Tertullian, the preparation for baptism was described, by Clement of Alexandria for example, as a process of teaching that illuminates the subject, and culminates in the purifying moment of baptism. With Tertullian, the preparation for baptism became a process of purification. Besides being a process that gradually qualifies the individual as a subject of knowledge, the preparation for baptism becomes equally a process that renders the individual's soul as an object of knowledge. The individual must ensure that one's soul is pure enough to approach the practice of baptism. This marks a transformation in how baptism was regarded, because purification originally depended

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[39] On this matter and how the different translators chose to translate the French terms *aveu* and *confession* in some of Foucault's lecture courses, see *On the Government of the Living*, xvii-xviii, and *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 2n.

upon God whereas Tertullian shifts the burden onto the individual. In this way, the access to truth and purification that baptism promises is transformed into a test that centres upon one's subjectivity.[40]

This test was intensified by Tertullian's emphasis on the notion of original sin. Foucault shows how through Tertullian's elaboration of ideas on the possible presence of evil within one's soul, associated with the fall of mankind, the practice of baptism undergoes a further transformation: "From then on, the central function of baptism would be to ward off the satanic element lurking in the inscrutable depths of the Christian's soul."[41] This marks the introduction of risks and suspicions around procedures of alethurgy, which intensified over time. This practice established an obligation to verbalise one's thoughts, and subject oneself to a spiritual director capable of deciphering any traces of evil in one's soul. Over time, with the widespread practice of confession, manifestations of truth developed in a way that placed an emphasis on the obligation to speak the truth about oneself. Thus, although the practices that Foucault considers in these lecture courses are still far away from the institutionalisation of the sacrament of penance in the 13th century, they are part of a history of truth and government that increasingly emphasised the insertion of the subject into the manifestation of truth. In such practices, truth, power and subjectivity are intertwined and constitute a basis for modern subjectivity.

Penance

From the practice of baptism, Foucault turns to practices of penance. The appearance of practices of penance was a prelude to the later establishment of institutionalised confession marked by the increased emphasis on the individual to speak the truth about oneself. Foucault shows how practices of penance originated in early Christianity out of concern with what must be done when an individual who was already baptised – and, thus, cannot undergo baptism again – breaks with the truth of Christianity. This transgression against the truth could occur for a variety of reasons, such as individuals committing grave

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[40] See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 115-117.
[41] Jean-Michel Landry, "Confession, Obedience, and Subjectivity: Michel Foucault's Unpublished Lectures *On the Government of the Living*," *Telos* no. 146 (Spring 2009): 116.

sins or renouncing their faith in order to avoid the persecution that Christians faced around the 3rd century. In response to this, canonical penance was introduced, not exactly as a second baptism (although this term is sometimes used, loosely and with metaphoric license) but as a one-time event through which the individual can repeat the procedures of penance undergone in preparation for baptism.[42] This practice entailed various truth acts and implied a status that concerned the whole individual, not just a set of actions to be performed. It implied, for example, an external, objective examination of the sinner's actions. Canonical penance also introduced and emphasised a reflexive truth act, which he defines as those acts "by which the penitent himself manifests his truth as sinner or his truth as penitent."[43] This obligation to show and manifest oneself garners a significant place within practices of penance of the catechumenal institution.

These acts of penance within early Christianity were referred to as *exomologesis*, derived from the Greek verb that means 'to manifest one's agreement'. *Exomologesis*, later translated into Latin as *confession*, was the status that was required from the penitent, which involved "the manifestation of one's agreement, the acknowledgement, the fact of admitting something, namely one's sin and the fact of being a sinner."[44] Tertullian described this practice as *publicatio sui*, that is, one's public exposure of oneself. This practice is later displaced by the increasing emphasis on *expositio casus*, which was a practice of penance that took a verbal and juridical form, later institutionalised into the sacrament of penance. However, in the 3rd century, although *exomologesis* entailed a relationship between subjectivity and the manifestation of truth, its form was different from that which confession as the verbalisation of sins would later establish. *Exomologesis* consisted in a particular episode at the moment of the sinner's reintegration where penitents dramatically reveal themselves, linking self-punishment with true self-expression. Foucault refers to a 3rd century correspondence that explains that this practice required penitents to "prove their suffering, show their shame, make visible their humility, and exhibit their modesty."[45] Rather than the verbal confession and analysis of sins,

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[42] See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 194.
[43] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 198.
[44] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 202.
[45] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 59.

exomologesis was characterised by dramatic emphasis, maximum theatricality, somatic and symbolic expression. This status bore upon most aspects of the penitent's life: what food one ate, what clothes one wore, what sexual relations one had. In this way, *exomologesis* implied a general status placed on the individual's existence, and was not simply an act one did in order to make up for a sin one had committed (a judicial principle of correlation). Its aim was to serve as a representation of death or of dying, whereby sinners express a will to renounce their own body and flesh, and themselves as sinners, in order to obtain the state of purity they had at baptism, and gain access to a pure spiritual life.[46] Thus, although *exomologesis* was not explicitly a verbal confession, Foucault's aim is to show that it is an important piece in the history of the obligation to manifest the truth about oneself.

Spiritual Direction: Examination of Conscience and Confession

Foucault considers the practice of spiritual direction in the first Christian monasteries in the 4th century as an essential part of the history of the obligation to tell the truth about oneself. It is in this context that Foucault identifies the clearest formulations of the obligations to speak and decipher the truth about oneself. This marks the increased prominence given to the obligation to verbalise one's thoughts to a person of authority. This practice eventually disseminated beyond the strictly monastic context to form the basis of the sacrament of penance in the 13th century. Such confessional practices highlight the importance of "first, the detailed verbalization of the sin by the subject who committed it and, second, the procedures of knowledge, discovery, and exploration of oneself."[47] Foucault contends that these practices are not present in early Christianity in this form, but emerge later on within the Christian context, specifically from practices of spiritual direction within the monastic institution. Although not in the confessional form they came to occupy in the Middle Ages, practices of spiritual direction played a crucial role in pagan antiquity as well. For this reason, Foucault analyses the specificity of these practices within the Christian context by comparing and contrasting them with similar

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[46] See Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 57-60.
[47] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 225.

practices in antiquity to highlight how the obligation to verbalise the truth about oneself developed historically. Foucault analyses these shifts in techniques of spiritual direction between antiquity and Christianity in various sources between 1980 and 1981, often using the same or overlapping material, particularly in his discussion of what he considered as the two most important techniques of the self in the history of Western spiritual direction: the *examination of conscience* and *confession*.[48]

The activity of spiritual direction was common to both antiquity and early Christianity. However, the structure, aims and means of this activity were not always the same. Foucault argues that the aim of spiritual direction in antiquity was to guide the individual towards self-transformation in order for one to be the master of oneself. This spiritual direction was not intended to be a constant and regular activity, but rather episodic, circumstantial and provisional. Individuals sought spiritual direction in times of personal trouble or anguish: "One solicits or one accepts the advice of a master or of a friend in order to endure an ordeal, a bereavement, an exile, or a reverse of fortune."[49] Since the aim of such a practice was to foster the autonomy of the directed, a binding relationship of obedience to one's master was not demanded of the directed. Neither was the exhaustive exploration of oneself and the obligation to verbalise one's innermost thoughts a necessary feature of spiritual direction in antiquity. This does not mean that the veridiction of oneself or the obligation to tell the truth about oneself were non-existent in antiquity, or that this was a Christian innovation. Techniques of the self that concerned the manifestation of truth did exist in pagan antiquity. These were later taken up and adapted by Christianity whereby such practices garner new meanings. These transformations can be clearly seen if one considers the importance given to verbalisation in these techniques. Foucault argues that whereas "[i]n antiquity, the one who spoke was obviously the master,"[50] in the Christian monastic context this scheme was inverted, and the obligation to speak – about one's thoughts, desires, doubts – was the duty of the disciple. In antiquity, the master spoke because he possessed knowledge of values or

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[48] See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 167-320; Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*; Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 91-161.
[49] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 28.
[50] Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 140.

principles of conduct. The disciple, on the other hand, manifested obedience by remaining silent and listening. The aim of this interaction was for the disciple to, eventually, master himself, discover the same truths and be in a position (of power) to speak too. In monastic practices, the disciple's speech was a sign of his obedience; thus, verbalisation was enveloped within the necessary condition of subjection.[51]

Techniques of the examination of conscience also manifest the differences between ancient pagan and early Christian practices of self-examination and confession. Foucault emphasises that although techniques of the self that aimed at the discovery of the truth about oneself – such as the examination of conscience – are more usually associated with Christianity, such techniques predate Christianity. Foucault refers to how the invention of the examination of conscience is often attributed to Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. In fact, these Pythagorean verses were often cited in antiquity: "Do not allow sweet sleep to slide under your eyelids before you have examined each one of your daily actions. What have I done wrong? What have I done? What have I omitted that I should have done?"[52] Foucault notes how the aim of this Pythagorean practice was one of purification, whereby one purifies oneself before sleeping, before coming into contacting with the spiritual world through one's dreams. He shows how this practice later developed into the Stoic examination of conscience, exemplified in section 36 of the third book of Seneca's *De Ira*:

> What is more beautiful […] than this custom of investigating one's day? What blessed sleep is it that follows this review of one's actions. So calm, profound, and free is one's rest when the soul has received its portion of praise and criticism and, subject to its own control and its own censor, it secretly conducts a review of its own behaviour. I exert this authority over myself and every day I call upon myself, I summon myself when the light has faded and my wife is finally quiet. I examine myself and take stock of my acts and words. I hide nothing. I overlook nothing. Why, indeed, would I fear anything among my

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[51] See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 140-141.
[52] Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 95.

errors when I can say to myself: 'Make sure not to do it again. I forgive you today. In such a discussion, you spoke too aggressively: you did not correct the one who you were criticizing; you offended him.'[53]

Foucault notes that although the language employed in the Stoic examination of conscience seems to be primarily judicial, whereby the judicial scene is rehearsed and the subject is both the judge and the accused with regard to oneself, in fact "the vocabulary is far more administrative than judicial."[54] This means that the function of the Stoic examination of conscience is akin to the administration and inspection of oneself in order to ensure that one's actions are carried out correctly and, if not, that such mistakes and faults are rectified accordingly. Rather than a search for a hidden truth within the subject, the form of the Stoic examination of conscience is the memorisation of the acts one committed during the day. This memorisation was not demanded for its own sake, but primarily in order to reactivate the moral principles that ought to guide the Stoic's life. This ensures that one's conduct is in accordance with the set of guiding principles one has adopted: "One cultivates this art of memory, or rather one performs an act of memory in order to remember and reactualize, to better inculcate in one's thought and in one's conduct, the rules and codes that must govern in general one's behaviour in life."[55] In this way, the Stoic examination of conscience aims at autonomy. By examining himself, the Stoic ensures that his conduct is guided by rational rules in line with the principles of universal reason that govern the world.

Besides the examination of conscience as a form of *confession to oneself*, Foucault considers Stoic practices of *confessing to others*. These practices took the form of, for example, consulting friends for advice. Such practices were widespread in ancient philosophical and medical schools, such as in Epicurean schools, Galen and Plutarch. Foucault treats in further detail *De tranquillitate animi*, a text in which Seneca advises his young friend, Serenus. Serenus sought out Seneca to confess his state of malaise to him.

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[53] Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 97.
[54] Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 98.
[55] Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 99.

However, Serenus' confession does not disclose his faults or shameful desires. Instead, Serenus confesses information related to the three important moral domains of the free men of Greco-Roman antiquity: "the domain of riches, the domain of political life, and the domain of glory; to acquire riches, to participate in the affairs of the city, to gain public opinion."[56] Seneca's reaction to Serenus' disclosures does not take the form one might expect of a master who tries to uncover the secret details of the disciple's thoughts. Nor does he attempt to bind Serenus in a relation of submission to him. Instead, using arguments, demonstrations and examples, Seneca affirms the force of the truth of the moral principles that they share in their pursuit of attaining the status of sage. Serenus' aim is to tell Seneca what it is that pleases him or not, in order to consult Seneca for guidance on how to further activate the force of the truth of the moral knowledge he already possesses.[57]

Foucault argues that these techniques of the self constitute the background for the Christian practices of the examination of conscience and confession. He refers to a text by John Chrysostom, a 4th century archbishop and early Church Father:

> Let us call on our conscience, let us get it to give an account of actions, words, and thoughts. Let us examine what profits us or harms us, what evil we have spoken, what thought has led us to cast glances that are too free, what harmful fate we have prepared. Let us cease spending at the wrong time. Let us endeavor to replace harmful expense with useful investment.[58]

Foucault remarks that the administrative language of this examination of conscience is strikingly similar to Seneca's. Foucault reads this as "an obvious transfer of several technologies of the self in Christian spirituality from practices of pagan philosophy."[59] However, he argues that around the 4th century, within and because of the monastic institution, the Christian examination of conscience develops a different structure,

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[56] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 33.
[57] See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 100-103.
[58] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 258.
[59] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 63.

different objects and different ends than in antiquity. What necessitated these transformations were "two fundamental elements of Christian spirituality: the principle of obedience, and the principle of contemplation."[60]

The principle of obedience refers to how Christian spiritual direction was characterised by absolute passivity, non-resistance and the discipline's dependency upon and submission to a master. Christian obedience also entailed humility, which consisted in debasing oneself to a status beneath that of others, and accepting their orders. Therefore, rather than autonomy, which was the aim of ancient spiritual direction, obedience was the key feature of Christian spiritual direction, such that a failure to obey amounted to a grave transgression. This can be seen through the adage, well-known in monastic literature: "everything that one does not do on order of one's director, or everything that one does without his permission, constitutes a theft."[61] Obedience, as a permanent condition of Christian spiritual direction, implied total submission to one's superiors in such a way that one may only act upon the orders one is given. Foucault exemplifies the severity of this principle by referring to a claim by Cassian, a 4th century monk, that "[t]he young not only must not leave their cell without the knowledge of the person in charge, but they must not even presume his authorization to satisfy their natural needs."[62] Foucault also cites the story of Dositheus, who was a disciple of Saint Barsanuphius, a 6th century monk: "Dositheus was a young man who was dying from tuberculosis but who obviously could not die without the permission of Saint Barsanuphius. Saint Barsanuphius refused permission for a time, at the end of which he told him: 'I now authorize you to die,' at which point, relieved, Dositheus passed into the other world."[63]

The principle of contemplation further highlights the specificity of the Christian examination of conscience. Whereas in Seneca the object of consideration was one's actions, this is no longer the sole point of focus in Christianity. In the Christian context, the objects of examination also include one's thoughts and one's reflections:

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[60] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 64.
[61] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 64.
[62] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 271-272.
[63] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 272.

"*cogitationes*, the nearly imperceptible movements of the thoughts, the permanent mobility of soul."[64] The Christian examination of conscience is fuelled by a principle of suspicion towards one's thoughts since one's reflections may be contaminated with illusion and evil, the products of Satan. As a result, the Christian was obliged to adopt discretion and vigilance towards oneself to battle one's susceptibility to deception. This concern with the nature, quality and substance of thoughts was crucial to the Christian, especially since the objective of the monastic life was the contemplation of God. To explain this vigilance, Foucault refers to Cassian's use of three metaphorical comparisons. Cassian compares the Christian examination of conscience to, firstly, the activity of the miller sorting good grains from bad ones; secondly, to the officer allotting tasks to soldiers according to their capacities; and, thirdly and most importantly, to the moneychanger who examines coins so as to verify their authenticity.[65] Likewise, the Christian must examine and interpret one's thoughts to determine their quality and origin.

But, the question remains, how is one to perform this hermeneutics of the self? Cassian and his contemporaries proposed that this must be done through the continuous confession of one's thoughts. This is what was referred to as *exagoreusis*, that is, "the perpetual putting oneself into discourse,"[66] or the "permanent avowal of oneself."[67] Foucault contrasts *exagoreusis* as a form of confession with the earlier practice of *exomologesis*. Although both practices relate to manifestations of truth, *exomologesis* did not consist of a detailed confession of one's fault, but instead demanded the dramatic display of one's sinful being through one's gestures, clothing, fasting practices, or prayer. The alethurgy of *exagoreusis* instead consisted in "an analytical and continuous verbalization of the thoughts."[68] Foucault notes that, paradoxically, this manifestation of one's truth simultaneously amounts to a renunciation of oneself. This, he argues, is the essence of Christian subjectivation whereby the aim of the examination of conscience was to determine the true nature of one's thoughts, while renouncing the illusory and evil

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[64] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 66.
[65] See Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 66-67.
[66] Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 307.
[67] Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 163.
[68] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 73.

thoughts one had. In the same way that *exomologesis* points towards the model of martyrdom by obliging the penitent to sacrifice one's being as sinner, *exagoreusis* implies the obligation to verbalise one's thoughts to one's master in a relationship of submission and obedience.[69]

This section highlighted how Foucault traces the historical development of techniques that manifest the truth about oneself. He shows how, after various historical transformations of ancient techniques of the self, Christianity placed the utmost importance on the obligation to verbalise the truth about oneself, a practice which originated in the monastic institutions around the 4th century. This obligation, Foucault argues, has been a constant presence in Christian culture ever since, and has permeated the mode of governing through truth in Western societies. However, one must pay attention to the genealogical motivations behind Foucault's analysis. By genealogy, Foucault did indeed mean to provide the historical roots of the present; however, importantly, by genealogy Foucault also meant that one can turn to history to reveal the *contingent* roots of the present. Ultimately, this was also Foucault's motivation for retrieving the historical importance of the notion of care of the self in antiquity. Foucault's genealogy of this notion reveals how the injunction to care for the self was central to ancient ethics. It had as much, if not more, centrality as the Delphic maxim 'know thyself' which history has privileged at the expense of displacing the notion of care of the self.[70] Similarly, although Foucault emphasised that the relationship between subjectivity and truth-telling came to be heavily determined by a Christian hermeneutics of the self, his point is that *it could be otherwise*: "[m]aybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are."[71] In this regard, Foucault considers himself an optimist who is emboldened in the face of the contingency of history.[72] The ethos of genealogical inquiry is not to use history to learn lessons or find solutions for contemporary problems; Foucault makes it clear that "you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of

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[69] See Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 308-309.
[70] See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France 1981-1982*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 1-19.
[71] Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 336.
[72] See Michel Foucault, "So Is It Important to Think?," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 458.

another problem raised at another moment by other people."[73] Nonetheless, Timothy O'Leary notes that, due to a similarity of problems Foucault observed in the ancients and in contemporary times,[74] Foucault "insists that their [the ancients'] example can be an inspiration to our own efforts."[75] In this spirit, alternatives to confessional truth-telling practices[76] that have come to determine modern subjectivity are considered in the next sections, which turn to Foucault's analysis of ancient practices of self-writing and of parrhesia. This strengthens the claim pursued in this thesis that, despite being significantly impacted by power relations that sway practices of self-narration toward normalising and subjectifying self-decipherment, the activity of narrating oneself can nevertheless contain self-creative and possibly subversive traces.

3.2 Writing the Self

As attested by his genealogical interest in the obligation to tell the truth about oneself, Foucault turned to antiquity in his final work to explore different practices of truth-telling about oneself. Practices of self-writing were one such concern for Foucault. Self-writing was a notion close to Foucault's heart, as can be seen in his studies on the role of writing as a technique of the self,[77] as well as in how he explicitly considered his own writings as a project of self-transformation and self-creation.[78] Foucault discusses self-writing in the most direct manner, albeit in a short text, in the 1983 essay titled "Self Writing". He presents this essay as "part of a series of studies on 'the arts of oneself,' that is, on the aesthetics of existence and the government of oneself and of others in Greco-Roman

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[73] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 256.

[74] See Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 256.

[75] Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2002), 84.

[76] This gesture is inspired by Chloë Taylor, "Alternatives to Confession: Foucault's 'Fragments of an Autobiography'," *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 55-66. "Alternatives to Confession" is also a chapter title in her book on the culture of confession, discussed in the next chapter.

[77] See Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 333-362; Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 27-30; Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 272-280.

[78] See Michel Foucault, "Interview between Michel Foucault and Claude Bonnefoy, 1968," in *Speech Begins after Death*, ed. Philippe Artières, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 25-81; Michel Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: The New Press, 2000), 239-246. For a reading of Foucault's own working ethos in light of his account of ethics, see O'Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*, 121-153.

culture during the first two centuries of the empire."[79] Foucault referred to such a "series of studies" in different ways in the 1980s. In April 1983, he announced a book separate from *The History of Sexuality* series with the title of *Le Souci de soi* (the title Foucault eventually used for the third volume):

> *Le Souci de soi*, a book separate from the sex series, is composed of different papers about the self – for instance, a commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades* in which you find the first elaboration of the notion of *epimeleia heautou*, "care of the self," about the role of *reading and writing in constituting the self*, maybe the problem of the medical experience of the self, and so on.[80]

Around the same time, Foucault also conceived of a project to be titled *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres*. This is the main title under which he eventually grouped his 1983 and 1984 Collège de France courses. Daniel Defert notes that this project was to form part of the Éditions du Seuil collection *Des travaux* [Works], which Foucault edited with Paul Veyne and François Wahl. Of this collection, Defert writes:

> It's an old project of Foucault's, to promote academic research outside of the mediatized circuits of general publishing. It's in this collection that he plans to publish *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres* [*The Government of Self and Others*], a work that would link together ethics and politics, and for which he had outlined several plans around Alcibiades, or the idea of care of the self and political life; Epictetus, on listening, *writing, and the practice of the self*; self and others.[81]

As yet, none of these 'side projects' have been published in this way, although drafts of them do exist. What is clear, as can be seen in the emphasis in the quotations above, is that Foucault was highly interested in practices of self-writing. The "Self Writing" essay

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[79] Michel Foucault, "Self Writing," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 207.
[80] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 255 [emphasis added].
[81] Daniel Defert, "Chronology," in *A Companion to Foucault*, eds. Christopher Falzon, Timothy O'Leary, and Jana Sawicki (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 78 [emphasis added].

offers a glimpse into how Foucault might have gone on to study these practices further. In this essay, Foucault argues that the fascination with self-writing was not a novelty of the 16th century. Although such practices were consolidated through an increase in autobiographical, confessional and self-revelatory writing, they can be traced back to the establishment of Christianity, where an attitude of self-decipherment was encouraged and also manifested itself in writing about oneself. However, Foucault argues that these features were also present in some way before Christianity in literature concerning the philosophical cultivation of the self, such as writings of Seneca, Plutarch and Marcus Aurelius. For Foucault, such writings, although manifesting similar regulatory aims, had "very different values and follow[ed] altogether different procedures."[82] His approach to ancient practices of self-writing can thus be situated within his broader interest in antiquity. This can be seen in his attempt to extrapolate features of ancient self-writing so as to shed light on how self-writing can constitute something other than a hermeneutics of the self characterised by self-berating confessional practices.

Foucault maintains that since ancient ethics emphasised that the individual must strive to make a beautiful entity (*tekhne tou biou*) out of their life, it necessitated training and exercise in the art of living. This form of *askesis*, a work of the self on itself, was predominant in ancient Greek schools of thought, such as the Pythagoreans, the Socratics and the Cynics. This art of living entailed practices of "abstinences, memorizations, self-examinations, meditations, silence, and listening to others."[83] At a later stage, the act of writing came to play an important role in the art of self-cultivation. Figures such as Seneca and Epictetus emphasised that besides reading, meditating and training, the art of living must also involve writing. One writes in order to transform and cultivate oneself into an ethical subject. One does not passively write accepted principles; in the realm of care of the self, one writes whatever one writes to memorise the principles and to continuously and actively take up these principles while inscribing them in one's soul as learned material that guides and governs one's actions and dispositions. For Plutarch, for example, writing has an *ethopoietic* function: "it is an agent of the transformation of truth into

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[82] Foucault, "Self Writing," 208.
[83] Foucault, "Self Writing," 208.

ēthos[84] or, as Foucault puts it, "the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principles of action."[85]

As representatives of this form of writing, Foucault considers in further detail the hupomnemata. 'Hupomnemata' usually meant record-keeping documents such as public registers. However, as a practice of the self, the hupomnemata also referred to a common practice among 'cultivated' individuals who kept individual notebooks that served as memory aids. As Foucault describes them:

> One wrote down quotes in them, extracts from books, examples, and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind. They constituted a material record of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent rereading and meditation.[86]

Although the hupomnemata served the function of supporting memory, this was not their sole function. They also served as the basis of a framework for spiritual exercises aimed at effecting one's transformation. They were not just meant to be near at hand, but also proximate to one's soul. One took note of ethical principles to make use of them in everyday life and testing times. The written words constituted a set of helpful discourses that, through use, would become deeply lodged in the soul and push one toward the subjectivation of discourse, thus embodying the meaning of the written phrase. The phrase does not solely remain wise advice that one had noted down, but would also be transformative. Through them, one transforms oneself in a way that makes one worthy of being an authentic utterer of those wise words. With the help of the hupomnemata, the individual becomes an ethical subject who utters and acts according to the principles embraced by ethical individuals, not simply because those are the principles that ethical individuals utter, but because he himself has actually become an ethical individual.

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[84] Foucault, "Self Writing," 209.
[85] Foucault, "Self Writing," 209.
[86] Foucault, "Self Writing," 209.

The hupomnemata shift between being disparate and being unifying. Their disparate character results from their being, essentially, a textual patchwork constituted by words others said or by "a timeless discourse accepted almost everywhere."[87] In order for the contents of the hupomnemata not to dissipate meaninglessly, Seneca stressed that excessive and extensive reading can be exhausting and may have a scattering effect. As a result, it was suggested that reading be coupled with writing in order to gather and collect one's thoughts, and counter mental agitation and quick change of opinions. Epictetus suggested another way not to succumb to the heterogeneity of the content one compiled in the personal notebook. He argued that it did not matter whether one knew the entire work of a philosopher and can reconstruct his every argument, as long as one could identify "'the local truth of the precept' and 'its circumstantial use value.'"[88] Thus, what writing could accomplish was the combination of traditional authority of what was already said with the singularity of one's circumstances. This combination transcends the hupomnemata since the written material "becomes a principle of rational action in the writer himself."[89] The cultivation of the self as an ethical agent was the ultimate aim of writing as a tool or technique of the self. In this essay on self-writing, Foucault also situates his analysis of ancient personal correspondence among friends, previously discussed in relation to the genealogy of the obligation to tell the truth about oneself, within this context of practices of the self. In personal correspondence with a friend who asks for advice or shares any of his troubles or daily life, one could draw on the material from his hupomnemata that acts on the one seeking advice. The letter also acts on its author; as Seneca remarked, "when one writes one reads what one writes, just as in saying something one hears oneself saying it."[90] Personal correspondence was therefore not a simple extension of the hupomnemata, but also constituted a way of manifesting oneself, both to oneself and to others, and of showing oneself and exposing oneself to the gaze of others.

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[87] Foucault, "Self Writing," 211.
[88] Foucault, "Self Writing," 212.
[89] Foucault, "Self Writing," 213.
[90] Foucault, "Self Writing," 214.

In his brief genealogy of self-writing, then, Foucault presents at least three models of self-writing which, rather than forming a neat progression, present overlapping and disparate techniques and modalities. First, Foucault notes how Cicero's letters from the 1st century BC manifest a form of self-narration through which he presented himself as a subject of action in relation to friends or enemies, fortunes and misfortunes. Second, in later work such as Seneca's from the 1st century and Marcus Aurelius' from the 2nd century AD, Foucault sees a form of self-narration that "is the account of one's relation to oneself"[91] which privileges the areas of the health of the body and the soul, and leisure activities. It is in relation to this that Foucault studies Seneca's practices of self-examination and daily recollection, his letters on illness, solitude and friendship to Lucilus, or Marcus Aurelius' letters to Fronto, material which he also discusses in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures in 1982. Third, Foucault refers to the model of self-writing found in the work of the 4th century AD bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, characterised by "scrupulous attention to what occurs in the body and in the soul […] a matter of dislodging the most hidden impulses from the inner recesses of the soul, thus enabling oneself to break free of them."[92] Foucault thus creates a distinction between ancient practices of writing such as Seneca's and later practices of accounting for oneself such as the early Christian writing of the first centuries AD. Unlike the hupomnemata, the latter literature is characterised by tropes of temptations, struggles and downfalls aimed at constituting a confessional narrative of oneself to reveal the unspeakable and that which is hidden in the depths of one's soul. This demanded work of decipherment by an external authority who castigates the self and bears witness to the defects of the individual.

Around the same time that "Self Writing" was published, Foucault delivered the Regents' Lecture in Berkeley in April 1983, titled "The Culture of the Self".[93] He ended this lecture with a brief reflection on the role of writing in the ancient practices of care of the self. He asks how this culture of the self appears to have disappeared from the experience of modern subjectivity, despite having been such a prominent component of the ancient

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[91] Foucault, "Self Writing," 217.
[92] Foucault, "Self Writing," 221.
[93] See Michel Foucault, "The Culture of the Self," Regents' Lecture at UC Berkeley, April 12, 1983, michel-foucault.com/2013/10/30/the-culture-of-the-self.

Greco-Roman ethics of care of the self, whose institutions, methods, techniques and exercises were constitutive of individual and collective experiences of selfhood. One of the reasons he cites for this disappearance is that Christianity introduced an ethical paradox in its account of asceticism, namely that concern for the self came to take up the form of sacrifice and renunciation rather than self-cultivation. This has transformed care of the self into self-disclosure. Moreover, this self-disclosure has been taken up as the domain of the human sciences, particularly in their assumption that the predominant relationship of the self to itself, and of others to the self, has to be a relationship of knowledge. Techniques of the self in modernity, Foucault argues, fall under the domain of educational, pedagogical, medical and psychological techniques, and their authoritative or disciplinarian structure. Thus, the role of self-writing in self-fashioning and creative and critical self-transformation was diluted and replaced by an attitude of self-decipherment assisted by the development of normalising human sciences.

Apart from practices of writing the self, one could also consider Foucault's discussion of speaking the truth under risky conditions as complementing the current analysis of how practices of self-narration can function otherwise than by subjugating and normalising. Foucault's studies on the ancient notion of parrhesia highlight how self-narration had the ability to function in ancient Socratic and Hellenistic contexts as a practice that preserves the possibility of a resistance that connects ethical self-cultivation with political critique.

3.3 Alternative Truth-Telling: The Risks of Parrhesia

In the first lecture of *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault situates his aims in the course in relation to the different trajectories he pursued in his research. He clarifies that, contrary to the epistemological analysis of discourses of truth, the study he wishes to conduct in this lecture course concerns:

> the conditions and forms of the type of act by which the subject *manifests* himself when speaking the truth, by which I mean, thinks of himself and is recognized by others as speaking the truth. […] [T]his would involve analyzing

the form in which, in his act of telling the truth, the individual constitutes himself and is constituted by others as a subject of a discourse of truth, the form in which he presents himself to himself and to others as someone who tells the truth, the form of the subject telling the truth.[94]

These two forms of analysis correspond to the different kinds of analysis Foucault conducted in his works. His earlier work dealt with discourses and practices through which, for example, madness or delinquency were made intelligible, and with discursive practices that constituted the speaking, labouring and living subject as an object of knowledge. Foucault recognises that, at a later phase of his research, he shifted the emphasis onto the discourses and practices through which the subject speaks about him or herself within the realms of penality and sexuality, such as avowal, confession and examination of conscience.[95] Although it is true that the emphasis of Foucault's analysis changed throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the central issue he engaged with – the question of the relations between the subject and truth was consistent. This degree of continuity clearly emerges in his analysis of parrhesia. His different analyses throughout the years can, in fact, all be seen as grappling with the three genealogical axes he identifies – the axis of truth or knowledge, power relations and subjectivity.[96] His study of parrhesia enabled him to bring together these different axes without either foregrounding one particular axis over the others or reducing the different axes to each other. As he says, "[c]onnecting together modes of veridiction, techniques of governmentality, and practices of the self is basically *what I have always been trying to do*."[97]

The first discussion of parrhesia by Foucault is found in his 1982 lecture course, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. The first appearance of this notion is found in his discussion of the Epicurean practice of spiritual direction, where Foucault argues that Epicurean guidance was only possible on the condition of an intense friendship between the guide and the guided, and this necessitated a way or attitude of speaking. This way of speaking,

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[94] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 2-3.
[95] See Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 3.
[96] See Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 262-263.
[97] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 8 [emphasis added].

generally translated as 'frankness', is parrhesia, which Foucault preliminarily defines as "opening the heart, the need for the two partners to conceal nothing of what they think from each other and to speak to each other frankly."[98] The responsibility of parrhesia fell on the master, not on the student, insofar as it is the master who must deliver true speech in order to effectively bring about the transformation and improvement in the disciple. Foucault highlights further characteristics of parrhesia by considering Stoic parrhesia. Seneca affirms that parrhesia "is a matter of showing (*ostendere*) what I feel (*quid sentiam*) rather than speaking (*loqui*)."[99] For Seneca, the truth of parrhesia must also be complemented by the conduct of the individual: 'This is the essential point […]: let us say what we think and think what we say; let speech harmonize with conduct.'[100] For Foucault, Christian spiritual direction is different since it shifts the essential obligation of truth-telling onto the guided. The Christian model requires the guided to confess – 'This is what I am' – whereas in the Greco-Roman model, the one who guides must be present within the true discourse in order to be able to say: 'This truth I tell you, you see it in me.'[101]

Thus, in his first discussion of the notion in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault studies parrhesia as a practice of the self within the ancient Greco-Roman ethics of care of the self. In the subsequent lecture course, *On the Government of the Self and Others*, he discusses ancient parrhesia as a fundamentally political notion, rooted in political practice and the problematisation of democracy. A year later, in *The Courage of Truth*, his aim was to study parrhesia within the context of ethical practices of truth-telling about oneself, in which parrhesia was diverted "towards the sphere of personal ethics and the formation of the moral subject."[102]

The Courage of Truth opens with Foucault's analysis of parrhesia through Socrates' last moments as a risky truth-telling in relation to the care of the self. A crucial feature of Socratic parrhesia that Foucault highlights is the symphony of discourse and action; the

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[98] Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 137.
[99] Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 404.
[100] Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 406.
[101] Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 409.
[102] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 8.

harmony between *logos* and *bios*. For Socrates, parrhesia as an ethical notion is a question of the way one lives – it is an attitude, an ethos, the style of one's living; in other words, it is the care of the self. Socratic parrhesia concerns the ability to give an account of oneself, not merely to justify oneself by saying who one's teachers were or what works one has done, but rather to manifest the relationship between one's words and deeds. It is this harmony, Foucault says, which defines Socratic parrhesia, whereby one's free speech is authenticated by one's mode of living: "The mode of life appears as the essential, fundamental correlative of the practice of truth-telling."[103] This emphasises the necessary link between parrhesia, the ethics of *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self) and the mode or style of life associated with it. The ancient ethics of the care of the self required one to submit one's life to a test in order to be able to sift good actions from bad ones. Foucault highlights how this facet of Socratic parrhesia implies an emphasis on stylistics, or an aesthetics of existence: "I have tried therefore to find, with Socrates, the moment when the requirement of truth-telling and the principle of the beauty of existence came together in the care of the self."[104] For Foucault, in the history of subjectivity this emphasis on the aesthetics of existence has been overshadowed by a focus on the metaphysics or ontology of the soul built on knowledge of the self:

Foucault extends his analysis of parrhesia by considering the Cynics and their understanding of the notion of 'the true life'. Foucault's interest in the Cynics lies in how they radicalised the Socratic notion of parrhesia. Cynic parrhesia was characterised by the practice "of truth-telling which pushes its courage and boldness to the point that it becomes intolerable insolence."[105] Foucault notes that in several ancient texts by, for example, Diogenes Laertius, Dio Chrysostom and Epictetus, the word 'parrhesia' (denoting both free-spokenness but also insolence) was often applied to the Cynics.[106] Cynic parrhesia goes beyond the establishment of a harmony between life and discourse. The Cynic is designated as the one who *bears witness to the truth*. The Cynic is contrasted with the Platonic conception of the true life. The Platonic true life was founded on a notion

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[103] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 149.
[104] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 163.
[105] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 165.
[106] See Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 166.

of truth as *aletheia*, understood in a fourfold way as that which is not concealed or hidden, that which is unalloyed, that which is straight, and that which remains beyond any change and is, thus, incorruptible.[107] Foucault argues that this formulation of the true life was transformed by the Cynics' consideration of the advice that the Delphi oracle gave to Diogenes: 'Change the value of the currency'. Foucault notes that Cynics are regularly associated with money, and various sources refer to an incident of falsifying money concerning Diogenes and his father (a money changer).[108] The oracle's advice to alter the currency was generally understood to mean challenging customs or break up conventions. Foucault goes further with this interpretation, suggesting that the change in currency implied by the Cynic model of the true life involves a difference from the way in which people generally lead their lives. The Cynic ethic implied a life lived *otherwise*. The otherness (*altérité*) of the Cynic other life (*une vie autre*) is, as Graham Burchell notes, to be understood "in the sense of the mode of existence of the true life in this world, which is radically other than common or traditional forms of existence."[109] This sense of 'other world' (*un monde autre*) must be distinguished and distanced from the metaphysical understanding of the other world in the sense of a Platonic transcendent world of forms or the Christian afterlife (*l'autre monde*). With this distinction in mind, Foucault asks, "May not, must not the philosophical life, the true life necessarily be a life which is radically other?"[110]

He attempts to answer this question by considering the ways in which the Cynic life radically transforms the meaning of the Platonic true life, while retaining the four general features of the true life based on the understanding of truth as *aletheia* outlined above. Firstly, with its emphasis on being *unconcealed*, the Platonic true life prohibits shameful actions to be censured by others. Taking this idea of the true life to the crude extreme, the Cynics embodied the disregard for the code of propriety and conventions. This can be seen in the various practices that Diogenes is claimed to have performed, breaking the distinction between activities that are conventionally done in private, such as satisfying

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107 See Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 218-219.
108 See Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 240.
109 Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 244.
110 Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 247.

basic needs, and those that are not. Secondly, the true life as the *unalloyed* life implied lack of mixture with that which is impure, in order to prevent one from being dependent upon external and uncertain events. Cynics radicalised this feature of the Platonic true life by living a life of extreme poverty seeking further destitution. Reversing this feature of the true life that aims at purity and self-sufficiency, Foucault says that the Cynic's life is "scandalous, unbearable, ugly, dependent, and humiliated poverty."[111] This reversal extends in such a way as to become a systematic practice of dishonour, which was otherwise unheard of in ancient Greek society. Foucault, however, points out that this practice was different from a Christian humiliation that aimed at self-renunciation because, through this practice, the Cynic asserts his self-mastery.[112] The third feature of the Platonic true life is that it is a *straight* life lived in a balanced and organised way in accordance with nature and customs. The Cynics transgress this organisation and conformism by basing their behaviour only on the domain of nature. This manifested itself in, for example, the consumption of raw food and their rejection of any ban on incest.[113] Lastly, the true life was an *unchangeable and sovereign* life which implies possession of and pleasure in oneself. Within this framework, Foucault considers the assertion that the Cynic is the true king. Foucault argues that in the meeting between Diogenes and Alexander, Diogenes emerges as the truly sovereign king (without formal power, of course) for several reasons. For example, unlike Alexander, Diogenes needs no army to exercise his sovereignty, and did not depend on inheriting the monarchy or on training in order to be able to rule. Furthermore, Diogenes maintains that Alexander's rule can be lost due to a misfortune; thus, by ridding himself of all the elements upon which the satisfactions of the 'king of men' depend, Diogenes emerges as the true king. The true life also implies that the sovereign subject assists and cares for other people. Foucault maintains that this feature is present in the Cynic life too, since the Cynic willingly tries to cure other people and rid them of their disturbances. However, unlike the Platonic model of care for others, this takes a polemical and militant form since the Cynic advice is often harsh and inappropriate.

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[111] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 259.
[112] See Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 262.
[113] See Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 263.

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This chapter continued the reconstruction of Foucault's account of self-narration begun in the previous chapter, this time by considering how and why his later work from the 1980s led him to look at the ancient origins of the obligation to speak the truth about oneself. This detailed consideration of Foucault's late work highlighted the ways in which practices of self-narration have not always meant and need not mean normalising power inherent in confessional discourses. Following Foucault, this chapter considered the ways in which, beyond normalising confession, practices of self-narration can take the form of ethical self-constitution as well as parrhesia, that is, courageous truth-telling that can subvert hegemonic understandings of normalcy and social ordering.

The next chapter uses the insights from Foucault's ideas on self-narration, as well as feminist extensions of Foucault's work, to study the narration of trauma in institutional contexts. The aim of this application is to show how Foucault's work helps to raise pressing and urgent critical questions in an area that he did not consider directly. In the same way that this chapter and the previous one developed a dual approach to Foucault's notion of self-narration – one that aligns it with confessional discourses, and another with critical resistance and self-fashioning – the next chapter goes beyond the unilateral characterisation of traumatic self-narration as normalising and confessional to also consider how some trauma narratives can potentially be instances of parrhesia and, thus, instances of courageous truth-telling that may – wittingly or not – serve to trouble and destabilise the hold of regulative norms on the activity of self-narration.

Chapter 4 Foucault, Feminism and the Government of Trauma

This chapter extends Foucault's analysis of practices of self-narration, using feminist analyses to argue that the activity of narrating one's self and trauma is implicated in entrenched power relations, and even those facets of oneself that one might assume to be the most private and intimate are shown to be greatly influenced by socio-political factors. What this chapter also reveals is that, importantly, there is a flip side, namely that besides being confessional and possibly hegemonic, practices of self-narration also contain a trace of the possibility of resistance. Feminist practices of consciousness-raising are analysed as forms of self-narration to highlight the precarious but rich point where the personal meets the political, and the implications of this point of encounter for self-narration are explored. This chapter also considers the extent to which narrations of trauma by survivors can function as instances of critical parrhesia.

4.1 Self-Narration as Confession, as Hegemony, as Subversion

As the previous chapter emphasised, confessional practices have existed in different forms and with different aims. Individuals narrated themselves through various mechanisms in different historical contexts, and there is no linear thread seamlessly linking these various practices of self-narration. Thinking otherwise would amount to taking a "transhistorical view of confession,"[1] as Chloë Taylor describes it. This view claims that humans have always had an impulse to confess, and that such confessions relieve one of an internal weight. This view presents confession as an activity that remained, for the most part, unchanged over times in its aims, format and psychological efficacy. The transhistorical view of confession identifies Augustine's *Confessions* as a founding literary autobiographical confession, and traces the propagation of this mode of self-disclosure through the codification of Christian penance as a sacrament, through Rousseau's confessional work, to Breuer and Freud's exploration of the 'talking cure' or 'chimney-

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[1] Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 1.

sweeping'[2] in psychoanalysis. In a book that allocates such a central role to Foucault in its title, and that is subtitled "A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'" in clear reference to Foucault, it becomes immediately clear that the transhistorical view of confession will be contested, in a manner reminiscent of Foucault's treatment of the 'repressive hypothesis'. In his various writings on the topic, which Taylor considers as "fragments of a genealogy of confession,"[3] Foucault was ever suspicious of references to innate or natural impulses, liberatory aims, and activities that proclaimed to be power-neutral. A genealogical approach such as Taylor's considers the significant continuities and discontinuities in the modalities that confession took over time. As she notes, Foucault recognises that the link between the different manifestations of this activity "is one of developing and unpredictable disciplinary power, and not one of continual and unshifting discipline, nor an ahistorical response to an innate psychological need."[4] Thus, despite acknowledging similarities between confessional practices in different historical moments, he outlines the novelties that distinguish, for example, ancient pagan confessional practices from ancient and medieval Christian practices, and that differentiate such practices from the psychoanalytic dialogue. Over-hastily equating these practices beneath one rubric of 'confession' is a totalising gesture that elides the significant variations in such practices and masks the transformations introduced by different power/knowledge arrangements, such as the institutional codification of confession in Christianity and the birth of psychological knowledge.

In her book, Taylor proposes a genealogy of the 'confessing animal', in reference to Foucault's claim that "Western man has become a confessing animal."[5] Taylor critically considers and revises the totalising historical grand narrative that posits a universal and necessary notion (such as 'instinct', 'nature', or 'desire') that supposedly explains the transhistoricity of confession. A genealogy of confession weakens the solidity of historical narratives by emphasising the contingency at their heart and, therefore, the

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[2] Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, "Case Histories," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 2*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 30.

[3] Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 3.

[4] Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 2.

[5] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 59.

possibility of things to be otherwise. If, for example, the compulsion to confess and its various articulations are shown to be historical *effects* – rather than causes – that underwent significant changes over time, the possibility of things being otherwise is introduced. There is a transformative power in the realisation that phenomena which are taken for granted, privileged, and made to appear as timeless are, in fact, more recent and less fixed than we had imagined, and are thus more open to contestation, transformation or refusal. A genealogy of confession, then, shows how the present understanding of confession, conceived as "an inevitable outcome not only of our psychological makeup and of our social bonds (familial, erotic, punitive), but also of our system of values or morality,"[6] can be subject to critique and rethinking.

Influenced by Taylor's genealogical and feminist analysis of practices of self-narration, the next sections consider how feminist philosophers and theorists have used and extended Foucault's views to study practices of self-narration. Through this Foucaultian and feminist lens, practices of self-narration are seen to be caught up in various relations and networks of power that manoeuvre individuals into subjugation. However, such practices also contain within them the possibility of agency, critical resistance and self-creation. Moreover, in later sections, feminist analysis is used in order to consider the narration of trauma. Sexual abuse and domestic violence have been, and still are, key feminist concerns. Feminist reflections on the narration of these traumas highlight how social power can function to solidify the reproduction of disempowering and hegemonic narratives that continue to subjugate traumatised individuals; nonetheless, the co-existent potential of trauma narrations to subvert and challenge such narratives remains and must not be overlooked.

I Self-Narration as Confession or as Technology of the Self?

Feminist theory has been particularly receptive to Foucault's work, engaging productively both with his views on discourse and power relations, and his later work on ethics and technologies of the self. Aside from commenting on the usefulness or otherwise of

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[6] Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 7.

Foucault's account of power relations and sexuality for feminist theorising,[7] some feminist theorists have turned to Foucault's late work to either charge his ethical work with being masculinist[8] or androcentric[9] or, on the contrary, to see whether there are conceptual resources in this work that complement or extend feminist aims. Margaret A. McLaren's work on Foucault is in the latter camp. In a chapter in her book on feminist applications of Foucault's work, she analyses the implications of Foucault's later work on technologies of the self and parrhesia for feminist practices.[10] She particularly focuses on practices of self-narration, both insofar as such practices echo Foucault's account of confession and, more interestingly, to analyse how these practices contain significant traces that can destabilise current configurations of power relations and can result in the development of creative practices of the self.

Self-narration is one example of what Foucault calls practices (or technologies) of the self.[11] Technologies of the self do not necessarily amount to critical or subversive acts. Indeed, various practices of self-narration can function as extensions of the power to subjectify, objectify and categorise according to dividing practices. Yet, as seen for example in Foucault's analyses of ancient hupomnemata, correspondence among friends in antiquity and acts of parrhesia, it is possible to speak of practices of self-narration that are not reducible to confessional or normalising subjection. Self-narration occupies this ambivalent space; as McLaren writes, "[c]onfession, Foucault says, has a *double* sense of subjection; one is *compelled to tell the truth* about oneself by institutionalised religious norms, but at the same time the speaking subject *constitutes herself* through this articulation. Confession is, at least in part, about the subject's participation in her own

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[7] See, for example, Caroline Ramazanoğlu, ed., *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1993) and Susan J. Hekman, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).
[8] See Jean Grimshaw, "Practices of freedom," in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoğlu (London: Routledge, 1993), 51-72.
[9] See Kate Soper, "Productive contradictions," in *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoğlu (London: Routledge, 1993), 29-50.
[10] See Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany: State University of New York, 2002), 145-164.
[11] "It seems to me, that all the so-called literature of the self – private diaries, narratives of the self, and so on – cannot be understood unless it is put into the general and very rich framework of these practices of the self." Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 277.

self-construction."[12] Despite contrary interpretations, Foucault did not deny this latter active possibility, arguably not even in his earlier work, as seen in the analyses of Rivière's and Barbin's self-narrations. In his account of ancient practices of writing and self-writing, Foucault points toward (but, admittedly, leaves underdeveloped) the extent to which narrative practices, including practices of self-narration, can function as techniques of self-formation that can defy the normalising tendencies of power relations. Confessional practices thus ambivalently position the subject "both as producer of and as produced through her discourse."[13] Writing too, as a technology of the self, can be ambivalently identified both as an active self-constituting activity and as the tool that enables the writing of objectifying 'case histories'. Self-narration, then, has to be considered as both a form of productive self-writing and, ambivalently, a form of confession. Furthermore, there is a politically subversive dimension in the work of self-transformation. Since self-understandings develop and emerge within socio-cultural and historical contexts, self-transformation is not just a dandy, self-absorbed aesthetic activity, as some have characterised it,[14] but "involves a critique of historical, as well as current, social conditions and norms."[15]

Autobiography too as an act of self-narration can function ambivalently as a confessional exercise or a work of self-writing. If autobiographical self-narration aims solely or predominantly at discovering an inherent truth about oneself, then it qualifies as an example of normalising confession according to Foucault's account. Conversely, autobiographical self-narration can function as a critical practice of active subject-formation (or active subjectification, as opposed to passive processes of subjection or, worse, subjugation) if it reflects critically on the processes of subjectification themselves, or if it seeks to reveal the discursive conditions and practices of power that enable a particular self-characterisation over others. By presenting identity as multifaceted, complex, dynamic and not static, autobiography can challenge fixed identity categories,

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[12] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 146 [emphasis added].
[13] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 149.
[14] See Pierre Hadot, "Reflections on the notion of 'the cultivation of the self'," in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, ed. François Ewald, trans. Timothy J. Armstrong (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992 [1989]), 225-231.
[15] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 151.

while also remaining an activity that is restricted by historico-cultural conditions that determine identities. Of course, it is not always easy or desirable to break away from these conditions of social recognisability as this can be painful for the individual, even if these conditions themselves are a source of pain.

A theoretical outlook that combines Foucault's work with feminist concerns emphasises that the personal or subjective is always (if not always already) tied to the social or political. This concern is perfectly captured in the feminist slogan from the 1960s, 'the personal is political', the aim of which was to highlight how problems that women might have thought were their individual problems – such as a case of domestic violence or sexual abuse – are, in fact, a reflection of wider socio-political structures. The next section elaborates this insight, paying particular attention to how this feminist reflection informed feminist practices of self-narration.

II Narrating between/beyond the Personal and the Political

Except for occasional references in interviews to practices of friendship or sexual pleasure,[16] Foucault did not dwell much on how contemporary practices of the self can function critically rather than hegemonically. One of the reasons why McLaren's work is fruitful is that she identifies feminist practices of autobiography and consciousness-raising that can be analysed through Foucault's ideas on confession and parrhesia. McLaren proposes that:

> Women's autobiography can be viewed as a feminist technology of the self because the subject plays an active role in her own self-constitution. Yet autobiography can also be confessional. Confessional autobiography reiterates normalizing discourses and ties one to one's identity. Autobiography, then, can be either an exercise in subjection, if it produces the required truth about oneself, or

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[16] See Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 163-173.

it can be a process of subjectification, if one critically examines how one came to be as one is with reference to normalizing discourses.[17]

As an example of autobiography in the critical sense, McLaren cites the work of Morwenna Griffiths, who coined the notion of critical autobiography: "an autobiography will add to reliable knowledge if it makes use of individual experience, theory, and a process of reflection and re-thinking, which includes attention to politically situated perspectives. This is a 'critical autobiography'."[18]

Besides feminist autobiography, McLaren identifies feminist consciousness-raising groups as entailing possible critical and subversive practices of self-narration. McLaren identifies these practices as technologies of the self which, although imbued with power relations that may sway them toward hegemonic practices that sediment power's grip on the individual, can also function critically as creative practices of personal and social transformation. McLaren recognises that an emphasis on "techniques of the self as political does not reduce politics to the personal, or preclude collective action or structural changes."[19] This critique, often voiced by critics of so-called 'identity politics', overlooks the utility and necessity of rooting macro-analyses of society in individuals' experiences. Moreover, micro and macro perspectives are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they can reinforce each other in such a way that self- and social transformation are theorised together. Consciousness-raising occupied a central role in second wave feminist practices and, as McLaren writes, "is often viewed as the cornerstone of the women's liberation movement in the United States [and] originated with the second wave of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s."[20] Despite its prominent status, feminist consciousness-raising was a highly contested practice within the women's movement. Some of its critics argued that it was not properly political (whatever that means) because of its insistence on the personal. Other critics attacked the practice on the basis that it

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[17] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 152.
[18] Morwenna Griffiths, "Autobiography, Feminism and the Practice of Action Research," *Educational Action Research* 2, no. 1 (1994): 76.
[19] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 145.
[20] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 155.

assumed a false homogeneity among the experiences of women and obscured individual differences of race, class, and sexual orientation.[21] Another line of criticism of such practices argues that an excessive zooming in on individuals' lives "can result in a stultifying political correctness,"[22] and that "[t]his displacement of the political by the personal may lead to a merely individualistic concern with lifestyle."[23] This section does not rehearse such criticisms of consciousness-raising practices and identity politics but, rather, focuses on how such practices of self-narration resisted being drawn toward, or limited by, individualising confessional discourse.

Proponents of practices of consciousness-raising argued that the strength of these practices lay in how women were empowered by the realisation that the daily struggles they encountered were shared by other individuals too and, as such, "were not personal pathologies, but reflected a larger pattern of social and political discrimination."[24] Through such practices of consciousness-raising, one's experiences of discrimination were not seen as referring back to a truth about the individual's identity; instead, this experience was *connected* to broader social realities that perpetuated these discriminations. The shareability of concerns among women, although surely subject to individual differences, could have an empowering function by leading to the creation of discourses and social movements that motivate social and institutional change. This empowering capacity of consciousness-raising, and its ability to root personal experiences in social factors, are expressed by various proponents of the practice: 'Consciousness-raising is one of the most political acts in which one can engage. In consciousness-raising, women learn that economics, politics, and sociology mean on the most direct level: as they affect their lives;'[25] 'Consciousness-raising is many things, but one thing it is not is psychotherapy, or any other kind of therapy. Therapeutic processes have been employed mostly to encourage participants to adjust to the social order. Consciousness-raising seeks

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[21] See McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 157-158.
[22] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 159.
[23] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 159.
[24] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 155.
[25] Claudia Dreifus, *Women's Fate: Raps From a Feminist Consciousness-Raising Group* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 6, quoted in McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 156.

to invite rebellion;'[26] '[t]he total group process is not therapy because we try to find *the social causes for our experiences* and the possible programs for changing these.'[27] The dissociation of consciousness-raising practices from therapeutic ones is instructive. Many (psycho)therapeutic practices foreground an individual's 'ailments' in isolation from their social causes and the contexts in which they are immersed. For this reason, they can be considered as confessional in the sense of having individualising tendencies.

Displacing this individualising emphasis with a broader socio-political outlook can have implications for a critical analysis of self-narration. On one hand, it shows that self-narration is always already caught up in dominant discourses and, thus, it is futile to think that self-narration can ever be a power-free and neutral activity. On the other hand, this entanglement is not fixed once and for all. Rather, self-narrations can occupy different configurations in relation to dominant discourses, resisting some of its effects and creating new counter-discourses. Poststructuralist, particularly Foucaultian, accounts of truth, power and subjectivity have been assiduous in detailing this uneasy balance between discursive co-option of self-narratives and critical resistant self-narration, as the next section shows.

III Is Truth-Telling, like the Subject, Dead?

Taking her cue from the heated feminist debates on the political utility and philosophical possibility of practices of truth-telling and self-narration, Mariana Valverde claims that:

> [t]he 1960s consciousness-raising group may have gone out of fashion, but many of the speech practices associated with it have become ubiquitous in both feminist and nonfeminist sites. Support groups, political gatherings, self-help meetings, informal conversations, and radio and television call-in programs are just some of

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[26] Dreifus, *Women's Fate*, 7, quoted in McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 156.
[27] Pamela Allen, *Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation* (New York: Times Change Press, 1970), 30, quoted in McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 157 [emphasis added].

the arenas in which various forms and styles of 'truth telling' are practiced by women.[28]

Valverde notes that such practices, crucial in so-called second wave feminism, became caught up in the polarising debates between feminists who "sing the praises of any and all autobiographical accounts"[29] and feminists who express postmodern scepticism about the value and possibility of such truth-telling since they "tend to see the quest for authenticity as deluded, and the construction of a unified humanist feminist subject as an ideological and political trap."[30] This important feminist debate has reached an impasse, Valverde claims, with theorists lumping such practices "under a single banner and [are] either praised or derided *in toto*."[31]

Valverde offers a sensible intervention in this debate. She argues that a critical account of practices of self-narration must be able to distinguish between classic confessional practices, and practices of truth-telling that have – or can have – different social and ethical effects. To account for the critical potential harboured in such practices, one must hold on to the critical and politically progressive potential implicit in various forms of self-narration and truth-telling. It is crucial to question the either/or format of setting a humanist truth-telling (whose aim it is to get to the root of a 'deep self') against a posthumanist mode of truth-telling (that follows the critique of transparent self-knowledge offered by thinkers like Foucault, Butler, Derrida and others). Such a binary would problematically imply that confessional discourse is unilaterally opposed to some form of truth-telling that is radically subversive or outside the 'humanist trap'.

Valverde rhetorically poses some questions often associated with the 'postmodern' theoretical attacks on truth-telling practices, which is worth quoting at length:

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[28] Mariana Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling in a Post-humanist World: A Foucauldian Contribution to Feminist Ethical Reflections," in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, eds. Dianna Taylor and Karen Vintges (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 67.
[29] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 67.
[30] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 67.
[31] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 67.

Isn't experience always linguistically and culturally constructed? Don't we always resort to stereotyped narrative forms in telling our story, so that a transgressive tale of coming out as a lesbian ends up sounding remarkably like an evangelical conversion experience, and is to that extent hardly authentic? Isn't "the subject" dead? If Man is dead, does that mean that Woman is equally defunct? If we are not autonomous subjects who create meanings, as eighteenth-century European intellectuals believed, but rather mere effects of discursive and cultural practices, then what is the status of the tales we tell? Can honesty and sincerity be a sound basis for knowledge as well as ethics, if, as Jacques Lacan tells us, not only is self-knowledge impossible but, more disturbingly, self-identity is but a perpetual illusion?[32]

Valverde thinks that the 'postmodern' approach represented in these rhetorical questions pours cold water over truth-telling and practices of self-narration and, in so doing, (to retain the water metaphor) risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Although she is sympathetic to such deconstructive critical thought, as is this thesis, Valverde argues that there remains the appeal of a particular kind of subjectivity and a particular kind of confessional truth-telling. This is not nostalgic or naïve thinking, but a source of critical possibilities; as she aptly puts it:

"breaking the silence," however trite as a book title, and however problematic as a theoretical project in the post-Foucauldian age, remains a real, meaningful imperative for many ordinary women facing up to the old problems of oppression, violence, sexual shame, and so on. After all, most women who become feminists do so not by reading postmodern theory but by participating in some kind of truth-telling activity, such as coming out as a lesbian or going to a support group in which one learns that one's experience of rape or incest is part of a large collective problem.[33]

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[32] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 68.
[33] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 69.

In view of this reflection, Valverde proposes an approach that goes beyond the impasse that has exhausted such debates on feminist practices of truth-telling. She argues that both extreme sides of the debate hold untenable assumptions: whereas the 'humanist' proponent of truth-telling practices might be neglecting the insights brought about by a critical deconstruction of the subject, likewise the 'posthumanist' (or 'antihumanist') assumes that any practice of truth-telling rests on humanist assumptions. Valverde thus contends that not all practices of truth-telling are necessarily confessional or refer back to a 'deep truth' about subjectivity. One may hold on to the relevance of practices of self-narrations – as this thesis does – without holding on to notions of 'absolute truth' or 'transparent self-knowledge'.

This leaves room for a realm of non-confessional truth-telling or, better still, confessional truth-telling that moves beyond the politically and ethically debilitating effects of a particular form of confessional discourse. We know that Foucault explored such forms of truth-telling in, for example, Stoic practices of self-examination and in practices of parrhesia, as explored in the previous chapter. These practices do not operate at the level of the confessional; rather, Valverde claims, they are to be seen as operating "at a level that one could call Deleuzian – the level of de-centred ethical assemblages"[34] that go beyond the self as articulated by the disciplinary psychological disciplines. Like Deleuze, Foucault experiments with non-territorialising ways of thinking about selves, bodies and, ultimately, ethics: "he looked through ancient sources in order to find inspiration and resources for his desire to develop a post-psychological, post-disciplinary, post-Romantic ethics."[35]

However, Valverde notes that, when it comes to his analysis of such non-confessional practices, Foucault privileges 'high culture' and masculine sources, as attested by his various analyses of antiquity. For this reason, Valverde turns to practices in the feminist archive to shift this imbalance. She remarks that "women – and men – can and do much ethical work, and much truth-telling work, that does not fit the Rousseauian paradigm of

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[34] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 71.
[35] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 71.

authenticity and truth-telling."[36] Practices of self-narration, therefore, are "not the monopoly of that long confessional tradition that goes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau through 1960s pop psychology to Oprah Winfrey."[37] For example, she analyses feminist consciousness-raising groups in light of the tension between the confessional and the non-confessional. She argues that consciousness-raising groups constitute a site for Foucaultian *askesis*, or spaces for utilising technologies of the self and self-making. Consciousness-raising support groups function, Valverde claims, to create a strong link between individual stories and political demands, as well as to show how broader political analyses are rooted and manifest themselves in the life stories and bodies of actual individuals: "'Wife assault' or 'gendered violence' as a major worldwide issue can be embodied, made real, through individual storytelling; and by the same token, an individual who has gone through years of abuse can begin to see herself as a large collective rather than an isolated, dysfunctional individual."[38] This dual function of such consciousness-raising groups shows, for Valverde, that such practices of truth-telling or self-narration need not automatically amount to confession in Foucault's negative sense of the term, even if such practices do entail a confessional dimension. What Valverde is emphasising is that not all claims rooted in first-person experience are necessarily confessional truth-telling. As she puts it: "*Truth telling becomes confessional only under certain circumstances*, in situations in which the institutional and cultural context and the speaker's own analytic tools favor such a move."[39]

In this way, Valverde does not concede that the 'postmodern camp' has won the debate and that we need to do away with notions of authenticity. Instead, the philosophically more interesting and politically more progressive move is to recognise that "there are many different practices of truth telling and, therefore, many different kinds of selves, and that these can easily coexist, even in the same person."[40] Valverde hits on a strong point

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[36] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 73. For a similar analysis of feminist practices of self-narration, see also McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 145-164 and Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 191-235.

[37] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 71.

[38] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 82.

[39] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 83 [emphasis added].

[40] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 73.

here. Rather than insisting on strictly measuring the degree of veracity of the pro- and anti-self-narration theoretical camps, we could instead agree that *both* harbour important truths. For Valverde, different genres or ways and contexts of speaking raise different ethical problematics. It is not a matter of having to choose whether to be theoretically for or against first-person experiential accounts; as Valverde puts it: "Earnest accounts of one's experience of victimization do not have to be dismissed as naive by those of us who feel more comfortable with cosmopolitan irony: it is possible to respect both."[41] Not all ethico-political aims can be reached with the same set of practices or discourses. Moreover, no matter how confident and self-assured we are about our chosen set of practices, the aims of our struggles can very easily be frustrated or deferred. Valverde concurs with this point and argues that "if telling personal stories, to oneself or to others, is not one thing with a single meaning […] then it follows that telling one's story for a political purpose *cannot be regarded as a distinct act with a single, predictable effect*."[42] Despite the theoretical robustness that may motivate one's practices, it is not up to the individual to predict their reception and efficacy. As put by Foucault in personal communication with Dreyfus and Rabinow: "People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what *what they do does*."[43] It is in this light that I argue, with Foucault's ideas, that practices of self-narration occupy a rich but unstable space.

Valverde illustrates her point on the polymorphous nature of truth-telling, as well as the unclear determination between the confessional and non-confessional, by drawing on three modes of truth-telling: psychological, sociological, and antiscientific. The first mode of truth-telling draws on tenets of 'liberal psychology' to provide accounts that appeal to an individual's personality traits such as self-esteem, introversion, and so on. The second mode of truth-telling, Valverde claims, is a form of 'leftwing sociologism' in which an individual unburdens oneself by externalising the cause of one's suffering through an economic or sociological explanation. A third form of truth-telling is identified by

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[41] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 74.
[42] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 87 [emphasis added].
[43] Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 187 [emphasis added].

Valverde in the form of accounts that do not seek to unravel any causal explanations of their current predicament, but instead draw on 'antiscientific' accounts that draw on notions of luck or 'the stars'.[44] Valverde's overarching point is that there is no reason why such different modes of truth-telling and self-narration cannot co-exist in the same person. Indeed, she claims, the critical ethico-political potential of diverse self-narrating practices remains largely untapped "in the overly abstract debates about 'confession.'"[45] Although the ambivalence brought about by the possible incommensurability of truth-telling modes might not contribute "to building up what is grandiosely called 'feminist methodology,' [it] is very useful in everyday life."[46] Perhaps this is one of those scenarios where 'robust theorising' can learn a lot from everyday seemingly mundane practices, in the same way that such practices may be better informed if viewed through a critical theoretical lens.

Valverde's position presents an interesting position in the heated identity politics debates by loosening the rigidity of the extreme binary positions. Not all self-narration is confessional, and not all confessional discourse is necessarily 'bad': "Acknowledging that 'identity' (personal history, antecedents, biography) matters, and matters politically, does not have to mean accepting all the baggage of 'identity politics.'"[47] Self-narration is not a unitary and univocal activity; it happens in a variety of contexts, through a variety of techniques, and for a variety of aims. It would be philosophically and politically counter-productive to regard all such practices as confessional in the undesirable sense. Stressing the importance of embracing the diversity of self-narrating practices does not eliminate the possibility or desirability of critically evaluating norms and practices that are clearly more damagingly normalising than others. If, as stated above, "[t]*ruth telling becomes confessional only under certain circumstances*," and such circumstances are imbued with power relations that constrict individuals' potential for self-expression and self-transformation, then the unravelling of these circumstances and their hegemonic effects remains a critical task.

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[44] See Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 83.
[45] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 83.
[46] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 83.
[47] Valverde, "Experience and Truth Telling," 87.

The next section applies the views discussed in this chapter more specifically to narrations of trauma by survivors in institutional contexts. Trauma narrations proliferate in society, and intervene in a social context permeated with cultural discourses that make such narrations intelligible. Discourses and power relations come to bear on trauma narrations, regulating their intelligibility and governing their form and dissemination. However, beyond a merely 'negative' understanding of such an analysis, a key point being emphasised is that, despite their fragility and possible co-option, trauma narrations *can* function critically and subversively by revealing the power of norms and opening up new ways of being and narrating.

4.2 Governing the Narration of Trauma

I Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales

What the preceding sections highlight, ultimately, is that since self-narratives are socio-cultural products, they can be studied *sociologically*. In fact, the analysis of self-narration and of narratives of trauma in this section follows the sociology of narratives proposed by Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey, particularly in their distinction between subversive stories and hegemonic tales.[48] Ewick and Silbey study the conditions according to which a self-narrative can function in counter-hegemonic ways. They refer to a dual function of narrative: an *epistemological* role through which narratives reveal social and cultural meanings, and a *political* role whereby narratives are mobilised with subversive or transformative aims to counter culturally dominant ways of organising and interpreting social realities. This countering gesture is not to be understood as mere opposition: it is not clear where a narrative becomes a counter-narrative. Narratives, including counter-narratives, reflect – indeed, to an extent, *are* – power relations that facilitate particular ways of ordering reality while maintaining dominant social practices and their currency in place. "Narratives," Ewick and Silbey argue, "can function to sustain hegemony or,

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[48] See Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey, "Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative," *Law & Society Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): 197-226.

alternatively, subvert power."[49] It is not easy to neatly delineate where hegemony ends and subversion begins; indeed, the two phenomena are, by their complex nature, not clearly demarcated in this convenient way.

To unpack this difficult tension, Ewick and Silbey analyse what they call the social organisation of narrative by suggesting that "narratives are told for a variety of reasons, to a variety of audiences, with a variety of effects."[50] They highlight that narratives are not told in a random manner; there are contexts that regulate (by eliciting as well as by discouraging) *when* a narrative is given. Even if it is determined that it is a right context for narration, social norms and conventions govern the narrative content, that is, *what* gets narrated. Not any type of content is expected and treated favourably. Ewick and Silbey cite an example from the courts where narratives that defy the court's definitions of a coherent and persuasive account tend to be treated "as filled with irrelevancies and inappropriate information."[51] This also raises questions on whether narratives need to fulfil certain *performative conditions* in order to be treated as credible. Ewick and Silbey note that, especially in court contexts, true accounts are disbelieved simply because they do not satisfy the implicit presentation requirements. From a critical theory perspective that seeks to reveal how power relations function, it is crucial to analyse how a subject's credibility is tied to specific discursive norms, and the follow-up question should ask about who has access to such knowledge of norms, and what kind of narratives are being precluded from the start by these norms. Thus, "[t]he social organization of narrative or storytelling regulates not only when and what kinds of stories can be told, it also governs […] *how* stories are told."[52] Lastly, alongside the *when* [context], the *what* [content] and the *how* [presentation], narratives are also socially organised with regard to their intention, that is, with regard to their *why*: "storytelling is strategic. Narrators tell tales in order to achieve some goal or advance some interest. […] We tell stories to entertain or persuade, to exonerate or indict, to enlighten or instruct."[53]

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[49] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 200.
[50] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 205.
[51] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 207.
[52] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 208 [emphasis in original].
[53] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 208.

These different dimensions of narratives operate simultaneously. To some degree, narratives must satisfy some narrative and social expectations if they wish to be intelligible and efficacious; otherwise, they are condemned to unintelligibility or triviality. Inevitably, narratives rely on social conventionality, which means that "[b]ecause of the conventionalized character of narrative, then, our stories are likely to express ideological effects and hegemonic assumptions."[54] The hegemonic contribution of narratives take place through various means, for example when they reproduce existing structures of meaning and power, or when narratives stifle and preclude alternative narratives by presenting themselves as the only viable or credible narratives. Narratives also function hegemonically when "they conceal the social organization of their production,"[55] and hide the fact that their significance and reach are cultural phenomena, and thus are not unquestionable.

Importantly, Ewick and Silbey emphasise that narratives contribute to existing hegemonies "by effacing the connections between the particular and the general."[56] This echoes McLaren's characterisation of feminist consciousness-raising groups as possibly embodying parrhesia by resisting individualising power. Foucault highlights how power does not only act in a *totalising* manner by aspiring to give, despite cracks and resistance, an exhaustive account of the individual; power is also *individualising*, that is, it uses the notion of individuality as a vehicle for normalisation and subjection.[57] Narratives can be studied in a similar way. Besides offering totalising schemas of interpretation, power functions hegemonically on narratives by individualising. Ewick and Silbey argue that this happens, for example, in the legal system:

> In fact, given the ideological commitment to individualized justice and case-by-case processing that characterizes our legal system, narrative, relying as it often does on the language of the particular and subjective, may more often operate to

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[54] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 212.
[55] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 214.
[56] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 215.
[57] See Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 332.

sustain, rather than subvert, inequality and injustice. The law's insistent demand for personal narratives achieves a kind of radical individuation that disempowers the teller by effacing the connections among persons and the social organization of their experiences.[58]

This point goes some way toward suggesting what constitutes a *counter-hegemonic* or *subversive* narrative. Counter-narratives, thus, are not the absolute opposite of hegemonic narratives; it might be the case, following Foucault's formulation, that there is no 'outside' to power relations,[59] and that counter-narratives work through the same logic of power relations and 'merely' thwart or frustrate the intended outcomes of power. Ewick and Silbey characterise narratives as subversive insofar that they emplot a connection between "biography and history."[60] This does not amount to reducing an individual's narrative to the broader socio-historical conditions that give rise to it, nor does it generalise an individual's narrative. Rather, "subversive stories recount particular experiences as *rooted* in and part of an encompassing cultural, material, and political world that extends beyond the local."[61] According to Ewick and Silbey, subversive stories:

> are those that break the silence. Stories that are capable of countering the hegemonic are those which bridge, without denying, the particularities of experience and subjectivities and those which bear witness to what is unimagined and unexpressed. […] Subversive stories are narratives that employ the connection between the particular and the general by *locating the individual within social organization*."[62]

But this is not a straightforward matter; it is not up to the individual narrator to emplot such a connection between the individual and the social organisation. Narratives, of trauma for example, can veer between hegemonic normalisation and subversive

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[58] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 217.
[59] See Michel Foucault, "Power and Strategies," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 141.
[60] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 218.
[61] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 219 [emphasis in original].
[62] Ewick and Silbey, "Subversive Stories," 220 [emphasis in original].

parrhesiastic truth-telling despite the aims of the speakers, as the following section on survivors' discourse shows.

II Swaying Survivors' Discourse

In their excellent analysis of survivors' discourse through a Foucaultian theoretical lens, Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray locate a tension that surrounds and haunts trauma narratives. On the one hand, narratives of trauma can function critically and subversively to reveal and disrupt existing hegemonic discourses and practices. But, equally, on the other hand, the flexibility of power relations can neutralise this subversive potential by transforming it into another technique by which power functions. Reflecting on the constantly emerging narratives of rape, incest and sexual assault, Alcoff and Gray ask: "Is this proliferation and dissemination of survivor discourse having a subversive effect on patriarchal violence? Or is it being co-opted: taken up and used but in a manner that diminishes its subversive impact?"[63] The authors acknowledge that practices of 'speaking out' and 'breaking the silence' have great critical potential in calling for and effecting political transformation, but they also recognise that such practices ought to be analysed as discursive acts that, like any discursive event, are subject to entanglement and co-option by power relations that can sterilise and commodify such practices. [64]

Alcoff and Gray draw on Foucault's account of discursive and confessional power to show how, beyond the conscious intentions of speakers, power functions through:

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[63] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 261.

[64] This point may also illuminate analyses of the 'Me Too' movement. Some analyses, particularly critical ones, have used Foucault's ideas to regard the movement as possibly a manifestation of confessional power: "the act of confessing isn't an act of political liberation. From the confessional, to the therapist's couch, we are a deeply confessional society. The moment of release, however, comes at a price. As French philosopher Michel Foucault lays out in the *History of Sexuality*, the confessional has long been a space where power is exercised over individuals by compelling them to name their experiences, to reveal some hidden truth. #MeToo is the technological equivalent of the confessional. Instead of a couch, though, we have social media platforms, and the confessor is the audience that we post for and the platforms that collect the information we post. Not only do we hand over our power when we confess, but we subject ourselves to surveillance." Samatha Rose Hill, "Why #MeToo Is Not For Me," *Medium*, November 4, 2017, medium.com/amor-mundi/why-metoo-is-not-for-me-a8472da49034.

multiple and subtle mechanisms by which dominant discourses have co-opted our collective speech and whether this tendency toward co-optation can be effectively resisted. One of our central concerns will be how the tendency of the confessional structure to disempower the [person confessing] can be overcome.[65]

Alcoff and Gray "explore the transgressive character of survivors' speech"[66] not to conclude that survivors' narratives are unilaterally powerful, but to show how survivors' discourse constitutes a site of unstable conflict. Despite efforts – systematic, structural, or cultural – to silence and discredit survivors, their discourse persists in, echoing Cynic parrhesia, "disgusting and disturbing […] the listeners' constructed sensibilities."[67] Moreover, survivor speech intervenes at a discursive level by introducing into the realm of the thinkable categories such as "'rapist father' or 'rapist boyfriend' as an object of discussion or analysis."[68] Survivor speech also positions itself as demanding to be heard, posing a challenge to "conventional speaking arrangements: arrangements in which women and children are not authoritative."[69]

However, although survivors' narratives of trauma can function to rattle and disconcert, "the speaking out of survivors has been sensationalized and exploited by the mass media, in fictional dramatizations as well as 'journalistic' formats such as […] television talk shows."[70] These techniques amount to the silencing of the subversive potential of trauma narratives, or serve "to channel it into nonthreatening outlets."[71] Such nonthreatening outlets include an excessive focus on the individualising facet of the narrative which places the prime emphasis on the individual narrative while failing to regard how the trauma suffered connects to wider structural issues. In the spirit of consciousness-raising practices discussed above, connecting individual narratives to wider social causes does not amount to obscuring the individual, or writing him or her out of the narrative. Rather,

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[65] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 263.
[66] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 263.
[67] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 266.
[68] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 266.
[69] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 267.
[70] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 262.
[71] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 268.

the point is to show how individual experiences are made possible by broader social conditions, and that a therapeutic emphasis on the former may fail to capture the role of the latter. Another nonthreatening outlet is to transform survivors into "docile, self-monitoring bodies who willingly submit themselves to (and thus help to create and legitimate) the authority of experts,"[72] allowing such experts to position themselves as possessors of universal truths. In such circumstances, "[i]t is the expert rather than the survivor who will determine under what conditions the survivor speaks and whether the survivor's speech is true or acceptable within the dominant discourse's codes of normality."[73]

It is in the midst of this unstable terrain that survivors' narratives of trauma exist, with their potential to subvert being continuously subject to intricate recuperation tactics. 'Speaking out' as a political tactic loses its critical efficacy if and when it amounts to passing everything having to do with trauma "through the endless mill of speech."[74] As Alcoff and Gray ask, while recognising that there is no one clear answer to their questions:

> has it [the growth of the phenomenon of speaking out] simply replayed confessional modes which recuperate dominant patriarchal discourses without subversive effect, or has it been able to create new spaces within these discourses and to begin to develop an autonomous counterdiscourse, one capable of empowering survivors? Given that power operates not simply or primarily through exclusion and repression but through the very production and proliferation of discourses, should we not be more than a little wary of contributing to the recent proliferation of survivor discourse?[75]

This wariness complements Foucault's own hesitance in uncritically regarding any seeming practice of resistance as obvious, unilateral and actual resistance, without acknowledging that this presumption of subversion would, in fact, be mistaking power for

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[72] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 260.
[73] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 271.
[74] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 21.
[75] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 275.

its ruse and rashly confusing the cure with its lure. As Foucault cautions at the end of *The Will to Knowledge*: "The irony of this deployment [of sexuality] is in having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance."[76] Thinking that one is placing oneself outside the ruse of power could mean that one might be contributing to the solidification of power relations, despite one's best intentions.

Alcoff and Gray's analysis does not pour cold water over any attempt to subvert the grip of hegemonic power. Rather, they speak from the position of survivors motivated by concerns of justice and empowerment, who recognise that human experience is imbued with theory and discourses, and thus "always already political."[77] In conclusion to their charged analysis, they highlight how "[a]s survivors, we must develop and identify methods and forums in which emotional expression can activate the subversive potential of our rage,"[78] amid attempts to discredit survivors' narratives on the basis of their emotional presentation as either 'too much emotion' (and thus manipulative) or 'too little emotion' (and thus as not credible). Ultimately, the subversive potential of survivors' narratives of trauma can be unleashed if the depoliticising and silencing strategies of power that channel the narratives through the authoritative and familiar discourses are overridden. Managing this may elevate trauma narratives from the realm of the subjugated confessional to the status of *critical witnessing*: "to speak out, to name the unnameable, to turn and face it down."[79] This empowered and empowering use of trauma narratives is a way "to make survivor discourse public in such a way as to minimize the dangers of speaking out for survivors yet maximize the disruptive potential of survivor outrage."[80] Narrating from a position of outrage in a sociality that resists listening to one's suffering, or that is only able to hear suffering on its own terms can be a risky form of truth-telling. The next section considers the courageous truth-telling typical of such practices of self-narration as instances of parrhesia.

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[76] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 159.
[77] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 283.
[78] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 286.
[79] Nancy Ziegenmeyer, *Taking Back My Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 218, quoted in Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 287.
[80] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 286.

III The Subversive Truth-Telling of Trauma: Survivors as Parrhesiasts

Despite the popularity and boom of autobiographical trauma memoirs in recent decades, trauma narratives are not always well-received. There is a tendency for the utterances of traumatised individuals to be ignored, intentionally misinterpreted, or treated with suspicion. It seems that narratives of trauma must first conform to the socially desired schemas before they can be received with empathy. If not in conformity with the desired framework of meaning, such narratives by shattered selves are perceived as a possible threat. However, despite these risks and pressures that surround the narratives of traumatised individuals, narratives of trauma still harbour the potential to threaten hegemonic effects of power. Despite their fragility, narrations of trauma can constitute a socially engaged practice of parrhesia.

Jenny Edkins argues that trauma is characterised not just by the feeling of utter powerlessness associated with it, but also by a betrayal of trust when one's community is a site of danger rather than shelter. This betrayal of trust, she writes:

> can be devastating because who we are, or who we think we may be, depends very closely on the social context in which we place and find ourselves. […] If that order betrays us in some way, we may survive in the sense of continuing to live as physical beings, but the meaning of our existence is changed.[81]

Améry, an Auschwitz survivor, captures this point in his poignant remark: "Every morning when I get up I can read the Auschwitz number on my forearm. […] Every day anew I lose my trust in the world."[82] Referring to Améry's quote, Edkins remarks that "[i]t has become plain to a survivor that the appearance of fixity and security produced by the social order is just that: an appearance."[83] Nonetheless, Edkins continues, the survivor is dependent upon that same social, political and discursive order to tell his tale: "This is the

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[81] Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.
[82] Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 94, quoted in Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 8.
[83] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 8.

dilemma survivors face. The only words they have are the words of the very political community that is the source of their suffering."[84] Yet, following Foucault's characterisation of discourse as risky, strategic and tactical, the use of language by trauma survivors may disentangle the taken-for-granted meanings of terms. Traumatised individuals' narratives of what they endured can have a politically subversive role:

> The testimony of survivors can challenge structures of power and authority [and] strip away the diverse commonly accepted meanings by which we lead our lives in our various communities. They reveal the contingency of the social order and in some cases how it conceals its own impossibility. They question our settled assumptions about who we might be as humans and what we might be capable of.[85]

Des Pres echoes this point in his incisive description of the subversive character of survivors' testimonies: "The survivor, then, is a disturber of the peace. He is a runner of the blockade men erect against knowledge of 'unspeakable' things. About these he aims to speak, and in so doing he undermines, without intending to, the validity of existing norms. He is a genuine transgressor, and here he is made to feel real guilt."[86] Survivors' testimonies, then, emerge as untimely, unusual, irregular and unwanted because of their untamed character. Testimonies can be a coping mechanism for survivors, an opportunity to finally render in speech that which has haunted them. Trauma testimonies persist; as Des Pres puts it, they are "given in memory, told in pain and often clumsily, with little thought for style or rhetorical device."[87] Narratives of trauma are told with hesitance, urgency and brutality. It is for this reason that, for the sake of preserving the stability of the social order, it would be better if survivors remained silent; otherwise they may be forcibly silenced. Survivors' testimonies are risky endeavours; thus, they can qualify as acts of parrhesia. Beyond the stable, secure and regulated (and regulatory) truth, the truth typical of survivors' testimonies destabilises. The same can be said of the affective

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[84] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 8.
[85] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 5.
[86] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 42-43.
[87] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 29.

dimension of survivors' voices – the anger, delusion, bitterness, hopelessness: "Their anger was not new. It was 'old, atavistic. We were angry as all civilised men who have ever been sent to make murder in the name of virtue were angry.'"[88] These emotions present a risk to normalising processes of subject formation.

In the so-called Western world, the regulation of this domain of emotions falls under the monopoly of the predominant psychological discourses. The aforementioned anger and emotions of survivors find themselves expressed in a depoliticised and depoliticising psychologist's or psychiatrist's office, and find themselves contributing to the survivors' diagnosis of, say, PTSD. This is one of the techniques of power by which the destabilising effects of survivors' narratives are neutralised. Such diagnosing, enabled by the category of PTSD (which, ironically, was partly fuelled by veterans' lobbying in order to be eligible for compensation if injured in combat) amounts to pathologisation and is a form of depoliticisation. As Edkins writes: "Those who survive often feel compelled to bear witness to these discoveries. On the whole, the rest of us would rather not listen. A frequent excuse is that the horrors survivors testify to are too terrible. They are 'unimaginable': we need not listen because we cannot hear."[89] Agamben too considers the silencing effect that is brought about when the Holocaust is given a quasi-mystical or ineffable status:

> I was accused of having sought to "ruin the unique and unsayable character
> of Auschwitz." I have often asked myself what the author of the letter could
> have had in mind. The phenomenon of Auschwitz is unique. […] But why
> unsayable? Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical? […]
> To say that Auschwitz is "unsayable" or "incomprehensible" is equivalent
> to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one does with a god. Regardless of
> one's intentions, this contributes to its glory.[90]

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[88] Edkins, 7. The quote she cites is from the US Marine veteran Michael Norman, quoted by Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 27.
[89] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 5.
[90] See Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 31-33.

To avoid this depoliticising and silencing effect, Edkins adopts a Foucaultian genealogical approach to power to show how trauma can be used as an instrument of power, rather than as critical resistance. Normalisation and medicalisation of survivors amounts to their depoliticisation by silencing or neutralising them: "[I]n contemporary culture victimhood offers sympathy and pity in return for the surrender of any political voice."[91] When unleashed, the political voice of the survivor has the potential to alter dominant, particularly liberal, conceptions of selfhood and sociality. Edkins maintains that trauma highlights the self's dependence on the social order, challenging the notion of the modern individual as a "separate, autonomous, sovereign individual."[92] She proposes a psychoanalytically-informed (and, to an extent, one could also say poststructuralist) understanding of subjectivity and the state as built upon the pretences of security, wholeness and closure, features which, she claims, are impossible to achieve.[93] Narratives of trauma can thus serve as counter-narratives on multiple fronts. Like Edkins, Meg Jensen argues that "testimony can challenge a state's version of events,"[94] particularly in relation to how an event or a trauma is commemorated. Erected public monuments may function to perpetuate the state narrative of a particular event, but can also function as "counter-monumental gestures"[95] that trouble the version of events presented by the state. Jensen compares such gestures to acts of risky truth-telling described by Foucault as parrhesia. The parrhesiast's speech is dangerous insofar as s/he speaks from an inferior position of power, and risks dangerous consequences. Despite the difficulties it entails, such speech is subversive since it can challenge that which is institutionally regarded as true.

Testimonies of trauma can also challenge institutional pressures by, for example, not succumbing to the pressures to testify or confess in accepted ways, or not reiterating the expected narrative, either in its content or in its format. Complexities, dangers and pressures surround, and will continue to surround, traumatic self-narration in whichever

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[91] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 9.
[92] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 11.
[93] See Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 10-11.
[94] Meg Jensen, "Post-traumatic memory projects: autobiographical fiction and counter-monuments," *Textual Practice* 28, no. 4 (2014): 701 [abstract].
[95] Jensen, "Post-traumatic memory projects," 702.

form it is made, be it in the form of memoir-writing, or in therapeutic settings, or in legal testimonies, or in the form of memorialisation of a historical traumatic event. Self-narration is caught up in institutional processes and power relations that favour specific forms of self-narration over others. These complexities, dangers and pressures surrounding the practice of self-narration, however, do not automatically transform it into a suspect activity. Various survivors of trauma regard the ability to provide a self-narrative in the aftermath of trauma as empowering; the need to present a coherent account of oneself after trauma persists and must be acknowledged. Such a need presents itself as a response to the pain that the traumatised subject suffers due to its fragmented sense of self. Nonetheless, this does not mean that such a need cannot be critically evaluated in light of hegemonic institutions, structures and rules that regulate self-narration with which this need to self-narrate may become intricately related. It only goes to show how attempts at (traumatic) self-narration will persist in their necessity, difficulty and pain.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The opening chapter delineated the various strands of research on trauma history and theory to indicate the different phases of work done in these areas, but also to situate the concerns pursued in this thesis. Subsequent chapters turned to Foucault's works to outline his views on self-narration, and to develop a theoretical approach inspired by his views that can be adopted to analyse narrations of trauma. This chapter and the preceding ones were motivated by Foucault's claim that "one of the main political problems would be nowadays, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves."[96] Power was shown to function intricately and intimately through practices of narrating oneself, and the fact that the possibility of resistance lies in such 'small practices' was also emphasised. It was argued that practices of self-narration can be swayed to the hard grip of normalising power, but they can also reveal the fallibility of power, its finitude, and can present critical and creative opportunities. This critical potential was further explored through Foucault's later works in the 1980s on the beginnings of the hermeneutics of the self and his studies of ancient practice of self-writing and parrhesia. Through these works, it was argued that

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[96] Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, 76.

self-narration could amount to an exercise in self-fashioning rather than referring back to a subjectifying inherent truth that could then be a tool of subjugation. The insights from Foucault's work were then brought into dialogue with feminist analyses of practices of consciousness-raising in order to apply them to the study of narration of trauma by survivors. Traumatic self-narration was analysed through a theoretical lens informed by Foucault's varied approaches to practices of self-narration, concluding that although there is always a risk that trauma narratives may normalise confessional discourses, the truth-telling of survivors' narratives of trauma can be compared to the courageous truth-telling of parrhesia in virtue of their possible ability to subvert norms.

The following chapters further enrich the theoretical approach to trauma developed in this thesis through a close consideration of Butler's work. Complementing Foucault's views on discourse, power and subjectification, Butler's work informs the critical approach adopted in this thesis to the ethical and political stakes of narrating trauma in institutional contexts. The next chapter identifies and delineates notions in Butler's work – such as precariousness, vulnerability and relationality – to add further theoretical layers to the Foucaultian analysis of self-narration proposed in the previous chapters. The subsequent chapter then considers how Butler's views on self-narration, particularly her critical emphasis on narrative coherence and its inherent difficulties, add further insights to the study of the ethics and politics of narrating trauma. The theoretical outlook developed in dialogue with Foucault's and Butler's work will then be applied to analyse contexts where trauma is narrated, namely in courts, in psychotherapeutic settings and within the asylum seeking process.

Chapter 5 Precarious Accounts of Oneself: Butler on Vulnerability and the Ethics of Self-Narration

This chapter turns to the philosophical works of Judith Butler to enrich the theoretical approach to trauma developed in previous chapters. Butler's work is explored in conversation with Foucault's insofar as her work too emphasises how power relations play a crucial role in the constitution of subjectivity. This chapter examines how Butler's development of the notions of performativity, precariousness, vulnerability and relationality inform her account of self-narration, expounded most systematically in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Butler's account of self-narration, which she develops in the context of her discussion of ethical subjectivity, troubles the conception of self-narration built around a sovereign subject who has full control and mastery over itself. According to her, relational self-constitution troubles closed and coherent self-narration. These ideas from Butler's work are used to study the ethics and politics of traumatic self-narration in the subsequent chapter, building on the preceding analysis of the same theme through Foucault's work.

5.1 From Performativity to Precariousness

I Gender Performativity and Vulnerability

Butler's early work is renowned for her revolutionary account of gendered identity, which she develops through the notion of performativity.[1] In *Gender Trouble*, Butler presents her critique of the metaphysics of substance which conceives of identity as a manifestation of a stable inner essence or core. She follows Nietzsche's argument that challenged the doubling involved in conceiving of a 'doer behind the deed'.[2] Yet although, over time, the appearance of a stable interiority is formed, Butler reverses the causal relation and

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[1] Excellent commentaries on Butler's work, particularly her earlier work, include Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2008); Vicki Kirby, *Judith Butler: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2006); Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

[2] See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22-34.

considers subjective interiority as an effect of exteriority. Butler contends that the emphasis on interiority reflects political motivations to regulate, control and police sexuality: "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality."[3] Butler argues that this approach sets the boundaries on which identities can count and be valued, and – echoing Foucault – maintains that such an approach establishes disciplinary and normalising strategies that delineate, regulate and police the acceptable, separating it from the prohibited, the normal from the pathological.

Against this conception of gender identity, Butler puts forward the idea of gender performativity. In her words: "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*."[4] Butler replaces the spatial metaphor of gender identity as being a sort of grounding with an emphasis on the temporal dimension that creates the illusion of a seamless identity over time, hiding the contingent groundlessness of gender. This contingency opens up gender to transformation. Butler here echoes Derrida's account of iterability, whereby although repeatability is key to every sign, repetitions do not merely create more of the same. While repetitions conserve the original, each repetition can be seen as introducing something different, creating new possibilities for transformation. Herein lies the productive dimension of performativity. Butler follows Derrida's critique of Austin and maintains that the performative produces that which it names, that is, the subject is not an autonomous agent who authors actions intentionally. The subject, however, is not unilaterally determined through a single act of constitution, but is brought into being through re-citation and repetition.[5]

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[3] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185-186.
[4] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191 [emphasis in original].
[5] For a discussion of the historical development of the concept of performativity, including Austin's use of the term, Derrida's critique, and Butler's account of performativity, see James Loxley, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2007).

This has given rise to two remarkably opposed interpretations of Butler. First, some commentators have read Butler's account of identity to imply a subjectivity that is completely determined by discourses and power relations, allowing no possibility for resistance (an old Foucaultian story). Against this interpretation, one could argue that no matter how far or deep determination and construction go, there always is *surplus*. No matter how clearly demarcated and policed the boundaries of gender are, these categories are not enough to comfortably capture the plurality of possibilities beneath stable gender identities or compulsory heterosexuality. Second, others, however, have read Butler's analysis as implying a voluntarism of sorts, that is, that everyone is free to choose and change one's gender as s/he pleases. In response to this interpretation of Butler's views, it is important to consider that Butler is clearly not implying that any gender performance enjoys equal social treatment. Butler contends that gender and sexuality are highly regulated and policed arenas: "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality."[6] The voluntarist interpretation of performativity has been further fuelled by Butler's discussion of drag and parody, where she claims that "[*i*]*n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*."[7] Butler argues that practices of drag and cross-dressing can have a critical and subversive role since they show how gender at large is a practice, an imitation, a performance; that, therefore, there is no such thing as an 'original' gender which is imitated or copied in, say, drag or gay subjects. Through her theorising of drag as potentially subversive, Butler is shedding light on the power (sometimes violent) of norms and discourses to establish what counts as true and real; as she writes:

> As a young person, I suffered for a long time, and I suspect many people have, from being told, explicitly or implicitly, that what I "am" is a copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real. Compulsory heterosexuality sets itself

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[6] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185-186.
[7] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187 [emphasis in original].

up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real implies that "being" lesbian is always a kind of miming.[8]

Butler's performative account of gender identity denaturalises gender, highlighting the unnecessary policing of gender and sexuality. As speech act theory shows us, a speech act or a performative can be successful or not. Gender performance too is measured by degrees of success. Its failure, however, has great stakes insofar as it can lead to social or actual death. This highlights the risk involved in gender performance; power in society facilitates some gender performances while rendering impossible other gender performances.[9] Butler highlights, therefore, how social existence entails various risks. Butler writes about the risk of becoming undone, the risk of not being secured within the current regimes of truth and order, the risk of being dehumanised, the risk of becoming socially unintelligible, the risk of being injured and harmed. There is also, however, the risk of something being denaturalised or subject to critique, when something can no longer be taken for granted. For Butler, this latter risk is what makes the practice of drag politically subversive, at least potentially. Critics have misconstrued Butler's point as implying a simplistic approach promoting parody and drag as the key to changing the

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[8] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 312.

[9] In *Undoing Gender*, Butler analyses various examples of individuals, particularly trans individuals, whose lives were rendered unliveable due to their gender performances: "Brandon Teena was killed on December 30, 1993, in Falls City, Nebraska after being raped and assaulted a week earlier for being transgendered. Mathew Shephard was killed (beaten and tied to a post) in Laramie Wyoming on October 12, 1998, for being a 'feminine' gay man. Gwen Araujo, a transgendered woman, was found dead in the foothills of the Sierra mountains after being assaulted at a party in Newark, California, on October 2, 2002." Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 251n.2. Elsewhere, Butler discusses Charles Howard's story: "I tell this story, when I'm trying to explain gender violence to people, about a guy in Maine who, I guess he was around eighteen years old [Charlie Howard was twenty-three years old when he was killed.] and he walked with a very distinct swish, hips going one way or another, a very feminine walk […] And he was teased by his classmates on the way to school and he got used to it and he just walked, and I think he even walked a little more outrageously the more he was teased. But one day he was walking to school and he was attacked by three of his classmates and [despite his pleas that he could not swim] he was thrown over a bridge and he was killed. And the question that community had to deal with […] was how could it have been that somebody's gait, that somebody's way of walking, could engender the desire to kill that person? […] And I think, if that young man could show that gender was that variable, it really raised the question for everybody else – and especially for those that attacked him – of whether their own genders were also perhaps not quite as stable or quite as fixed as they thought. […] I mean, a walk can be a dangerous thing. If you go for a walk, you're also vulnerable socially. […] You assert your rights of mobility and you take a certain risk in public space." See Judith Butler and Sunaura Taylor, "Interdependence," in *Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers*, ed. Astra Taylor (New York: The New Press, 2009), 204-205.

world for the better. As she says, "There are those who think that the text has belittled politics and reduced politics to parody; some claim that drag becomes a model for resistance or for political intervention and participation more generally."[10] Butler argues that drag can be subversive insofar as it shows gender to be imitative, thereby revealing the hegemony that gender produces, and challenging the claim of naturalness, reality and originality of heterosexuality.

However, drag faces risks of its own. It can be subversive but, importantly, not all drag is necessarily subversive and has positive political implications. Clarifying possible misinterpretations of her argument in *Gender Trouble*, Butler sustains her discussion of drag in *Bodies that Matter*, where she analyses *Paris is Burning*, a 1990 documentary on the ball culture and vogue dancing in New York and the African-American and Latino gay and transgender communities in the 1980s.[11] Such communities organised contests where they dress up, act and walk (as on a catwalk) in order to be judged on the criteria of how well they can perform their role and how 'real' their drag is. Butler argues that this documentary highlights how "drag is not unproblematically subversive."[12] As can be seen in the documentary, drag also tends to augment and re-idealise heterosexual norms without critically questioning them. Moreover, although such contestations can open gender up to further fluidity and flexibility, they are not free from violent and hateful responses, as Butler highlights through the case of Venus Xtravaganza. Venus was a trans woman performer, sex worker and aspiring model who was saving money for sex reassignment surgery. However, the failure to pass as a woman made her susceptible to violence from her clients who discovered what she called 'her little secret.'[13] This sometimes led to her having to run away through windows to avoid customers who felt betrayed and enraged for having been seduced by what they perceived to be a man. She was eventually killed on 21 December 1988, when she was strangled by someone, presumably by a client, who has never been found and brought to justice.

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[10] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 213.
[11] See Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 81-97.
[12] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 176.
[13] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 89.

Butler's early work contributes to a critique of identity as being a stable core, and of the subject as being an autonomous self-determining agent. Butler interrogates the conditions of possibility through which subjects emerge as intelligible or real subjects. Rather than free and autonomous, the subject emerges through norms and power relations. Since her early writings, Butler has considered the extent to which this susceptibility and dependence on norms exposes some lives to violence and bodily harm.[14] The subject's relation to norms is not a supplement to one's independent existence, but points towards the subject's dependence on such norms for its social intelligibility and survival. In this regard, Butler is reacting to views that conceptualise the subject as a self-enclosed, self-transparent, unitary and autonomous entity that can easily give a coherent account of itself. This conception of the subject has been critiqued by Butler in different ways throughout all her works, and it is within this context that her views on vulnerability and precariousness must be understood.[15]

Since her earliest work on how gender is performatively enacted and reiterated through acts of self-constitution,[16] Butler asked – and was pushed to ask – questions such as: "What about being affected? What about the ways in which we are formed or acted on?"[17] Influenced by Foucault and others, Butler engaged with these questions through theories of cultural construction, whereby social and discursive norms *act on* subjects to structure the realm of the thinkable, the liveable and the speakable. Nonetheless, Butler says, "I didn't have a way of explaining what that 'acting on' is."[18] This prompted her exploration of the notions of vulnerability, dependency, susceptibility and injurability. The point of this was not to posit a free and strong autonomous subject who constitutes itself as opposed to a vulnerably constituted subject. Indeed, throughout her work, Butler

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[14] Butler emphasises this dimension of her analysis of gender in the Preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*.

[15] In an interview, Butler describes how and why her earlier concerns with gender led her to a consideration of linguistic vulnerability and, later, of the role of vulnerability in ethics. See Aaron Aquilina and Kurt Borg, "The *CounterText* Interview: Judith Butler," *CounterText* 3, no. 2 (2017): 122-123. For a longer discussion by Butler on the relation between gender performativity and the precariousness of life, see Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 24-65.

[16] See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531.

[17] Aquilina and Borg, "The *CounterText* Interview," 122.

[18] Aquilina and Borg, "The *CounterText* Interview," 123.

deconstructs the active/passive dichotomy in order to show how the subject can be thought of as simultaneously acting and acted upon.[19] In recent work, Butler has similarly explored how vulnerability is not contrary to agency or resistance but, in fact, is its condition of possibility.[20]

Although associated more with her post-2004 work, vulnerability had already been foregrounded by Butler in an earlier text from 1997, *Excitable Speech*, in which she refers to *linguistic* vulnerability. There, she argues that humans are dependent upon linguistic categories that name subjects and bring them into being as socially intelligible agents. These speech acts exceed the individual, and point to a frame of reference that is beyond one's grasp. Linguistic vulnerability exposes subjects in such a way that interpellations name them irrespective of their choosing.[21] Subjects are dependent upon such interpellations for social recognisability and survival; yet, in their perpetuation, these same interpellations can also be or become painful or intolerable.[22] It could therefore be argued that the notions of vulnerability and precariousness have been operating in Butler's account of subjectivity since her early works. However, an expansion in Butler's use of these notions happens in *Precarious Life*, where she inscribes these notions in her account of subject-formation, particularly in how she develops this concept through notions of grief, loss, embodiment and precariousness. In *Precarious Life*, Butler inscribes the notion of precariousness within her account of subject-formation. To be a subject implies a corporeal state of being open to injury, a linguistic vulnerability that entails the possibility of being wounded; precariousness highlights the subject's susceptibility to loss, its

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[19] In this regard, Butler draws from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly his later work. See Judith Butler, "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche," in *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 36-62.

[20] See Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12-27.

[21] For Butler's use of the term 'linguistic vulnerability' in relation to Louis Althusser's account of interpellation, see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1-41.

[22] "There is no way to protect against that primary vulnerability and susceptibility to the call of recognition that solicits existence, to that primary dependency on a language we never made in order to acquire a tentative ontological status. Thus we sometimes cling to the terms that pain us because, at a minimum, they offer us some form of social and discursive existence. The address that inaugurates the possibility of agency, in a single stroke, forecloses the possibility of radical autonomy." Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 26.

dependency on norms and social conditions for its recognition and survival, as well as the constitutive power of relationality.

II Precarious Life: Precariousness and Precarity

Written in the wake of 9/11, the essays in *Precarious Life* are "a response to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from those events."[23] Butler argues that rather than taking the time to reflect deeply and seriously on the exposure to such vulnerability, the reaction of the United States in the aftermath of 9/11 was a heightening of nationalist discourse, surveillance mechanisms, human rights breaches and various forms of censorship. The events of 9/11 showed how easily human life can be expunged, and how vulnerable to injury the human body is. Such facts are surely reasonable causes of fear and grief since they foreground how that which one might hold on to dearly may be easily lost at the whim of another. In this case, the issue at hand is violence and terror, and Butler's question in this regard is: "what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war"?[24] In *Precarious Life*, Butler considers this question from both the social and the personal perspective insofar as these perspectives cannot be clearly dissociated. Thus, her analysis shifts from, on one hand, a psychoanalytically-informed understanding of loss, aggression and dependency to, on the other hand, reflections on the political reactions of the US in the aftermath of 9/11, such as human rights breaches in cases of indefinite detention and a lack of fair trials. Indeed, throughout the whole book, Butler's main concern is to reflect on the inevitable interdependency that defines life in order to rethink and reimagine – without grand utopian conclusions – the basis for a global political community.

Importantly, this rethinking amounts to conceiving of ethical and political responsibilities beyond the notions of self-sufficiency and sovereignty that have dominated philosophical and political discourses.[25] This reimagining, although urgent, is made difficult by the

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[23] Butler, *Precarious Life*, xi.
[24] Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.
[25] See Butler, *Precarious Life*, xiii.

broad currency of the notions of self-sufficiency and sovereignty. These notions have determined the terms of political debate in such a way that certain explanations of the violence of 9/11 were not considered as proper explanations but rather as exonerations. Such events were framed in such a way that allowed particular kinds of questioning or historical inquiries while precluding others. This was even reflected in the terminology used, where the use of the term 'terrorism' by the US aimed at portraying itself as an undisputable victim of violence, therefore justifying the use of limitless aggression against targets deemed as responsible for such an attack.[26] This framing of the event, Butler says, regulated and limited what counted as a legitimate critique in such a way that it influences "what we can hear."[27] The experience of the US being a victim in this unprecedented way represented a decentring of its ordinary dominant position.

One way through which this decentring was rectified was through the narratives given. The first-person point of view was emphasised in order to re-assert its centrality within the international political domain. In this way, the wound caused by the public manifestation of vulnerability is reversed into a demonstration of US leadership and strength. Butler asks whether there could have possibly been other narratives propounded by the US. By this, she does not mean to understate the value of narratives that emphasise the pain and tragedy suffered in 9/11: "These stories have to be told, and they are being told, despite the enormous trauma that undermines narrative capacity in these instances."[28] Rather, the challenge that Butler puts forward is to consider forms of narration that decentre the US from its supposed supremacy and, rather than acting as a self-sufficient autonomous agent to reach what it perceives to be just ends, collaborate in international coalitions, even those it does not lead, with the aim of fostering more global conditions of cooperation. Thus, while condemning the violence done against the US, Butler maintains that we can "consider our recent trauma to be an opportunity for a reconsideration of United States hubris and the importance of establishing more radically egalitarian international ties."[29] An important step toward this, Butler argues, is to step out of the

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[26] See Butler, *Precarious Life*, 4.
[27] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 5.
[28] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 7.
[29] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 40.

narrative perspective associated with US supremacy and "consider the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others."[30] This effort would constitute a response to efforts that were made to mask and hide the precariousness of life by denying the place of vulnerability in discussions of ethics and politics.

Butler maintains that a non-violent ethics and politics *can* follow from an awareness and serious consideration of this fundamental vulnerability and the intricate ways in which the subject is not self-possessed, but is bound to others in such a way that one finds oneself not fully in control.[31] She reads military political reactions as a denial of vulnerability, such as George W. Bush's statement on September 21, just ten days after the events of 9/11, that the time for grieving – a manifestation of one's vulnerability and recognition of one's dependency on others – is over and must be followed by resolute action in order to correct the suffered imbalance.[32] In *Precarious Life* and later work, Butler seeks to rethink a reversal of this reaction by insisting on the subject's fundamental dependency on external forces, be they social and cultural norms, other persons, or shared linguistic contexts. The challenge she thereby presents is how to conceive of political action and collective resistance which does not necessarily flow from a self-sufficient autonomous agent, but rather from a subject who is multiple, fractured and perhaps wounded. Butler's challenge is also to the posture of invulnerability that pretends it has the power to dictate the adequate time to stop grieving and to muster resolute agency.

Butler's analysis of vulnerability can seem to imply that she is proposing vulnerability as an essential feature that defines the human. If this is so, one may say, as has been suggested by some,[33] that she is proposing a new humanism, which would contradict her earlier critiques of universalism. In *Precarious Life*, Butler deals directly and critically with this suggestion when she writes:

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[30] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 7.
[31] It seems that Butler will further elaborate this discussion of non-violence in her forthcoming book, titled *The Force of Nonviolence: The Ethical in the Political*.
[32] See Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29.
[33] See Sina Kramer, "Judith Butler's 'New Humanism': A Thing or Not a Thing, and So What?," *philoSOPHIA* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 25-40; Drew Walker, "Two Regimes of the Human: Judith Butler and the Politics of Mattering," in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 141-166.

By insisting on a "common" corporeal vulnerability, I may seem to be positing a new basis for humanism. That might be true, but I am prone to consider this differently. A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen.[34]

Through her analysis, Butler does indeed invite a reconsideration of what it means to be human. Yet, in line with her critique of identity and the metaphysics of substance, she considers the 'human' as a category that is brought about and constituted through different iterations. The human is shown to be not merely a descriptive category, but also a normative one that is caught up in and framed by various power mechanisms and norms in such a way that it is not applied equally, and not everyone has the same kind of access to the category of the human.

Butler highlights this point in her discussion of the heightened grievability of some lives over others, as shown for example in the prioritisation of particular obituaries (American soldiers or civilians, for example) over others (Palestinian civilians or US targets, for example).[35] Hence, Butler writes, "[a] hierarchy of grief could no doubt be enumerated."[36] Consequently, obituaries as acts of nation-building "stage the scene and provide the narrative means by which 'the human' in its grievability is established."[37] Butler shows how this hierarchy emerges clearly, for example, when considering the treatment of the loss of lives brought about by the US military, described through the dehumanising language of 'collateral damage', as well as in the treatment of certain lives lost on 9/11 that were at the limits of human intelligibility: "The queer lives that vanished on September 11 were not publicly welcomed into the idea of national identity built in the

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[34] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 42-43. For other instances where Butler addresses this critique, see also Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 1-16 and Judith Butler and Arne De Boever, "Arne De Boever interviews Judith Butler – Demonstrating Precarity: Vulnerability, Embodiment, and Resistance," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 23, 2015, lareviewofbooks.org/av/demonstrating-precarity-vulnerability-embodiment-resistance.
[35] See Butler, *Precarious Life*, 34-38.
[36] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 32.
[37] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 38.

obituary pages, and their closest relations were only belatedly and selectively (the marital norm holding sway once again) made eligible for benefits."[38] Hence, although Butler wants to refer to a notion of a common human vulnerability, she does not overlook the fact that these features are not equally manifested or foregrounded: "I do not mean to deny that vulnerability is differentiated, that it is allocated differentially across the globe."[39] This is a significant qualification and perhaps not an immediately clear one. On one hand, Butler is insisting on the commonality and shareability of human vulnerability in order to rethink the notion of subjectivity and consider how this may inform a rethinking of a non-violent and more egalitarian global politics. However, on the other hand, Butler recognises that current socio-cultural realities imply that precariousness is unevenly distributed. As a result, Butler has been criticised as contradictorily holding that precariousness is a general existential condition equally applicable to all, as well as a particular condition that applies to some more than it does to others.[40]

In clarifying this possible contradiction, in later work such as *Frames of War*, Butler sought to revise her elaboration of the notion of precariousness by highlighting its links and intersections with the notion of precarity. As she writes, "[t]he more or less existential conception of 'precariousness' is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of 'precarity'."[41] Although lives are fundamentally precarious due to their public exposure, which makes them susceptible to loss, the notion of precarity complicates the simple assimilation of the notion of precariousness into a universal feature of subjectivity. This is because precarity "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death."[42] The crucial political task that Butler identifies is to recognise precariousness in more egalitarian ways. This task is also the task of critique, which entails a difficult critical engagement with the frames through which precariousness is made visible and lives are recognised as liveable or worth living.

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[38] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 35.
[39] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30-31.
[40] See Catherine Mills, "Undoing Ethics: Butler on Precarity, Opacity and Responsibility," in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 47-49.
[41] Butler, *Frames of War*, 3.
[42] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

Such a task is complicated by the mechanisms employed in order to subdue and hide the effects of vulnerability, by retaining the appearance and feeling of self-mastery and self-sufficiency. Moreover, precariousness cannot be properly or easily perceived and recognised because it refers to that feature of life which marks it as dependent upon relations to others, or being in the hands of others in such a way that the subject is impinged upon by its exposure to others whom one may or may not know. It is to a closer analysis of this latter point, as explained in Butler's important essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics" (reprinted as Chapter 2 of *Precarious Life*), that I will now turn.

III Grief, Dependency, Relationality

In "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Butler seeks to find a basis for community in what she considers to be two inarguable and inescapable dimensions of life: first, one's exposure to and complicity in violence and, second, one's vulnerability to loss and the mourning that follows. Butler claims that, despite being geographically and socially distributed unequally, experiences of losing something one had, or somebody one desired and loved, seem to be shareable in such a way that "[l]oss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all."[43] Corporeal existence binds us together in this experience of loss because the body is both the site of agency but also that which exposes us to others and potential injury. The social vulnerability of the body, therefore, is a crucial aspect of political constitution that marks the subject as "attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure."[44] Thus, although typically associated with one's private realm, the body as a social phenomenon has a public dimension: "my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life."[45] The fundamental vulnerability highlighted by the public exposure brought about by bodily existence forces us to consider subjectivity as fundamentally interdependent rather than independent. This conception of corporeal existence emphasises the inevitable relationality of existence, not only as a descriptive

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[43] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.
[44] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.
[45] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.

fact but as a normatively imbued dimension of social life.

Butler's discussion of vulnerability is framed in opposition to an account of political life that is built upon the presumption of autonomy.[46] She argues that through grief one can become aware of the way in which one is relationally constituted. This is because, as Butler describes it, the loss of another in, say, a human relationship must not be understood as two clearly distinct agents who related together and now no longer do so. Rather, the subject is constituted through that attachment to another in such a way that when one loses another, one also loses a part of itself. Thus, in accounting for a relationship with another, the subject may find itself challenged since it is the very constitution of oneself as an autonomous self-sufficient agent that is called into question through the dependency of the 'I' on another:

> I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must.
> Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.[47]

The notion of undoing is an important one in Butler's account of the subject.[48] The process of subject-formation is not a unilaterally constructive one. One is not only formed as a subject, as if this is a process that happens once and for all, but one may also be deformed or partially formed or may no longer count as a formed subject. Foregrounding the relationality at the heart of subjectivity counters the notion of an autonomous subject who is fully in control of one's actions or fully cognizant of oneself. The language of social construction, in these writings more than in her earlier writings, paves way for a softer language that speaks of the subject as being 'given over': "One does not always stay

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[46] It is important to emphasise that, in presenting this critique of autonomy, Butler is not implying that political movements struggling for rights of autonomy over one's body should cease to employ such a discourse. See Butler, *Precarious Life*, 25-26.

[47] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

[48] See, especially, Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 1-16.

intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel."[49] Hence, it is not a simply a matter of emphasising a relational view of the self over an autonomy-based one. Relations dispossess the subject as much as they constitute it; one is not only done (that is, constituted) by one's relations to others, but also undone and dispossessed by them.

Butler's notion of dispossession,[50] according to which the subject is not a self-determining agent, echoes Butler's earlier work on the question of agency, and on whether her ideas, fuelled by a poststructuralist or postmodern perspective, are complementary with the traditional feminist aims of emancipating women.[51] In *Precarious Life*, Butler employs the notion of dispossession in her discussion of ec-stasy, a notion she had considered in relation to subject-formation in her first major work, *Subjects of Desire*.[52] This is what Butler means by ec-stasy:

> To be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself, and thus can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or grief. I think that is I can still address a "we," or include myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways *beside ourselves*, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage.[53]

In this sense, the precariousness of life points towards an ecstatic relationality that emphasises the ways in which one is dependent upon others and is bound to others. One's

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[49] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.

[50] For the different senses in which Butler uses the term 'dispossession', see *Undoing Gender*, 7, 16, 19, 100, 111, 149 and, especially, Judith Butler, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

[51] See, for example, Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 194-203; Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xi-xxx; Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 35-57 and 127-143.

[52] See Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 43-59.

[53] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24 [emphasis in original].

life is necessarily implicated in the lives of others, and such entanglement complicates the extent to which one can sensibly or meaningfully speak of a self-enclosed 'I'. This entanglement of subjectivity, relationality and interdependence has great implications for how to theorise self-narration. How does one narrate oneself if 'one' and 'self' turn out to be more complicated matters than originally assumed? Do vulnerability and precariousness have an ethical import? How can one account for oneself responsibly, ethically and politically, if subjectivity is relationally constituted irrespective of one's immediate choosing? These are some of the questions with which Butler engages in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. This chapter will now turn to this text to analyse how the notions from Butler's work discussed in this section – vulnerability, precariousness, relationality – impact her account of self-narration and ethics, or the ethics of self-narration.

5.2 Vulnerability and the Ethics of Self-Narration

I Giving an Account of Oneself: Butler on Ethics and Self-Narration

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler presents her account of subjectivity, vulnerability and dependency in terms of questions of moral philosophy. Annika Thiem argues that although the dimension of ethics or moral philosophy has characterised Butler's writings since her earliest works, it emerges more explicitly in what were then (in 2008, when Thiem's book was published) Butler's most recent major works, namely *Precarious Life*, *Undoing Gender* and most prominently *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Principally, Butler's concern is how to think of responsibility or accountability in relation to a subject who lacks control and mastery over oneself, and who is not the cause of its own emergence. In other words, if the 'I' is given over to others, is shaped by norms and power relations, and is constituted through the relations it has with others, how can it account for itself? How can moral agency and accountability be retained if one moves beyond the autonomous, self-sufficient subject of mastery? In response to such questions, Butler argues that when the 'I' tries to give an account of itself, it must necessarily end up doing so in terms of a set of relations to others and to norms. This fundamental dependency and

relationality, therefore, exceeds the subject's capacities for narration in such a way that it cannot completely account for itself and for its emergence. Thiem situates Butler's work within debates of moral philosophy by foregrounding the two key concepts of responsibility and critique to show how poststructuralist ideas, such as Butler's, have a lot of insight to offer to questions of moral philosophy. This claim is bolder than it seems, especially if one considers it in the light of several denunciations of the utility of poststructuralism in moral questions "because of its trenchant criticisms of traditional moral philosophy and its centering on rational subjects and universal norms," leading to its characterisation (or caricaturing) "as a philosophy of nihilism that has contributed to a perceived erosion of the 'moral fabric' of society."[54]

Butler shows that the remits of moral inquiry and critique are intertwined since both investigate the norms that regulate how and what subjects come to be. Butler declares at the outset that such questions of moral philosophy or ethics spill over to political concerns and social critique. Indeed, for her, ethics and politics are not two clearly distinct realms, especially since the issue of subject-formation pertains to both domains: "In this sense, ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique. And critique finds that it cannot go forward without a consideration of how the deliberating subject comes into being and how the deliberating subject might actually live or appropriate a set of norms."[55] Thus, Butler positions herself alongside thinkers like Foucault, other poststructuralist thinkers, and Adorno in explicitly associating ethics with social critique. Various instances in *Giving an Account of Oneself* attest to this: "It will be necessary to reconsider

[54] Annika Thiem, *Unbecoming Subjects: Judith Butler, Moral Philosophy, and Critical Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 2. For a critique of Butler's poststructuralist feminism, see Seyla Benhabib, "Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, by Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995), 17-34. For a critique of Foucault's ethics and politics, see Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions," *Praxis International* 3 (1981): 272-287 and Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 238-293 and Richard Wolin, "Foucault's Aesthetic Decisionism," *Telos* no. 67 (1986): 77-86. For an account of Derrida's ideas on ethics, including their critics, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014 [1992]). For an excellent analysis of this inseparability of ethics and politics in poststructuralism through an engagement with the work of Levinas, Derrida and Nancy, as well as a survey of the literature that employs or critiques poststructuralist ideas within ethical and political debates, see Madeleine Fagan, *Ethics and Politics after Poststructuralism: Levinas, Derrida, Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
[55] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 8.

the relationship of ethics to social critique, since part of what I find so hard to narrate are the norms – social in character – that bring me into being;"[56] "Foucault, like Adorno, maintains that ethics can only be understood in terms of a process of critique, where critique attends, among other things, to the regimes of intelligibility that order ontology and, specifically, the ontology of the subject."[57] In this regard, Butler's views complement Foucault's, in that both regard subject-formation as an essentially social and political process, and, moreover, ethics is an extension of such an inquiry insofar as it reflects on how the self came to be and how its existence is sustained through socio-political processes.

For Butler, questions of ethics and politics do not only pertain to the ontological preconditions for the formation of the subject. Rather, such questions imply a critique of the discursive and socio-political conditions under which something is rendered real or intelligible. Butler further articulates the way in which she conceives of the relation between ethics and critique through Foucault's views on how norms and discourses determine subjectivity. Although these norms do not completely determine the subject, they regulate and delimit such an activity since they provide a framework upon which the subject depends for social and self-recognition. Butler builds on Foucault's point to argue that one's relation to these norms and to the regimes of truth that govern norms is also a relation to oneself. This means that a critical engagement with norms is also a critical engagement with oneself: "Critique is not merely *of* a given social practice or a certain horizon of intelligibility within which practices and institutions appear, it also implies that I come into question for myself. Self-questioning becomes an ethical consequence of critique for Foucault."[58] It is for this reason that the activity of narrating one's self has both an ethical and political dimension in such a way that makes it possible to speak of, and analyse, the *political ethics* of self-narration.

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[56] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 82
[57] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 109.
[58] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 23. For a similar analysis of the relation between ethical self-constitution and subject-formation, in dialogue with Foucault's works, see Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in *The Judith Butler Reader*, eds. Sara Salih and Judith Butler (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 302-322.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler shows how her ideas on vulnerability and precariousness impact her approach to the nature, limits and stakes of self-narration. She maintains that one's account of oneself, given in discourse, cannot fully express one's self because the public nature of discourse exceeds the self. Echoing Foucault's statement, often cited by Butler, "discourse is not life; its time is not yours,"[59] she writes that discourse interrupts the activity of giving an account of oneself in the same way that the formative character of norms and relations to others dispossess the subject from its autonomy and self-sufficiency. This is because "[t]his 'interruption' contests the sense of the account's being grounded in myself alone, since the indifferent structures that enable my living belong to a sociality that exceeds me."[60] Butler thus probes the extent to which the self can be narrated, that is, the narrativisability of the self, and the extent to which this narration can be coherent. What Butler means by 'accounting for oneself' goes beyond the strict connotations of moral or legal accountability in order to consider narrative accountability, that is, accounting for oneself in terms of a narrative; a story.

In light of her reflections on vulnerability and on how the subject is given over to a wider sociality beyond one's control, it comes as no surprise, therefore, that Butler does not ascribe to the subject the power to dictate freely and completely one's own story about who one is or how one came to be: "this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or mine alone. […] The narrative authority of the 'I' must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story."[61] Thus, Butler complicates the idea of self-knowledge obtained through one's self-transparency. It is not only the case that one does not know enough about oneself, as if *more* knowledge would do the trick. Rather, she implies that full self-knowledge is structurally impossible: "The 'I' can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one's own emergence as a subject who can know."[62] One cannot,

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therefore, simultaneously be a subject and 'look back' to its starting point, articulating that point of origin in words.

In view of this impossibility, does it mean that what remains of the attempt to construct a 'story' or 'narrative' about oneself is merely a fictitious or invented account that bears no resemblance to reality? In various instances in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler hints at this position when she cites various authors who claim that there is something in the process of offering a narrative account of oneself that corresponds to fiction. For example, referring to the possibility of self-narration in light of the impossibility of accounting for the conditions of the self's emergence, Butler writes that "[n]arration is surely possible under such circumstances, but it is, as Thomas Keenan has pointed out, surely fabulous."[63] Furthermore, referring to the powerlessness of the self with regard to recovering its origins, she maintains that "[t]he irrecoverability of an original referent does not destroy narrative; it produces it 'in a fictional direction,' as Lacan would say."[64] In this context, Butler writes, "I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know."[65] Butler considers the possible objection that, in admitting a limited possibility of accounting for oneself in narrative form, she is still trying to account for the conditions that precede (in space and in time) the subject, that is, the prehistory of the subject. Challenging this objection, Butler writes that her position of acknowledging that "there is no final or adequate narrative reconstruction of the prehistory of the speaking 'I' does not mean we cannot narrate it; it only means that at the moment when we narrate we become speculative philosophers or fiction writers."[66]

For Butler, thus, there is a necessary *failure* at the heart of attempts to narrate oneself. Indeed, it is this failure that one must consider in order to get to the heart of Butler's account of ethics. Butler's views problematise the subject's ability to grasp, know and master itself, and this lack of self-control and knowledge has often been associated with

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[63] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37. The reference to Keenan is to Thomas Keenan, *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
[64] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.
[65] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 39.
[66] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 78.

failure. However, Butler argues "that what we often consider to be ethical 'failure' may well have an ethical valence and importance that has not been rightly adjudicated by those who too quickly equate poststructuralism with moral nihilism."[67] Butler insists that it is in virtue of such perceived lack of agency that ethical responsibility is incurred:

> This postulation of a primary opacity to the self that follows from formative relations has a specific implication for an ethical bearing toward the other. Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of one's relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one's ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds.[68]

The next section dwells further on the various references to 'failure' in Butler's work to highlight the centrality of this notion to her account of self-narration, and of ethics and politics more generally.

II The Virtues of Ethical Failure

Butler concludes the first chapter of *Giving an Account of Oneself* by asking: "If I find that, despite my best efforts, a certain opacity persists and I cannot make myself fully accountable to you, is this ethical failure?"[69] Butler acknowledges this failure as being at the heart of subjectivity and ethics, but considers it as a productive failure insofar as the failure brought about by the opacity of the self to itself is a necessary feature upon which ethics must be based. In other words, this 'failure' is an important conceptual tool that Butler uses in order to elaborate conceptions of ethics and responsibility that take into account the precariousness of life and the opacity of the subject to itself. As Catherine Mills highlights:

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[67] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 21. For an analysis of this ethics of failure, see Mills, "Undoing Ethics," 41-64.
[68] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 20.
[69] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 40.

For Butler, it is not the achievement of autonomy – whether against or with others – that matters in ethics; rather, it is precisely the *failure* to achieve a condition approximating autonomy that is of primary significance. And notably, this failure is not occasional or circumstantial – it is a necessary feature of ethical subjectivity.

The upshot of this is that her ethics are less an ethics of relationality than they are an ethics of failure. In Butler's account of ethics, it is in the failure or incapacity to provide a full account of ourselves that our accountability emerges.[70]

Such references to the notion of failure in Butler's work are also present in some of her earlier work. In her critique of how discourses and power relations regulate a cultural matrix of intelligibility, she argues that failure to fit within such a matrix results in the production of abject bodies as necessary exclusions that uphold the socially accepted forms of being: "abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject."[71] In relation to the cultural frameworks that regulate and define the space and meaning of an intelligible sexuality, Butler writes that, "precisely because certain kinds of 'gender identities' *fail* to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain."[72] Butler shows how, despite its fragile and precarious position, this presumed failure can itself be an opportunity to subvert the rigid frames of intelligibility. Thus, although it is clear that failing to follow the social scripts of powerful norms exposes the individual to violence, there are nonetheless ethical and political opportunities tied with these perceived failures.

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[70] Mills, "Undoing Ethics," 52 [emphasis in original].
[71] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xiii.
[72] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24 [emphasis added].

Other significant references to failure are found toward the end of *Gender Trouble*. Tying up her main argument, Butler argues that the predominant conception of gender identity imposes the fantasy of a seamless grounded identity. This hides the extent to which gender identity is not grounded in a substance (substratum) but, rather, is produced in time and is structured by repeated acts. Butler emphasises how this repetition might not necessarily replicate sameness, but might open up different outcomes, including outcomes that run counter to the desired aims that powerful norms uphold. Failure to repeat certain norms or, rather, failure to repeat certain norms *in a particular way* may have important transformative effects: "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the *possibility of a failure to repeat*, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction."[73] This means that it is impossible for one to consistently repeat and embody social norms, and, in this regard, one will always fail. Norms themselves fail insofar as there is always excess that they cannot capture: "[t]he injunction *to be* a given gender produces *necessary failures*, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated."[74] Butler's point is that such failures are not individual failures or bad performances but, rather, point towards "a constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable."[75] This failure, like the failure to meet the socially regulated criteria of what constitutes an intelligible identity, is instructive and can shed light on new possibilities of subversion and resistance. This point complements Foucault's view that no matter how pervasive the effect of power relations may be on the constitution of subjects, there is always – except in exceptional states of domination – room for resistance and possibilities of transformation which, although emerging from the power relations themselves, thwart the intended outcome and point towards other forms of truth, power and subjectivity.[76]

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[73] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 192 [emphasis added].
[74] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 199 [first emphasis in original; second emphasis added].
[75] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 200.
[76] See Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 336 and Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 292-293.

Butler further elaborates on the notion of failure in *Bodies that Matter*, where she invokes this notion in relation to one's limited ability to provide a stable, authoritative and complete account of oneself, clearly anticipating her discussion of self-narration in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Interestingly, Butler links the *traumatic* with that which cannot be narrated, whereby the unnarratable is that which fails to be discursively captured or recognised:

> This injunction [to be or get "sexed"], requires and institutes a "constitutive outside" – the unspeakable, the unviable, the nonnarrativizable that secures and, hence, *fails* to secure the very borders of materiality. The normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as "being" – works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well. And in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt signification as its abject bodies or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, *the nonnarrativizable*, *the traumatic*.[77]

Butler elaborates further this point through an engagement with the work of Slavoj Žižek. Butler agrees with Žižek on the implications that the failure present at the heart of the processes of subject-formation has on the possibility of self-narration: "The subject is, as a result [of foreclosure], never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompletion of the subject."[78] Žižek's further claims that totalising and closed interpellations fail because of a *trauma* that haunts language and discursive formations. By 'trauma', what is meant here is a nonnarrativisable realm:

> Crucial to Žižek's effort to work the Althusserian theory through Lacan is the psychoanalytic insight that any effort of discursive interpellation or constitution is subject to failure, haunted by contingency, to the extent that discourse itself invariably fails to totalize the social field. Indeed, any attempt to totalize the

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[77] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 140 [emphasis added].
[78] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 141.

social field is to be read as a symptom, the effect and remainder of *a trauma that itself cannot be directly symbolized in language*. This trauma subsists as the permanent possibility of disrupting and rendering contingent any discursive formation that lays claim to a coherent or seamless account of reality. It persists as the real, where the real is always that which any account of "reality" fails to include.[79]

What, then, is to be made of these different references to 'failure' in Butler's work? Rather than being a weakness or a shortcoming, these necessary or 'structural' failures play a productive role. For example, foreclosure is necessary for the subject to emerge; dependency, as opposed to self-mastery, is necessary for ethics; the failure to give a coherent account of oneself is necessary for a constitutive relationality; the possible failures of performativity are necessary for social transformation; and so on. Thus, Butler's work has an implicit normativity that serves both as a critique of dominant conceptions – of subjectivity as coherent; of politics as programmatic and predictable; of ethics as categorical – and as a positive account of an ethics and politics of vulnerability.[80] The next section provides a sketch of such an ethics and politics, whereas the subsequent chapter then considers how these ethical and political insights from Butler's work can illuminate an analysis of the ethics and politics of traumatic self-narration.

III Normative Risks and Potentials: Towards an Ethics and Politics of Vulnerability

Butler's thought suggests that apprehension of precariousness and vulnerability has a normative potential to inspire an ethics and politics that cater for more liveable lives in a more inhabitable world. However, this apprehension only has normative *potential* and not strong ethical *prescriptions*. Thus, although Butler's work does not seek to be prescriptive in this strong sense, questions can still be asked on the normative appeal of her views on vulnerability. Such questions include: What are the ethical obligations that follow from

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[79] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 143 [emphasis added].
[80] For a systematic account of Butler's ethics and politics of vulnerability, which also situates Butler's views within the broader literature on vulnerability, see Erinn C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2014).

awareness of vulnerability, how strong are these obligations, and where do these obligations emerge from? What political potential does vulnerability entail, and what strategies must be adopted in order to actualise this potential? These questions seem particularly pertinent in light of Butler's soft ethico-political language of failure discussed in the previous section. As with other poststructuralist ethical and political perspectives, Butler acknowledges that there is no necessary link between her theoretical ideas and her ethico-political aspirations. Nonetheless, the normative force of her work must not be underestimated.

Throughout her writings, Butler has continuously sought to link her reflections on precariousness and the interdependency that constitutes subjects with the normative aims of an ethics of non-violence. She concedes that there is no necessary causal link between the two: "The postulation of a generalized precariousness that calls into question the ontology of individualism implies, although does not directly entail, certain normative consequences. It does not suffice to say that since life is precarious, therefore it must be preserved."[81] This means that the normative aims being presented *can* be consistently read from the ideas being put forward by Butler, but these aims are not the only possible outcome. An awareness of one's, and especially others', vulnerability can lead to violent abuse of others for one's advantage rather than to an ethical sensibility. This marks a tension in the normative suitability of Butler's aims. As Ann Murphy argues, despite the fact that Butler has articulated her ideas on precariousness in line with her aspiration for a less violent world, "she recognizes that attending to vulnerability can incite violence and/or hospitality in equal measure."[82] This contention follows on from her work in *Precarious Life* where Butler argues that the body is the site of touch and care but, equally, of injury and abuse. Mills too critiques Butler's account of normative ethics, by arguing that the link she draws between precariousness and normative commitments to equality and justice is not sufficiently elaborated, and this thus:

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[81] Butler, *Frames of War*, 33.
[82] Ann V. Murphy, "Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 579.

places an onus on her [Butler] to provide some explanation of the relationship between the normative force of precariousness, and the political import of precarity. Moreover, some explanation of why precariousness has this normative force should also be forthcoming. […] [W]hile precariousness may thus give rise to an obligation, it does not determine the shape of that obligation, or tell us what it is. Thus, Butler's claim that the recognition of precariousness entails a commitment to egalitarianism and the universalisation of rights appears to be without justification.[83]

Mills acknowledges that Butler does not maintain that the recognition of precariousness necessarily generates clear normative commitments. Instead, what Butler maintains is that the acknowledgment of the generalised condition of the precariousness of life, at best, implies particular normative consequences in particular circumstances, and not that the concept of precariousness is necessarily and intrinsically normatively imbued.[84]

Furthermore, in *Frames of War*, Butler writes that "[p]recariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other."[85] This implies an ethics of cohabiting the world with strangers who might share different frames of significance. This unknowingness in the face of the other does not undermine responsibility, but is rather the space into which one is thrown, and from which responsibility emerges. One cannot choose to define – or can only do so by inflicting

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[83] Mills, "Undoing Ethics," 48. Similarly, Amy Allen argues that normative criteria are not clearly delineated in Butler's work. Allen maintains that Butler "needs some normative concepts […] and to spend more time and energy defending the ones that are already working in her text." See Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 77, quoted in Thiem, *Unbecoming Subjects*, 208. Such a critique of Butler's work is reminiscent of the Foucault-Habermas debate, with Habermas' characterisation of Foucault's notion of genealogical critique as "cryptonormative," and Fraser's contention that Foucault's work is "normatively confused." See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 276 and Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power," 284.
[84] Moya Lloyd too maintains that although Butler's account of a vulnerable subject exposed to loss does open up possibilities for grounding ethical obligations, this is not enough to ensure ethical responses. While, she argues, ecstatic relationality and existential precariousness have the potential to lead to ethical openness, "[t]he problem is that it is not apparent exactly what, if anything, might be done to enable or encourage ethical action in conditions of precarity where the actual prospects for ethical responsiveness appear to be foreclosed." See Moya Lloyd, "The Ethics and Politics of Vulnerable Bodies," in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 185.
[85] Butler, *Frames of War*, 14.

severe violence – the terms of co-existence with others. The collective 'we' is a contested space but is also necessary for social belonging and persistence. Butler argues that sociality implies that one's life is implicated in the lives of others, strangers as well as familiar others. One's ethical relations and obligations to others precede the individual sense of self in the same way that one's subjectivity depends on factors and forces beyond one's control, such as discourses, social norms, other people.[86] Following Levinas, Butler argues that ethics is not grounded in a free agent who is responsible for the actions one chooses to author. Self-possession, in fact, hinders the possibility of ethics, according to Butler: "If I possess myself too firmly or too rigidly, I cannot be in an ethical relation."[87] Instead, an ethics of vulnerability is dependent upon a subject who is given over to that which exceeds it – norms, power relations, regulatory practices and institutions. It is precisely from out of this unchosen and unwilled realm that ethical obligations arise:

> [s]omething impinges upon us, without our being able to anticipate or prepare for it in advance, and this means that we are in such moments affronted by something that is beyond our will, not of our making, that comes to us from the outside, as an imposition but also as an ethical demand. I want to suggest that these are ethical obligations that do not require our consent, and neither are they the result of contracts or agreements into which any of us have deliberately entered.[88]

Reading Levinas alongside Arendt, Butler writes that one cannot decide with whom to co-exist. Indeed, she argues, "no one has the right to decide with whom to co-habit."[89] Through Levinas' analysis of the injunction 'thou shalt not kill', Butler brings out the point that not only are we obligated to preserve the lives of those with whom we cohabit the world, but also to affirm the plurality of the individuals involved without seeking to

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[86] See Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2012): 141.
[87] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," 142.
[88] Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," 135.
[89] Judith Butler, "Is Judaism Zionism?" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 85, quoted in Fiona Jenkins, "Sensate Democracy and Grievable Life," in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 136.

reduce these differences into a universal category that regulates that which is recognisable. This challenges the predominant ways of identifying a 'we' to whom 'I' am responsible, showing that the construction of such a 'we' may depend on exclusions.

Butler's philosophical language is another dimension of her work that manifests its implicit normativity. In her discussion of vulnerability and precariousness, Butler employs a soft, cautious language that highlights that one must proceed with caution due to the inherent risks of reifying and repeating hegemonic structures or ways of thinking. As Foucault showed, the feeling of liberation and emancipation may, in fact, be merely a ruse of the very same power one seeks to oppose. Furthermore, there is always a lack of knowledge when it comes to anticipating in advance the efficacy and outcomes of political struggles or critique. As Butler writes:

> How will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose? Is it, one might rejoin, a matter of "knowing"? For one is, as it were, in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this simultaneity that is at once the condition of our partiality, the measure of our political unknowingness, and also the condition of action itself. The incalculable effects of action are as much a part of their subversive promise as those that we plan in advance.[90]

The same unknowingness applies when considering the nature of ethical obligations in Butler's work. Awareness of precariousness and precarity can instil in us a sense of ethical obligation, but in itself this is not necessarily a sufficient ground for ethics. As with political decisions, according to Butler, ethical decisions cannot be predicted or justified in advance but "they can be sketched, they can be schematized, they can be prepared for."[91] This preparation consists in taking heed of the precariousness that characterises life, which can move us to act. This movement has an affective dimension, which is a

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[90] Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 185.
[91] Vikki Bell, "On Speech, Race and Melancholia: An Interview with Judith Butler," in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. Vikki Bell (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 166.

crucial feature that can push us toward ethical behaviour: "only when we are sufficiently impressed by the injustice of some situation in the world that we are moved to change it."[92] Sara Rushing analyses the role of affect in Butler's work, particularly in her ethics, and argues that although the affective dimension is underdeveloped in Butler's work, she does consider the ethico-political import of affects such as generosity, humility and patience. However, Rushing thinks that these affects must be complemented with others such as love, care and hope, so as to cultivate the dispositions required in order to "move ethics from the refusal to *react* and towards the capacity to *respond*."[93]

What I am calling the *softness* of Butler's ethico-political language characterises her philosophical language at large, which seems to have shifted from one text to the other. Whereas texts such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* are more akin to philosophical treatises full of technical arguments, later texts such as *Precarious Life* and *Giving an Account of Oneself* – although equally technical – function more as appeals to affect, which is not to say that they are reduced to rhetoric. Some of her later texts do not seem to operate by seeking to convince the reader by presenting persuasive arguments. For example, in *Precarious Life* Butler writes, "I am arguing, if I am 'arguing' at all."[94] Rushing picks upon this phrase and writes that Butler's work:

> is working on us affectively, through her words, by repeatedly invoking a vocabulary of affect, vulnerability, interdependence, loss, grief and, somewhat, love and care. This body of words has aesthetic appeal, a certain poetry to it, which is meant not so much to communicate ideas to us as to induce an experience of precariousness, or to perform it iteratively across multiple texts and talks, and to solicit a community of solidarity.[95]

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[92] Lloyd, "The Ethics and Politics of Vulnerable Bodies," 183.
[93] Sara Rushing, "Butler's Ethical Appeal: Being, Feeling and Acting Responsible," in *Butler and Ethics*, ed. Moya Lloyd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 81 [emphasis in original].
[94] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 24.
[95] Rushing, "Butler's Ethical Appeal," 82. For a further discussion of Butler's writing style and a characterisation of her works as rhetorical and performative, see Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics*, 20-22.

This affective way of articulating ethics calls for imagining and reimagining ways of thinking and living. As Murphy puts it, "the obligation imposed by precariousness is one that cries for a more equal and even realization of corporeal vulnerability."[96] There, perhaps, is no force in this model of ethics except for, precisely, a *cry* for an ethical and generous world. There might not be anything definitive in Butler's account of vulnerability and precariousness that pushes one to act ethically; one can only be *inclined* to respond in this way.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The principal aim of this chapter has been to show how Butler's views on precariousness and vulnerability are crucial to her account of self-narration. However, the chapter did not draw just on Butler's 'later' works where the role of notions of vulnerability and relationality are more pronounced, but also on Butler's earlier works on performativity and subject-formation. Butler's discussion of corporeal vulnerability, typically associated with *Precarious Life*, was connected back to her views on linguistic vulnerability in *Excitable Speech*; while her discussion of self-narration, most evident in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, was situated within her earlier work on the narrativisability and its failure in *Bodies That Matter*. This chapter considered the implicit normativity of Butler's views on vulnerability through her emphasis on the unchosen character of ethical obligations and of sociality. Moreover, this chapter emphasised the intrinsic link between ethics and social critique in Butler's work, whereby her account of vulnerability functions as a critique of the over-insistence on self-sufficiency and mastery. It was also argued that Butler presents a 'performative demonstration' of vulnerability through the soft philosophical language she employs in her writings. These different 'gestures' are further explored in subsequent chapters to demonstrate how narratives of trauma can function as instances of critique which, however, can have their critical potential thwarted.

This chapter also presented Butler's account of self-narration in detail, outlining the emphasis she places on the constitutive relationality that troubles self-sufficiency and the

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[96] Murphy, "Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism," 582-583.

coherence of self-narration. Self-incoherence (or self-opacity) was emphasised not as a shortcoming or a failure of the self but rather as "an ethical resource."[97] Conversely, Butler's work shows how an excessive emphasis on narrative coherence amounts to a denial of vulnerability and dependency. The next chapter will use Butler's work to adapt it more specifically to an analysis of the narration of trauma. Narrative coherence will be analysed as a possibly hegemonic norm that can function to circumscribe traumatised individuals their narratives. The politics of narrating trauma will be considered by analysing the institutional norms and discourses that impact survivors' narrations of sexual trauma.

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[97] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 63.

Chapter 6 Butler and the Politics of Narrating Trauma

This chapter reads Butler's ideas on self-narration in relation to issues in trauma theory. Butler's account of self-narration is read as a critique of the tendency of various strands of moral philosophy and psychology to place great importance on narrative coherence. Butler identifies this normative prejudice when she writes that one "can never provide the account of [one]self that both certain forms of morality and some models of mental health require, namely, that the self deliver itself in coherent narrative form."[1] Following Butler, narrative coherence within practices of self-narration is understood here as a tendency that pervades philosophical thinking, but that may also harden into a potentially hegemonic norm. Narrative coherence is paramount within various dominant therapeutic discourses, and is seen as empowering traumatised individuals by giving them more control over their lives. However, when subjected to closer scrutiny, the possibility of narrative coherence becomes open to critique on multiple levels. Butler's ideas may be seen as incompatible with, or incapable of explaining the need for, narrative coherence expressed by various trauma survivors. But rather than undermining any notion of narrative coherence, Butler's account of self-narration will be used to challenge the over-emphasis placed on a conception of self-narration based on mastery, unity and coherence.

The chapter will go on to further analyse how the norm of narrative coherence functions by considering narrations of sexual trauma by survivors in institutional contexts. The autobiographical narratives of sexual trauma by Alice Sebold and Susan Brison are considered to show how narrative coherence functions in legal and political contexts of testifying as a possibly hegemonic norm that circumscribes how trauma is narrated by facilitating certain forms of self-narration while silencing other forms of narrating oneself. The chapter concludes by arguing that a reading of Butler's work on self-narration in relation to insights derived from trauma theory on the difficulties of narrating life after trauma enables a critical ethico-political analysis of powerful hegemonic norms and

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[1] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 79.

practices – such as the insistence on and over-valorisation of narrative coherence – that are currently operating on the activity of traumatic self-narration.

6.1 Butler and Trauma Theory

Narrating one's life is made all the more complicated in the aftermath of traumatic incidents. The relation between trauma and narrative is often described in terms of a rupture. Trauma theorists refer to the urgent need felt by traumatised individuals to be able to narrate their life in a *coherent* way in order to counter the shattering effect of traumatic incidents and restore psychic stability. Trauma narratives are governed by discourses of psychological well-being, and particular forms of trauma narratives are privileged over others in form and in content. Narratives considered to be 'failed stories' are side-lined while individuals unable to articulate their story are ignored. Dominant therapeutic discourses respond to the rupture of trauma by emphasising the importance of restoring survivors' mastery over their narratives, and of recovering narrative coherence to empower traumatised individuals by giving them more control over their own lives. This sense of control contributes to reinstating the subject as the master and sole author of its life narrative instead of leaving it to suffer the continuing debilitating effects of trauma. This impulse toward control and coherence is understandable in the context of how trauma disempowers the individual by disabling one's sense of agency. However, subjected to closer scrutiny, the possibility of narrative coherence in self-narration becomes less easy to sustain without question.

I Trauma as Rupture

"I will always miss myself as I was;"[2]
"I died in Vietnam;"[3]

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[2] Migael Scherer, *Still Loved by the Sun: A Rape Survivor's Journal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 179, quoted in Susan J. Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 39.

[3] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), 180, quoted in Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," 39.

"I died in Auschwitz, but no one knows it."[4]

These are some of the ways in which survivors describe themselves in the aftermath of trauma. Although the term 'trauma' is today used more frequently in reference to the psychological realm, the original medical meaning of trauma as a break, a laceration, a shattering in the physical body, or something which destroys a presumed unity remains. Trauma is understood as a rupture that strips the self of its familiar dwelling in the world, and reveals a painful fragmentation at the heart of subjectivity. One's self and one's relations to others are undone after trauma, leaving the survivor with the difficult task of recovering a sense of self, remaking one's world, and rediscovering meaningful attachments to others. This characterisation of trauma complements Herman's:

> Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. The damage to relational life is not a secondary effect of trauma.[5]

The survivor's ability to narrate in words the traumatic episode, and to attempt to integrate the episode within a life story, is seen as a sign of agency whereby the survivor can exercise some form of control and mastery over the traumatic episode. With its emphasis on the opacity of the self to itself and, consequently, on the impossibility of self-narrative coherence, Butler's account of self-narration can be seen as countering some central tenets in trauma theory and therapy. What the next section shows is that, rather than dismissing the validity of efforts to narratively reconstruct one's self-narrative in the aftermath of trauma, Butler's work calls attention to the possible hegemonic effects of certain norms –

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[4] Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, 267, quoted in Susan J. Brison, "Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory, and Personal Identity," in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 12.
[5] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 51.

such as the norm of narrative coherence – that place questionable demands on traumatised individuals.

II Butler on Narrative Coherence

At first glance, one may think that theoretical elaborations that emphasise, even promote, the opacity of the self to itself, such as Butler's, do not really help to ease matters for individuals seeking narrative coherence in their lives. Unfair critics might argue that a negative portrayal of narrative coherence amounts to a dangerous postmodern flirtation with fragmentation or an insensitive celebration of non-closure. Catharine MacKinnon, for example, has harshly criticised the fancy for a fragmented self that she sees in the work of 'postmodernists' such as Butler and Rosi Braidotti; she writes, "Postmodernists ought to have to confront the human pain of the ideas they think are so much fun."[6] The need for narrative coherence is often expressed by traumatised individuals seeking to rebuild their life after a traumatic incident, individuals who do not and cannot 'afford' to relish any virtues that can be associated with a fragmented subjectivity. One could argue that to such individuals there is absolutely no positive potential seen in enduring incoherence; rather, incoherence is seen as entailing only painful repercussions.

One must definitely pay heed to the negative repercussions of a felt sense of incoherence that follows traumatic events. Although Butler sheds doubt over the possibility of constructing an authoritative account of oneself – thus contesting the merits of certain phenomenological and hermeneutical accounts of narrative selfhood – she does not deny the importance of giving a narrative account of oneself: "We can surely still tell our stories, and there will be many reasons to do precisely that."[7] These various reasons for which one can tell a story about oneself range from a narcissistic self-absorption to, more interestingly, a felt need. Sometimes, the possibility of giving a coherent account of oneself is not a whimsical matter, but rather a matter of necessity, of need. Traumatised

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[6] Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Points against Postmodernism," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 75, no. 3 (2000): 707.

[7] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.

individuals may feel compelled to speak and write about their traumatic experience precisely in order to reestablish the coherence and bearability of their lives, despite the impossibilities and painful hardship that this entails. One can here consider Primo Levi's description of how, after his release from the concentration camps, he resorted to writing in an almost obsessive way. As he describes it:

> You remember the scene: the Ancient Mariner accosts the wedding guests, who are thinking of the wedding and not paying attention to him, and he forces them to listen to his tale. Well, when I first returned from the concentration camp I did just that. I felt an unrestrainable need to tell my story to anyone and everyone! […] Every situation was an occasion to tell my story to anyone and everyone: to tell it to the factory director as well as to the worker, even if they had other things to do. I was reduced to the state of the Ancient Mariner. Then I began to write on my typewriter at night. […] Every night I would write, and this was considered even crazier![8]

In such cases, narrative paradoxically provides both comfort (due to the attempt at self-coherence) as well as pain (due to the retraumatising memories). Butler does recognise that traumatised subjects might feel the need to coherently narrate one's life. As she writes:

> [L]earning to construct a narrative is a crucial practice, especially when discontinuous bits of experience remain dissociated from one another by virtue of traumatic conditions. And I do not mean to undervalue the importance of narrative work in the reconstruction of a life that otherwise suffers from fragmentation and discontinuity. The suffering that belongs to conditions of dissociation should not be underestimated.[9]

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[8] Primo Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 224-225, quoted in Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 16.
[9] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 52.

Yet, despite this, Butler does not concede that the solution could be found in putting one's faith in a conception of self-narration based on self-mastery, unity and coherence: "Conditions of hyper-mastery […] are no more salutary than conditions of radical fragmentation."[10] This is because such a conception amounts to a denial of the fundamental fragmentation that results from the impingement on the subject by others and by social norms. This does not mean, however, that Butler denies the possibility of speaking about oneself or, even, of giving a narrative account of oneself. What she challenges is a *particular way* in which the subject can narrate itself. Butler recognises that being able to give an account of oneself, even if not a singular, authoritative and complete one, can amount to continued social and psychic survival. Her contention lies with the aspiration toward a coherent and united narrative of oneself as posited, for example, by some strands of psychoanalytic thought and practice:

> Within some psychoanalytic circles, doctrines, and practices, one of the stated aims of psychoanalysis is to offer the client the chance to put together a story about herself, to recollect the past, to interweave the events or, rather, the wishes of childhood with later events, to try to make sense through narrative means of what this life has been, the impasses it encounters time and again, and what it might yet become. Indeed, some [such as Roy Schafer] have argued that the normative goal of psychoanalysis is to permit the client to tell a single and coherent story about herself that will satisfy the wish to know herself.[11]

Butler does not consider narrative incoherence as a failure of the fantastical subject who is in complete control over oneself, but as a mark of the precariousness of life whereby the subject is given over to a sociality that is beyond its grasp, and to social relations that tie it to others beyond its choosing. This vulnerable exposure, "[t]his fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away," she writes.[12]

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[10] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 52.

[11] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 51. However, Butler probes deeper into this normative aim of psychoanalysis, and proposes various theoretical elaborations – fuelled even by variations of psychoanalytic thinking, such as the work of Jean Laplanche – on self-narration that do not aim towards unity and appropriation. See Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 65-77, 84-101.

[12] Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.

Rather than a matter with which we must try to make do, in this same vulnerability, in its recognition and apprehension, lies an ethical potential: "perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves."[13] It is this ethical potential that is lost in the tendency of strands of trauma therapy to rush toward narrative coherence. This urge can be viewed critically as a prejudice in mental health discourses; an assumption, with normative and political implications, regarding the possibility of a unitary non-fragmented subject.

6.2 Rape and the Politics of Self-Narration

The privileging of narrative coherence is not a tendency that happens solely in philosophical thinking. Narrative coherence functions as a norm that has an effect on how narratives are socially received and valued. A critical study of narrative coherence, then, shows how this norm manifests itself socially, and which of its operations can be politically contestable. The written narratives of Sebold and Brison, both survivors of sexual violence, highlight the potentially problematic privileging of narrative coherence. This section analyses these narratives alongside Butler's critique of narrative coherence as case studies that foreground the politics of narrating trauma in institutional contexts.

I Confessing Trauma in the Court

Tara Roeder remarks how, despite the fact that the relationship between trauma and storytelling is not ordinarily a linear one, "[r]ape victims who choose to make their stories public and/or seek redress from the justice system, however, will indeed find themselves under intense pressure to tell clear, concise, and coherent accounts of the violence they have undergone."[14] Such an analysis emphasises how traumatic self-narration is not merely a personal or individual matter because, as a dialogical activity, it is always already implicated within a socio-political context. Roeder considers the harmful effects of the

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[13] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 40-41.
[14] Tara Roeder, "'You Have to Confess': Rape and the Politics of Storytelling," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 9 (2015): 18.

institutional treatment of traumatic self-narration on victims, such as "the type of linear, cohesive narrative privileged by the legal system."[15] Discussing how narratives of rape are conducted in the legal sphere, she claims that the rape victim narrates her story over and over again: the average rape victim "gives her account of the crime 57 times to various officials before the case even lands in court."[16] In the process, police, lawyers and other officials analyse the narrative for any inconsistencies, as well as reading the narrative through norms surrounding rape discourse in the public sphere, such as victim-blaming and doubting. The veracity of the victim's speech is established not just on the basis of the narrative (and the evidence, on occasions) but on how the narrative is presented and how its presentation fits within the set of cultural and legal expectations: "the rape victims are expected to perform in particular ways if they wish to be believed."[17] Any shred of the narrative that seems not to hold water may lead to the dismissal of the victim's narrative.

Roeder frames her analysis as a consideration of the ways in which traumatic rape testimony is institutionally regulated in order to fit a culturally sanctioned narrative. This cultural sanctioning promotes the form that self-narration should take, and the narrator's conformity with the victim profile which, in the case of rape, consists of "scripts of guilt, silence, forgetting, and forgiveness often forced upon female victims of sexual violence."[18] Narrative coherence is one such pre-existing schema that is valued by the legal institutions. As Andrew Taslitz writes, "the story of a case must be told in such a way as to satisfy a jury's need for narrative coherence and fidelity."[19] This institutional and institutionalised pressure in favour of narrative coherence – *as if trauma can be so easily and conveniently amenable* – persists despite the theoretical difficulties that narrative coherence implies, let alone the well-documented difficulties that traumatised individuals face to meet these requirements of narrative coherence.

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[15] Roeder, "'You Have to Confess'," 19.

[16] Abigail Goldman, "Rape still a crime where victim can share blame," *Las Vegas Sun*, August 17, 2008, lasvegassun.com/news/2008/aug/17/rape-still-crime-where-victim-can-share-blame, quoted in Roeder, "'You Have to Confess'," 19.

[17] Roeder, "'You Have to Confess'," 21.

[18] Roeder, "'You Have to Confess'," 21.

[19] Andrew E. Taslitz, *Rape and the Culture of the Courtroom* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 6, quoted in Roeder, "'You Have to Confess'," 22.

Sebold reflects upon this tension in *Lucky*, a memoir in which she presents her account of how she was obliged to testify as a rape survivor while being aware of the institutional presuppositions and privileging surrounding traumatic testimony. She recounts how:

> It was a shaky start to the most important story I would ever tell. I began a sentence only to trail off and begin again. And this wasn't because I was unaware exactly what happened in the tunnel. It was saying the words out loud, knowing that it was *how* I said them that could win or lose the case.[20]

This issue of *how* the narrative is presented highlights the performative dimension of testifying. It reveals that trauma narratives are adjudicated upon criteria of success or failure, as if they are a performance or an examination. This performative dimension is foregrounded once again in the treatment of rape victims within contexts of cross-examination, where rape victims are made all the more aware that narrative coherence is not just a matter pertaining to how they themselves relate to their traumatic incident, but a matter that determines their credibility as witnesses. After testifying, a court bailiff remarked to Sebold that she was "the best rape witness I've ever seen on the stand,"[21] and Sebold is understandably relieved to hear so. Despite its accepted ordinariness and Sebold's relief, this comment seems in particularly bad taste, and clearly brings out the rigid and undesirable criteria by which narratives are marked as a success or otherwise by the legal system. In another episode, Sebold recalls narrating her story to a friend, acknowledging the implicit operation of norms that allow for smoother reception of her narrative by listeners: "I told him everything I could bear to tell. I intended to tell him all the details but I couldn't. I edited as I went, stopping at blind corners where I felt I might fall apart. *I kept the narrative linear.*"[22]

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[20] Alice Sebold, *Lucky* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002 [1999]), 174, quoted in Roeder, "'You Have to Confess'," 22 [emphasis in original].
[21] Sebold, *Lucky*, 198.
[22] Sebold, *Lucky*, 79 [emphasis added].

II Traumatic Relationality

In her work, based also on her own experience of sexual trauma, Brison provides a rich analysis of the narration of trauma and the role of narratives in reconstructing a sense of self after the shattering effect of trauma. Brison writes that trauma, particularly when it is intentionally inflicted by other humans, damages one's relational dwelling in the world: "When the trauma is of human origin and is intentionally inflicted, […] it not only shatters one's fundamental assumptions about the world and one's safety in it, but also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity."[23] This characterisation goes some way toward explaining why several trauma survivors express feeling that their life and their self can never be the same after the traumatic episode. It also explains why trauma survivors feel the need for narrative coherence in order to restore a viable sense of self and self-narrative. Brison's work argues for a relational view of selfhood in light of how the self can be constructed and deconstructed through its exposure to a wider sociality: "The study of trauma, I suggest, provides support for a view of the self as fundamentally relational – vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of others."[24]

This emphasis on relationality echoes Herman's classic study of trauma and recovery. This is not an incidental point: on various occasions in *Aftermath*, Brison outlines her process of recovery through the recovery stages outlined by Herman. For Herman, trauma ultimately is an experience that breaches one's sense of being and persisting in the world, in such a way that a human subject must reconnect successfully with others and with a wider social context if it hopes to recover from the shattering effects of trauma. As she writes: "The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation."[25]

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[23] Susan J. Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," 40.
[24] Brison, "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self," 40.
[25] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.

This formulation of trauma in terms of relationality bears comparison with Butler's views. The works of Brison and Herman could be read alongside Butler's work with fruitful outcomes. Brison's and Herman's emphasis on the relational constitution of subjectivity, and the relational damage that trauma brings with it complements Butler's work on how the self is relationally and vulnerably given over to a broader sociality outside its choosing. The works of Brison and Herman also seem to converge with Butler's on their shared concern over the impossibility of narrative coherence and control. Herman describes a "premature demand for certainty"[26] which lead therapists to discount or trivialise patients' traumatic experiences by forcefully imposing a demand for coherent narratives on trauma victims. She argues that a degree of uncertainty regarding basic facts in the narrative will always persist, and that this narrative 'incoherence' – or, rather, narrative openness – is inescapable: "In the course of reconstruction, the story may change as missing pieces are recovered. […] Thus, both patient and therapist must accept the fact that they do not have complete knowledge, and they must learn to live with ambiguity while exploring at a tolerable pace."[27] It is interesting to read this last quote through Butler's ideas on self-narration, informed by her views on self-opacity and the ecstatic relationality which leave us partially blind to ourselves and each other. Brison too argues that trauma recovery highlights the impossibility of self- and narrative coherence. Referring to her long and arduous process of recovery, she writes: "Recovery no longer seems like picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative). It's facing the fact that there was never a coherent self (or story) there to begin with."[28] This formulation is interestingly atypical insofar as it distances itself from the therapeutic meta-narrative of restoring self-mastery and coherence that usually shapes narratives of trauma recovery.

Conversely, Brison's and Herman's work on traumatic self-narration can clarify some of Butler's contentions on narrative coherence. Narratives by trauma survivors foreground the desire for narrative coherence, stability and control in order to recover a sense of

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[26] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 180.
[27] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 179-180.
[28] Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 116.

agency and empowerment. Incoherence in contrast may be seen as disempowering and often painful. Brison, for example, argues that "[i]n order to recover, a trauma survivor needs to be able to establish greater control over traumatic memories and other intrusive symptoms of PTSD, recover a sense of mastery over her environment (within reasonable limits), and be reconnected with humanity."[29] In no way is this an admission of the powers of individualistic mastery. Brison is precise in her theorisation when she affirms that any degree of control one achieves over one's environment, recovery, and self-narrative will always be within limits. Moreover, Brison continues, "[w]hether these achievements occur depends [...] on other people."[30] Ultimately, what all three thinkers (Butler, Brison, Herman) emphasise is that an exaggerated and unilateral emphasis on the coherence of one's life narrative can function as a hegemonic norm that, on the individual level, does not really improve the survivor's well-being, and on the social level, results in the privileging of one set of stories over others. This privileging can and must be contested on multiple levels, including the philosophical, psychological, and socio-political levels.

6.3 Narrating Otherwise: Trauma and Critique

What critical potential, then, is enabled by such a critique of narrative coherence in trauma narratives? Are there, after all, any ways in which narratives of trauma can highlight the unsuitability or undesirability of norms that influence how trauma narratives are socially received, interpreted, and circulated? We know more or less what trauma disables, but can it enable anything? I must emphasise that I think that there is nothing intrinsically noble in suffering. Suffering does not raise the victim to a heightened moral standing; nor does suffering automatically make the victim an exemplary person. Ascribing to the victim a state of innocence or purity implies a moral economy that equates goodness with suffering, as if suffering cleanses. It is not a celebration of self-abnegation or an ethic of virtuous traumatisation which I wish to propose. Rather, what can be done with trauma? Such a question does not imply that trauma can be *useful*. There is no economy or utility to trauma; indeed, trauma is that which defies all such economy. Trauma reveals a

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[29] Brison, *Aftermath*, 71.
[30] Brison, *Aftermath*, 71.

heightened point of vulnerable exposure to a wider sociality and to a constitutive relationality. The great challenge is how one can regard this exposure positively when that same sociality and relationality turn out to be traumatic. It is not at all obvious that traumatic incidents are a gateway to a better understanding of relationality, as if trauma is just what we need in order to improve our sense of solidarity and our political discourses. In fact, trauma destroys the relational bonds of sociality, forcing the individual to retreat into the shelter of an atomised subjectivity, and this is to be respected, especially when trauma violates one's intimate existence.[31] A trauma victim cannot be blamed for desiring a unified sense of self and a 'healthy' degree of mastery and agency over the direction of one's life. Trauma stands as a constant reminder that our bodily existence potentially exposes us to unwanted violence. In reaction to the breach of violence, it is perhaps easier to rush to restore the impenetrable subject of mastery, to react violently, or to perpetuate the logic of dominating others.

However, traumatic violence need not be an argument against relationality. Violence is a hurtful breach of that relationality. The philosophical, ethical and political challenge is to find, as Butler puts it, "one of the sources of nonviolence in the capacity to grieve, to stay with the unbearable loss without converting it into destruction,"[32] or without quickly seeking to impose coherence on one's self-narrative in the aftermath of violence suffered in order to restore the impression of an impenetrable autonomous subject. Following Butler, I want to ask what could happen if we 'stay with' the trauma a while longer, asking what trauma can enable despite its nature to shatter and disconnect us. One possible response to this difficult question is that trauma *can* (though it might not) enable apprehension of how one is relationally constituted and dependent upon others who can both enrich one's life and do it great harm. The vulnerable exposure of incoherence at the heart of subjectivity is often negatively portrayed; yet, as Butler shows, a greater challenge

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[31] See Jenny Edkins, "Remembering Relationality: Trauma Time and Politics," in *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship Between Past and Present*, ed. Duncan Bell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 99-115.
[32] Judith Butler, "Speaking of Rage and Grief," PEN World Voices Festival, April 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxyabzopQi8.

is to think of this incoherence as an ethical resource that invites a radical revision of notions of ethical subjectivity and responsibility.

Contemporary discourses strive to maintain the solidity of a meta-narrative of strong, coherent, unitary subjects. Yet, trauma narratives can occupy another space; they can subvert fantasies of mastery and resist psychological regimes of truth and power/knowledge. This apprehension may lead us to oppose the meta-narrative of a unified coherent pre-trauma self on one hand, and on the other, that of a broken, shattered post-trauma self that needs to be rebuilt. Trauma narratives, then, can have a critical function even in, or perhaps especially in, their supposed incoherence. A relational understanding of trauma and its narration does not merely emphasise that trauma – or, indeed, our whole life – cannot be successfully narrated, and that we would only be deluded in thinking that it can be. Rather, relational understandings of trauma reveal how human subjects are constituted in relation to their relations, to incidents, and to powerful discourses that regulate suffering. Certain trauma narratives and reflections on them can counter and defy these injunctions. This countering is not just of philosophical relevance. Narratives exist in social circulation, which implies that while some narratives can become more hardened over time, other narratives may function as subversive counter-narratives that unsettle culturally dominant perceptions and practices. Roeder highlights this power of counter-narratives of trauma when she writes:

> The relentless cultural transmission of all stories of sexual assault – partial, fragmented, "imperfect" as they may be – is one way to confront the reality of rape and shape our knowledge of its reality. Each story of rape varies in its particulars; there is no one narrative that can contain these explosive and singular moments of disruption. Yet, placed beside each other, these experiences come to mean in a culture in which rape has always been a shaping factor, and function as a reminder of the complex power associated with not only the telling, but the hearing, of such stories.[33]

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[33] Roeder, "'You Have to Confess'," 28.

This highlights how pre-existing schemas for adjudicating narratives may not be the most suited to apprehending trauma. This is consequential since the survivors' narrative reconstruction of the trauma is not by itself sufficient for better well-being since what also needs to be addressed is what Herman calls "the social or relational dimension of the traumatic experience."[34] This includes the presence of an audience that receives and engages sympathetically with narratives of trauma, without imposing normative expectations or rigid narrative demands on trauma survivors. Ultimately, survivors do not simply narrate trauma to reconstruct personal self-coherence for its own sake, but also to channel one's narrative into a public sphere that they hope would be receptive to their suffering.

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This chapter considered how, and the extent to which, certain forms of trauma narratives – such as Brison's and Sebold's – serve as alternative testimonies that unsettle, with difficulty, the social and discursive schemas that socially shape traumatic self-narration. This is only a critical potential, rather than a necessary actuality, which may be foregrounded in trauma narratives. This potential can be quickly extinguished through the co-option of survivors' narratives by, for example, the discourses of the psy sciences or state apparatuses. The potential of trauma narrations can sway toward subversion just as easily as it can be swayed toward normalisation. This chapter took as its starting point the need for narrative coherence felt by trauma survivors who, in response to the shattering power of trauma, seek to narrate their life in a coherent manner in order to retain agency and control over their life story. It was shown how the notion of narrative coherence is not a neutral concern but is a possibly hegemonic norm instated and enforced through discourses of the psy sciences that over-emphasise the therapeutic value of narrative coherence. Butler's work provides various critical resources with which to analyse this tendency toward coherence by presenting the activity of self-narration as a precarious endeavour fraught with difficulties and limits. Since individuals are relationally constituted, they do not have sole authority and authorship over their life narratives and,

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[34] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 183.

as such, a coherent, linear and masterful self-narrative is an impossibility. This does not imply that any political and ethical concern with self-narration is futile. Rather, Butler's work enables a critical consideration of the norm of narrative coherence and its effect on self-narration.[35] The trauma memoirs of Sebold and Brison were analysed to highlight how traumatised individuals attempt to narratively account for their life after trauma, but also to show how self-narration can function critically by foregrounding possibly hegemonic factors that are bearing on the activity of self-narration.

The remaining two chapters will utilise the theoretical framework to trauma adopted throughout this thesis to other areas of application. The next chapter sustains the critique of narrative coherence by turning to literature from the psychological sciences to show how narrative coherence is a privileged norm, particularly in the context of trauma narratives. The ways in which different researchers in the psychological sciences have discussed the relation between selfhood and narrative, and narrative and trauma are outlined in order to argue that narrative coherence is a dominant norm that impacts how trauma is narrated as well as how trauma narratives are socially received. The last chapter then turns to another area in which this approach to trauma narratives can be applied, namely the process of seeking asylum. The analysis of trauma narratives and discourses of trauma in the asylum process draws on Foucault's views on the entanglement of self-narration and power relations, Butler's critical views on self-narration, and the dominant role accorded to the norm of narrative coherence in the psychological sciences. Together, these applications bring together the insights developed in this thesis to highlight the critical issues surrounding the narration of trauma in institutional contexts.

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[35] Other recent work is also consolidating the critique of an over-emphasis on narrative coherence in the study of self-narratives, and the conceptual tools derived from Butler's work is being drawn upon to conduct such critical work. See Renata Kokanović and Jacinthe Flore, "Subjectivity and illness narratives," *Subjectivity* 10, no. 4 (2017): 329-339.

Chapter 7 The Norm of Narrative Coherence: Psy Sciences and Self-Narration

This chapter analyses approaches in the psychological sciences (henceforth, psy sciences[1]) to the activity of self-narration. Narratives occupy an important role in psychology and psychotherapy, particularly when the latter is seen as a site in which individuals narrate personal experiences. Various psychological theorists, such as Jerome Bruner, Donald Polkinghorne, Roy Schafer and Michele Crossley regard narrative as an important organising principle through which human life and the self can be understood. Such narrative psychologists have argued that challenging experiences, such as traumatic episodes, create a rupture in the self-narrative in such a way that the practice of psychotherapy is seen as an "exercise in story repair"[2] that will ideally lead to a "more dynamic and thus more useful plot which serves as a more powerful and connective force."[3] In this chapter I will examine the way in which the relation between the self, narrative and trauma is theorised in different psychological theories, paying particular attention to how narrative coherence is privileged in such theories. The chapter thus connects the two main insights of the thesis: firstly, that practices of self-narration are embedded in various power relations that regulate and influence how one narrates one's self and experiences, and secondly, that such influence manifests itself as a tendency

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[1] My use of the term 'psy' in this context is inspired by Nikolas Rose's work. Rose writes: "I focus upon the human sciences, in particular psychology and its affiliates – the endeavours which can be generically termed 'psy'. I think that these types of knowledge and expertise, largely invented since the mid-nineteenth century, are of particular significance. For these embody a particular way in which human beings have tried to understand themselves – to make themselves the subjects, objects, targets of a truthful knowledge. And I think that they have played a constitutive role in shaping the ways in which we think of ourselves and act upon ourselves. That is to say, I suggest that 'psy' – the heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise - has made it possible for human beings to conceive of themselves, speak about themselves, judge themselves and conduct themselves in new ways. But in this book I make a stronger argument. My claim is that the psy disciplines and psy expertise have had a key role in constructing 'governable subjects'. Psy, here, is not simply a matter of ideas, cultural beliefs or even of a specific kind of practice. I suggest that it has had a very significant role in contemporary forms of political power, making it possible to govern human beings in ways that are compatible with the principles of liberalism and democracy." Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, 2nd ed. (London: Free Association Books, 1999 [1989]), vii. See also Nikolas Rose, *Inventing our selves: Psychology, power, and personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-21.

[2] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 57.

[3] Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, 179, cited in Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 58.

toward the privileging of narrative coherence, which is shown to be a hegemonic norm that operates at the level of philosophical theorising, as well as in psychological theories. The hegemony of this norm opens it up to scrutiny at the political level.

7.1 Narrative and Psychology

I "… all therapies are narrative therapies"

Introducing his work on narrative and psychotherapy, John McLeod concedes that "[i]n preparing for this book, I have been painfully aware of how large a topic narrative therapy is."[4] In a survey of narrative approaches in psychology, Brian Schiff echoes this sentiment when he writes that "[t]he diversity of approaches to narrative in psychology is extensive – and exhausting. It is dizzying. My review has only scratched the surface of the complexity and diversity of narrative in psychology."[5] Narrative psychology or, more precisely, narrative therapy is often associated with Michael White and David Epston's *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*.[6] However, this chapter adopts a wider perspective to narrative psychology that includes White and Epston's approach as one among others. Indeed, McLeod concludes – absurdly, it would seem at first glance – that "all therapies are narrative therapies."[7] His point is that, despite the different approaches and suppositions, the activity that is common to most psychotherapeutic practices is "to give the client every opportunity to tell his or her story, to really listen to these stories, and to allow space for the telling of new or different stories."[8]

For the purposes of this chapter, storytelling (insofar as self-narration is a form of storytelling about oneself) is considered as a fundamental cultural activity that reflects how people are thinking about experiences. As a storytelling activity, practices of psychotherapies is equally cultural. McLeod importantly points toward how

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[4] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, xi.
[5] Schiff, "Fractured Narratives," 252.
[6] White and Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*.
[7] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, x.
[8] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, x.

contemporary psychotherapy reinforces cultural trends in the direction of individualism. This is because, with exceptions,[9] most therapeutic practices reinforce the idea of the person "as a discrete, separate and autonomous individual."[10] McLeod argues that psychotherapy plays a significant role in reinforcing particular cultural norms: "Therapy is one of the ways in which a culture keeps itself in existence as a system of thought and action."[11] This is an interesting claim that shifts between common sense and a provocative attack on psychotherapy. Rather than an enterprise that guides individuals to improved well-being according to scientifically reliable criteria, psychotherapy is presented as an endeavour that actively perpetuates a particular culture by proposing it as a fixed understanding of well-being, using the criteria of scientific validity to further fossilise the apparent necessity of this culture.

This critical perspective adopted by McLeod toward psychotherapy is in line with a "postmodern impulse […] to deconstruct therapy, to strip away its claims to privileged scientific knowledge/power/certainty and to reveal the core of therapy as an arena for telling personal stories."[12] This arena is not a neutral and innocent space, outside of cultural pressures and norms, in which individuals voice their worries or desires. The therapeutic scene can be considered as a form of language game governed by implicit discursive rules and power relations that qualify some people as more or less "conversant with the nature of the therapy plot."[13] Thus, rather than regarding the psychotherapeutic scene as a privileged point that grants therapists access to the individual's psyche, a "brutal shift in perspective"[14] is called for in order to properly regard the role of narratives in therapy, and to apprehend the human, following MacIntyre, as "essentially a story-telling animal."[15] Such a narrative perspective "takes therapy in the direction […] [of] 'moving out' into the stories of a culture rather than 'moving in' to individual personal experience."[16] This cultural character of psychotherapy and storytelling calls into question

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[9] Such exceptions include the work of Kenneth J. Gergen and White and Epston, to be discussed below.
[10] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 19.
[11] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 26.
[12] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 23.
[13] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 17.
[14] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 27.
[15] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.
[16] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 27.

the presumption that therapries are 'value-free' scientists who "are meant to be morally neutral."[17] McLeod claims that the conception of therapy as happening in a moral vacuum can be contested since "[i]mplicit in the therapist's story is an image of the 'good life'."[18] Others suggest that in order to live a good life, we "need clear narratives with a beginning, a middle, and an end,"[19] thus showing how therapists guide clients to an implicit notion of the 'good life'. Reflecting on the implicit moral vision of narrative approaches to psychotherapy, Singer and Rexhaj claim that "[a]s a nascent perspective in psychology and psychotherapy, the narrative approach adopts an implicit vision of 'the good life'."[20] However, it can also be argued that the aim of the psy sciences is not to agree on what should constitute a good life. A shared conception of the 'good life' might not be shared among theorists, in much the same way that they do not agree on the terminology (and, one might say, on the normative implications of the terminology) used. For example, Singer and Rexhaj argue that "this narrative movement in psychotherapy has yet to coalesce around a shared terminology, set of principles, or techniques."[21] Rather than being a limitation, this lack of agreement is a productive one since, as they argue, important questions can be asked, pertaining to what is considered to be a healthy and good self and, by extension, a maladaptive self, and what the role of the therapist is in guiding individuals to what is considered as a healthy self.[22]

In addition to these crucial issues concerning normative claims within narrative approaches to psychology, this chapter addresses the following question: Why is narrative coherence emphasised in an exaggerated manner in the psychological sciences? And by what means, with what effects and at what price is this done? To engage with these questions, this chapter looks at how self-narration is conceived through the different approaches in psychology in order to trace implicit theoretical and normative privileging of particular conceptions of self-narration – namely, coherent, linear and unitary narration

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[17] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 20.
[18] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 26-27.
[19] Kuisma Korhonen, "Broken Stories: Narrative vs. Narration in Travelling Theories of Cultural Trauma," in *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative*, eds. Matti Hyvärinen, Mari Hatavara, and Lars-Christer Hydén (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013), 275.
[20] Singer and Rexhaj, "Narrative Coherence and Psychotherapy," 209 [abstract].
[21] Singer and Rexhaj, "Narrative Coherence and Psychotherapy," 210.
[22] See Singer and Rexhaj, "Narrative Coherence and Psychotherapy," 210.

– in typical psychological and psychotherapeutic contexts. This privileging is traced in order to highlight one way in which the psy sciences, wittingly or not, contribute to the reinforcing of predominant notions of subjectivity that guide their notions of 'healthy' subjects. The dominance of the norm of narrative coherence is foregrounded in order to highlight how it acts on traumatised individuals, regulating what constitutes as a valid trauma narrative, and what amounts to a therapeutic narrative. Such a norm informs an understanding of what it means to be a *subject* in the multiple senses of the word: as an active author of stories and as a passive subject authored by cultural scripts that are outside its choosing.

II Narratives in Psychology

Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology

Since the 1980s, psychology has become preoccupied with how narratives and narration mark its processes and theories. Although initiated in other disciplines – the influential 1981 book *On Narrative*[23] serves as a reference point to this so-called narrative turn in the humanities – this concern with narrative in psychology can be, and often is, traced back to the 1986 volume edited by Theodore R. Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*, a volume that is claimed to introduce the term 'narrative psychology'.[24] In his contribution to this volume, Sarbin proposes that "the narrative is potentially a useful root metaphor for psychology and other human sciences."[25] For Sarbin, narrative is an organising principle through which human life can be understood. In opposition to other models of human life and behaviour, such as the mechanistic, organicist and positivist models, Sarbin proposes "the narratory principle" which he defines as the principle "that human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures."[26] Sarbin draws on the human ability to connect

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[23] William J. T. Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
[24] For a more extended discussion of the so-called 'narrative turn' that began in literary criticism and spread to other disciplines, including psychology, see Schiff, "Fractured Narratives," 245-264.
[25] Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," 4.
[26] Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," 8.

a set of images into a narrative account to justify his treatment of narrative as the organising principle for human action. He goes on to argue, however, that narrative "is an achievement."[27] In light of this, one could therefore argue, as this thesis does, that a narrative construction of a series of events implies purposeful and intelligent manipulation – determined by socio-cultural factors of how this should be done – of the data presented. Sarbin supposes that total incorporation of life by narrative is possible, and suggests that:

> we can reflect on any slice of life. Our dreams […] are experienced as stories, […] our fantasies and our daydreams are unvoiced stories […,] rituals of daily life are organized to tell stories[…,] pageantry of rites of passage […] are storied actions. Our plannings, our rememberings, even our loving and hating, are guided by narrative plots.[28]

For Sarbin, it is as though life itself appears as narrative or narratively structured – after all, as his volume's subtitle suggests, human conduct has a "storied nature" – rather than humans imposing culturally-ridden schemas of narrative and of interpretation over life. He also suggests that survival is dependent on being able to make proper sense of narratives: "Survival in a world of meanings is problematic without the talent to make up and to interpret stories about interweaving lives."[29] This statement gains further traction when reinterpreted in light of how traumatised individuals must conform and amend their stories in accordance with institutionally privileged forms of self-narration in order to be heard and treated favourably.

As support for the narratory principle, Sarbin points to the pervasiveness and centrality of storytelling in human life, which can be traced back to the oral tradition, Homeric epics, ancient parables and fables, and traditional proverbs. For him, this shows how the narrative model is well-suited to deal with the experiential intricacies of human life, and that by invoking "images of storytellers and storytelling, heroes, villains, and plots,"[30] one

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[27] Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," 9.
[28] Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," 11.
[29] Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," 11.
[30] Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," 11.

can better understand how humans relate, think and engage in moral choices. Like MacIntyre, Sarbin holds that narratives are central to understanding human conduct,[31] but what he does not consider is how certain narratives and narrative forms become entrenched as more powerful and (morally) instructive forms of thinking and experiencing than others. Sarbin's account of the narrative model is presented as an alternative to "the current dissatisfaction with the positivist framework"[32] that associates narratives with fiction and is thus sceptical of the explanatory power of the narrative model in psychology. Sarbin's proposal of the narratory principle has gone on to be influential in the development of further narrative approaches to selfhood and human psychology.

Life as Narrative

Further elaboration on the role of narratives in human psychology continued in the 1980s through Bruner's influential work. Bruner famously distinguished between two modes of thought that were, for him, irreducible: the paradigmatic or logico-scientific mode and the narrative mode.[33] He claims that, although the former mode has long been studied and privileged, the extent to which humans make sense of the world through the latter narrative mode of thought has been under- explored. In his 1987 article, "Life as Narrative", he adopts a constructivist approach to the "the stories we tell about our lives: 'our autobiographies,'"[34] to consider the role of the mind in constructing meaning. Bruner is interested in the question of what one does when one constructs oneself *autobiographically*, suggesting that the understanding of 'life' is informed by a particular notion of autobiography, in its structure and form. He proposes two theses that are at the heart of his argument about life as narrative; the first is that "[w]e seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of narrative," and the second is that "the mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair: that is to say, just as art

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[31] See Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," 11.
[32] Sarbin, "The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," 19.
[33] See Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 11-43.
[34] Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 71, no. 3 (2004): 691 [originally published in *Social Research* 54, no. 1 (1987)].

imitates life in Aristotle's sense, so, in Oscar Wilde's, life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative."[35]

He claims that, despite its being a widespread human practice, the activity of narrating oneself is a peculiar activity. This is because the reflexivity implied in self-narration marks the individual as both the narrator and the object of the narrative. Following de Man's characterisation of autobiography as implying a "defacement,"[36] Bruner points out that the enterprise of self-narration "seems a most shaky one,"[37] raising problems of verification, problems relating to distortion of the narrator's original intentions, and difficulties in accounting for oneself in terms of intentions without acknowledging that one's intentions may have been determined in ways unknown to the narrating subject. Yet, despite the problematic nature of self-narration, he claims that "it is perfectly plain that not just any autobiography will do. […] One imposes criteria of rightness on the self-report of a life."[38] Among the criteria he refers to are external criteria of verifying whether an event actually happened or not, and other internal criteria of psychological adequacy. Interestingly, however, Bruner argues that life does not appear as narrative since narrative reconstructions of one's life are "always a cognitive achievement."[39] He also acknowledges that life stories are "highly susceptible to cultural, interpersonal, and linguistic influences."[40] This susceptibility implies that "life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about 'possible lives' that are part of one's culture;" furthermore, a culture includes "a stock of canonical life narratives," as well as "combinable formal constituents from which its members can construct their own life narratives."[41] This is particularly relevant for the line of argument pursued in this thesis since it highlights the socio-cultural influences that come to bear upon the activity of self-narration. Bruner emphasises how the culturally available stock of narratives is taken up by individuals to constitute their life narrative, Moreover, these life narratives become "variants of the

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[35] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 692.
[36] See de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," 919-930.
[37] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 693.
[38] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 693.
[39] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 692.
[40] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 694.
[41] All quotations in this sentence are from Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 694.

culture's canonical forms"[42] in such a way that "we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives."[43]

To exemplify his argument, Bruner discusses one of his studies: "[w]e were interested in how people tell the stories of their lives and, perhaps simplemindedly, we asked them to do so – telling them to keep it to about half an hour, even if it were an impossible task."[44] The sample consists of "a family – a father, a mother, and their grown son and grown daughter."[45] The themes foregrounded in his study include issues of home, moral principles, work, aspirations, hesitations and outlook on life. The sample chosen can be considered to be heteronormative, work-oriented, religious, marriage-driven, patriarchal: "Our family is headed by George Goodhertz, a hard-working heating contractor in his early 60s, a self-made man of moral principles, converted to Catholicism in childhood and mindful of his obligations."[46] Moreover, the way the themes are dissected indicates less an openness to the various ways in which people can narrate their lives, and more of a perpetuation of dominant norms that instruct how lives are to be narrated, and that dictate which features of life are valuable. In my view, Bruner's study reads more like an attempt to transform life narratives into readable narratives, where the degree of readability is determined by the extent to which the narratives conform to hegemonic values.

Although Bruner's psychological theories consider how self-narratives are culturally informed and that they can be otherwise, he does not pay enough attention to the stringent ways in which self-narratives are shaped, and the extent to which self-narratives must submit to this shaping if they wish to be heard. In my view, this oversight deprives such psychological theories of their possible critical import by failing to properly locate the political significance of such narrative shaping. For example, in another paper, Bruner argues that different contexts, especially institutionalised ones such as the analyst-analysand or lawyer-client relations, demand particular forms of narrative. This demand

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[42] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 694.
[43] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 694 [emphasis in original].
[44] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 700.
[45] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 700.
[46] Bruner, "Life as Narrative," 701.

rests on background knowledge that provides "not only bases for interpretation but, of course, important grounds for negotiating how a story shall be taken – or, indeed, how it should be told."[47] In light of this, Bruner argues that narratives are dependent on but not completely reducible to such cultural scripts. Several such theories in the psy sciences consider the extent to which actions and their meaning are informed by one's cultural situatedness. Most theorists seem to regard this influence quite neutrally, if not positively, focusing on how situatedness benefits the subject by providing cultural belonging to individuals, or allowing the subject to be rooted in a community within which one's actions acquire significance. The importance of such rootedness is not to be underestimated; after all, most individuals seek to dwell comfortably in a world where their relation to cultural scripts is one of smooth productive engagement. However, these scripts (behavioural, textual, cultural) can be *problematised* in the dual sense of the word which Foucault describes:[48] first, by studying how such scripts come to be the way they do in particular historical moments, and second, how these cultural scripts can become a problem to some, or can be critically engaged with in such a way that their historically contingent existence is shown to be upheld by possibly contestable and unnecessary privileging, inequality and exclusion.

Narrative Unity under Stress

Other psychological theorists and practitioners have built on Bruner's views of narrative as a mode of thinking, and on the role of narrative in psychotherapy. Polkinghorne proposes that narrative theories of the self present an alternative to theories of the self as a substance. Rather than being a substratum, the self is presented as a temporal process always in a state of becoming. Polkinghorne takes his cue from Gestalt psychology to argue that knowledge is organised through cognitive structuring which allows one to relate particulars to a conceptual whole. Likewise, the individual encounters the contents of human experience as intelligible: "We do not encounter a buzzing confusion of

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[47] Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 11.

[48] See Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1990), 257.

indistinct and unstructured perceptual elements, but a world that appears as meaningful."[49] For Polkinghorne, narrative is what holds things together and, like Sarbin, he considers narrative to be a cognitive organising process that gives meaning to events and organises them as part of a plot. Polkinghorne elevates the narrative approach to selfhood and life in such a way that it guarantees cohesion. One can object by arguing that there is an important difference between the cohesive structure of experience on one hand, and the cohesion ascribed to a whole life narrative on the other, since the latter is not a perceptible object. Although it can and does work on particular occasions, this supposed cohesion can also be regarded as discursive construction open to critical scrutiny, just like other discourses that claim to have a hold on human subjectivity and its processes. Further scrutiny of this discourse of self-unity reveals underlying cultural and political factors and prejudices functioning to keep intact the illusion of self-unity.

For Polkinghorne, although self-narratives are like other kinds of narratives insofar as they share a narrative structure, they are also significantly different since, unlike fictive narratives for example, self-narratives have a necessarily unfinished nature.[50] Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's concept of emplotment, Polkinghorne claims that discontinuous and disconnected events are woven together in a single coherent story through the process of emplotment.[51] This process is not a unilateral one, and "often consists of multiple threads of subplots woven together into a complex and layered whole."[52] Referring to David Carr's views,[53] Polkinghorne concludes that the narrative form is not merely an external cover that one imposes *over* experience in order to structure it; rather, the narrative form is an inherent structure *of* human experience and action: "Storytelling and story comprehension are ultimately grounded in the general human capacity to conceptualize – that is, to structure experiential elements into wholes."[54] He maintains that narrative

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[49] Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 1, no. 2&3 (1991): 135.
[50] See Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 136.
[51] See Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 141; For Ricoeur's discussion of emplotment, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984 [1983]).
[52] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 141.
[53] See David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).
[54] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 142.

human identities are continually evolving because as one progresses in life, more experiences are accumulated which, in turn, necessitate a revision of one's self-narrative. This, for him, is generally a relatively smooth process one undergoes throughout one's life, whereby the narrative revisions "incorporate the progressive layers of understanding that result from additional social interactions occurring throughout one's life history."[55] This process is regarded as "an ongoing task, sometimes a struggle, and success is a real accomplishment,"[56] once again indicating – like Sarbin and Bruner – that the narrative coherence they see the self as possibly embodying is a construction, a success that is culturally achieved. In fact, Polkinghorne seems to agree with Karl E. Scheibe's idea that self-narratives "must be embedded in and constructed out of a person's particular cultural environment – that is, the specific vocabulary and grammar of its language, its 'stock of working historical conventions,' and the pattern of its belief and value system."[57]

Polkinghorne argues that although the integration of new experiences is generally a smooth process, it can be troubled by "stressful conditions"[58] that cause the self-narrative to decompose, leaving the individual in a state of anxiety due to the meaninglessness purportedly brought about by the dissolution of narrative coherence. Polkinghorne frames this disruption in adversarial terminology: "Our adversary in the struggle is everything that opposes narrative integration: temporal disorder, confusion, incoherence, chaos."[59] For Polkinghorne, without a unified sense of self, one's well-being suffers; as a result, one would not be able to successfully function. In such moments, "the plots we have employed to identify ourselves and give meaning to our lives seem unable to integrate previously forgotten or new events."[60] The active verb "we have employed" makes this process seem more like a forceful manipulation that transforms haphazard life events into a narrative whole rather than an automatic or 'natural' cognitive process. The agency which prompts the individual to structure its own life narrative in certain ways can be read

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[55] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 144.
[56] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 145.
[57] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 144. On this idea, Polkinghorne draws on the ideas of Karl E. Scheibe. See Karl E. Scheibe, "Self-Narratives and Adventure," in *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct*, ed. Theodore R. Sarbin (Connecticut: Praeger, 1986), 129-151.
[58] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 135.
[59] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 145.
[60] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 149.

as a social force, a power relation, or a normalising tendency, perpetuated also by the psy sciences, that instils the idea in contemporary society that a non-integrated self is an incoherent self, and that an incoherent self is an abnormal self. Teasing out the implications of his narrative model of selfhood for clinical practices, Polkinghorne claims that "[o]ne of the reasons people seek psychotherapeutic assistance is the feeling of despair that accompanies the dissolution of the narrative unity of their self-concept."[61] The dissolution of narrative unity is considered as a severe psychological problem that can afflict an individual. In fact, for Polkinghorne, since traumatic incidents can result in the shattering of the unity of the victim's self-narrative, the principal aim of therapy is to restore a narrative unity that is presumed to have characterised the individual's life before the trauma. He claims that what people seek in psychotherapy is a reconstruction of their life story in a way that integrates its contradictory elements. The therapist "assists"[62] the individual by co-constructing the individual's life narrative in a way that coheres.

This notion of self-narrative clearly regards narrative coherence as the aim of therapy and as guarantor of positive psychic well-being and, correspondingly, views incoherence as an obstacle to be surpassed. But the prioritisation of coherence at all costs does not sit easily alongside what Polkinghorne himself regards as "the therapeutic commitment to truth,"[63] which perhaps should entail embracing events irrespective of whether they fit a coherent therapeutic narrative or not. Nonetheless, Polkinghorne insists that the multiplicity of events and relationships one experiences can and should be accounted for coherently in one's self-narrative. However, one may argue that this is not epistemologically possible, and neither might it be a desirable aim. The notion of subjectivity propagated through the account of self-narration that privileges coherence may not have sufficient regard for the reality of narrative openness brought about by one's dependency and relational constitution play in the formation of subjectivity, as highlighted in previous chapters through Butler's work. Theoretically, the account of subjectivity presupposed by this notion of self-narrative, emphasising the self's ability to

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[61] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 150.
[62] Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 150.
[63] Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, 181, quoted in Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 62.

integrate and incorporate all of its experiences, reflects an obsession with an expanding and colonising self, and could function oppressively. McLeod, in fact, regards the notion of narrative coherence as having "serious limitations,"[64] despite its appeal and dominance. He argues that the notion of a coherent self-narrative rests on the assumptions that a unitary self is possible and that it is desirable to achieve a coherent sense of self that is bounded and autonomous. These assumptions reflect ideas on selfhood that are predominant in Western culture with its favouring of "the bounded, autonomous individual [who] fits into the achievement-oriented, militarist, consumer society that has been created in the modern world," and, more specifically, in "Western masculinist culture, with its emphasis on hero myths."[65] This understanding of selfhood has been criticised from the perspective of transcultural psychology, among others.[66]

Despite the critique that has been presented in response to this understanding of selfhood and self-narration, it remains a predominant one in psychological theory and practice, even if there are and have been alternative conceptualisations of the relation between narrative and therapy that do not place such a dominant emphasis on narrative coherence. In fact, the rest of this section considers two further approaches (psychoanalytic and postmodern) that present a different perspective to the question of narrative in psychology, before turning to show how the insights derived from these different approaches to narration can inform a critique of the hegemonic emphasis on narrative coherence in the context of trauma narration.

Psychoanalysis and Self-Narration

Although this chapter identified the 1980s as a key point in the 'narrative turn' in psychology, the history of the relation between psychology and narrative goes back much further than this.[67] Freud's own psychoanalytic approach, for example, and his use of the

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[64] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 45.
[65] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 45.
[66] See McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, 45.
[67] For a discussion of the pre-1980s interest in narration in psychology, see Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, 101-124.

'talking cure' has a strong narrative dimension; indeed, for Schafer, "[i]t makes sense, and it may be a useful project, to present psychoanalysis in narrational terms."[68] Most variations of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice hold that "[w]e are forever telling stories about ourselves. […] [T]he self is a telling."[69] For this reason, Jurgen Reeder claims that "everything in psychoanalytical work takes place within the framework of a narrating activity."[70] Donald Spence similarly characterises Freud as:

> a master at taking pieces of the patient's associations, dreams, and memories and weaving them into a coherent pattern that is compelling, persuasive, and seemingly complete […]. Freud made us aware of the persuasive power of a coherent narrative – in particular, of the way in which an aptly chosen reconstruction can fill the gap between two apparently unrelated events and, in the process, make sense out of nonsense. There seems no doubt but that a well-constructed story possesses a kind of narrative truth that is real and immediate and carries an important significance for the process of therapeutic change.[71]

Schafer too characterises psychoanalysts as "people who listen to the narrations of analysands and help them to transform these narrations into others that are more complete, coherent, convincing, and adaptively useful than those they have been accustomed to constructing."[72] What both Spence's and Schafer's descriptions highlight is that psychoanalysis too, at least in some of its forms, is driven by a will to narrative coherence. Without the interpretative intervention of the psychoanalyst, "narratives are disorganized

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[68] Roy Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 30. Furthermore, Steven Marcus argues that Freud's writings and method can be viewed as a continuation of bourgeois novels of the 19th century, and suggests that it may be useful to approach Freud's case histories from the point of view of literary criticism. See Steven Marcus, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History," in *Freud: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Perry Meisel (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 195. Reeder further fuels this interpretation by referring to how Freud referred to his own work, "ten years before the publication of the Dora-case: '[…] it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science'." See Jurgen Reeder, "Freud's Narrative: From Case History to Life Story," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 1, no. 1 (1992): 55.
[69] Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," 35.
[70] Reeder, "Freud's Narrative," 51.
[71] Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*, 21.
[72] Roy Schafer, *The Analytic Attitude* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 240, quoted in Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, 119-120.

and the patients are unable to tell a coherent story of their lives;"[73] as Freud put it, "patients are altogether incapable of rendering a coherent and clear story."[74] Such psychoanalytic approaches rest on the tenet "that a coherent story is in some manner connected with mental health [...]. On this reading, human life is, ideally, a connected and coherent story."[75]

However, this does not seem to be a universally accepted tenet in psychoanalytic circles. Although it is true that psychoanalysts make use of free association as a therapeutic technique "so that the ego's demand for coherence and comprehension may be satisfied,"[76] it is also true that various psychoanalysts would hold that "there is no single, necessary, definitive account of a life history."[77] Schafer argues that the traditional perception of the process of transference as the way in which the analysand re-experiences one's past through the present relationship with the analyst would be a "poor account"[78] of the process. This is because such an account characterises "life history as static, archival, linear, reversible, and literally retrievable. Epistemologically, this story is highly problematic."[79] Schafer's preferred approach to narration within the psychoanalytic dialogue "emphasizes new experience and new remembering of the past [...]. If analysis is a matter of moving in a direction, it is a moving forward into new modes of constructing experience."[80] Reeder goes a step further and even questions whether psychoanalysis, including Freud's formulation of it, relies at all on the assumption that a coherent and unified self-narration is a requirement or the aim of psychoanalysis. He argues that despite the common view that portrays Freud as championing the importance of a complete narrative as a requirement for the patient's well-being, "he never states that the patient would have a psychological need of a complete story to get well. [H]e does not consider the complete story to be an integral part of the treatment."[81] Although *coherence* and

[73] Marcus, "Freud and Dora," 195.
[74] Reeder, "Freud's Narrative," 53.
[75] Marcus, "Freud and Dora," 195.
[76] Reeder, "Freud's Narrative," 51.
[77] Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," 30.
[78] Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," 36.
[79] Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," 36.
[80] Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," 36.
[81] Reeder, "Freud's Narrative," 54.

completeness are different aspects of the self-narrative, they are both challenged by the possibility of a degree of unknowingness – which psychoanalysis itself highlighted – that haunts the self's desire to account for oneself, as well as the analyst's desire to synthesise the patient's narratives into a coherent and complete whole. Reeder voices this position thusly:

> behind my story there is merely the trace of something unknown and fundamentally ineffable and that my narrative is always merely a provisional arrangement. My point of articulation can be displaced at any time through the arrival of a new signifier, a new way of telling and therefore also of seeing and experiencing.[82]

As characterised by various theorists and practitioners of psychoanalysis, the aim of the analytic work is for analyst and analysand to "deconstruct the original story; together they must discover and uncover the contradictions and incompletions that are dictated by the subject's defensive operations."[83] Moreover, the analyst's interpretations are *retellings* of the patient's narrative in which "certain features are accentuated while others are placed in parentheses; certain features are related to others in new ways or for the first time; some features are developed further, perhaps at great length."[84]

Reeder argues that throughout his work Freud employed "a metaphorics concerning analytical work in which he likened it with an archaeological excavation."[85] This search for the 'deep meanings' of mental states is the target of Foucault's critique of the modern will to knowledge which posits an authoritative figure who is able to decipher the deep inherent truths of subjectivity; a will to discover the *truth* about one's sexuality or the *truth* about one's desires. Schafer argues, however, that this interpretative process is not a unilateral one guided by the analyst, but a process of co-authoring: "The analyst's retellings progressively influence the what and how of the stories told by analysands. The

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[82] Reeder, "Freud's Narrative," 58.
[83] Reeder, "Freud's Narrative," 52.
[84] Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," 35.
[85] Reeder, "Freud's Narrative," 52.

analyst establishes new, though often contested or resisted, questions that amount to regulated narrative possibilities. The end product of this interweaving of texts is a radically new, jointly authored work or way of working."[86] Schafer regards this process "as a project of 'reauthoring' a life through 'co-authoring' it; 'a dialogue' through which the person's (problematic) life story is transformed."[87] Spence too contends that therapists construct rather than discover meanings in individuals' stories; the therapist is not only a listener nor the sole master interpreter of the patient's narrative, but "also plays a role as a collaborator in the production of the story or narrative; the therapist is like the editor of a living text."[88] This raises questions regarding what constitutes a 'better' life story and how life stories can and whether they should be reauthored. Crossley refers to more self-critical approaches to psychoanalysis that hold that "therapists are in the business of 'constructing' rather than 'discovering' meanings through stories."[89] This is because the psychotherapeutic process effectively amounts to something other than coauthoring due to the inherent power imbalance of the scene of therapy: "the therapist remains in a more privileged and powerful position in the therapeutic situation and often operates with a 'master narrative' that guides understanding,"[90] and which depends upon the therapist's theoretical inclinations. For Spence, the therapist's orientation also determines how the patient's narrative is heard:

> If, for example, the analyst assumes that contiguity indicates causality, then *he will hear* a sequence of disconnected statements as a causal chain […]. If he assumes that transference predominates and that the patient is always talking, in more or less disguised fashion, about the analyst, then *he will hear* the material in that way.[91]

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[86] Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," 36.
[87] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 60.
[88] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 59.
[89] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 58.
[90] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 60.
[91] Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*, 129, quoted in Kenneth J. Gergen and John Kaye, "Beyond Narrative in the Negotiation of Therapeutic Meaning," in *Therapy as Social Construction*, eds. Sheila McNamee and Kenneth J. Gergen (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 170 [emphasis added].

This highlights the power of therapists to determine what qualifies as an appropriate self-narration in terms of form and style, as well as how self-narratives are to be interpreted. In the next part of this section, I consider some psychological perspectives on selfhood and self-narration that can be broadly considered as 'postmodern', and that highlight the impossibility or problematic nature of coherent self-narratives. Furthermore, such perspectives within the psy sciences suggest that self-narratives are discursive and cultural products, whereby different discourses and knowledges have different power in determining how self-narration happens.

Postmodern Counter-Currents

Various researchers in the psy sciences have emphasised the role of power relations in therapeutic contexts, echoing Foucault's concerns with self-narration as a product of discourses and power. Narrative therapy, as proposed by White and Epston in the 1980s, overtly cite Foucault's works on knowledge, power, and subjectivity as an influence.[92] Narrative therapy, originally developed as a form of family therapy, attempted to move beyond individualising and potentially harmful outlooks in therapeutic contexts. Following Foucault's account of discourse, White and Epston argue that engaging in language is never a neutral activity because "[t]here exists a stock of culturally available discourses that are considered appropriate and relevant to the expression or representation of particular aspects of experience."[93] Such discourses enable people's lives to be organised in stories. However, as Karl Tomm puts it in his foreword to White and Epton's book: "[s]tories can, of course, be liabilities as well as assets,"[94] for while stories can assist the individual in understanding oneself and others, other stories can hinder, constrain or pathologise the individual. For this reason, "[n]arrative therapy seeks to *externalize problems*, seeing them not as individual problems, or even as located within the family

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[92] See White and Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, 1. For more on Foucault's views as an influence on White and Epston's narrative therapy, see A. C. (Tina) Besley, "Foucault and the turn to narrative therapy," *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 30, no. 2 (2002): 125-143.

[93] White and Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, 27. For other approaches in critical and discursive psychology that rely on Foucault's views on discourse and power, see Ian Parker, ed., *Deconstructing Psychotherapy* (London: Sage Publications, 1999) and Ian Parker, *Critical Discursive Psychology*, 2nd ed. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015 [2002]).

[94] White and Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, x.

structure, but as an aspect of the dominant social structure."[95] Viewing individual problems from a socio-political lens allows the individual "to separate from 'problem-saturated' descriptions of their lives and relationships."[96] White and Epston consider practices of externalising problems as critical "counter-practices to cultural practices that are objectifying of persons and of their bodies. These counter-practices open space for persons to re-author or constitute themselves, each other, and their relationships, according to alternative stories or knowledges."[97] For White and Epston, this gesture allows the therapist to collaborate with the patient to reveal social realities and dominant discourses that are disempowering and reinforcing obstacles to the individual. For this reason, they regard therapy as a political activity while recognising that not enabling patients to challenge techniques of power is equally political. The aim of such politicised therapy is to shift the focus from understanding psychological problems as inherent in individuals to regarding them as effects of subjugating dominant narratives. In this way, rather than individualising, therapy is politicised: "Recognizing that individual problems are connected to the larger social, political milieu means that *at least sometimes* the solution to individual problems lies in social and political change."[98]

Other leftist approaches to the psy sciences have emphasised the entanglement of mental illness with a capitalist and neoliberal culture. Mark Fisher, for example, argues that politicising mental illness not only highlights the explicit link between the negative effects of capitalism and mental illness, but also points toward other kinds of critical narratives that can be narrated by individuals and that counter the individualising and pathologising effect of dominant psy discourses and practices. As Fisher puts it in this incisive excerpt:

> The current ruling ontology denies any possibility of a social causation of mental illness. The chemico-biologization of mental illness is of course strictly commensurate with its depoliticization. Considering mental illness an individual chemico-biological problem has enormous benefits for capitalism. First, it

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[95] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 161 [emphasis added].
[96] White and Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, 4.
[97] White and Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, 75.
[98] McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, 162 [emphasis added].

reinforces Capital's drive towards atomistic individualization (you are sick because of your brain chemistry). Second, it provides an enormously lucrative market in which multinational pharmaceutical companies can peddle their pharmaceuticals (we can cure you with our SSRIs). It goes without saying that all mental illnesses are neurologically *instantiated*, but this says nothing about their *causation*. If it is true, for instance, that depression is constituted by low serotonin levels, what still needs to be explained is why particular individuals have low levels of serotonin. This requires a social and political explanation; and the task of repoliticizing mental illness is an urgent one if the left wants to challenge capitalist realism.[99]

Other theoretical perspectives that discuss the implications of postmodernity on the psy sciences include Kenneth Gergen's social constructionist positions. Gergen claims that the motivation to write his influential 1991 book *The Saturated Self* stemmed from his desire to account for the increasingly "complex, demanding, and engulfing" world which brought with it "an enormous increase in excitement, invitation, possibility, intrigue, and useful information [… as well as] simultaneous bewilderment at the explosion in responsibilities, goals, obligations, deadlines, and expectations."[100] This postmodern condition, which he calls *social saturation*, "is marked by a plurality of voices vying for the right to reality,"[101] and brought with it significant changes in the understanding and experience of selfhood. Gergen does not lament any loss of the Romantic self. Although he thinks that certain facets of a postmodern culture can have detrimental effects on the experience of selfhood – for example, an increase in social isolation – his theoretical attitude is marked by a certain playfulness and fascination with possibilities, through which "one opens an enormous world of potential […]; a degree of optimism is merited."[102] Among the possibilities that this saturation opens up, Gergen considers how the postmodern world "is a world in which we no longer experience a secure sense of self,

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[99] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 37 [emphasis in original].
[100] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, xvii.
[101] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 7.
[102] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 17.

and in which doubt is increasingly placed on the very assumption of a bounded identity."[103] The plurality of discourses in postmodernity and the lack of easy criteria by which to adjudicate among competing discourses, coupled with the fragmented and flexible sense of self, pose "a profound challenge to the concept of the autonomous self. Concepts of the individual – as the center of knowledge ('one who knows'); as possessor of rationality; as author of his or her own words; as one who creates, decides, manipulates, or intends – are all placed in question."[104] Gergen is aware that this claim may seem paradoxical in light of the excessive and problematic emphasis on individualism in the contemporary age: "Western culture has long placed a strong value on the individual's self-determination (usually limited to the male). It is the good person, it is said, who makes his own decisions, resists group pressure, and 'does it his way.'"[105] He further critiques this dominant conception of selfhood by arguing that the notion of autonomous individuals "invites people to think of themselves as fundamentally isolated, alone to ponder and create their own fate. Because cooperating with others means 'sacrificing one's own desire' to the will of others, individualism also discourages cooperation and the development of community. A me-first attitude is also invited."[106]

Despite this persisting conception of selfhood as autonomous, unified and self-enclosed – if not narcissistic[107] – Gergen embraces facets of the saturated self insofar as it contains the potential "to bid final adieu to the concrete entity of self, and then to trace the reconstruction of *self as relationship*."[108] This conception of relational selfhood philosophically, ethically and politically problematises the sovereignty of the subject. For Gergen, the shift toward relationality challenges the dominant vocabulary of individualism, and instead regards selves as "manifestations of relationship, thus placing relationships in the central position occupied by the individual self for the last several hundred years of Western history."[109] Contra critics of postmodernism, Gergen argues that

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[103] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 16.
[104] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 156.
[105] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 97.
[106] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 97.
[107] See Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 154.
[108] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 140 [emphasis added].
[109] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 146-147.

postmodernism does not only stand for a deconstruction of the humanist self but *may* also inspire "a new vocabulary of being,"[110] namely relational being. This account of selfhood has implications on how self-narration can be thought. The notion and experience of relational selfhood requires us to consider the self as "a heteroglossia of being, a living out of the multiplicity of voices within the sphere of human possibility."[111] For Gergen, narrative coherence is both *impossible* (due to postmodern saturation) and *undesirable* (due to his favouring a relational ontology). In its concern with how relationality can trouble coherent accounts of oneself, Gergen's outlook on narrative and selfhood can be seen as close to Butler's, and his emphasis on interdependence resonates with her account of relationality. As can be seen in the following claims by Gergen, his views on selfhood in postmodernity – written in the psy register – echo Butler's philosophical account of selfhood: "One's sense of individual autonomy gives way to a reality of immersed interdependence, in which it is relationship that constructs the self;"[112] "[w]e appear to stand alone, but we are manifestations of relatedness."[113]

This section discussed the various theoretical approaches to narrative within the psy sciences. Practices of self-narration have been an integral part of the psychotherapeutic scene, pre-dating the more explicit emphasis on narrative since the so-called 'narrative turn' in the 1980s. This section also analysed the attitudes characterising these different theoretical positions to the question of narrative coherence, and the extent to which one *can* coherently narrate oneself or whether coherence is a quality that one *should* aspire for. The next section considers more specifically the question of narrative coherence with regard to trauma narrations to highlight *that* an impulse toward privileging narrative coherence in psy therapeutic contexts exists, and to show *how* this will to coherence operates in psy contexts dealing with traumatised individuals.

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[110] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 242. Gergen expands further on his account of relational ontology in a later work. See Gergen, *Relational Being*.
[111] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 247.
[112] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 147.
[113] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 170.

7.2 Trauma and Narrative Coherence

I "… life stories gone awry"

Several theorists and therapists have interpreted Freud's work as resting on a fundamental assumption that mental health corresponds to a coherent narrative account of one's life. Following his lead, the practice of psychotherapy has been characterised as an "exercise in story repair"[114] that ideally leads to a "more dynamic and thus more useful plot which serves as a more powerful and connective force."[115] Arthur Frank uses the term 'narrative wreckage'[116] to describe effects of traumatising experiences. Crossley elaborates further on this by arguing that "traumatizing events can be characterized as trauma precisely because they do not conform to our more everyday, normal sense of reality."[117] Similarly, the experience of mental illness has been characterised as amounting "at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself,"[118] or as "life stories gone awry."[119] This highlights the implicit valorisation of narrative coherence and the presumed coherence that governs ordinary life stories, and sheds light on the hardness of discourses and practices that promote narrative coherence as a necessary requirement for legitimate self-narration. For Crossley, "[t]he plain fact is that the kinds of experiences most of us undergo cry out for the kind of 'old-fashioned narrative' [;] we have to have some sense of ourselves as a unified, coherent person"; "we need coherent subjects."[120] According to such views, coherence is the normal state of affairs: "It is 'normal' for us to experience such narrative coherence in the sense that, for most of us, most of the time 'things do, after all, make sense, hang together.'"[121] Crossley is critical

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[114] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 57.
[115] Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, 179, quoted in Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 58.
[116] See Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 53. Frank borrows the expression "narrative wreck" from Ronald Dworkin. See Ronald Dworkin, *Life's Dominion: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 211.
[117] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 57.
[118] Marcus, "Freud and Dora," 195.
[119] George S. Howard, "Culture Tales: A Narrative Approach to Thinking, Cross-Cultural Psychology, and Psychotherapy," *American Psychologist* 46, no. 3 (1991): 187, cited in Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 57.
[120] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 41-42.
[121] Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 90, cited in Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 51.

of what she regards as postmodern flirtation with narrative incoherence where self-narratives, or when self-narration in the wake of traumatic incidents, are concerned. She equates the wariness of narrative coherence with a celebration of shattered identities and incoherent self-narratives, and seems to share the view that such a position "displays a radical insensitivity and is difficult to reconcile with the feelings of terror and pain that accompany the personal fragmentation often experienced by patients entering therapy."[122] Her criticism of postmodern outlooks on self-narratives builds on this point:

> Postmodern approaches such as Gergen's considerably overplay the disorderly, chaotic and variable nature of contemporary human experience. On a routine, daily basis, there is more order and coherence than such accounts suggest. This is nowhere more apparent than when we examine traumatizing experiences, which have the capacity to painfully highlight the 'normal' state of narrative coherence which is routinely taken for granted and thus remains 'unseen'.[123]

Crossley draws on Martin Heidegger's notion of angst to argue that this 'normal' state of affairs is troubled by existential crises such as bereavement, relationship breakdown or illness. Such experiences of loss of 'grounding' call into question the taken-for-granted "sense of implicit connection between events, people, plans, aims, objectives, values and beliefs."[124] Crossley maintains that, by definition, trauma is that which does not conform to our everyday sense of reality, where this 'normal' sense of reality is characterised "by the fact that we *constantly struggle to create or maintain such stability* in the face of 'an ever-threatening, impending chaos at all levels, from the smallest project to the overall "coherence of life".'"[125]

This is a challenging claim, and very much the opposite of how the relation between self-narration and narrative coherence is presented in this thesis. My view is that one of the

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[122] Michele L. Crossley, "Formulating Narrative Psychology: The Limitations of Contemporary Social Constructionism," *Narrative Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (2003): 290.

[123] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 56.

[124] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 56.

[125] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 57 [emphasis added]. The quotation within Crossley's quotation is from Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 91.

reasons why Crossley sees such difference between pre- and post- trauma selves is that she is reiterating the pressure imposed upon individuals to incline towards narrative coherence. Crossley is subscribing to the idea that the aim of therapy is and should be to restore the unity, coherence, integration, transparency, mastery and control that define "the 'normal' state of narrative coherence,"[126] as she calls it. This is a philosophical, ethical and political privileging that exerts a governing influence on contemporary subjectivity in general, and psychotherapy in particular. This configuration is not as innocent, essential and timeless as it is presented to be. Theorists like Crossley worry about how postmodern critiques of narrative coherence risk "losing the human being in the process."[127] My worry is how such theorists, despite their well-meaning efforts to restore unified conceptions of selfhood in trauma survivors, are unable to think of the human without necessarily subscribing to the dictum that human life must be governed by coherence and unity. Rather than accusing postmodern theorists of insensitivity toward traumatised individuals' fear and pain, a welcome effort – theoretically and in practice – would be to shift the theoretical goalposts, and regard this fear and pain as partly propagated by the psy sciences' overstated and exaggerated drive toward narrative coherence, to the extent that an inability to smoothly conform to this injunction renders one's life narrative incoherent and, by implication, unhealthy. Crossley simply states the injunction to narrative coherence, and identifies it as a *useful* norm that enables individuals to rebuild a coherent sense of identity after traumatic incidents, without going on to critically examine the notion and the power dynamics that underpin this very privileging of narrative coherence.

Whereas, for the most part, the norm of narrative coherence is endorsed and propagated, some therapists gesture toward a critique of an over-emphasis on narrative coherence in post-traumatic. In a 2006 issue of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, a group of theorists and practitioners discussed the utility of narrative coherence in clinical practice. Most contributors subscribed to the idea that coherent self-narratives are necessary for

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[126] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 56.
[127] See Mick Cooper and John Rowan, "Introduction: Self-plurality – The One and the Many," in *The Plural Self: Multiplicity in Everyday Life*, eds. Mick Cooper and John Rowan (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 2, cited in Crossley, "Formulating Narrative Psychology," 290.

improved well-being, with notable exceptions to be discussed below. In the opening piece of this issue, Giancarlo Dimaggio argues that "self-narratives used by individuals to give meaning to their experience need a certain degree of clarity and consistency if they are to promote adaptation and be effective at guiding behaviour."[128] Dimaggio notes how disorientated or disorganised forms of attachment can be developed by children of, for example, seriously ill or abusive parents, which would later in life deprive them of the ability to integrate their past experiences in a well-adapted manner due to the tendency to be diagnosed with dissociative or borderline personality disorders. Such individuals, Dimaggio argues, would "relate events in a confused manner, swing from one emotion to another, suffer memory lapses, have problems in distinguishing between fantasy and reality, and give others a feeling of unease."[129] He remarks that such narratives have been characterised in different ways: some consider such incoherence to be a narrative disruption,[130] others regard incoherent narratives as impoverished and disorganised,[131] while others consider certain disrupted stories, such as those of schizophrenics' or individuals with a dissociative disorder, as barren, cacophonous or disorganised.[132] Similarly, the incoherence brought about by trauma can disrupt various features of the life narrative: it can affect its plot structure, the themes present in the individual's worldview, as well as the goals of the self-narrative. The point in Dimaggio's differentiation among forms of narrative incoherence is not to critically examine how norms of psychotherapy privilege certain narrative criteria over others; on the contrary, Dimaggio supports the view that narrative coherence is of paramount important: "The structure of a story […] has to comply with certain criteria to be beneficial and promote adaptation;"[133]

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[128] Giancarlo Dimaggio, "Disorganized Narratives in Clinical Practice," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19, no. 2 (2006): 103 [abstract].

[129] Dimaggio, "Disorganized Narratives in Clinical Practice," 104.

[130] See Robert A. Neimeyer, "Narrative Disruptions in the Construction of the Self," in *Constructions of Disorder*, eds. Robert A. Neimeyer and Jonathan D. Raskin (Washington: APA Press, 2000), 207-241, cited in Dimaggio, "Disorganized Narratives in Clinical Practice," 105.

[131] See Dimaggio, "Disorganized Narratives in Clinical Practice," 105.

[132] See Paul H. Lysaker and John T. Lysaker, "Psychotherapy and Schizophrenia: An Analysis of Requirements of an Individual Psychotherapy for Persons with Profoundly Disorganized Selves," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19, no. 2 (2006): 171-189. See also Giampaolo Salvatore, Laura Conti, Donatella Fiore, Antonino Carcione, Giancarlo Dimaggio, and Antonio Semerari, "Disorganized Narratives: Problems in Treatment and Therapist Intervention Hierarchy," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19, no. 2 (2006): 192-193.

[133] Dimaggio, "Disorganized Narratives in Clinical Practice," 105.

"intervention […] should also result in the narrative being adequately *organized*. In other words, there needs to be a modification not only of the contents of stories, but also their form."[134] Here, Dimaggio is writing as a therapist: he refers to how the therapist-as-listener can become overwhelmed and disoriented when trying to make sense of an individual's incoherent narration. In such instances, therapy takes the form of patiently retrieving information and memories from the individual in an attempt to "modifying the structure of stories, with the aim of making them clearer and more coherent."[135] The insistence on narrative coherence here is very apparent; Dimaggio's language echoes a will-to-coherence that is favoured for therapeutic reasons but which, strikingly, fails to properly consider the power relations that condition this drive for coherence.

In another study, Sara Jirek proposes a conception of narrative coherence as a continuum, which she defines in this way:

> I identified five major components of highly coherent post-trauma narratives: (1) the narrator articulated a continuous and detailed storyline, without constant prompting, regarding her or his life before, during, and after the trauma(s); (2) the narrator's life story was intelligible, organized, and logical; (3) the narrator articulated a clear sense of self before and after the trauma – aware of both the continuity and the change of the self; (4) the narrator incorporated the trauma into her or his worldview or belief system; and (5) the narrator incorporated the trauma into her or his vision of the future.[136]

Jirek's claim is that a decrease in symptoms of post-traumatic stress follows only if the reconstructed narrative by the trauma survivor is coherent. Not every narrative construction is viewed positively; if the construction is narratively incoherent, it is not of therapeutic use to the survivor, and the survivor would not be able to integrate the traumatic experience into their identities and life stories.

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[134] Dimaggio, "Disorganized Narratives in Clinical Practice," 106 [emphasis in original].
[135] Dimaggio, "Disorganized Narratives in Clinical Practice," 107.
[136] Jirek, "Narrative Reconstruction," 172.

Echoing the sentiments of the phrase "life stories gone awry" discussed above, Jirek points out that the essence of a traumatic event is that it "throws a significant 'plot twist' into one's life story, threatens the narrative coherence of that story, challenges one's sense of identity, initiates a 'crisis of meanings', and may shatter assumptions about how the world works and one's place within it."[137] Jirek recognises that "society [is] filled with pre-existing narratives that are widely available and readily understood,"[138] out of which individuals construct their self-narrative. She notes that "not all narratives are equally valued or encouraged in a society. In fact, some stories have no accepted place in the discursive environment, are not validated, or are strongly discouraged."[139] This, she continues, calls for a closer analysis of how "narratives are *influenced* by the historical moment, social norms, politics, power, privilege, and individuals' locations in the social structure."[140] The excessive emphasis placed on narrative coherence can be considered as one such influence, perpetuated by the authoritative status of the psy sciences, which determine which narrative structures are to be favoured within and beyond clinical settings.

Jirek only tentatively refers to critics who reflect on the cultural character of the notion of narrative coherence in a short discussion of the possible shortcomings of her study: "it is important to note that some scholars have critiqued the assumption that narrative coherence is necessarily a positive or desirable characteristic in individuals' stories."[141] When Jirek provides an example of a trauma survivor with a high degree of narrative coherence, the conception of subjectivity presented can be critically scrutinised. She quotes a "Level III trauma survivor" – that is, an individual whose life narrative exhibits the highest category of narrative coherence – describing her post-trauma outlook on life:

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[137] Jirek, "Narrative Reconstruction," 169. To support her claim, Jirek cites George Hagman, "Beyond decathexis: Toward a new psychoanalytic understanding and treatment of mourning," in *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*, ed. Robert A. Neimeyer (Washington: American Psychological Association 2001), 13-31. See also Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
[138] Jirek, "Narrative Reconstruction," 180.
[139] Jirek, "Narrative Reconstruction," 182.
[140] Jirek, "Narrative Reconstruction," 182 [emphasis added].
[141] Jirek, "Narrative Reconstruction," 185.

I've always been really, really strong. And I've always been a firm believer of 'that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger' and to learn from everything. And as long as you like yourself now, then you shouldn't regret anything because that's what made you who you are now. And that's pretty much what I live by. [142]

Such embracing of personal strength of character, self-determination and self-confidence portrays a conception of Western liberal subjectivity that centres on autonomy while disregarding dependency and vulnerability. One may ask whether the narratives of "Level III" trauma survivors demonstrating high narrative coherence promoted by the psy sciences are promoted because they are indeed healthy in themselves, or because they reflect a socially dominant conception of subjectivity.

Other commentators agree that the outcome of therapy is "to elucidate the means by which traumatized persons can move *from chaos toward coherence*."[143] However, they argue that self-narratives are constituted by the various discourses and themes that pervade the culture one inhabits. Since one's identity is at the intersection of competing and multiple narratives, coherence as such is difficult if not impossible to attain: "even under favorable circumstances, a tendency toward narrative coherence operates as a system principle that is never fully achieved."[144] Thus, when thinking about the coherent integration of experiences, one needs to acknowledge the openness that perpetually defines self-narratives, irrespective of whether they are haunted by trauma or not. Botella and Herrero argue that when faced with unexpected discontinuity in one's self-narrative in the wake of traumatic incidents, individuals seek therapy and claim, 'I want to be again as I used to be,'[145] where the pre-trauma self is presumed to be a coherent one. Neimeyer, Herrero and Botella conclude that, despite the impossibility of its complete realisation, the concept of

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[142] Jirek, "Narrative Reconstruction," 181.
[143] Robert A. Neimeyer, Olga Herrero and Luis Botella, "Chaos to Coherence: Psychotherapeutic Integration of Traumatic Loss," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* 19, no. 2 (2006): 128 [emphasis added].
[144] Neimeyer et al., "Chaos to Coherence," 130.
[145] Luis Botella and Olga Herrero, "A Relational Constructivist Approach to Narrative Therapy," *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling* 3, no. 3 (2000): 412.

narrative coherence can helpfully orient therapy; however, "the inevitability of incoherence"[146] still lurks at the heart of subjectivity and can fruitfully motivate psychological growth. While a critical analysis of the value of narrative coherence does not seek to challenge the desires of trauma survivors, it questions contexts where this norm functions as a demand placed on traumatised individuals that hinders, rather than facilitate, traumatic self-narration.

The philosophical views on subjectivity explored in previous chapters, through Foucault and particularly through Butler's work, raise important questions in this regard. They foreground the effect of trauma on our understanding of subjectivity, and suggest a need to attend to philosophical ideas on vulnerability, relationality and dependency by refusing to perpetuate the model of subjectivity (and the models of ethics and politics that follow from it) associated with mastery, control and strength. Such apprehension would stop perpetuating the notion of a human subject who is strongly self-determining and autonomous, and who only becomes 'shattered' and 'disrupted' *because of* the traumatic incident without considering the extent to which dependency, vulnerability and exposure are constitutive features of all human subjects. A denial of this reality would be precisely that – a fantasy, a denial. The rest of this chapter pursues further this analysis by looking at how the norm of coherence has been critiqued from both within and outside the psy sciences.

II Critique of Narrative Coherence

Complementing the critique of the norm of narrative coherence in the psy sciences pursued in this chapter, Mark Freeman argues that certain theories of narrative psychology do not only posit a narrative understanding of the self but go further by also proposing that this narrative must also "entail the additional notion of coherence or connectedness."[147] This, for him, is an unjustified and unnecessary leap. Reacting to the dictum that a life narrative has to be coherently structured like a classical narrative with a

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[146] Neimeyer et al., "Chaos to Coherence," 143.
[147] Freeman, "Identity and Difference in Narrative Inquiry," 337.

beginning, middle and end, he writes: "Is this the case? If so, *when* is it the case? For all time, across the course of history? And for whom? All people? Most? Some? Can one speak of narrativity *without* invoking this further idea of coherence? How coherent *is* experience anyway? How *desirable* is coherence?"[148] His probing questions highlight that not everyone may have access – linguistically or theoretically – to the requirements of narrative coherence. He also alludes to how the appearance of narrative coherence can be used as a defence mechanism by individuals whose life narratives are riddled with uncertainty. This in no way trivialises some people's need to make sense of their life narrative. As Freeman suggests, "sometimes people who are coming apart can benefit greatly from getting themselves back together. Whatever one's theoretical commitments, this seems difficult to contest."[149] Therefore, Crossley's contention that a postmodern worry about the possible dangers of insisting on life narrative coherence amounts to insensitivity is not entirely correct. Not even the most 'postmodern' of arguments (as also shown when discussing Butler's work) would simply revel in incoherence for its own sake, especially in the context of psychotherapy. A distinction (admittedly not an easy one) needs to be drawn between the incoherence alluded to in the critique of the unitary self on one hand, and the incoherence associated with, for example, schizophrenia and dissociative disorders on the other. A failure or refusal to conform to the norms of narrative coherence does not reduce one to incongruent speech; incoherence need not amount to radical incoherence that disrupts one's functioning in society. A regard for narrative incoherence or, better still, narrative openness or fluidness brought about by recognition of the impossibility of giving a unitary account of oneself, could be one way for the psy sciences and the politics they inform to creatively rethink therapy and selves without resorting to problematic conceptions of unitary selves. The challenge, therefore, is to carefully differentiate between an incoherence that is actually hindering the individual's functioning, and an incoherence that calls for attention and respect without being easily silenced, usually by pathologising it.

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[148] Freeman, "Identity and Difference in Narrative Inquiry," 337-338 [emphasis in original].
[149] Freeman, "Identity and Difference in Narrative Inquiry," 338.

Experiences of loss, grief and trauma can cultivate a heightened awareness that the presumed coherence of a non-traumatic life narrative is a fantasy; a denial of vulnerability that we "constantly struggle to create or maintain,"[150] as Crossley puts it. Were this stability so ordinary and natural, it would not presumably require such purposeful effort to maintain it. It would seem that such a struggle to maintain this stability is a matter of perpetuating the norm of coherence, and of propagating the impression of a coherent self despite its impossibility. This is a response of denial, socially upheld and subjectively incorporated, that masks vulnerability and rashly seeks to transform it into a posture of invulnerability. Traumatic experiences, thus, highlight how such an ordered, stable and coherent self was never possible in the first place. One is, then, always already narratively incoherent. This is captured in Brison's reflection on trauma recovery, already cited in the previous chapter: "Recovery no longer seems like picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative). It's facing the fact that *there was never a coherent self (or story) there to begin with*."[151] Rather than "constantly struggle to create or maintain" such stability in the pre-trauma self, and rather than inscribe it at the heart of contemporary therapeutic practices, one wonders whether it is not time to rethink the self and subjectivity in light of its vulnerability, and to take stock of its narrative incoherence. This would result in a challenge to the psy sciences to revise their logics and intricate relations to predominant discourses and practices that continue to uphold contestable notions of self-coherence, and that seem to have a monopoly on the current definitions of psychic health, normality and happiness.

Reflecting on the question of narrative coherence in the context of constructivist psychology, Dan McAdams observes that the underlying approach to narration holds that it "moves (ideally) in the direction of coherence."[152] Correspondingly, he argues, dominant therapeutic approaches demand that "therapists and their clients co-construct new narratives to replace disorganized or incoherent stories of self."[153] In this way, narrative coherence is equated with the 'good' and 'healthy' without the necessary critical

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[150] Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, 57.
[151] Brison, *Aftermath*, 116 [emphasis added].
[152] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 110.
[153] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 110.

evaluation of what is held to constitute coherence and of whether narrative coherence is necessarily beneficial. McAdams refers to research that proposes that people are typically unable to construct causally coherent life narratives prior to their young adult years.[154] Although "temporal coherence" emerges before the age of five, other types of coherence, such as autobiographical, causal and thematic coherence emerge later in adolescence. McAdams also argues that, ultimately, "the problem of narrative coherence is the problem of being understood in a social context."[155] This implies that it is the social context that determines whether something is coherent or not. The predominant definition of coherence concerns "structural expectations about time, intention, goal, causality, or closure,"[156] and if such characteristics are disrupted, as often happens in traumatic experiences, then the resulting narrative is deemed as incoherent. This judging of narratives as coherent and incoherent is reliant on norms that regulate the structure and content of narratives. It is not just a stylistic norm that is being debated here. What is being implied is that there can be no understanding of narrative coherence without the broader social contexts that give meaning to coherence. This is because, as McAdams argues, such abilities of 'higher-order' coherence emerge once the individual is socialised into society's meaning of what constitutes a life: "As they grow older, children learn about what events typically make up a normal life writ large, and they internalize society's expectations and assumptions about the human life course."[157] This highlights the cultural character of life narrative coherence, and its normalised and possibly normalising tendencies, to which traumatised individuals are subjected.

McAdams further asks: "[b]ut is coherence […] always enough?"[158] Although a coherent narrative may make more sense to a listener than an incoherent one, and may be better at "successfully integrat[ing] a life in time,"[159] the therapist's eagerness to impose coherence

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[154] See Tilmann Habermas and Susan Bluck, "Getting a Life: The Emergence of the Life Story in Adolescence," *Psychological Bulletin* 126, no. 5 (2000): 748-769, cited in McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 115.

[155] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 111.

[156] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 111.

[157] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 115.

[158] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 117.

[159] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 117.

over an individual's life narrative may amount to a "rush to coherence."[160] This rush echoes Herman's contention that, oftentimes, therapists may impose a "premature demand for certainty"[161] over trauma victims, which may not always have the intended beneficial therapeutic results. As McAdams suggests, "[l]ife is messier and more complex than the stories we tell about it,"[162] indicating that the will to narrative coherence exhibits a false mastery and imposes a false unity over a narrative which demands a more sensitive apprehension of the incoherence it manifests. McAdams suggests that a well-formed life narrative must necessarily attempt to give expression to a plurality of voices of the self. Contrastingly, life narratives that are made to fit "a single, dominant perspective, no matter how coherent they may seem to be, are too simplistic to be true; they fail to reflect lived experience."[163] At best, then, a coherent life narrative may turn out to be disappointingly uninformative as it may not capture the intricacies that define lived experience, particularly in contemporary times when "the modern self is bombarded with so many diverse stimuli and shifting demands that it simply cannot assume a coherent form."[164] At worst, as more forceful critics of narrative coherence such as Peter Raggatt assert: "the imposition of coherence upon modern life constitutes a hegemonic insult."[165]

For McAdams, closer analysis of self-narration reveals the "cultural underpinnings of narratives and *of the very concept of coherence itself*. […] [A]ny consideration of narrative coherence must eventually come to terms with the characteristic assumptions regarding what kind of stories *can* and *should* be told in a given culture, what stories are understandable and valued."[166] The trait of narrative coherence is itself governed by several cultural underpinnings, and what is deemed to be a coherent narrative usually refers to a narrative that replicates the kind of stories that "are understandable and valued

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[160] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 118.
[161] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 180.
[162] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 118.
[163] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 119; see Hubert J. M. Hermans, "Voicing the Self: From Information Processing to Dialogical Interchange," *Psychological Bulletin* 119, no. 1 (1996): 31-50.
[164] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 120.
[165] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 120; see Peter T. F. Raggatt, "Multiplicity and Conflict in the Dialogical Self: A Life-Narrative Approach," in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, eds. Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2006), 15-35.
[166] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 123 [emphasis added].

among people who live in and through a given culture."[167] Furthermore, narrative coherence is given a questionable normative force when it becomes entangled with "cultural expectations regarding what kinds of lives people should live."[168] Through a study he conducted, McAdams shows that "midlife American adults [… with] a highly productive and caring approach to social life […] tend to construct highly coherent life stories whose main themes constellate around the idea of redemption."[169] This idea of redemption is a characteristic trope that appropriates some of the deeply valued discourses in American cultural history, and determines what counts as a coherent narrative: "Protestant conversion narratives, rags-to-riches stories about the American dream, narratives of liberation and freedom, self-help narratives about recovery and the actualization of human potential, broader discourses about manifest destiny and the chosen people."[170] This shows how it is not only the privileged quality of narrative coherence that can be challenged, but also the normative characteristics that are contingently tied to it; characteristics that reflect models of subjectivity that have no deep regard for relationality, and that as McAdams himself recognises, can be critiqued "for their presumptuousness, their lack of ambivalence, and their exuberant celebration of the expansive individual self."[171]

Critiques of the privileging of narrative coherence, and alternatives to it, have also been presented in work that draws philosophical, psychological, and sociological views alike. In their introduction to an edited volume titled *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, the editors describe their task as that of critiquing and displacing the paradigm within narrative studies that treats coherence as "a virtue […,] the ultimate guarantor of the quality of narratives[…,] a norm for good and healthy life stories."[172] For them, this paradigm – what they call "the coherence paradigm" – is characterised by an understanding of a good narrative as one that progresses linearly, chronologically, and proceeds from a beginning

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[167] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 123.
[168] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 123.
[169] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 122.
[170] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 122.
[171] McAdams, "The Problem of Narrative Coherence," 122.
[172] Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christer Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo, and Maria Tamboukou, "Beyond Narrative Coherence: An Introduction," in *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, eds. Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christer Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo, and Maria Tamboukou (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010), 1.

through a middle to an end, thus implying closure. The function of a narrative according to this paradigm is to create coherence in experience, which is typically regarded as lacking form. This paradigm equates a coherent life narrative with a life lived ethically. Besides theoretically and methodologically challenging the paradigm of coherence, the editors seek to *ethically* challenge the coherence paradigm by showing how it "privileges middle-class conventionality and marginalizes the experiences of artistically creative as well as politically traumatized people."[173] Drawing on a multiplicity of approaches – from philosophy to linguistics to psychology to historiography – the volume grapples with the various ways in which and reasons for which narrative coherence is privileged in, specifically, the areas of illness, the arts, and the management of trauma in political contexts.

The idea of narrative coherence is often traced back to Aristotle, who regarded good tragedy as characterised by a beginning, middle and end.[174] However, the transposition of criteria that were intended for drama to the realm of the humanities and social inquiry can be contested. Theorists like MacIntyre, for example, sustain Aristotle's emphasis on the normative aspect of narrative coherence. In response to modern individualism and its resulting moral fragmentation, he suggests that regarding life as an evolving and coherent narrative will help in overcoming the modernist dilemma. His notion of narrative identity centred on unity and coherence, disavowing any trace of complexity, contradiction and undecidability that life entails.[175] My counter-position to such positions is that the exaggerated focus on narrative coherence itself, and the lack of acknowledgement of the complexity of self-narratives, including their occasional resistance to coherence, fuels the emphasis on individualism that, in turn, further impoverishes moral language and restricts one's ability to respond ethically. In my view, a more suitable alternative to narrative identity would take heed, as Butler does, of narrative incoherence and its possible virtues in order to seriously consider the role that narrative interdependence and relationality have in one's ethical life. Notions of narrative revisability and fluidity ought to be granted more

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[173] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 2.
[174] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 2.
[175] See Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 4.

attention than current dominant discourses oftentimes afford them. An insistence on the chronology and coherence of one's life narrative "ignores the possibility of self-narrative as a creative study of one's history and its complexities, and transforms it almost as a curriculum vitae demanded by others."[176] This does not imply that coherence should be done away with absolutely; its utility in particular contexts will persist. However, there are several cases of narration "that do not fit into the received and dominant idea about narrative coherence," and they should not be made to "comply with the often implicit norms of narrative theory."[177] Due to the predominance of the coherence paradigm, some life narratives that do not lend themselves to easy coherence, including but not limited to trauma narratives, end up being narrated "in circumstances and settings that severely constrain the telling."[178] Such normative impositions on narration, especially when trauma survivors are involved, amount to an ethical disservice whereby the focus is placed on conformity with "preconceived narrative norms"[179] rather than on listening to the actual stories. In the case of narrations of trauma in institutional contexts, the failure to listen to the narratives being presented, by expecting traumatised individuals to perform according to the culturally-specific forms of narration at all costs. Narrative coherence may turn out to be a harmful phenomenon in some contexts and not the guarantor of well-being that it is often presumed to be. For example, narrative coherence has been used ideologically to legitimise certain narratives while excluding from the canon other narratives – by women or slaves, for example – that do not fit hegemonic narrative structures.[180] The configuration of the self implied by the paradigm of coherence thus can be viewed as "a cultural construction and an effect of gendered and racialized discourses and practices"[181] that has been importantly contested by feminist and postcolonial critics.

The privileging of narrative coherence is not just a descriptive matter, that is, it does not inconsequentially describe how narratives are coherently produced. Rather, this type of privileging, and the means and measures by which it is achieved are politically noteworthy

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[176] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 7.
[177] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 2.
[178] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 2.
[179] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 2.
[180] See Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 7.
[181] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 7.

realities that can be contested, both on the grounds that they create conditions of inequality, and for being undesirable normative commitments which, although socially pervasive, urgently need to be exposed to critique. The privileging of coherent life narratives can create a situation where researchers highlight the structure and content of such narratives at the expense of other "more challenging cases"[182] that could well equally rich narratives. Like the gesure of the psychotherapist gently reworking a client's narrative, the demand for narrative coherence reveals a culturally and institutionally preferred mode of narrating, but there is nothing essential or timeless in this form, or in the virtues and therapeutic promises that are hegemonically attached to it. Trauma narratives in particular present a challenge to the excessive bias in favour of narrative coherence: "Extreme political traumas often seem to block the whole capacity to tell, and the ideal of coherent and standard narration stands in cruel contrast to what the victims and witnesses can actually do."[183] Narratives of political trauma, for example those presented to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) in South Africa, tended to be homogenised in the clinic and, moreover, culturally and institutionally, when coherence was defined in terms of "the purposes of the national project of unification."[184] Rather than merely displacing the privileging of narrative coherence with narrative incoherence (which would simply replicate the exclusionary logic), this critique argues for widening the parameters of what constitutes a life narrative that can be accepted as such, that can be heard as such, and that can be responded to on its own terms. Narratives that are deemed incoherent can offer a challenge or invitation "to listening in new and creative ways."[185]

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[182] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 10.
[183] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 11.
[184] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 11. For similar analyses of the TRC, see also Jan Blommaert, Mary Bock, and Kay McCormick, "Narrative inequality in the TRC hearings: On the hearability of hidden transcripts," in *Discourse and Human Rights Violations*, eds. Christine Anthonissen and Jan Blommaert (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 33-63 and Fiona C. Ross, "On having voice and being heard: Some after-effects of testifying before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Anthropological Theory* 3, no. 3 (2003): 325-341.
[185] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 2.

This chapter considered how self-narration is theorised in the discourses of psychology with reference to the psychological literature on self-narration. The therapeutic value ascribed to narrative coherence was critiqued, as well as how it is equated with a healthy narration and narrator. In this chapter, narrative coherence was not viewed as a neutral therapeutic technique, but as connected to dominant social techniques of power that regulate narrations of trauma. My claim is that the drive to narrative coherence in institutional contexts that deal with traumatised individuals calls for a political analysis of the implications of this privileging. This is pursued in the next chapter, which turns to the role of traumatic self-narration in the asylum seeking process, identifying the form that the injunction toward narrative coherence takes in this institutional context of power. This enables a reflection on the social role of narrative coherence that goes beyond solely theoretical or philosophical concerns (such as those of the theoretical debates in psychology or philosophy, which themselves are not apolitical) to consider the explicitly political consequences of traumatic self-narration. Consequently, the next chapter will show how narratives are treated unequally in the context of the asylum process, where certain narratives and narrative forms are explicitly preferred and encouraged over others. This pressure excludes several individuals from meeting the narrative requirements demanded of them. When the stakes involved are one's survival (asylum/detention/deportation), the analysis of self-narration garners additional urgency. Echoing concerns raised throughout this thesis, the next chapter examines how traumatic self-narration in the asylum process can be a perpetuation of hegemonic norms on one hand, or, on the other hand, how it can enable subversive practices. Trauma narratives can sway toward normalisation but they can also resist dominant discourses, opening up possibilities of thinking and living subjectivity, trauma, ethics and politics in different ways.

Chapter 8 Narrative Inequality and the Culture of Trauma in the Asylum Process

This chapter sustains the critique of practices of self-narration by discussing the narration of trauma in the asylum seeking process, thus bringing together the various analyses pursued in previous chapters. In the absence of official documents, the process of seeking asylum is significantly dependent upon the ability of the asylum seeker to provide a narrative of persecution to the state authorities in order to be considered as eligible for asylum. The asylum seeking context makes for a rich case study which makes manifest the ideas pursued in previous chapters. I will use the notion of narrative inequality, elaborated further in relation to the asylum context by Jan Blommaert, to consider how the use of narratives is not a right to which everyone has equal access and that, moreover, whereas some narrative modes are considered as more reliable and true, others are disqualified from certain social contexts. This power of and around narratives could determine whether an asylum seeker makes a successful asylum claim or whether the asylum story is rendered incoherent or unbelievable according to the state-sanctioned criteria of what should count as a suitable narrative. Other issues which this chapter considers are the power relations at play when asylum seekers are 'coached' on how to perform their narrative, as well as the critical issues that arise concerning the differing notions of narrative coherence and of trauma employed in the asylum seeking process. In this way, the different but related concerns of this thesis are brought together, showing how power relations impact practices of traumatic self-narration. This impact can be analysed philosophically, as well as in relation with the psy sciences which deal with trauma most proximately, and in relation to its political effects.

8.1 Narrative Inequality in the Asylum Process

Writing from a perspective of critical discourse analysis and anthropological sociolinguistics, Blommaert analyses narrative inequality in the stories of African asylum seekers in Belgium. His study is informed by the contention that using narratives is not a universal right that everyone can access in an equal manner. He builds on Dell Hymes

and Courtney Cazden's discussion of "rights to use narrative,"[1] and the inequalities of opportunity that are associated with these rights. Whereas some narrative modes are considered as more reliable and true, others are disqualified from certain social contexts. This does not only mean that, for reasons of propriety or clarity, some narratives lend themselves better than others to a specific context. The deeper point being investigated here is that, in certain contexts where individuals must narrate, the narrative must be of a certain form if it is to be considered socially worthy and consequential. This implies that anyone failing to meet these narrative requirements or unable to access the resources required to produce that kind of narrative will be excluded from the social transaction. This is one important way in which trauma narratives and their social reception are controlled. In the asylum process, success or failure have significant consequences. In such a context, the narrative is more than a set of words since it is the discursive key upon which power is operating. An analysis of how power relations shape the activity of self-narration must consider the techniques with which some linguistic articulations are rendered more suitable than others, and must seek to uncover the conditions under which a narrative is deemed to be reliable or unreliable. Blommaert highlights this narrative inequality when he shows that the institutionally favoured narrative form in the asylum process is one that requires "access to communicative resources that are often far beyond the reach of African asylum seekers not only linguistically but also narratively and stylistically."[2] This is a crucial point: if, in so-called 'receiving countries', a legal right such as seeking asylum is only accessible to those who can access and exhibit the form of narration required in order to be eligible for that right, then important questions need to be asked about it.

Through empirical research, Blommaert shows how these institutional pressures manifest themselves in the Belgian asylum seeking procedure. He notes that narrative inequality is not a monolithic phenomenon, but rather a multi-dimensional phenomenon that assumes

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[1] Dell Hymes and Courtney Cazden, "Narrative Thinking and Storytelling Rights: A Folklorist's Clue to a Critique of Education," in *Language in Education: Ethnolinguistic Essays*, ed. Dell Hymes (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1980), 126, quoted in Jan Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality: African asylum seekers' stories in Belgium," *Discourse & Society* 12, no. 4 (2001): 413.
[2] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 414.

various shapes. One of the shapes that narrative inequality takes pertains to the accessibility and availability of linguistic-communicative resources. Therefore, people who do not have access to the institutionally demanded forms of linguistic expression are, from the start, prejudiced against. Narrative inequality can also take the form of systemic refusal to attempt to culturally contextualise the narratives presented by asylum seekers: whereas the asylum system demands a specific context of persecution narrated in particular ways, asylum seekers tend to put forward 'home narratives' that are usually long and anecdotal stories about the refugees' home societies.

Narrative inequality also highlights the centrality of performance; for the institution, *how* the narrative is performed is just as important as its content. It therefore comes as no surprise that the asylum seeking process is often described as akin to a criminal investigation. The communicative resources required to feel comfortable within this setting are numerous, putting asylum seekers on the back foot in a situation where an open interview in which the asylum seeker can freely narrate "become[s] a threat rather than an opportunity."[3] This is because asylum seekers are vulnerable to attitudes of cross-examination and suspicion by state officials. Referring to her study of the French asylum process, Carolina Kobelinsky remarks how "[s]uspicion seemed to be the primary attitude adopted toward asylum seekers;"[4] Fassin echoes this sentiment when he writes that "[t]oday, the dominant ethos of the authorities with regard to asylum is suspicion."[5] This makes the asylum interview feel more like an examination, where the criteria of success are how well one can perform and how correctly one answers, judged in relation to how one is expected to reply: "The details given by interviewees can also backfire: details are open to scrutiny and one inaccuracy, inconsistency or contradiction in the story can be enough to disqualify asylum seekers."[6] This test-like environment is highly circumscribed by the discourse of public administration. Blommaert suggests that the administrative

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[3] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 416.
[4] Carolina Kobelinsky, "In Search of Truth: How Asylum Applications Are Adjudicated," in *At the Heart of the State: The Moral World of Institutions*, by Didier Fassin et al., trans. Patrick Brown and Didier Fassin (London: Pluto Press, 2015 [2013]), 73.
[5] Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012 [2010]), 127.
[6] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 428.

scenario is governed by "the unchallenged and apparently unchallengeable assumption that bureaucratic and administrative clients would have complete control over the medium and communicative skills in which bureaucratic and administrative procedures are being carried out."[7] This implies that one must not only be familiar with the administrative logic at play, but must also possess developed literacy skills and some degree of access to a standardised variety of a language.[8] Thus, it seems that literacy requirements "increase in size and scope the lower one gets into society."[9] Blommaert remarks that, in the Belgian context, literacy is a sociocultural given, hence the institutional expectation is that one is competent in standard linguistic resources, further curbing the communicative range that asylum seekers have access to.

Accordingly, narrative coherence is defined according to the same demands, that is, a narrative expected of an individual who has been taught the conventions of a well-written linear narrative. These narrative norms, such as "textual consistency, linearity, logic, rationality and factuality; they require considerable attention to details; they rely on written language as the basic and most lasting format of declaring 'truth'; in short, they are highly culture- and society-specific and reflect local ideologies of language, literacy and communication."[10] Moreover, it could be argued that this institutionally demanded narrative form, defined by coherence, linearity and consistency, does barely come natural under ordinary circumstances, let alone in situations where an individual may feel alien to the spoken language and the expected narrative form. Furthermore, difficulties arising from the attempt to verbalise traumatic incidents, and the limited time to formulate one's asylum narrative – "restricted to a number of well defined occasions, […] sometimes (but by no means always) assisted by interpreters"[11] – further complicate the narrative scenario, heightening the need to recognise the cultural specificity of the form of narration being privileged, and the contingency of this privileging. For this reason, this confrontation between institutions and the asylum seekers' voices is regarded as "a battle with unequal

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[7] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 417.
[8] See Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 418.
[9] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 418.
[10] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 436.
[11] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 437.

arms,"[12] where incompatible narrative conventions are treated unfairly. Also, if not whim, sometimes these criteria for deeming a narrative coherent or not boil down to "matters of style,"[13] such as the comprehensibility of the way in which one communicates. Ungrounded moral assessments of a speaker's character are also made based on communicative criteria, again including their narrative style. Equally, claims are sometimes disqualified on the basis that although "[t]here is no evidence offered of the *impossibility* of these facts, they just *seem* unlikely."[14] This curtails the individual's capacity to present one's point, whereby that which the institution wants to hear is privileged at the expense of that which the individual feels is of great significance to his or her life. Moreover, the individual – often already troubled and disrupted by the traumatic experience – has to police oneself and bracket one's own experience in an attempt to convince the authorities that one's story is worth hearing. Failing to convince in this regard may lead to deportation or criminalisation. For these reasons, then, it is right to say that the norms governing the asylum seeking procedure resemble those of a criminal investigation; failing to live up to the narrative expectations imposed by the procedure renders one a dubious figure. Self-narration under these dire circumstances exemplifies Foucault's claim that confession demands that one adopt an attitude of suspicion towards oneself, where through the act of confession, one utters one's crimes to an authority who has the power to chastise or forgive him or her.

The oral narrative of the asylum seeker is transcribed, polished, interpreted, reinterpreted, quoted, disseminated and recontextualised with the institutional assumption being that the differences between the oral narrative and the resulting written transcript are insignificant, thus ensuring that the responsibility for the narrative remains on the asylum seekers' side. This is so despite the fact that the narrative "is remoulded, remodeled and re-narrated time and time again,"[15] resulting in the narrative disseminating and operating in the hands of bureaucracy beyond the control of the original speaker. This reshaping of asylum seekers' narratives is significant and "shifts the epistemic centre from the asylum seeker to the

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[12] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 436.
[13] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 437.
[14] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 442 [emphasis in original].
[15] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 438.

administrator processing the application."[16] In such cases, the 'administrator' actively participates in the co-creation of the final narrative. This transformation goes beyond merely necessary administrative work done on oral narrations in order to render them useful in procedural matters, but also implies a deeper manipulation that attempts to standardise experiences by fitting them – sometimes uncomfortably – within rigid institutional confines. The matter stops being a simply bureaucratic impulse when amid this active translation are lives hanging on the line, and when the impulse of the professionals is more concerned with preserving theoretical coherence than with listening to trauma experiences as such. The editing is sometimes not just stylistic or formal but material and substantial, in which content deemed to be 'padding' or extra is eliminated so that the crux of the narrative is immediately clear. Given instances of non-native varieties of a language, the 'administrator' must impose a coherent order on the narrative, ensuring that the narrative is "*squeezed* into the boxes of a standard form."[17]

This 'squeezing' can, and often must, be subjected to critique since it is not always motivated by a will to benefit the asylum seeker, but instead ensures that reality is made to fit the historical and dominant structures of intelligibility that delineate what falls within the domain of the recognisable and the truthful. As Foucault argues, such a will is a coercive will to truth that masks its violence behind a veil of innocence that is the product of a long association of the true with the noble.[18] A whole array of verbs can be identified to represent this 'working on' narratives, ranging from more passive to more active agency: "shaped,"[19] "reshape,"[20] "mould,"[21] "reorganise,"[22] "mediate,"[23] "homogenized,"[24]

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[16] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 441.
[17] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 444 [emphasis added].
[18] See Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 56.
[19] Kelly McKinney, "'Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence': Testimony, Traumatic Memory, and Psychotherapy with Survivors of Political Violence," *ETHOS* 35, no. 3 (2007): 266.
[20] Molly Andrews, "Beyond narrative: The shape of traumatic testimony," in *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, eds. Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christer Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo, and Maria Tamboukou (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010), 156.
[21] McKinney, "'Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence'," 287.
[22] Andrews, "Beyond narrative," 148.
[23] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 414.
[24] Ross, "On having voice and being heard," 329.

"adapt,"[25] "teasing out,"[26] "prompted."[27] This easing need not be intended as a coercive pressure, but nonetheless functions as an indirect agency. This is akin to how Foucault portrayed the functioning of power as the government of conduct: "Government, here, refers to all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others."[28]

The pressure involved in the imposition of such cultural narratives marks the scene of narration as a conflictual scene defined by power asymmetry. Bureaucratic and administrative state procedures constitute the space in which human subjects are constructed as "'[c]ases (administrative, legal, welfare, medical, educational and probably far more).'"[29] This is the space in which Foucault saw "subjects being transformed into knowable objects of clinical observation by means of a multi-layered complex of discursive and material practices."[30] This, too, is the contradictory and agonistic space of discourse, which Foucault saw as "an important site and object of conflict [that] can contribute to our own subordination."[31] The language in which trauma narratives are articulated, the in/direct pressures on trauma narrations, and the way in which trauma and traumatised subject emerge as objects of inquiry are concerns that call for a similar analysis. Narrative inequality proves to be an important concept that can contribute to a critical theorisation not only of how trauma narratives are constructed and reconstructed, but especially of how narratives and narrative features are unequally treated in society.

The next section extends further the analysis of trauma narration by zooming in on the power relations that impact how trauma is narrated in the asylum process. Drawing on fieldwork and empirical studies done in the United States and Europe on the asylum process, the ways in which the narration of trauma is impacted in this process are examined. In particular, I emphasise how trauma narration is caught up in a precarious position that can serve both to crystallise as well as to strategically subvert power

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[25] Blommaert, Bock, and McCormick, "Narrative inequality in the TRC hearings," 40.
[26] Hyvärinen et al., "Beyond Narrative Coherence," 12.
[27] Jirek, "Narrative Reconstruction," 182.
[28] Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.
[29] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 445.
[30] Blommaert, "Investigating narrative inequality," 446; see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
[31] Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 260; see Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52.

relations. In this way, I show how the process of swaying between normalisation and subversion – explored in a previous chapter in relation to Foucault's views on power – plays out in the context of trauma narration in the asylum process. Thus, the findings of empirical studies on the power of psychological discourses of trauma and the role of narration in the asylum process are used and connected to the theoretical framework developed in previous chapters, the stakes of which extend beyond the purpose of more grounded empirical studies. This ties together the concerns raised in previous chapters on the politics of self-narration by also bringing these ideas in dialogue with empirical studies.

8.2 The Power of Trauma in the Asylum Process

Trauma narratives in the asylum seeking process oscillate in a difficult relationship between hegemony and subversion. When asylum seekers are guided and even directly assisted to structure their life narrative (or their 'story of persecution') in certain ways, they are made to succumb to hegemonic norms that determine which forms of life narration (coherent, linear, transparent) count as legitimate, and which forms of traumatisation (namely, those recognised under PTSD criteria) are thought to indicate a legitimate and 'well-founded fear of being persecuted' demanded by nation states in order to qualify as a refugee worthy of legal protection.[32] Trauma has a necessarily political valence when it is implicated within the asylum process. This is for at least two reasons. Firstly, the implicit rules of the power/knowledge of the psy sciences play an important role in the conceptualisation of trauma, in such a way that the PTSD diagnosis holds a lot of weight. Secondly, this same diagnosis of PTSD can be used, and is used, by asylum seekers and agencies aiding them to construct a self-narrative that increases their chances of a successful asylum claim. This tactic, despite its strategic utility in helping asylum seekers in their asylum application, is considered in its dynamic nature, both as a subversive technique – a sort of using of techniques of power against power itself – and

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[32] See 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 1, "Definition of the Term 'Refugee'".

as a strategy that perpetuates hegemonic norms that regulate what counts as a suitable life narrative worth protecting.

Under ordinary circumstances, setting foot in a country without the right documents will most likely amount to a legal violation. In Europe and the United States, the asylum seeking process is one of the extraordinary circumstances through which one may legally enter a country, seeking protection and asylum.[33] In the absence of official documents, the receiving country employs an understandably complex process. Of particular importance to this thesis are not the legal justifications of this process or the critique that can be made of such practices, but the role of self-narration in this process and the power relations that govern it. Several sources in the academic literature that analyses the asylum process in different countries note how, in the absence of official documents, this process is dependent upon a narrative of persecution which the asylum seeker must present to the state authorities in order to be eligible for asylum: "a narrative of persecution is necessary in order to gain asylum;"[34] "[w]hen someone applies for asylum in Italy, he or she is supposed to compose a personal story […] and to present it in front of a commission."[35] In the US, "[i]n the absence of other documentation of a well-founded fear of persecution, the [Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services] B.C.I.S. depends upon asylum applicants' narratives as evidence of their suffering."[36]

Given the criteria that determine success/failure, or what is deemed convincing/unbelievable, it may feel like this process is more of a test or performance: "During the process of narration, storytellers are expected to engage in performative

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[33] For detailed analyses, besides those cited in the discussion below, of the asylum seeking process (in Switzerland and in the United States respectively) that highlight the relations between self-narration, trauma, law and power relations in this process, see Marie-Florence Burki, "Asylum seekers in narrative action: An exploration into the process of narration within the framework of asylum from the perspective of the claimants" (Master's thesis, Université de Neuchâtel, 2015), doc.rero.ch/record/259276, and Stephen Paskey, "Telling Refugee Stories: Trauma, Credibility and the Adversarial Adjudication of Claims for Asylum," *Santa Clara Law Review* 56, no. 3 (2016): 457-530.

[34] Connie G. Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," in *Immigrant Rights in the Shadows of Citizenship*, ed. Rachel Ida Buff (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 40.

[35] Virginia Signorini, "Producing memory: Narratives of suffering in the asylum experience," *Subjectivity* 8 (2015): 382 [abstract].

[36] Amy Shuman and Carol Bohmer, "Representing Trauma: Political Asylum Narrative," *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 466 (Fall 2004): 402.

features that include repetition, vivid concrete details, and coherence of plot."[37] Although it could be said that most forms of self-narration involve a performative dimension, this dimension is further heightened when it happens in an institutional setting, as was also highlighted in the analysis of court testimony by sexual trauma survivors. In the days leading up to the interview in which asylum seekers present their narratives to the authority that processes asylum claims, they are helped to compile their application and to prepare for their interview. Usually, this aid comes in the form of immigration attorneys, immigrant service providers or NGOs. Their work is to inform asylum seekers about what the asylum seeking process actually entails, the legal information they should be aware of, and to give them advice on how to construct their narrative in order to stand a better chance of its being accepted by the state agency processing their application. It is at this delicate stage that immigrant service providers attempt to approximate the asylum seekers' narrative to the form and content that is implicitly or explicitly favoured by the state. Ultimately, "[n]arratives must conform to a story that the law recognizes."[38] This legal recognition is highly determined by whether the narrative reproduces the power relations that fuel the hegemony of the law, or whether the narrative questions the assumed hegemony.

In this line of analysis, Connie Oxford argues that "the narrative itself emerges as either hegemonic or subversive."[39] Oxford's understanding of subversion relies on Foucault's elaboration of power as circulating through multiple sites, and of resistance as co-existent with power: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."[40] The extent of the subversive potential that lies in asylum seekers' narratives is limited and complicated. It is true that there is an element of subversion when asylum seekers are encouraged to strategically present their narrative through the legally recognised criteria in order to

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[37] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 41.
[38] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 41.
[39] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 41. It must be specified that the subject of Oxford's analysis is the process of seeking asylum in the United States. However, broader concerns pertaining to the functioning of power in how asylum seekers are 'processed' apply to territories beyond the US.
[40] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 95.

improve the chance of success of their application. However, ultimately, this strategy also strengthens the grip of hegemonic power on self-narration. One wonders, then, whether this presumption of subversion would, in fact, be mistaking power for its ruse. As Foucault cautioned at the end of *The Will to Knowledge*: "The irony of this deployment is in having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance."[41] Oxford is aware of this sad irony when she remarks that the practice of resistance can also be a matter of accommodating hegemonic power: "Immigration attorneys and service providers practice resistance (and sometimes accommodation by conforming to the expectations regarding how stories should be told) by using the rules of asylum to their advantage by teaching asylum seekers to tell hegemonic stories."[42]

Many asylum seekers are initially unaware of the form of legal narrative they would be asked to articulate as part of the asylum seeking process. As a result, it is from the immigration service providers and their attorneys that they learn how to articulate the required narrative, typically of persecution. In a sense, asylum seekers are taught how to perform their traumatic narrative successfully. It is not the case that the state apparatus will be initially supportive or sympathetic – on the contrary, the role of the state apparatus is to question the validity and truth of the narrative, to 'catch out' the claimant, and check for inconsistencies and unverified information. It is amid these practices of power that agencies providing support to asylum seekers respond with strategically employed counter-practices, such as teaching asylum seekers to adjust and fine-tune their narratives so as to make them more understandable and acceptable by the legal criteria: "asylum applicants frame their claims in an effort to match their cultural circumstances with the legal rules for granting asylum."[43] In this regard, lawyers and immigration service providers have a crucial role in "reframing the [asylum] claim not only to be consistent with the law, but also, to correspond with current Western social values, regardless of the merits of any particular claim."[44] Hence, the asylum seeker must be prepared and, to an

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[41] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 159. Although in this quotation Foucault was specifically referring to the deployment of the apparatus of modern sexuality, it is also a general observation on how power functions.
[42] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 42.
[43] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 396.
[44] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 398.

extent, trained in presenting to the authorities the story that they want to hear, or the one they are able to hear. One must consider, then, the highly stressful process leading to the interview where the asylum seeker cannot regard the narrative as his or her *own* life story but as a tool that must be invoked and used in certain ways for political and strategic purposes.

According to this hegemonic system, it is expected that asylum seekers are versed not only in *how* their narrative must be presented, but also in *what* the law considers to be important information that contributes to the success of the narrative. It is useless for the asylum seeker to emphasise information that the law considers as secondary, or simply unimportant:

> At another asylum hearing, the case of an escaped high-profile member of the opposition government, the applicant (Henri) kept mentioning the political situation in the Central African Republic and the role of Libya in the various coups, information critically important to him, but not relevant to the hearing officer, who became increasingly impatient during the hearing.[45]

This shows that no matter how crucial that information may be to the applicant, it is the criteria of the law that have to be satisfied if the applicant wishes the asylum application to be successful. There are also specific legal criteria determining what counts as political persecution or not, to the extent that an episode one experiences in the country one has escaped – no matter how traumatic – may not qualify him or her as eligible for asylum. This case from the Netherlands clearly demonstrates this point: 'In Sri Lanka […] it is unfortunately not unusual for women to be the victim of sexual violence. […] The applicant is therefore not in an exceptional position.'[46] Moreover, repeated narratives desensitise authorities, and are negatively treated due to suspicion that narratives that repeat certain narrative tropes are considered fabricated. As Kobelinsky notes: "The

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[45] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 405.
[46] Thomas Spijkerboer, *Gender and Refugee Status* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 125, quoted in Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 398.

repetitive nature of the cases and the routinization of the decision-making processes led to a kind of erosion of affects. The resultant indifference of the agents was often consistent with the moral economy of suspicion: stories that are similar are assumed to be fake."[47]

To examine how the balance between hegemony and subversion oscillates in the asylum process, Oxford considers the case of Nicole, a psychologist who works with survivors of torture and who provides counselling for asylum seekers. Nicole recognises the power that a PTSD diagnosis holds in asylum applications. She is preoccupied by the sole and heightened focus placed on PTSD over other psychosocial problems. Echoing the earlier claim that narratives must conform to a story that the law recognises, Oxford writes that Nicole intentionally emphasises the PTSD diagnosis in the psychological report included with the asylum application "because she knows that it is the diagnosis with which asylum officers and immigration judges are familiar."[48] Aware of the fact that her specialised power/knowledge puts her in a position from where she can boost the asylum application, she privileges the diagnosis of PTSD, even though PTSD is not the be-all and end-all of the applicant's psychological well-being, and even though this practice contributes to a discourse on trauma that privileges the PTSD symptomatology. In so doing, Nicole shapes the asylum seeker's narrative in a way that makes it more successful in the eyes of the law. As she says: "PTSD is just one of the possible diagnoses that someone might have. But it's a diagnosis that the adjudicators, the [Immigration and Naturalization Service] INS, and the judges seem to be looking for."[49] Although it is true that Nicole is, ultimately, helping the asylum seeker's chances of gaining asylum, she is nonetheless contributing to the reiteration of hegemonic norms that consider trauma through the criteria of power/knowledge: "Nicole's motivation may not be to reproduce a hegemonic narrative, yet that is the outcome based on the reports she submits in asylum applications."[50] Another case of such accommodation of hegemonic power considered by Oxford is the case of Margaret, an employee at an immigrant organisation that assists females who have been raped after they were circumcised. Margaret advises such women to present their narrative

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[47] Kobelinsky, "In Search of Truth," 82.
[48] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 47.
[49] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 46.
[50] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 47.

in such a way that portrays them as "victims of a barbaric practice."[51] Since state agencies would be more inclined to view this practice (rather than, in this case, the fact that they were raped) as barbaric, these women are advised to frame their life narrative in this way to increase the likelihood that their asylum application will be successful.

What these cases show is that despite strategically working against institutional power with the plausible intentions of assisting the asylum seekers' applications, they are still encouraging hegemonic narratives. These actions by immigration service providers are, after all, ways in which "asylum seeker's narratives […] are remolded to fit a hegemonic narrative."[52] They thus contribute to reproducing institutional power rather than undermining it. This does not mean, however, that the potential subversion in such actions by immigrant service providers is negligible. The aim of resistance is not to overthrow all hegemonic narratives and instances of institutional power; indeed, arguably no singular action can achieve such an aim. As Foucault would say, there is no position that lies outside power relations. What one may hope for, then, are micro-practices that, within their limits, strategically reverse strategies of hegemonic power.

This section extends the discussion of the politics of narrating trauma by using the ideas developed in previous chapters through Foucault's work on self-narration to critically interpret findings from empirical studies on the asylum process. Rather than a mere 'application' of the theoretical ideas, this section aimed to use the theoretical framework developed throughout this thesis to read further into related empirical work. This analytical gesture is crucial in order to study how power actually functions in particular contemporary contexts, and to analyse the broader politics of trauma. The next section sustains further this methodological choice by illustrating critical points made in previous chapters on the power of psy discourses through empirical studies of how trauma discourses function in the asylum process. Furthermore, I draw on empirical studies on trauma in the asylum process to highlight how the norm of narrative coherence – analysed

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[51] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 48.
[52] Oxford, "Acts of Resistance in Asylum Seekers' Persecution Narratives," 48.

in previous chapters through Butler's critique and with regard to the psychological sciences – functions as a dominant norm that circumscribes trauma narration.

8.3 The Culture of Asylum; The Culture of Trauma

This concluding section of this chapter presents findings of empirical studies on the asylum process conducted in the United States and France, extending these analyses by interweaving them with the theoretical framework developed throughout this thesis. This approach to and use of such empirical studies is not merely to serve as an illustration of theoretical analyses of power or trauma, but is also an attempt to widen the stakes of more 'local' empirical studies by linking them to broader analyses of processes of subject-formation and critiques of the power of legal and medical discourses, particularly as they manifest themselves in the context of the narration of trauma in institutional contexts. Literature in migration studies emphasises the *cultural* intricacies involved in the narration of trauma in the asylum seeking process. After all, narratives and self-narratives are culturally situated and, hence, produced out of the discourses and understandings present in one's culture: "storytelling is part of people's everyday life, a cultural and intersubjective experience to the core in which a person draws on the cultural repertoires at his/her disposal to make sense of, imagine, and negotiate with others the world around them."[53] The asylum process is a space where the trauma narratives presented by individuals with greatly differing cultural backgrounds are judged according to the normative and narrative expectations demanded by legal criteria that, as the dominant criteria in a particular context, are themselves culturally situated. The point is not just to emphasise the cultural situatedness of narratives, but to show the power relations governing this space of encounter – should the asylum seekers be unable or unwilling to satisfy these criteria, it is not just the viability of their life narrative that is at stake, but their life itself. In their analysis, Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman foreground the cultural

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[53] Nando Sigona, "The Politics of Refugee Voices: Representations, Narratives, and Memories," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, eds. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 370. See also Marita Eastmond, "Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007): 248-264.

specificity of the discourses that surround self-narration in the asylum process, and describe the cultural obstacles that asylum seekers face in adjusting their narrative in a way that would make their asylum application successful: "The asylum applicants' discourses of fear, oppression, and flight are culturally specific; the [Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services] B.C.I.S. also has culturally specific expectations for representing experiences of persecution, a bureaucratic mode rarely familiar to individuals applying for asylum."[54] Moreover, the space where the asylum seekers' narratives encounters the legal expectations of state agencies is oftentimes a tense one which resembles more a scene of cross-examination with state agents seeking to uncover inconsistencies and false claims. As Fassin and d'Halluin wrote in 2005: "A quarter of a century ago, asylum was a matter of trust, in which the applicant was presumed to be telling the truth. Today, asylum is set in a climate of suspicion, in which the asylum seeker is seen as someone trying to take advantage of the country's hospitality."[55] Some officials of 'receiving countries' even pride themselves in their abilities – real or not – to 'out' asylum seekers as liars. As Bohmer and Shuman report:

> Another way the authorities decide if a story is 'true' is by judging the way the tellers present themselves. This is called demeanor in the law, and it is supposed to be a significant indication of credibility. Judges pride themselves on being able to tell whether someone is lying by watching how they behave when being questioned.[56]

As a result, it seems that the presumption is that the narratives presented by asylum seekers are false until conclusively proven to hold ground: "developing a capacity to unearth incongruences is a central feature of the training of new recruits who […] are socialized in their role not so much by being taught about refugees in terms of their rights and options, but through techniques to unmask lies and inconsistencies in asylum seekers'

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[54] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 395. Although their analysis can be applied to other territories, Shuman and Bohmer's analysis focuses on the asylum seeking process in the United States.
[55] Didier Fassin and Estelle d'Halluin, "The Truth from the Body: Medical Certificates as Ultimate Evidence for Asylum Seekers," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 4 (2005): 600.
[56] Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman, *Rejecting Refugees: Political Asylum in the 21st century* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 146.

narratives."[57] For this reason, Shuman and Bohmer consider this scene of interrogation as regulated by radically different discourse systems, encompassing the multiple voices of participants in colliding worlds.[58]

Shuman and Bohmer identify seven areas in which the discourses of the state agencies and the asylum seekers come into conflict. These areas include: an understanding of time as a Western variable through which the chronology, coherence and sequence of events is made intelligible; the issue of which information counts as more or less relevant to the narrative; the plausibility or believability of the asylum claim; and attention to details, dates, and evidence that can be corroborated. In view of the previous chapters on the problematic of narrative coherence, I will give closer consideration to two particular areas identified by Shuman and Bohmer: the emphasis on the *chronology and coherence* of the narrative, and the *emotional presentation* of the asylum seekers' narrative. Shuman and Bohmer claim that "trauma narratives are rarely chronological, and their complexity is often read as inconsistency."[59] Institutions, particularly legal institutions, privilege the criteria of coherence and chronology when adjudicating life narratives. Such authorities subscribe to the idea that "the construction of a true story is the belief that truth is consistent and detailed and that traumatic events are never forgotten. Similarly, the ability to tell the same story repeatedly seems essential for the truth of the story to be accepted."[60] But trauma troubles this possibility. Shuman and Bohmer argue that the sense of chronology within particular narratives is more of a recovery than a reproduction of a chronology which was already present in the narrative: "people generally do not recount events in the order in which they happened."[61] Nonetheless, an individual's inability to present one's narrative in a linear and legalistic way is considered "frustrating"[62] by lawyers, even sympathetic ones: "Errors in dates of events recounted or confused remarks

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[57] Sigona, "The Politics of Refugee Voices," 374.
[58] See Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 396.
[59] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 403. Shuman and Bohmer rely on Judith Herman's characterisation of trauma as "encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images." See Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 38, quoted in Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 403.
[60] Kobelinsky, "In Search of Truth," 76.
[61] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 402.
[62] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 401.

are seen not as signs of amnesia or trauma but as indicators of insincerity or deception."[63] Bohmer, who worked as a pro bono attorney with the Columbus Refugee and Immigration Services (C.R.I.S.) in the US, recounts how it was very difficult to understand the story of a particular asylum seeker because "he did not present a narrative in what we formally educated Westerners define as a 'logical manner.'"[64] In such cases, despite its near-impossibility, institutions still privilege narrative coherence and linearity:

> In the real world things don't work out neatly. The B.C.I.S. wants it neat – one day you get a death threat, the next they come to your house […] it doesn't work like that. The B.C.I.S. wants linear narratives […] all sorts of bizarre things happen […] it's not that they aren't at risk.[65]

This implies that, besides cultural understandings of suffering and trauma, there are also culturally sanctioned forms of self-narration which may be deployed in such institutional settings in order to bar individuals from having a successful asylum claim.

Besides narrative coherence, another aspect of the asylum seekers' narratives which plays an important role is emotional presentation. Shuman and Bohmer claim that, among the tips and tricks that asylum seekers are given by immigration service providers, "the narrative process involves 'educating' about expressing 'suitable' emotion when describing the story."[66] One can only imagine how strange this form of 'education' may appear to traumatised individuals who, after escaping from undesirable circumstances of persecution or torture, must understand, endure and perform successfully in order to meet the standards of this culturally specific understanding of 'suitability'. It comes as no surprise that, due to the intensely bureaucratic nature of it all, some asylum seekers actually describe "the asylum process itself [as] an emotional struggle comparable to the experience of persecution."[67] Over and above the emotional struggles stemming from the

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[63] Kobelinsky, "In Search of Truth," 85.
[64] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 401.
[65] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 405-406.
[66] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 406.
[67] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 406.

traumatic episodes of persecution, the fact that the asylum seeking process itself – in its cultural, legalistic and bureaucratic functions – is experienced as traumatic is a reality that calls for critique. This critique should entail a critical engagement of both the form that the asylum seeking process is taking in various countries, and the cultural impositions that are regulating the meaning of trauma as well as the meaning of successful and acceptable self-narration. The emotional presentation of the asylum seeker's narrative is a cultural variable that plays a significant role in the assessment of the asylum claim. Shuman and Bohmer remark that they have worked with several immigrants who describe their story without the emotional expression one would expect from the recounting of a traumatic episode. This is not an unusual phenomenon, in fact. As Herman describes in her influential account of post-traumatic subjectivity, emotional numbing (or constriction) is a cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, alongside hyperarousal (its opposite) and intrusion: "Sometimes situations of inescapable danger may evoke not only terror and rage but also, paradoxically, a state of detached calm, in which terror, rage, and pain dissolve. Events continue to register in awareness, but it is as though these events have been disconnected from their ordinary meanings."[68] However, despite the documentation of this phenomenon, state agencies do not favourably regard asylum seekers' narratives when they are accompanied by *too little* emotional expression. Neither will a narrative that is presented with what is deemed to be *too much* emotional expression be positively considered due to suspicion of exaggerated theatricality. Kobelinsky refers to a successful asylum claim in France of a Sudanese individual who reduced the court room to tears with his impassioned narration of how his entire family was murdered, and of another individual who elaborated on his motivations to become politically active in Guinea. The judge referred to the latter individual as exemplary, "by which," Kobelinsky remarks, "he perhaps meant that he perfectly embodied the image of a political refugee."[69] Thus, it seems that, in the context of the asylum process, narratives are considered as legitimate by authorities if they conform to the hegemonic conceptions of narrative, of trauma, and of truthfulness.

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[68] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 42-43.
[69] Kobelinsky, "In Search of Truth," 84.

Thus, with regard to the emotive component of the trauma narrative, both excess and lack are considered pathological forms. Yet pathologisation is also a crucial way in which trauma is governed in the asylum seeking process. As discussed above, a PTSD diagnosis boosts the asylum claim. This is because the suffering and fear of persecution perceived by the asylum seeker is being translated into a currency that is recognised and valued by the state and legal authorities. This imposes a victim role on the asylum seeker, and such pathologisation may have a disempowering effect. This disempowering counters a common narrative which drives asylum seekers forward, that is, a narrative of hope, agency, freedom and well-being: "To reveal his scars is to suffer a further indignity. But portraying himself as a victim, without dignity, is the necessary price of asylum."[70] Demanding this indignity as a necessary feature of the asylum seeking process has detrimental effects on the collective identity of asylum seekers. This is because their social recognisability depends on them conceding that they are, primarily and ultimately, victims: "For some applicants, describing oneself as a victim of persecution is incompatible with recovering a sense of dignity or personal integrity following a trauma."[71] The language and culture of pathologisation, with which asylum seekers might not be familiar, can thus hinder rather than facilitate their adjustment and social integration.

Reflecting on the French asylum process, Fassin and d'Halluin note how in the contemporary culture of asylum, there is an impulse to *move beyond the narratives* presented by asylum seekers. Nation states recognise that a trauma narrative "conveys veracity, *as long as it is placed in a certain general framework or presented in experts' terms*."[72] Fassin and d'Halluin note how, in contemporary times, there is an increasing reliance on expert knowledge, particularly medical and psy experts, to validate asylum narratives. For them, this dependence on expert knowledge has brought with it changes in the government of asylum trauma; namely, the focus on the applicant's *narrative* has been displaced by a heightened emphasis on the *body* of the asylum seeker. This displacement

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[70] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 403.
[71] Shuman and Bohmer, "Representing Trauma," 406.
[72] Didier Fassin and Estelle d'Halluin, "Critical Evidence: The Politics of Trauma in French Asylum Policies," *ETHOS* 35, no. 3 (2007): 325 [emphasis added].

from the individual's *logos* to the individual's *soma* complements the aura of suspicion surrounding asylum; whereas words are seen as possibly deceiving, the marks on the body are indubitable when examined by a medical professional: "Under these conditions, the asylum seekers' accounts, long the only evidence testifying to their story and justifying their request, were no longer sufficient to confirm the truth of the alleged persecution. The body, which could have retained a trace of it, came to be seen as potentially providing tangible proofs."[73] In a Foucaultian vein, Fassin notes how "the body, no longer the principal site at which the strength of power is manifested, has become the site where the truth of individuals is tested."[74]

For this reason, medical certificates have become a crucial instrument in asylum applications.[75] This requirement which, of course, is not just an administrative measure has been subject to critique, not least because this measure is not in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention which states that asylum must be granted on the basis of a well-founded fear of persecution, and not on actual physical evidence of torture. Through this reliance on expert knowledge, "more credit is granted to the expert's word than to that of the victim,"[76] further highlighting how it is not only a matter of individuals narrating their trauma in the institutionally favoured manners, but also that expert agents must verify the veracity of the individuals' claims by bypassing the narrative and 'going straight' to the body. Furthermore, some even doubt the actual effectiveness of the medical certificate in improving the chances of an asylum claim. Others feel ethically torn since, by issuing medical certificates to verify the applicants' claims, they are participating in an unjust machinery which is structurally designed to limit as much as possible access to asylum rights. However, for strategic reasons, medical experts who are sympathetic to asylum seekers nonetheless choose to 'be complicit' in the hope that employing the power of the medical discourse can help asylum seekers.[77] This mechanism of medical certificates has further consequences on the government of trauma in the asylum process. By opting for

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[73] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 110.
[74] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 113.
[75] At least in the French asylum context.
[76] Fassin and d'Halluin, "The Truth from the Body," 602.
[77] See Fassin and d'Halluin, "The Truth from the Body," 602-603.

clinical, medical and scientific discourses, medical certificates greatly depoliticise, decontextualise and dehistoricise accounts of trauma. Medical certificates are written in accordance with a standardised model that flattens the individuality of narratives and is hesitant when it comes to speculating on the origin of the physical bodily signs. For this reason, according to Fassin, the concluding phrase often used in certificates intending to corroborate applicants' claims – "[the physical signs] point to the truth of the facts he alleges"[78] – reads more as a personal conviction than a medical truth.

This section has emphasised how, apart from close scrutiny of the form and content of the traumatised individuals', asylum claims are decided on the basis of extra-narrative considerations too. These elements of evaluation include: legal responsibilities imposed on nation states; the coherence of the individual's story and its internal logic; the story's external logic; the accuracy of the individual's responses when interviewed by authorities; and the analysis of supplementary documents, such as medical certificates.[79] For a traumatised asylum seeker to score highly on all these elements is an almost impossible ideal, which explains why the asylum process itself is more often experienced as a disempowering ordeal than a quest for justice and a liveable life. The expectations imposed on trauma narratives and traumatised individuals highlight how behind this will to truth often lies an exclusionary and violent impulse.

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This chapter highlighted the various ways in which trauma narratives are governed in the asylum seeking process. It was argued that different narratives have unequal currencies in this process. Moreover, different individuals have unequal access to the narrative conditions expected by authorities. Asylum seekers, many times traumatised, narrate their story within contexts that are heavily caught up in power relations that govern, control and often disempower individuals. This concluding chapter showed how Foucault's ideas on how power and knowledge impact practices of self-narration, and Butler's ideas on the

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[78] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 124.
[79] See Kobelinsky, "In Search of Truth," 76.

over-valuing of narrative coherence, can be materially seen operating in the legal contexts of adjudicating asylum claims. The narration of trauma within the asylum context brings together the various concerns that motivated this thesis. The discussion of Foucault's concerns with the power of discourses was connected with an analysis of norms that govern trauma narration in contemporary institutional contexts, while Butler's critique of the hegemony of narrative coherence was employed to study the performative conditions that affect the credibility of individuals narrating trauma. The method of linking theoretical concerns on subjectivity and power with analyses of empirical studies on sexual trauma and the asylum process was employed to apprehend the entanglement of political and legal institutions with medical and expert knowledge that determine who qualifies as a legitimate subject worthy of rights, recognition, sympathy or pity. Altogether, this highlights the various powerful ways in which the narration of trauma is constrained and regulated, and although possibilities of resisting by narrating otherwise remain, they are rendered increasingly fragile, particularly in situations as precarious as that of seeking political asylum.

Conclusion: The Political Ethics of Self-Narration

This thesis analysed how experiences of trauma are narrated in institutional settings, particularly in medical and legal contexts, looking at how power functions to circumscribe and govern narrations of trauma. Questions that guided the analysis throughout the various chapters were: How is trauma narrated by survivors in institutional settings? What discourses and practices impact the reception of trauma narratives? How must trauma be narrated in order to be rendered intelligible and legitimate by authorities? What critical results can be rendered if the analysis of trauma narration is approached philosophically, sociologically and politically? I considered *which* narratives are enabled, enforced and perpetuated through this shaping, and *why* certain narrative forms are more privileged than others. I further asked: *what*, then, do these dominant narratives and narrative forms enable? Why not *other* narrative forms; why not other forms of narrating experience? What happens to our concepts, our philosophies, our self-understandings if lives are narrated in these other forms? What is upheld by this hierarchy of narrative forms? Are current socio-political orderings dependent on this necessary exclusion, whereby if lives are narrated *otherwise*, the narration risks endangering the appearance of social stability? What is it in self-narration that gives it such power to transgress and subvert, *merely* through the manner in which one speaks about oneself?

This thesis concerned itself with the institutional framing, reception, management and creation of narratives of trauma. It was not an intention of this work to either propose a definition of trauma as such, or to present an account of what trauma outside power relations can be, if indeed it can be. Once narrated, trauma is socialised and mediated through historically and culturally specific frames of reference. It is for this reason that what this thesis attempted was a socio-political investigation of the contemporary government of trauma narratives in order to show *that* and *how* certain conceptions of subjectivity, of narration, and of trauma are privileged over others. The targets of this critical analysis were discourses, power relations and institutional arrangements that constitute the conditions for the possibility of trauma to be recognised and heard as such.

Following the introductory chapter on the history of trauma and issues in trauma theory, the different chapters employed different gestures to provide a multi-dimensional engagement with the politics of narrating trauma. While the chapters on Foucault and Butler (Chapters 2, 3 and 5) involved interpretative and theoretical work that delineated the different references to and analyses of practices of self-narration in their works, other chapters applied Foucault's and Butler's ideas to research avenues not directly dealt with by these authors. For example, in Chapter 4, Foucault's ideas were read in relation to feminist analyses of consciousness-raising groups to show how this coupling can inform a politicised understanding of the narration of trauma. Moreover, in Chapter 6, Butler's ideas on self-narration and her critique of narrative coherence were extended and applied in order to critically study how sexual trauma survivors have their acts of self-narration heavily regulated and curtailed. Other chapters are less explicitly philosophical insofar as they adopt a critical outlook to institutional settings in which trauma is narrated. Chapter 7, for example, considered how self-narration is discussed and treated in literature and practices from the psychological sciences. With regard to the psy sciences, my main concern was with the privileging of narrative coherence and the implications of such privileging. I argued that the dominant conception of well-being as *depending* on narrative coherence, or that the latter will lead to the former, rests on a questionable supposition, insofar as coherent narration more easily fits the normalising expectations of how a 'healthy' docile body would narrate itself. This enabled me to gauge how the account of practices of self-narration pursued through Foucault's views of power and Butler's critique of narrative coherence compare with empirical realities. The final chapter, then, tied together the various concerns of the thesis – concerns about discourses that bear upon trauma narration, issues of psy power, and socio-political influences on the reception and adjudication of trauma narratives – by analysing the narration of trauma in the context of the asylum seeking process.

It is hoped that the analysis of traumatic self-narration pursued in this thesis yielded some results in the three different though related registers of *philosophy*, *ethics*, and *politics*. *Philosophically*, it was shown that trauma narratives present a challenge to rethink subjectivity in terms of relationality; trauma is a painful reminder of how individuals are

never solely in control over the direction of their life, and that one's familiar being in the world is a precarious dwelling that can be easily undone. This has implications on how subjectivity is theorised in contemporary philosophy. Concerns pursued in the more theoretical parts of this thesis can contribute to contemporary debates on narrative identity, selfhood and subjectivity. The way in which I approached Foucault's work on self-narration and self-writing (in Chapters 2 and 3), and Butler's work on precariousness, vulnerability and self-narration (in Chapters 5 and 6), was an attempt to introduce their ideas in dialogue with debates on narrative identity and selfhood.[1] Moreover, apart from historical and psychological perspectives, trauma itself was approached as an issue that raises various philosophical questions on, for example, self-fragmentation, the power of memory, and the embodied self. Such an engagement with trauma and its narration can invigorate as well as challenge philosophical ideas.

This thesis also sought to contribute to discussions of *ethics*,[2] and was itself motivated by an ethical concern with what is being done and what can be done for trauma narratives to avoid, as Jill Stauffer puts it, *the injustice of not being heard*.[3] Rather than a quantitative proliferation of trauma narratives, the question is, as Butler asks in *Precarious Life*: what is the framing that "decides, in a forceful way, *what we can hear*"[4] when we hear, in this case, trauma narratives? Are institutions, particularly institutions whose task it is to listen to trauma, able to apprehend the trauma, or are only the aspirations for mastery and resilience being heard? In foregrounding the possible violence of the will to coherence imposed on traumatised individuals struggling to narrate their life, this thesis sought to unite an ethical concern with a critique of institutions that come into contact with traumatised persons. An ethical openness implies a willingness on the part of those who

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[1] Works that use Butler's work in such debates include Olivia Guaraldo, "Thinkers that Matter: On the Thought of Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero," *AG About Gender: International Journal of Gender Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 92-117; Sarah Drews Lucas, "The Primacy of Narrative Agency: A Feminist Theory of the Self" (PhD diss., The University of Sydney, 2016); Lois McNay, *Against Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 96-125.

[2] Work on Butler's views on ethics, and that situates her views within debates in ethics and moral philosophy include Carolyn Culbertson, "The ethics of relationality: Judith Butler and social critique," *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, issue 3 (2013): 449-463; Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*.

[3] See Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[4] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 5 [emphasis in original].

encounter traumatised individuals to truly listen to their narratives, to be affected by the power of such stories, and to respond to these narratives. An ethical response may sometimes require an ethic that preserves fragmentation, if not incoherence, rather than professionals' inclination to brashly impose the preferred schemes of solid coherence and resilience.

Furthermore, as this thesis emphasised, philosophical and ethical analyses must be *politically* attuned. This much is implied by Butler's remark – which she also presents as a remark on Foucault's own philosophical approach – on how "the need to give an account of oneself necessitates the turn to power, so that we might say that the ethical demand gives rise to the political account, and that ethics undermines its own credibility when it does not become critique."[5] In this spirit, this thesis sought to show what can be made, politically, of trauma narratives. Narratives, including life narratives, are amenable to hegemonic shaping, commodification, depoliticisation and homogenisation. However, there also exists a space where trauma narratives can function as parrhesiastic courageous truth-telling by critically by revealing the hegemony of norms that are influencing the intelligibility of subjects and their stories. In this way, this thesis followed Foucault's claim on the centrality of the politics of ourselves by analysing micro-practices of self-narration as a gateway to the study of processes of subject-formation and the government of the self in contemporary times. Although power functions intricately and intimately through practices of narrating oneself, such 'small practices' harbour a possibility of resistance. In this thesis, critically examining practices of self-narration meant asking questions about what experiences are being enabled, and what modes of relating to oneself, to others and to the world are being hindered by dominant discourses and practices. The stories we tell about ourselves can be swayed to the hard grip of normalising power, but stories can also reveal the fallibility of power, its finitude, and can present new and creative opportunities which might disclose, as Foucault puts it, "the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think [… by giving]

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[5] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 124.

new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom."[6] The critical outlook adopted to the activity of self-narration in this study foregrounded its ethical and political stakes; what can be called the political ethics of self-narration.

This thesis highlighted how, despite a dominant order of discourse that tries to limit its critical potential, self-narration – including traumatic self-narration – can foreground the lack of fixity of techniques of power that uphold the appearance of social order. Testimonies of trauma may subvert in a parrhesiastic vein when they challenge a nation-state's version of events, or a state's defense of violent practices it may employ to, paradoxically, prevent violence. Narratives of trauma may uncover instances when legal apparata not only fail to protect and empower the vulnerable, but also hinder their access to justice. Trauma narrations may shatter the brashness, solidity and presumptuous certainty with which certain policies are implemented, condemnations are made, and commemorations are performed. Non-conforming testimonies may reveal a potentially violent will to truth lurking beneath speech, transforming it to confessional discourse rather than critical parrhesia. The risky truth-telling of traumatised individuals may present a critique to the model of subjectivity upon which political practices and discourses of psychology are based – the resilient and free subject of self-mastery – enabling care of the self to mean something other than depoliticising therapeutic care. Such critique troubles the predominant theoretical configurations that insist on strictly differentiating a pre-trauma coherent self from a post-trauma broken vulnerable self. This subversion can thus foreground the notions of relationality, precariousness and vulnerability as constitutive features of subjectivity. It is in these senses that the narrative interventions of trauma survivors can function politically as socially engaged practices of parrhesia, pointing to different ways in which subjectivity and social life can be organised.

Trauma has always been surrounded by power relations and discourses that impact how survivors narrate and which narratives have currency: from the railway accidents to the

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[6] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 316.

era of hysteria, from the false memory debates to the discrediting of sexual violence survivors, trauma survivors have always been subject to the violence of the will to truth. In certain contexts, as shown in the analysis of the asylum context, the power imbalance seems to be so extreme as to extinguish any possibility of critical narration. Despite any ambivalence or uncertainty that may govern the asylum seeking process, the asylum seeker has severely limited freedom to narrate oneself as one wishes, but must conform as best as possible to the demanded criteria. The will to truth operating in the asylum process has the capacity to function violently through its power to determine which lives are entitled to protection and which lives remain exposed to danger. But even if such contexts highlight the unlikelihood of resistance, disclosing some of the mechanisms that render some lives unliveable is an act of critical resistance, where one realises that *the present situation need not be the way it is*.

Amid the field of power relations, the possibility of resistance remains and should remain; there is, as Foucault puts it, "a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial."[7] Such resistances include: psychologists and psychiatrists who use their power to empower traumatised individuals and validate their narratives; soldiers and veterans who refuse to present war narratives within the sanctioned discourses of glory and refuse attempts by nation states to use them and their narratives for the purposes of nation-building and constructing historical memory; feminists and narratives of women survivors who refuse to privatise their narrative of sexual trauma and instead collectivise and connect their experience with broader social currents in order to contribute to the development of new discourses and the transgression of hegemonic gendered discourses.

In this spirit, the theoretical framework developed in this thesis to analyse the political ethics of traumatic self-narration may inform other critical work, including empirical studies. In the psychological sciences, for example, further work inspired by this theoretical outlook can further examine the power relations at play in clinical encounters

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[7] Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 96.

as well as the views on subjectivity that such sciences propound and reinforce through the dominant contemporary social currency of therapeutic discourses. The approach to trauma narratives developed in this thesis can also be adopted sociologically to consider self-narratives as products of socio-cultural and discursive factors with which the subject struggles and negotiates itself. This theoretical approach can also motivate further research on the social construction of experience, for example, in disability studies and medical humanities.[8] Such an approach motivates engagement with questions regarding the social reception of narratives, the norms that determine the formation, shape and performance of narratives, the social privileging of certain narratives and narrative forms over others, and how these norms become entrenched in institutional practices. What I hope this thesis shows is that an analysis of the ethics and politics of narrating trauma must entail multiple vantage and discursive points which include philosophy, sociology, the psychological sciences, critical legal studies and political theory.

Though clearly rooted in philosophy as a discipline, this thesis did not and could not consist solely of philosophical work in the narrow disciplinary sense. I think that it was necessary to adopt and employ a mixture of disciplinary discourses to conduct this research, as well as take into serious consideration works that employed different methodological (and normative) considerations. The outlook of this thesis toward other disciplines, such as the psychological sciences, was neither to 'underwrite' them nor to rashly critique them. The discipline of philosophy has a lot to learn from other methodological approaches and various fruitful efforts can be made to better weave philosophical theorising with empirical social scientific studies. In fact, this is the methodological approach that this thesis followed. The critical engagement with the psychological sciences in this study was not to argue that they are always already complicit in hegemonic exercises of power, but rather to study the diverse discursive and social effects of their practices. Although the analyses of psy disciplines is a critical one

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[8] See, for example, Kurt Borg, "Narrating Disability, Trauma and Pain: The Doing and Undoing of the Self in Language," *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* VIII (2018): 169-186, Valerie Raoul, Angela D. Henderson, and Carla Paterson, eds., *Unfitting Stories: Narrative Approaches to Disease, Disability, and Trauma* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), Katherine Kenny, Alex Broom, Emma Kirby, David Wyld, and Zarnie Lwin, "Terminal anticipation: Entanglements of affect of temporality in living with advanced cancer," *Subjectivity* 10, issue 4 (2017): 374-392.

on the whole, looking more closely at these other disciplines made my critique milder and enabled me to consider further possible critical work that can be done at the intersection of philosophy and psychology. Similarly, despite the avoidance of empirical studies in some forms of philosophising, the philosophical approach to self-narration developed in this thesis complemented and was enriched by the inclusion of qualitative social scientific studies. Thus, while philosophical theorisation informs the design of this study, it employs philosophy for the purpose of critiquing the present by evaluating what is socially possible, hearable, recognisable and privileged in the realm of narrating trauma in institutional contexts. Such an approach foregrounds an ethics of philosophising that emphasises the stakes of critique.

Such 'methodological' considerations should not overshadow the sensitivity of the topic discussed throughout. Trauma narratives unsettle. Theoretical elaborations about trauma cannot do justice to the sheer power of survivors' narratives. Throughout this research, I have been concerned not to adopt a moralising tone, or to ethically misuse trauma narratives, or to over-politicise (or mis-politicise) trauma. In other words, I deeply acknowledge "the problem of speaking for others."[9] The fineness of theoretical construction collapses in front of the visceral shattering of trauma, and I consider it inappropriate to read both by the same criteria. Aesthetics, theory and therapy should not be confused with each other; in this regard, I concur with Luckhurst's observation that "[o]ne should not be judged by the other – it would be as perverse to demand a greater clarity of therapeutic outcomes from a Sebald text as to lecture Susan Brison that her narrativization of her experience was an unethical act that failed to respect the singularity of her rape trauma."[10]

Ultimately, the impulse that guided this thesis was a wariness with regard to a will to truth and knowledge, the effects of which function to circumscribe, control and influence what and how trauma can be narrated. Consider, by way of conclusion, the following words

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[9] Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* no. 20 (1991-1992): 8.
[10] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 82.

written by Elanchelvan Rajendram, a Sri Lankan man who sought asylum in France, in his final appeal:

I don't know what more I can do to make people believe me.[11]

Despite presenting his narrative account, supplementary medical documentation and even a letter from a hospital doctor attesting that his scars were compatible with his narrative, Rajendram was deported; "A few months later, on February 28, 2007, he died after being shot sixteen times by the Sri Lankan army during a patrol."[12] What motivated this thesis was an unrestrainable feeling that it is intolerable that traumatised individuals must do so much to make people believe them and, moreover, that they must succumb and conform to narrative and extra-narrative criteria *before* (if at all) they are heard by institutions that are in place precisely to listen and respond to trauma. As McLeod contends, the aim of therapy is "to really listen to these stories, and to allow space for the telling of new or different stories. […] Not listening to *stories* deprives both therapist and client of the most effective and mutually involving mode of discourse available to both of them."[13] Similarly, Rose concludes that restraining the powerful will to knowledge when interacting with traumatised individuals "would require authorities to do more listening, rather than merely writing down a diagnostic category, but that would be all to the good."[14] The hopes of this thesis are that things could be *otherwise*. While aware that it may sound hyperbolical, this would require *another* epistemology, *another* philosophy, *another* ethics, *another* psychology, *another* jurisdiction,[15] *another* politics to exist. This is necessary to counter the problematic effects of an often violent will to knowledge that is constitutive of contemporary forms of government, and to safeguard the possibility for selves – traumatised or not – to narrate otherwise.

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[11] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 129 [emphasis added].
[12] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 129.
[13] McLeod, *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, x [emphasis in original].
[14] Nikolas Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future: The Politics of Mental Health* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 92.
[15] See Leigh Gilmore, "Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity," *Biography* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 128-139.

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