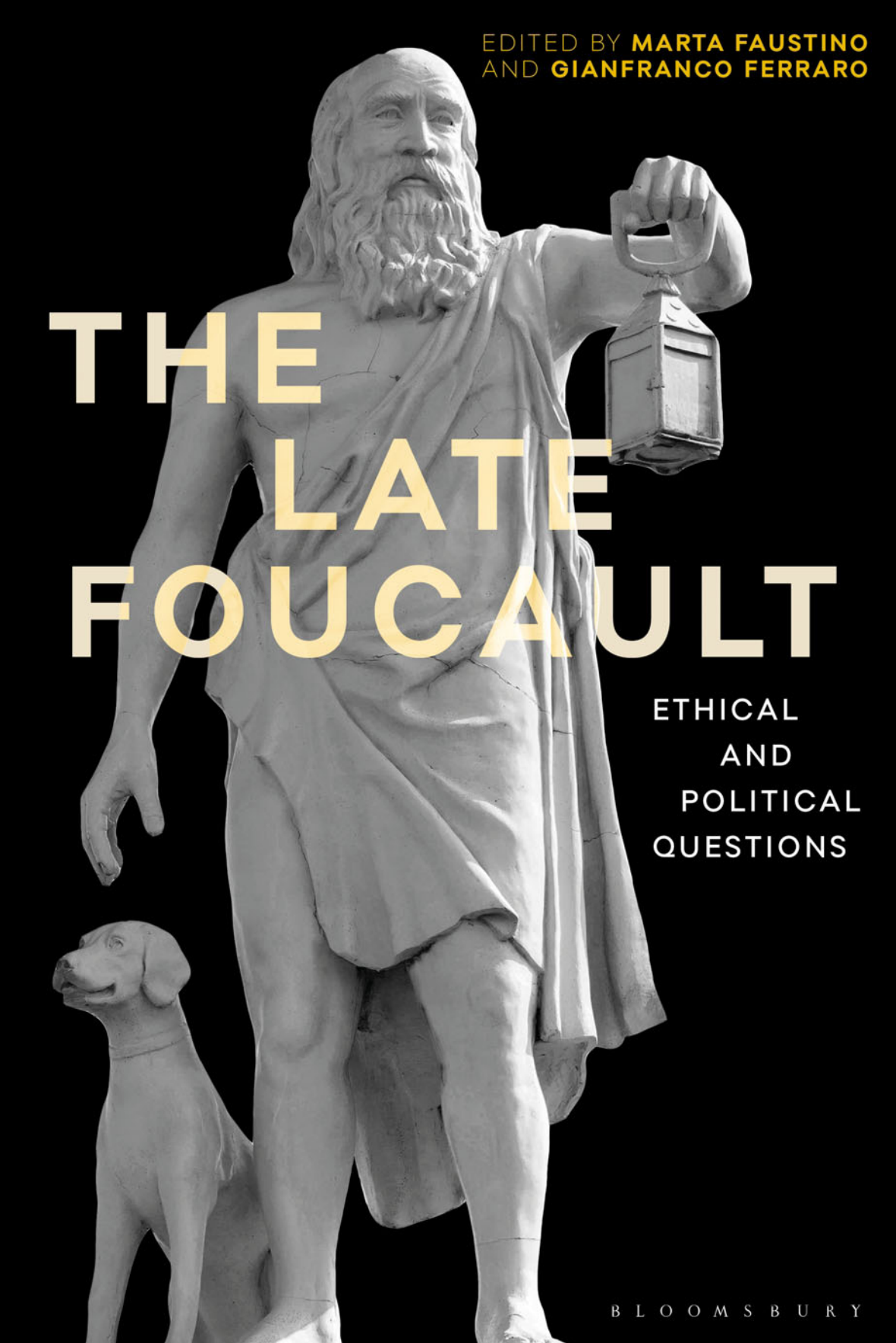


EDITED BY MARTA FAUSTINO
AND GIANFRANCO FERRARO

A grayscale sculpture of a bearded man, likely a philosopher or saint, standing and holding a lantern in his right hand. He is wearing a draped garment. A dog is sitting at his feet on the left side. The background is black.

THE LATE FOUCAULT

ETHICAL
AND
POLITICAL
QUESTIONS

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The Late Foucault

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Ethical and Political Questions

Edited by
Marta Faustino and Gianfranco Ferraro

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LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in Great Britain 2020

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Faustino, Marta, editor. | Ferraro, Gianfranco, 1981–editor.

Title: The late Foucault : ethical and political questions / edited by Marta Faustino,
Gianfranco Ferraro.

Description: London ; New York : Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. | Series: Re-inventing
philosophy as a way of life | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020032076 (print) | LCCN 2020032077 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781350134355 (hardback) | ISBN 9781350196773 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781350134362 (ebook) | ISBN 9781350134379 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984.

Classification: LCC B2430.F724 L38 2021 (print) |

LCC B2430.F724 (ebook) | DDC 194—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020032076>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020032077>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3501-3435-5

ePDF: 978-1-3501-3436-2

eBook: 978-1-3501-3437-9

Series: Re-inventing Philosophy as a Way of Life

Typeset by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

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Foucault, the Politics of Ourselves, and the Subversive Truth-Telling of Trauma: Survivors as Parrhesiasts

Kurt Borg

Foucault concluded his Dartmouth lectures in 1980 by saying that “one of the main political problems would be nowadays, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves” (Foucault 2016: 76). Despite the insistence of some, Foucault, the archaeologist of knowledge and the genealogist of power relations, held that his main concern had always been the question of subjectivity or, as he put it, “to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (Foucault 1983: 208). He claims to have dealt with this objective through three ways: first, by analyzing scientific discourses of inquiry that objectify individuals as speaking, living and laboring subjects; second, by looking at dividing practices that define normality at the exclusion of other subjects; and third, by studying ways in which humans turns themselves into a subject. Elsewhere (Foucault 1997a: 262) he describes this as the “three axes” or “domains of genealogy”—truth, power, and ethics—with which he engaged with differing emphasis in different moments in his work.

Among the various practices analyzed by Foucault in order to get to the heart of the issue of subjectivity, he considered the seemingly mundane practices of self-narration; or practices of telling the truth about oneself. His analysis of self-narration begins implicitly in his early works on discourse and the archaeology of knowledge, and continues in the middle works on power relations, sexuality, and confession. Even Foucault’s “side projects” on the “lives of infamous men” (Foucault 2000b), “dangerous individuals” (Foucault 2000a), and “parallel lives” are especially concerned with practices of self-narration, from his fascination with “marginal characters” such as Raymond Roussel (Foucault 2007), Pierre Rivière (Foucault 1982), and Herculine Barbin (Foucault 2013) to his interest in *lettres de cachet* (Foucault and Farge 2016). Foucault’s engagement with self-narration becomes more pronounced in his later work, as attested by his interest in the historical development of “the obligation to speak, the obligation to tell, the obligation to tell the truth, to produce a true discourse on oneself” (Foucault 2014: 311). This concern is also at the heart of the problematic of confession that spans Foucault’s work from *The Will to Knowledge* to his study of governmentality to its eventual transformation into an engagement

with the hermeneutics of the subject (Foucault 2005, 2016), technologies of the self (Foucault 1988), self-writing (Foucault 1997b), and, ultimately, *parrhēsia* (Foucault 2010, 2011).

This chapter uses material from both the “middle” and “late” Foucault since the insights in his earlier work have to be understood in light of the later work, while also acknowledging that any insights in his later work build upon and cannot be distanced from his earlier influential work on power.¹ Yet this chapter is not exclusively a contribution to Foucault studies, but also an application of his work on self-narration that extends it beyond its original aims and theoretical confines. The area of application of Foucault’s ideas in this chapter is the realm of the narration of trauma by survivors, and the ethical and political questions raised by trauma narratives, showing how Foucault’s work, particularly his later work on *parrhēsia*, can shed critical light upon these questions. Thus, not any form of self-narration is considered but, specifically, this chapter focuses on how trauma is narrated by survivors, that is, *traumatic self-narration*. There are various contexts in which trauma can be narrated: in autobiographies or fiction, to significant others, in clinical or psychotherapeutic settings, and in legal or institutional contexts. This chapter focuses on traumatic self-narration insofar as it is, to a great extent, a public or social narration. This does not mean that only public narrations of trauma will be analyzed. Rather, it means that there is a necessarily public or social dimension to any narration of trauma; once they are uttered, narratives of trauma are discursively channeled and transmitted through a publicly given medium that exceeds any individual grasp. This sphere in which trauma is narrated is the realm of discourses, power relations and subject-formation.

The main argument of this chapter is that survivors’ narrations of trauma can function as instances of *parrhēsia*. Foucault’s account of *parrhēsia* as risky, courageous, and possibly subversive truth-telling will be outlined in order to show how acts of traumatic self-narration can manifest characteristics of *parrhēsia*, namely the tendency to function as acts of critique that destabilize norms that are taken as given, and to gnaw at attempts to account for and categorize subjects into regulated categories. The other face of this argument is that, like *parrhēsia*, traumatic self-narration is a risky and precarious activity. This is because one of the ways in which power functions is by transforming the subversive destabilizing potential of *parrhēsia* into normalized, docile, and individualized confessional truth-telling that reinforces dominant discourses that regulate the domain of self-narration. Traumatic self-narration is precariously positioned in a tense relation between critical subversion on the one hand, and attempted normalization on the other. It is only by acknowledging this tension between subversion and normalization that the activity of traumatic self-narration can be understood in its complexity. This complexity refuses to be reduced to interpretations that unilaterally and uncritically regard self-narration as absolutely transgressive or, contrarily, as inevitably individualizing and confessional.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides an overview of Foucault’s different approaches to the practice of self-narration in his work prior to the 1980s. This will involve viewing self-narration through the lens of discourses and power relations by outlining Foucault’s intentions in publishing the medico-legal dossier of Pierre Rivière. This section then turns to the case of Herculine Barbin to

highlight how Foucault also approached the practice of self-narration through the problematic of the confessional will to truth.

The second section outlines Foucault's approach to practices of self-narration in his work in the 1980s, particularly on the hermeneutics of the self and self-writing. This section considers his work on *parrhēsia* as an extension of his lifelong engagement with the relation between the power of truth and subjectivity, and looks closely at Foucault's account of Cynic *parrhēsia*. It is with this form of *parrhēsia* that traumatic self-narration is eventually compared to.

The third section considers a feminist application of Foucault's ideas on self-narration. In the spirit of "the personal is political,"² it is not surprising that feminists influenced by Foucault's work have elaborated further on how practices of self-narration are imbued with power relations, and that in the same way that power impacts practices of self-narration, so too can such practices trouble hegemonic exercises of power and subvert some of its effects. This section explores the uneasy tension between what Ewick and Silbey (1995) term "subversive stories" and "hegemonic tales" in their proposed sociology of narratives.

The fourth and final section of the chapter builds upon these applications of Foucault's ideas to highlight how traumatic self-narration is caught up in a similar tension since narratives of trauma can be co-opted by power so that preferred conceptions of trauma narratives are reinforced, but they can also resist such co-option and depoliticization by positively functioning as subversive acts. In this latter way, narrations of trauma can function as a form of *parrhēsia* by, at a risk to the speaker, courageously uttering truth.

Foucault on Rivière and Barbin: Discourse, Power, Confession

Foucault's use of the notion of discourse highlights how discourse is not only or primarily controlled negatively, that is, through censorship or prohibition, but also positively or productively by influencing how the individual speaks and what the individual speaks about (Foucault 1981). The power of discourses does not only repress: "it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less" (Foucault 1983: 220). Discussing the anonymously authored voluminous book of a Victorian man's sexual encounters, titled *My Secret Life*, Foucault (1998: 21–3) shows how 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 problematized and spoken about in the nineteenth century than on the specificity of the anonymous author's desires.

The relation between discourse and power, and how they bear on the practice of self-narration, is further illustrated by Foucault's work on the memoir of Pierre Rivière. In 1835, Rivière murdered his mother, sister, and brother, and in the weeks leading up to his trial, wrote a memoir detailing his actions and motivations. The memoir was written with unexpected eloquence, and this confused the authorities and the public who took Rivière for a "village idiot" (Foucault 1982: 25). Foucault published Rivière's memoir in 1973, alongside a dossier made up of medical, legal, journalistic, and

administrative documents outlining Rivière's case. The memoir was the object of intense discussion by various authorities. Doctors, lawyers, judges, as well as the general public, all tried to give their interpretation of the truth about Rivière's identity that the memoir supposedly revealed; his sanity or insanity, his guilt or innocence. Foucault insists that his aim in publishing the dossier was not to establish a definitive truth about Rivière which the medico-legal institutions of the 1830s could not determine. Rather, he wanted to show how the discourses employed by the different institutions were caught up in a site of conflict and plurality, and functioned as "weapons of attack and defense in the relations of power and knowledge" (Foucault 1982: xi). Whereas some discourses may manage to achieve the desired order and regulation, sometimes these aims are frustrated or resisted. Foucault's presentation of Rivière's case is intended to manifest these possible productive failures of discourse. As he put it in an interview:

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."

Foucault 1989: 131

The practice of self-narration can furthermore be considered as a form of confession. In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault discusses the central role of confession in practices of subjectification, and recognizes how practices of confession function as exercises of power by instilling in individuals a supposedly inherent truth which is the object of study and interpretation by disciplines of power/knowledge (Foucault 1998). Similar to the Rivière dossier, Foucault (2013) published Herculine Barbin's memoir alongside and in tension with authoritative discourses presenting their interpretation of the case. Barbin was a nineteenth-century French "hermaphrodite" (intersex person) whose memoir Foucault published in 1978 alongside her medico-legal dossier. 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. Rather than a quest for truth and knowledge, Barbin's case highlighted the violence and exclusion inherent in the will to knowledge which poses as innocent and neutral: "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" (Bernauer 1990: 165). It is true that the case of Barbin was a tragic one; like Rivière, Barbin killed herself before her thirtieth birthday. For Foucault, her memoir—which she composed before her death in 1868—is proof of the intrusive and violent will to knowledge that dictated how individuals should understand themselves. Yet, there is an important sense in which both memoirs functioned in a *different* way; a possibly subversive way which revealed the contingency of power relations and discourses. The

eloquence of Rivière's memoir defied the easy categorizations of the institutions that attempted to pin him to a decipherable identity. The poignancy of Barbin's memoir highlighted the unsuitability of the obsessive will to truth. In their moment of subversion, these tragic individuals open up a space in which selves and identities can be otherwise. This is the realm of the non-confessional, of creativity and innovation, and of the risky truth-telling of *parrhēsia*.³

Beyond Confession: Self-Writing and the Risky Truth-Telling of *Parrhēsia*

Foucault's later works on classical antiquity present another approach to practices of self-narration that complements the analysis of such practices in terms of discourse and power. His motivation in considering antiquity in his later works was not to search for solutions to contemporary problems: "I am not looking for an alternative; you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people" (Foucault 1997a: 256). Rather, Foucault turned to antiquity insofar that "their example can be an inspiration to our own efforts" (O'Leary 2002: 84) to create practices of the self that did not conform to the predominant confessional model whose primary aim is to decipher an inherent truth about the self. His analyses of Stoic practices of self-examination and confession (Foucault 2005, 2016) and self-writing (Foucault 1997b) are a step in this direction.

Foucault argues that although practices of self-writing are associated with an increase in modern autobiographical and confessional writing, they can be traced back, albeit in different configurations, to pre-Christian literature concerning the philosophical cultivation of the self. Seneca and Epictetus, for example, emphasized that besides practices of reading (which should not be extensive and excessive, lest they have a scattering and agitating effect on the soul), meditating and physical training, the art of living must also involve practices of writing. The central aim of such practices was self-transformation and cultivation by writing down ethical principles or sayings in order for the individual to memorize them and actively take them up as one's guiding principles. Writing, thus, had an *ethopoietic* function; it implied "the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principles of action" (Foucault 1997b: 209). This was the function of the *hupomnēmata*, which were individual notebooks kept by "cultivated" individuals as memory aids. The wisdom from the *hupomnēmata* was also used in personal correspondence among friends who consulted each other for life advice. Foucault describes the *hupomnēmata* as follows:

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.

Foucault 1997b: 209

Foucault contrasts the function of such writing practices of the self with the early Christian writings of the first centuries, characterized by tropes of temptations, struggles, and downfalls, aimed at constituting a confessional narrative of oneself to reveal that which is hidden in the unspeakable depths of one's soul. This also demanded work of decipherment by an external authority that castigates the self and bears witness to the defects of the individual.

It is within this context that Foucault's discussion of *parrhēsia*, commencing in his 1982 lecture course must be approached.⁴ His late works on *parrhēsia* can be read as separate studies in themselves but, more fruitfully, one can follow Foucault in reading almost all of his work in terms of the question of the relation between subjectivity and truth (Foucault 1997d: 281–2). Foucault analyzes *parrhēsia* within the context of techniques of the self that characterized the ancient ethics of care of the self, and that are not reducible to the later confessional model. *Parrhēsia*, he says in his final lecture course, is “a certain way of speaking” (Foucault 2011: 6), “telling all” (Foucault 2011: 9), “free-spokenness” (Foucault 2011: 2), “saying everything” (Foucault 2011: 9) without concealing anything. The parrhesiast commits to one's speech, “he binds himself to this truth” (Foucault 2011: 11). Furthermore, for the speech to qualify as *parrhēsia*, it must present some kind of risk to the speaker. That is, in speaking what and how he does, the speaker is at risk. The receiver of the speech of *parrhēsia*, usually a person in a position of power that is higher to that of the speaker, will feel confronted or insulted by what is being said. The parrhesiast's speech is consequential and exposes the speaker to danger, if not violence (Foucault 2011: 11).

A defining feature of *parrhēsia* is symphony of discourse and action; it manifests harmony between *logos* and *bios*, and this has bearing upon the individual's ethical conduct. In fact, Foucault notes that *parrhēsia* was “originally rooted in political practice and the problematization of democracy, then later diverging towards the sphere of personal ethics and the formation of the moral subject” (Foucault 2011: 8). Analyzing Socratic *parrhēsia*, Foucault maintains that *parrhēsia* concerns the way in which one lives. It is an attitude, an *ēthos*, the style one gives to one's life; in other words, it is a component of the care of the self, the beautiful existence, and the true life, all crucial notions in classical ethics. Foucault turns to Cynicism as a model of a philosophical practice that radicalized the Socratic notion of ethics and the Platonic notion of truth as unconcealed and incorruptible. The Cynic pushes the practice of truth-telling “to the point that it becomes intolerable insolence” (Foucault 2011: 165); the Cynic's life is “scandalous, unbearable, ugly, dependent, and humiliated poverty” (Foucault 2011: 259). The Cynic bears witness to the truth in its crude and scandalous extreme by embodying a disregard for the codes of propriety and conventions with which the Platonic true life was associated. For example, Diogenes broke the distinction between activities that are conventionally done in private, such as satisfying basic needs, and other public ones. Doing so implied disregard for the Platonic injunction to live in a balanced and organized way with regard to nature and customs. The Cynics transgressed this organization and conformism by basing their behavior only on the domain of nature, to the point of destitution and dishonor; they promoted practices that were otherwise unheard of in ancient Greek society and its moral economy.

These normative reversals embodied by the Cynics complement the advice that the Delphic oracle gave to Diogenes the Cynic: change the value of the currency. This advice was generally understood as referring to the Cynics' tendency to challenge customs and break conventions. In view of this injunction, Cynic *parrhēsia* implies a change in the way in which people generally lead their lives. The Cynic ethic implies a life lived *otherwise*; "an *other* life, not simply as the choice of a different, happy, and sovereign life, but as the practice of a combativeness on the horizon of which is an *other* world" (Foucault 2011: 287). Rather than an ethics of self-renunciation and obedient submission to an authority which deciphers the truth of one's soul, the Cynic *ēthos* creates a transformative rupture in standard conventions and points to the possibility of selves and worlds being otherwise. Cynics defy; Cynics reveal the artificiality of norms and "explode the hypocrisy of accepted values" (Gros 2011: 354).

The two approaches Foucault adopts to practices of self-narration discussed in this and the previous section—namely, self-narration as caught up with subjugating effects of power/knowledge, and self-narration as a possible instance of ethical self-constitution with parrhesiastic potential—must be seen in tandem and not exclusive of one another. The next section explores how feminist uses of Foucault's ideas have drawn upon his work to highlight this inherent tension in practices of self-narration, whereby they can possess a trace of *parrhēsia* while also facing the risk of having this critical potential neutralized.

Self-Narration Between/Beyond the Personal and the Political

Feminist theory has been particularly receptive to Foucault's late work, and some feminist thinkers have turned to his late work to locate conceptual resources that complement or extend feminist aims. Margaret A. McLaren uses Foucault's work to identify feminist technologies of the self, particularly practices of self-narration, that can destabilize current configurations of power relations and can result in the development of creative practices of the self imbued with the potential for *parrhēsia*. McLaren highlights how confessional self-narration occupies a dual space: "[c]onfession, Foucault says, has a *double* sense of subjection; one is *compelled to tell the truth* about oneself by institutionalized 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 self-construction" (McLaren 2002: 146, *emphasis added*). Despite contrary interpretations, Foucault did not deny this latter active possibility, arguably not even in his earlier work, as seen in the cases of Rivière and Barbin. Confessional practices thus ambivalently position the subject "both as producer of and as produced through her discourse" (McLaren 2002: 149). If self-narration aims solely or predominantly at discovering an inherent truth about oneself, then it qualifies as an example of normalizing confession. On the contrary, 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 aims at critically examining how one came to be as one is with reference to

normalizing discourses, or seeks to reveal the discursive conditions and practices of power that enable a particular self-characterization over another.

Except for occasional references in interviews to practices of friendship or sexual pleasure (Foucault 1997c), Foucault did not dwell much on how contemporary practices of the self can function critically rather than hegemonically. McLaren's work is fruitful in that she identifies a series of feminist practices of autobiography and consciousness-raising that can go beyond normalizing confessional power and have the potential for subversive *parrhēsia*.⁵ Although criticized by some (McLaren 2002: 157–9; Alcoff and Gray 1993: 282–3) as depoliticizing due to their insistence on the personal at the expense of the political, or by assuming a false homogeneity among women, proponents of practices of consciousness-raising argued that the strength of these practices lay in how women were empowered by realizing that some of their daily struggles were shared by other individuals too and, as such, “were not personal pathologies, but reflected a larger pattern of social and political discrimination” (McLaren 2002: 155). Through such practices, one's experiences of discrimination are not seen as referring back to an inherent truth about the individual's identity; instead, experiences are *connected* to broader social realities that perpetuate these discriminations. The shareability of concerns among women, although surely subject to individual differences, could have an empowering function that motivates social change. Importantly, such practices did not have any individual therapeutic aims: “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 to invite rebellion” (Dreifus, *cit. in* McLaren 2002: 156); “[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” (Allen, *cit. in* McLaren 2002: 157, *emphasis added*). This point invites further consideration of the social situatedness of individual narratives.

Ewick and Silbey (1995) too regard consciousness-raising groups as a good example of how counter-hegemonic and possibly subversive narratives can be developed, both as a form of resistance against dominant narratives as well as a creative and politically transformative practice. Ewick and Silbey analyze the possibility of counter-hegemonic narratives by referring to a dual function of narrative: an *epistemological* role through which narratives reveal social and cultural meanings, and a *political* role whereby narratives can be invoked with subversive or transformative aims to counter culturally dominant ways of organizing and interpreting social realities. This countering gesture is not to be understood as mere opposition: it is not clear where, when and how a narrative becomes a counter-narrative. “Narratives,” Ewick and Silbey argue, “can function to sustain hegemony or, alternatively, subvert power” (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 200). 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 any convenient way.

To unpack this difficult tension, Ewick and Silbey analyze what they call the social organization of narrative by suggesting that “narratives are told for a variety of reasons, to a variety of audiences, with a variety of effects” (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 205). 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 favorably. Ewick and Silbey cite an example from the courts whereby narratives that defy the court's definitions of a coherent and persuasive account tend to be treated "as filled with irrelevancies and inappropriate information" (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 207). This also raises questions on whether narratives need to fulfil certain performative conditions in order to be treated as credible (see Borg 2018). 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 analyze how a subject's credibility is tied to specific discursive norms, who has access to such knowledge of norms, and what kind of narratives these norms are precluding from the start. 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" (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 208). Lastly, alongside the *when* (context), the *what* (content) and the *how* (presentation), narratives are also socially organized 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" (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 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 a 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" (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 212). The hegemonic contribution of narratives happens 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" (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 214) and hide the fact that their significance and pervasion are cultural phenomena, and thus are not unquestionable.

Importantly, Ewick and Silbey emphasize that narratives contribute to existing hegemonies "by effacing the connections between the particular and the general" (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 215). This ties back to McLaren's characterization of feminist consciousness-raising groups as possibly embodying *parrhêsia* by resisting what Foucault calls "individualizing power" (Foucault 2000c: 300). Foucault highlights how power does not only act in a *totalizing* manner by aspiring to give, despite cracks and resistance, an exhaustive account of the individual; power is also *individualizing*, that is, it uses the notion of individuality as a vehicle for normalization and subjection. As he 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" (Foucault 1983: 213). Narratives can be studied in a similar way. Besides offering totalizing schemes of interpretation, power

functions hegemonically on narratives by individualizing. 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 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.

Ewick and Silbey 1995: 217

This point suggests that what constitutes a counter-hegemonic or subversive narrative is not its being the absolute opposite of hegemonic narratives; it might be the case, as Foucault after all suggests, that there is no "outside" to power relations, and that counter-narratives work through the same logic of power relations and "merely" thwart or frustrate the intended outcomes of power (Foucault 1998: 94–102). Ewick and Silbey characterize narratives as subversive insofar that they emplot a connection between "biography and history" (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 218). This does not amount to reducing an individual's narrative to the broader socio-historical conditions that give rise to it, or to generalizing an individual's narrative, but encourages a consideration of particular experiences as socially, culturally, and politically rooted. Ewick and Silbey characterize such subversive or counter-hegemonic narratives as follows:

[S]ubversive 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*.

Ewick and Silbey 1995: 220

This, however, is not a straightforward matter; narratives can sway and be swayed between hegemonic normalization and subversive parrhesiastic truth-telling, despite the aims of the speakers. The next section situates narratives of trauma within this tension that characterizes practices of self-narration. Despite—or perhaps because of—the risks entailed in attempting to do so, traumatic self-narration can function as *parrhēsia* by revealing the artificiality of hegemonic norms and subverting them.

Survivors as Parrhesiasts: The Subversive Truth-Telling of Trauma

In their Foucauldian analysis of survivor discourse, Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray locate this tension that surrounds and haunts trauma narratives. On the one hand, narratives of trauma can function critically and subversively by revealing and

disrupting hegemonic discourses and practices. But equally, on the other hand, the flexibility of power relations can neutralize 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, they 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?” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 261) Alcoff and Gray recognize that practices of “speaking out” and “breaking the silence” have great critical potential in calling for and effecting political transformation, but they also recognize that such practices must be analyzed as discursive acts that are subject to entanglement with and co-option by power relations that can sterilize and commodify them (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 261). Drawing on Foucault’s accounts of discourse and confession as power, they show how, beyond the conscious intentions of speakers, power functions through:

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 confessor can be overcome.

Alcoff and Gray 1993: 263

Alcoff and Gray “explore the transgressive character of survivors’ speech” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 263) not to conclude that survivors’ narratives are unilaterally powerful, but to show how survivors’ discourse constitutes a site of unstable conflict. Despite efforts—be they systemic, structural, or not—to silence and discredit survivors, their discourse persists in, echoing Cynic *parrhêsia*, “disgusting and disturbing . . . the listeners’ constructed sensibilities” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 266). Survivor speech intervenes at a discursive level by introducing in the realm of the thinkable categories such as “‘rapist father’ or ‘rapist boyfriend’ as an object of discussion or analysis” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 266). Survivors’ discourse posits itself as demanding to be heard while critically foregrounding “conventional speaking arrangements: arrangements in which women and children are not authoritative” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 267).

However, although survivors’ narratives of trauma can 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” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 262). These techniques amount to the silencing of the subversive potential of trauma narratives, or “to channel it into nonthreatening outlets” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 268). Such nonthreatening outlets include an excessive focus on the individualizing 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. To connect the narrative in this way does not amount to obscuring the individual out of the narrative, but shows how individual experiences are made possible by broader social conditions, and that a therapeutic emphasis on experience may fail to capture the role of social constitution. Another nonthreatening outlet is to transform the survivor into “docile, self-monitoring bodies who willingly submit themselves to

(and thus help to create and legitimate) the authority of experts” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 260), whereby such experts coolly 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” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 271).

It is amid this unstable terrain that survivors’ narratives of trauma exist, with their potential to subvert continuously subject to intricate recuperation tactics. Speaking out as a political tactic loses its critical efficacy if, or when, it amounts to passing everything having to do with trauma “through the endless mill of speech” (Foucault 1998: 21). While recognizing that there is no one clear answer to their questions, Alcoff and Gray ask:

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?

Alcoff and Gray 1993: 275

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 its ruse and rashly confusing the cure with its lure. As he 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” (Foucault 1998: 159). By 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 seek to pour cold water on 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 also recognize that human experience is imbued with theory and discourses, and thus “always already political” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 283). 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” (Alcoff and Gray: 286), amid attempts to discredit survivors’ narratives on the basis of their emotional presentation displaying either “too much emotion” (and thus manipulative) or “too little emotion” (and thus not as credible) (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 285). Ultimately, the subversive potential of survivors’ narratives of trauma can be unleashed if the depoliticizing and silencing strategies of power that channel the narratives through the authoritative and familiar discourses is overridden. Managing to do so elevates 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” (Ziegenmeyer, *cit. in* Alcoff and Gray 1993: 287). Alcoff and Gray conclude that 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” (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 286). This critical use of outrage, which is not within any individual’s sole grasp and which can have effects that transcend individual subjectivity, is echoed by Judith Butler’s remarks on the state of *ec-stasy* which she defines as follows:

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 if 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.

Butler 2004: 24

The central question that this chapter is asking is: can certain narrations of trauma by survivors function as instances of *parrhēsia* and, if so, how? Nowadays, the authoritative currency which gives meaning to narratives of trauma is that of the psychological sciences, psychotherapy, discourses of resilience, recovery, well-being, integration, and therapies aimed at restoring the individual’s control and mastery over his or her own life story. This has implications on which narratives of trauma are privileged, which are normalized, and which testimonies are silenced. Hence, the valence of these discourses must be kept in mind when critically evaluating how and why trauma is narrated, and how such narrations can function subversively. Survivors of trauma often report a powerful need to testify, to bear witness to the horror they suffered. Survivors feel it as their duty to remember what they and others, especially those who died, have been through. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi recalls how, after his release from the concentration camps, he felt an unrestrainable need to narrate the trauma—“Every situation was an occasion to tell my story to anyone and everyone” (Levi, *cit. in* Agamben 1999: 16)—leading him to resort to writing in an almost obsessive way. Testimonies can be a coping mechanism for survivors, an opportunity to finally render in words that which has haunted the survivor. Trauma testimonies persist; as Terrence Des Pres puts it, they are “given in memory, told in pain and often clumsily, with little thought for style or rhetorical device” (Des Pres 1976: 29). Trauma narratives are told with hesitance, urgency, and brutality. Trauma is also narrated amid the risk of being subject to the possibly normalizing discourses of well-being, and particular forms of trauma narratives—homogenized, pathologized, commodified, if not aestheticized—are encouraged at the expense of other narratives.

Beyond the feeling of utter powerlessness, trauma is so catastrophic because it involves a betrayal of trust in what is supposed to sustain and secure the comfort of one’s life. This, Jenny Edkins 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 . . . but the meaning of our existence is changed” (Edkins 2003: 4). Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry echoes

this sense of betrayal which trauma brings with it 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” (Améry, *cit. in* Edkins 2003: 8). For the trauma survivor, something significant about oneself and the society one inhabits loses its meaning. What before the traumatic incident felt more or less fixed and secure now becomes an appearance. Yet survivors are in a way trapped within that same linguistic and social context, and their suffering is made sense of through the current predominant schemes of intelligibility: “This is the dilemma survivors face. The only words they have are the words of the very political community that is the source of their suffering” (Edkins 2003: 8). In the face of the seemingly unquestionable contemporary regimes of truth, the survivors’ statements jar and disturb. The affective dimensions of survivors’ voices too—their anger, bitterness, and urgency—have a critical value. As Edkins notes, referring to a remark by a U.S. Marine veteran: “Their anger was not new. It was ‘old, atavistic. We were angry as all civilized men who have ever been sent to make murder in the name of virtue were angry’” (Edkins 2003: 7, *cit. in* Herman 1992: 27).

Survivors’ narratives can have a politically subversive role that challenges structures of power and authority (Edkins 2003; Jensen 2013). Terrence Des Pres locates the subversive trace within survivors’ testimonies when he writes that “[t]he 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” (Des Pres 1976: 42–3). By foregrounding the lack of fixity of technologies of power that uphold the appearance of social order, survivors’ testimonies appear as untimely, unusual, irregular and unwanted because of their untamed character. 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 apparatus do not function as empowering tools that secure and protect the vulnerable. 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 *parrhêsia*. The risky truth-telling of traumatized 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 depoliticizing therapeutic care. It is in these senses that the narrative interventions of trauma survivors can function politically as socially engaged practices of *parrhêsia*, pointing to *other* ways in which subjectivity and social life can be organized.

Conclusion: Narrating Otherwise

This chapter analyzed traumatic self-narration through a theoretical lens informed by Foucault’s varied approaches to practices of self-narration, arguing that the

truth-telling of survivors' narratives of trauma can be compared to the courageous truth-telling of *parrhēsia* by virtue of its subversive potential. However, trauma narratives at large *may not* achieve such an aim, since narrations of trauma can be veered by normalized confessional discourses rather than the courageous subversion associated with *parrhēsia*. Foucault's work on Rivière and Barbin exemplifies his ideas on discourse and power, which can be read in dialogue with the ethical and political questions raised by the late Foucault. His work enables the development of critical conceptual resources with which to study practices of self-narration. Further research prospects are now opened up in this area by the recent publication of *Les aveux de la chair* (Foucault 2018).

This chapter follows Foucault's claim on the centrality of the politics of ourselves by analyzing micro-practices of self-narration to highlight how, despite their seeming mundaneness, they are a gateway to the study of processes of subject-formation and the government of the self in contemporary times. Such an analysis shows how power functions intricately and intimately through practices of narrating oneself, but also shows how such "small practices" harbor a possibility of resistance. Exploring the theoretical stakes of practices of self-narration means 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 by the hard grip of normalizing 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] new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom" (Foucault 1997e: 316). Adopting a critical outlook to the activity of self-narration foregrounds its ethical and political stakes; what can be called the political ethics of self-narration. The late Foucault, indeed his entire work, can enrich this endeavor.⁶

Notes

- 1 "Middle" Foucault is generally regarded as being his 1970s works. This "period" 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 conceptualizations of modern sexuality. "Late" Foucault refers to his 1980s works, which are 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. I discuss how 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 *assujettissement* in Borg (2015).
- 2 This refers to a second-wave feminist slogan, made popular in the 1960s, that emphasizes that the personal or subjective is always (if not always already) tied to the social or political. Thus, problems which women might have thought were their personal problems—such as domestic violence or sexual abuse—are, in fact, a reflection of wider socio-political structures.

- 3 For more on Foucault's analyses of Rivière and Barbin, including critiques of his approach, see Butler (1990), Gilmore (2001), LaFrance (2005), Pereira Andrade (2007), Repo (2014), and Taylor (2009).
- 4 For further studies on the notion of *parrhēsia* in Foucault's work, see Flynn (1991), Dyrberg (2014), Folkers (2016), Lawlor (2016), Ross (2008), and Simpson (2012).
- 5 For further works that highlight how consciousness-raising groups, and strands of narrative therapy, can entail the potential of *parrhēsia*, see also Taylor (2009) and Valverde (2004).
- 6 Different parts of this chapter were presented in a more preliminary form in conferences and seminars in Lisbon, Malta, and Granada. I sincerely thank all those who helped me improve this work with their feedback, particularly Raylene Abdilla, Aaron Aquilina, Keith Pisani, and Kathrin Schödel.

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