UNIVERSITÄT AUGSBURG
Universitätsbibliothek

OPEN ACCESS
OPUS AUGSBURG

This narrator nothing affirms, therefore he lies? Truth-speaking and discursive power in Teju Cole's Open City

Martin Riedelsheimer, Eva Ries

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Riedelsheimer, Martin, and Eva Ries. 2021. "This narrator nothing affirms, therefore he lies? Truth-speaking and discursive power in Teju Cole's Open City." In *Being untruthful: lying, fiction, and the non-factual*, edited by Monika Fludernik and Stephan Packard, 305–22. Baden-Baden: Ergon.

Nutzungsbedingungen / Terms of use:

licgercopyright

Dieses Dokument wird unter folgenden Bedingungen zur Verfügung gestellt: / This document is made available under these conditions:
Deutsches Urheberrecht
Weitere Informationen finden Sie unter: / For more information see:
https://www.uni-augsburg.de/de/organisation/bibliothek/publizieren-zitieren-archivieren/publiz/

This Narrator Nothing Affirms, Therefore He Lies? Truth-speaking and Discursive Power in Teju Cole's *Open City*

Martin Riedelsheimer and Eva Ries

1. Introduction

The discussion about whether or not fiction is capable of producing lies is more than two millennia old. This debate has been carried out with a view to the morality of literature (and art as a whole) on the one hand, and to the ontological status of the storyworld on the other. One part of the problem remains that "[t]here is no universally accepted definition of lying" (Mahon 2016; see 2008, 211) and that philosophical approaches to truth are likewise contested. Historically, there have been two tendencies: either to look for 'higher truths' in fiction (see Lamarque 2014, viii), or, conversely, to accuse writers of fiction of producing lies. Against the Platonic accusation that all fiction is just a lie, with which, as Peter Lamarque sums up the argument, poets "seduce a gullible audience into thinking they speak with real authority" (2014, 124), Philip Sidney has famously held that the poet "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" (2012, 1068). Indeed, if we accept James Mahon's general definitions, by which lying is the production of a "believed-false statement […] with the intention that the other person believe that statement to be true," while deception is "to intentionally cause to have a false belief that is known or believed to be false" (2016), then a writer of fiction can hardly be accused of lying, since authors of fiction do not usually claim that they report the 'truth' and only seldom attempt to hoodwink their readers into believing such a thing. What is more, modern literary studies mostly refrain from guessing the poet's or author's intentions that are central to such acts as lying and deceiving.

Nevertheless, readers may get the impression that some fictional texts are deceptive or that they are confronted with outright 'lies' within the narrative discourse. Such cases have mostly been discussed with regard to a narrator, rather than the author, engaging in an act of lying or deception and have been classified as unreliable narration. In unreliable narration, generally speaking, the 'lie' (if such a thing may pass within the realm of the fictional) is the narrator's, who 'affirms' occurrences that do not seem to be supported by the overall narrative, whose 'truth' they deviate from. However, this does not fully take into account the narrator's privileged discursive position – after all, the narrator is the one who produces the 'truths' of the narrative in the first

place – that might allow a narrator to withhold information *without* necessarily deceiving the reader or lying to them outright.

This theoretical problem is put to the test in Teju Cole's 2011 novel *Open City*, which showcases a form of narrative performance that resorts to silence to disavow truth-speaking without uttering demonstrable falsehoods. Not only does Cole's novel prominently question the norms that determine truth and falsehood in our everyday and political discourses, it also negotiates the connection between truth and (discursive) power as discussed by Michel Foucault (see below in section 2). The novel approaches the topic of truthfulness through its autodiegetic narrator Julius, who plays the double role of uncovering truth by giving a voice to oppressed discourses while simultaneously engaging in such oppression in his own narration. The ensuing tension between the narrator's resistance to discourses of power and his perpetuation of such discourses is instrumental in highlighting a paradox ingrained in the notion of truthfulness if seen through a Foucauldian lens. On the one hand, truth for Foucault depends directly on discursive power. This can be considered a relativist understanding of truth. On the other hand, in his late work Foucault admits to the necessity of truthfulness as a value that manifests itself for example in the practice of *parrēsia*, i.e. truth-speaking (on which see below). Cole's narrator juxtaposes these two notions of truthfulness, when, faced with an accusation of rape, he simply remains silent on the issue and so denies the reader any insight into the events. By rendering the facts of the case inaccessible in this way, the narrative marks its own opacity and directs readers' attention to the mechanisms of discursive power inherent in Julius's narration and, in a wider sense, in any instance of the production of truth. This power, as the novel also shows, somewhat paradoxically can only be countered by acts of truth-speaking.

The novel then highlights a central conundrum or paradox in our relationship towards the truth: while objectivity forms a necessary ideal in any production of truth, this ideal can neither be obtained by subjects nor would a truth that has not been subjectivized be of any use since it lacks a relationship to the subject. Thus, although fiction as a consequence of its ontological status cannot 'lie,' Cole's *Open City* shows that it can still emerge as an arena in which claims to truthfulness and the mechanisms of discourse production that generate what is perceived as the truth are scrutinized. Literature, therefore, can function as a means of critique that participates in or even initiates a never to be finished search for the truth.

2. Foucault on Truth and Truthfulness

The tension between truthfulness as a value and truth as a mere construct features prominently in the work of Michel Foucault, who has characterized his

entire philosophical project as a "history of truth" (Foucault 1992, 11). While in his earlier writings Foucault emphasizes the constructed character of truth and its alignment with power, in his late work on the concept of *parrēsia* he stresses the importance of truthfulness as a value. According to Foucault (1980, 133), truth is "to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements." It is, therefore, as Michael Ruoff (2018, 262; our translation) argues, "the product of a discourse whose aim it is to justify certain modes as well as rules of behaviour," and thus truth remains tightly linked to power itself. For Foucault (1991, 79), "the production of truth […] mean[s] […] the establishment of domains in which the practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent." Notions of truth might thus, historically speaking, range from the judgment of God to more modern-day concepts of proof, involving professional specialization and subjects competent to speak the truth in a certain area. The latter thus necessarily includes norms according to which statements can be falsified or judged to be lies.

In his later work, Foucault assigns a much more positive value to the significance of truthfulness in political contexts as well as in processes of self-subjectification. The problem he was implicitly addressing in those texts can be located in the problematic conclusions that might be drawn from a constructivist approach towards truth with regard to any kind of morality: in short, the assumption that truth might be a mere construct might also foster ethical relativism.[1] In his late writings on the history of sexuality Foucault points out that his focus on the techniques of the self in Roman and Greek culture uncovers concepts of subjectivity that deviate from the Cartesian tradition, demonstrating that a different form of subjectivity is possible, namely one that re-grants a certain kind of autonomy to the subject after its death (Foucault 1992, 6–9). The practice of *parrēsia*, or truth-speaking, plays a vital role in these techniques of the self (Foucault 2019, 19).

'Speaking the truth' can occur on different levels: the political level, on which an individual stands up either to tyranny or to the *demos* in democratic societies; and the personal level, on which *parrēsia* is used as a means in techniques of self-formation in which the truth about an individual is told to this individual by one of his or her friends, or in which the individual questions him- or herself about his or her relation to the truth (Foucault 2019, 15). In both cases the individual puts him- or herself in a relation to the truth and therefore participates in what Foucault terms 'games of truth.' What is

[1] As Thomas Flynn observes, the charge of ethical relativism was not unique to Foucault's brand of poststructuralist thought: "Foucault was facing an issue that many have regarded as the Achilles' heel of Marxism and structuralism alike: the moral implications of their theories of history and society. Do they lead to a sterile amoralism, rendering inconsistent any viable moral theory?" (Flynn 1987, 225).

striking in Foucault's account of *parrēsia* is that the different variants of *parrēsia* amount to a somewhat double-edged concept: whereas the subject can directly influence the games of truth, it is also subject to the truth of others. Therefore, while the individual has a certain degree of autonomy in partaking in these games of truth, this autonomy is limited by the discourses of others and by an ideal of objectivity that is reflected in the juxtaposition of different perspectives. Thus, a precarious balance is created between subjectivity and objectivity in productions of truth. According to this conception, truth cannot be found out or discovered but is created in an active process that is never quite finished. While Foucault then does not produce any such thing as a definition of what truth *actually* is (Flynn 1987, 227), in his writings on subjectivity and truth he clearly assigns a value to the concept of truthfulness. The alternatives to the traditional Cartesian conceptions of subjectivity which he proposes involve truthfulness as an ethos[2] on several levels.[3] The notion of an absolute truth in discourse is thus discarded and replaced by truthfulness as ethos (Gros 2019, xvii), a concept that becomes a central value in Foucault's late writings. This makes for a somewhat ambivalent stance towards truth from the perspective of Foucault's oeuvre as a whole. Overall, while for Foucault truth is necessarily historically variable and can never be absolute, truthfulness remains a central value in processes of self-subjectification that re-introduce a partial autonomy of the subject – *parrēsia* thus is a technique of the self that allows an individual to enter into a relationship with the truth by challenging discourses of truth production.

3. *Being Truthful – Counter-discursive Productions of Truth in* Open City

In *Open City* these different notions of truth, i.e. the denial of any kind of absolute truth as well as the concept of *parrēsia* and truthfulness, are negotiated in the autodiegetic narrator Julius, a Nigerian psychiatrist living in New York City. While he associates himself with objectivity and frames himself as a subject qualified to speak the truth, these claims are repeatedly undercut in his own narrative discourse and ultimately challenged entirely when, at the end of

[2] Ethos is understood by Foucault as 'habit' (Waldow 2013, 53) and does not necessarily include any interaction with the other – which is central to most other approaches towards ethics – but rather refers to any kind of coherent political attitude that an individual might develop.

[3] The positive evaluation of different kinds of *parrēsia* becomes particularly evident from the fact that for Foucault the whole practice of critical philosophy is rooted in the various manifestations of *parrēsia* that he describes in his lectures on this topic (Foucault 2019, 224; Gros 2019, xix).

the novel, he is confronted with an act of *parrēsia* that must altogether question the narrative's truth production.

Julius is assigned a position as a competent subject speaking the truth within the discourse of his profession of clinical psychiatry. In his free time, he strolls aimlessly through the city, observing its inhabitants as well as talking to them. In a typical flâneur's manner he walks back "into a vanished time," as Walter Benjamin (1999, 416) puts it, uncovering both the hidden parts of the city's history and the hidden traumata of its inhabitants.[4] In this, Julius'"s strolls mirror his practice of psychiatry, transferring his expertise in speaking the truth in this particular field to the streets of the city. Moreover, Julius performs several other norms that function as markers for speaking the truth in the twenty-first century, such as aiming at an ideal of objectivity as well as giving very detailed historical information on the sites he visits.[5] In this, his tone is mostly neutral and distanced, projecting disinterested observation (see Steckenbiller 2018, 5), and his detailed descriptions cause a temporal stretching in his narrative that suggests precision. His reporting creates the impression that Julius's main interest lies in an acute representation of facts. As Rebecca Clark puts it, "The sweeping range of knowledge – or at least abundance of factoids – that Julius recalls at a moment's notice as he aimlessly wanders the city seems to mimic a bird's-eye view, a privileged perspective that can pan out to see, read, and map the whole, from a subject position of disinterested omniscience (or at least omni-vision)" (2018, 186). Within the logic of the fictional world, Julius thus seems to engage in, or at least mimic, factual speech.[6]

An example that shows several of these markers of truth is when during one of his walks Julius comes across a bookstore, in which he looks for a book written by one of his patients:

> At around ten, I entered a bookshop, […], and as I went in I remembered a book I had wanted to look at for a long time: a book of historical biography by one of my patients. I found it quickly – *The Monster of New Amsterdam* – and settled in among the quieter stacks to read it. V., an assistant professor at New York University and a member of the Delaware tribe, had based the book on her doctoral dissertation at Columbia. It was the first comprehensive study of Cornelis Van Tienhoven. Van Tienhoven had been notorious as a seventeenth-century *schout* of New Amsterdam […]. He had arrived in 1633, as a secretary for the Dutch East India Company, but as he climbed up the social ladder, he became known for his many brutal acts, notable among them a raid he led to murder Canarsie Indians on Long Island, after which he had brought back the victims' heads on pikes. […] V's book made for grim reading. It was full of violent

[4] See e.g. also Miller (2015, 199): "Julius […] is preoccupied with New York's past. At times he looks at New York as if he were an archaeologist."

[5] Especially his rigorously objective collecting of data is marked in the novel: "Everything and everyone that Julius encounters seems to be leveled out into information" (Clark 2018, 194).

[6] See also Gabriele Rippl (2018, 279) and Pieter Vermeulen (2015, 97), who both emphasize the resemblance between Julius's associations and entries on *Wikipedia*.

> events, and in the endnotes were reprinted the relevant seventeenth-century records. (Cole 2011, 25–26)

Julius's narration here displays several norms necessary for the production of truth. First, the information on Van Tienhoven is very detailed, includes exact dates, and relates back to historical facts. Second, since this information seems to be drawn directly from an academic book, it is bolstered with the authority of academia as proof of the truthfulness of the information given by the narrator. This is then again emphasized when Julius explicitly refers to the sources at the end of the book, highlighting a common academic practice of truth production. Moreover, as Julius chances upon the bookshop during one of his strolls, this shows how his practice of flânerie is tightly linked to his work, i.e. to a realm in which he actually is in the position of a subject competent to speak the truth. It is only because V. is his patient that Julius is led to include the narration of the hidden collective trauma of the Canarsie Indians in his narrative of New York.

In several complementary scenes, Julius either encounters sites in the city that trigger him to uncover lesser-known parts of the city's history or meets people who tell him stories of individual as well as collective trauma. Those traumata then run counter to what might be considered white discourses of power. The stories that Julius reveals mostly belong to ethnic minorities, whose narratives of trauma form counter-discourses to white hegemonic discourses about New York. In juxtaposing the received truths of the majority with conflicting voices from the margins, this narrative practice already implies the constructed character of any notion of an absolute truth (Hartwiger 2016, 5). Thus, there is no single absolute truth about the city that determines its identity, but the city's identity is constantly re-created throughout the text. Julius's narration, therefore, aligns with the first part of a Foucauldian notion of truth in that it rejects absolute truth and accepts that the construction of truth is always linked to the workings of power. At the same time, it performs and even emphasizes the ideal of objectivity by checking hegemonic discourses with more marginalized voices.

4. Truth and Unreliability – Julius's Relativism and Underreporting

Nevertheless, the novel does not stop at simply producing a post-colonial counter-discourse to the implicit hegemonic discourse of power. Instead, it shows Julius adopting precisely the problematic stance towards ethics that might follow from constructivist notions of truth and that Foucault was accused of supporting. This becomes clearest in a passage in which Julius discloses his personal beliefs and self-image 20 pages before the end of the novel. In this

scene Julius commits to his own brand of ethical relativism[7] and even extends this self-image to his potential readership:

> Each person must, on some level, take himself as the calibration point for normalcy, must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him. Perhaps this is what we mean by sanity: that, whatever our self-admitted eccentricities might be, we are not the villains of our own stories. In fact, it is quite the contrary: we play, and only play, the hero, and in the swirl of other people's stories, insofar as those stories concern us at all, we are never less than heroic. […] We have the ability to do both good and evil, and more often than not, we choose the good. When we don't, neither we nor our imagined audience is troubled, because we are able to articulate ourselves to ourselves, and because we have, through our other decisions, merited their sympathy. (Cole 2011, 243)

Hence, according to Julius, not only can every individual judge for themselves whether they perceive their own actions to qualify as 'good' or 'evil,' but the option of anyone identifying themselves as 'evil' is excluded entirely. The problematic conclusion from Julius's views would seem to be that: no matter how bad an action might be, it will not register as negative in one's image of oneself, because "we are able to articulate ourselves to ourselves" and can, therefore, justify any action to ourselves. Julius thus uncovers his own purely relativist stance towards the truth – since the truth about the identity of the individual remains entirely subjective – and combines it with a relativist stance towards ethics – since according to his point of view we can always reinterpret our own actions as justified.

Such an apparent relativization of truth as an absolute concept, and possibly even the implicit rejection of searching for any truth as a value, can also be found elsewhere in Julius's narration, including at the level of the narrative discourse itself. One example where extratextual historical facticity is abandoned occurs when Julius narrates his encounter with Pierre, a Haitian shoeshiner he meets in the underground part of Penn Station. In rendering the conversation he has with the shoeshiner, Julius almost entirely surrenders the narrative voice to Pierre's first-person narrative, which is presented in free direct speech for the most part (Cole 2011, 71–74). Pierre claims that he left Haiti together with his employer, a Mr. Bérard, "when things got bad there" (Cole 2011, 71–72) due to what he calls "the terror of Boukman" (2011, 72). This places Pierre's life in the context of the Haitian revolution of 1791, in which Dutty Boukman was a leader of the slaves who fought for their freedom. The same temporal frame is corroborated when Pierre claims that after Mr. Bérard's death, in New York, he bought freedom for himself and his sister (Cole 2011, 73). As the rest of Julius's narrative is set in the twenty-first century, this would make Pierre over

[7] See also Li (2018, 67), who refers to Julius as "committing [an] ethical lapse as he is in many ways 'isolated from all loyalties.'"

200 years old, a clear deviation from the realism and historical factuality the novel seems to pursue up to that point.

Taken by itself, this break with factuality is difficult to assess, particularly since it is not Julius himself who seems to deviate from the truth. By surrendering the narrative voice to the shoeshiner, Julius assumes the role of a neutral narrative medium, a task he fulfills by rendering Pierre's narration without any notable intrusion – and above all without any evaluation, conforming with the ideal of disinterested objectivity he seems to pursue elsewhere. Even when Pierre violates the norms of what is possible within the conventions of realism, and thus departs from any historical factuality, Julius still seems to be within the parameters of the truthful as far as his own narrative is concerned: after all, he listens to and records the shoeshiner's story in the same way he does when it comes to his patients or to other characters he meets on his walks through the city. Yet although he proves to be a precise commentator on historical facts elsewhere, he either does not recognize the obvious contradictions in the shoeshiner's account or willfully ignores them, thus leaving open the question whether the narrator's evaluation of events can be trusted at all. In this way, the novel points out how common norms of truth only form part of an overall construction of truth that does not ensure that the speaker who obeys these norms actually speaks the truth.

This opens up a discrepancy between the way in which truthfulness is constructed at the story level and at the discourse level of the narrative. To be precise, it raises the question of the narrator's (i.e. Julius's) responsibility for the truthfulness of his narrative. Does the narrative voice, which is part of the narration's discourse, have to check the truthfulness of the story it renders? As the narrator in this case does not provide any comment on what he reports (i.e. on Pierre's story), but only seems to record it faithfully, the 'lie,' if it may be so termed, is Pierre's. However, while Julius in this case does not produce a false statement himself, his lack of any comment on Pierre's story nevertheless tears open a gap in the narrative that may be perceived as deceitful by the reader. As a consequence of this evaluative gap, a 'gapped truth' – one where it is entirely unclear who has violated the norm of truthfulness at this point –, is created in the narrative of *Open City*, which then points towards the difficulty of rendering truth in narrative, or, following (early) Foucault, to the way in which discursive mechanisms are essential in the construction of what is considered to be true.

A similarly gapped version of the truth, albeit at a much more personal level for the narrator, occurs towards the end of the novel. On his walks through the city, Julius meets Moji, the sister of one of his school friends from Nigeria. They keep loose contact until Moji invites him to a party, where she confronts Julius and tells him that when they were both teenagers he had raped her (Cole 2011, 244). While this sudden revelation certainly casts doubt on Julius's moral

evaluation, it is in particular his response that seems problematic with regard to the status of truth in the novel. For the narrator remains silent on the issue and does not only exclude Moji, but also the reader from any insight into his reaction to this accusation – a behavior that distinctly echoes the shoeshiner episode. Instead, he leaves the party and goes home, upon which the chapter, the novel's penultimate, ends. The last chapter is set in autumn, leaving a conspicuous temporal gap of several months to the night of the party, which takes place in May (Cole 2011, 232), and never returning to the rape. On the one hand, this lack of any direct reaction on Julius's part does not seem to constitute an outright case of lying. Rather, Julius seems to have taken to heart Sidney's (2012, 1068) claim that lying depends on an affirmation of facts and therefore avoids the lie by not speaking on the matter at all and thus not 'affirming' anything. On the other hand, there is something about this narrative non-engagement that rings entirely false. There is a cleavage between Julius's actions as a character who makes uncovering hidden trauma his business and his stance as a narrator who remains silent on and so engages in repressive discourse. Again, an evaluative gap opens up in Julius's narrative, only this time the gap concerns a rather more personal story than the vaguely political narrative of Pierre the shoeshiner.

Essentially, this cleavage is the result of a clash between what James Phelan (2005, 12) has described as the "character functions" and the "telling functions" of an autodiegetic narrator, a clash which results in the highlighting of the narrator's "synthetic function" as a touchstone for truth-speaking, or for the way in which essential truths may become difficult to access due to the distribution of discursive power. The telling functions are distinguished into the "narrator function," which refers to the narrator acting as a "reporter, interpreter, and evaluator of the narrated for the narratee," and the "disclosure function," which comprises the communication between narrator and readers in which a narrator may for example unwittingly reveal information beyond what is actually said to the narratee (Phelan 2005, 12). With regard to both functions, Julius's silence on the matter leaves a gap that is difficult to fill.

The reporting, interpreting, or evaluating that the narratee is offered by Julius is minimal, reluctant, and gapped. While Moji's accusation is presented by the narrator, the rhetorical construction of the narrative gives the impression that this reporting happens only reluctantly. Thus, Julius mentions his unwillingness to go to the party in the first place (Cole 2011, 231) and the chronology of his accounts of the party is oddly shuffled, with a lengthy description of his leaving the party and walking home inserted before the confrontation with Moji is reported, as if the narrator's intention were to defer or avoid this reporting. Further, the way in which the accusation itself is subtly framed in Julius's reporting suggests that only a minimal account of Moji's claims is presented. Julius renders Moji's allegation in indirect speech and in a strongly summarized

version – the "probably six or seven minutes" (Cole 2011, 244) she spends presenting her version of events are condensed to just about one page of text and so reduced to a minimum –, both of which means that the victim's voice is broken in the prism of the voice of the accused who wields the narrator's control of the narrative. Crucially, Julius's account only reverts to allowing Moji direct speech[8] when she turns to the present and accuses him: "You'll say nothing, she said. I know you'll say nothing. I'm just another woman whose story of sexual abuse will not be believed" (Cole 2011, 245).

Moji indeed correctly anticipates what happens next: during and after reporting the confrontation with Moji at the party, Julius says nothing about either the truth or falsity of Moji's claim that he had "forced [himself] on her" (Cole 2011, 244) or about his reactions, both cognitive and emotional, to such an accusation. This means there is no overt evaluating or interpreting of Moji's claim on offer. Julius's only evaluative statements do not pertain to the veracity of the accusation, but to the way in which Moji presents it and possibly to her own conviction of its truth, since he admits that "[s]he had said it as if, with all of her being, she were certain of its accuracy" (Cole 2011, 244). Overall, in this case, the evaluating and interpreting functions of the narrator seem even more strongly curbed than the reporting function, and the narrator functions are reduced to a bare minimum.

There is then little in Julius's narration that allows either the narratee or the reader to make an informed decision on what truly happened and to what extent Julius is guilty, which makes Julius's narrative at this point an extreme case of what Phelan (2005, 52) calls "underreporting," a type of narration that "occurs when the narrator tells us less than he or she knows." What exactly is it, though, that Julius must know but does not tell? First, his emotional reaction to the severe accusation he is confronted with is missing entirely. The reduction of all narrator functions to a minimum means that Julius's disclosure function is likewise reduced: there is little to be inferred from Julius's silence beyond a general sense of discomfort with the situation that is expressed in his reluctance to present the events – unless, that is, one were to infer an admission of guilt from Julius's silence on the matter. Second, it is above all the facts of the case that are drowned out by the narrator's silence. Julius does not give any indication of whether he remembers the night of the alleged rape at all and of course does not comment on the veracity of Moji's claims either.[9] Al-

[8] As Clark (2018, 193) as well as Pieter Vermeulen (2013, 48) point out, throughout the novel Julius directly incorporates other characters' speech in his own narration without separating the discourses of other characters from his own by means of quotation marks.

[9] While Julius earlier, when he encounters Moji for the first time in New York, remembers going to a party at the house of Moji's brother as a teenager and Moji later says that the rape took place at such a party, he does not mention anything about the party except that it was "a wild one, with lots of drinking" (Cole 2011, 157). Importantly, the narrator again uses his discursive power to present the narrative discourse in such a way as to

though Phelan (2005, 52) stresses that "[n]ot all underreporting […] constitutes unreliability," but only the omission of "salient" (2005, 52n) information that cannot be expected to be inferred by the narratee or reader, Julius may still be considered unreliable by these standards, as the ellipsis in his narrative cannot be filled with any certainty. However, this kind of unreliability does not make the narrator a liar, since there clearly is a difference between 'not speaking' and 'not speaking the truth.' Julius's refusal to 'affirm' anything in connection with Moji's accusation simply creates a narrative gap that proves impossible for the reader to fill and deprives readers of any yardstick by which to measure the narrator's deviation from the truth.

Nevertheless, Julius's act of 'not affirming' may still be seen as deceptive, or intentionally misleading, because it clashes with what Phelan (2005, 12) calls the mimetic character function, that is, with the novel's naturalistic depiction of Julius as a real person. Here it seems altogether unbelievable, or out of character, that Julius should show no response whatsoever to Moji's accusation, even though Moji directly challenges him to "say something now" (Cole 2011, 245). In remaining silent, Julius pushes the ideal of a disinterested objectivity to the limit, pretending to act as a non-involved reporter of the accusation against him. The implicit denial of his own investedness that this behavior suggests thus indeed appears to be an act of "torturous deception" (Cole 2011, 244). For a human being (and by extension for a realistically conceptualized character) it seems impossible not to react to claims that must rattle their entire social existence: the mimetic illusion of a life-like narrator is clearly broken here.

As a consequence, the *function* of this lack of a reaction is thrown into sharp relief. Due to the flaunting of mimetic conventions in the character of the narrator at this point, readers are likely to become aware that there is something 'strange' about this narrator's story. This is also what Phelan (2005, 13, see 28, 20) suggests when he argues that violations of a narrator's mimetic character function highlight their "synthetic functions," i.e. the narrator's wider textual functions as an "artificial construct[]" within the narrative. That is precisely what happens here: the realization that the narrator acts 'oddly' by not disclosing everything there might be to disclose raises a number of questions that are relevant to the way narrative and notions of truthfulness are interwoven. When Julius is accused of rape, the readers are encouraged to make a decision on whether or not to believe the accusation.[10] As it were, this puts them into the position of a judge or jury at trial, poring over the textual evidence of Julius's

separate the only morsels of information pertaining to the rape from the moment of Moji's accusation.

[10] This is not to say that all readers will necessarily respond to the text in the same way or that their decision on whether or not to believe the accusation will be uniform. However, in following Phelan's rhetorical approach to narrative, we also accept his premise that some readings offer themselves more readily than others, while nevertheless no reading can be considered definitive (see Phelan 2005, 18–19). In the case of *Open City*,

innocence or guilt, a task that – as in many real-world rape trials – is made difficult or perhaps even impossible by the silence of the accused.[11] As the accused here is the narrator of the entire story whose task it is to make the diegesis available to readers in the first place, his silence also must mean the end of the narration, or at least of this particular strand, which then continues to linger in the reader's mind, but is not picked up again over the few remaining pages of the novel. In the end, Julius's underreporting and his clearly voiced relativist stance have the potential to alert readers to the problem of truth and lying in *Open City* and in fiction in general.

5. *"Areas of Opacity" – Narrative and Power*

Indeed, Julius's silence can be said to touch on almost existential questions of narrative. It would appear that the most prominent synthetic function of this narrative gap is to highlight the problems of the notion of truth in narrative. As Julius observes with regard to his own profession as a psychiatrist:

> As physicians […] we depend, to a much greater degree than is the case with nonmental conditions, on what the patient tells us. But what are we to do when the lens through which the symptoms are viewed is often, itself, symptomatic: the mind is opaque to itself, and it's hard to tell where, precisely, these areas of opacity are. (Cole 2011, 238)

This is equally true for readers of narrative. Peter Lamarque (2014) has called this the "opacity of narrative," a concept that seems to be echoed here. For Lamarque, the opacity of a narrative ensues because the mode of its presentation is intricately linked to its contents:

> Rather than supposing that narrative descriptions are a window through which an independently existing (fictional) world is observed, with the implication that the very same world might be presented (and thus observed) in other ways, from different perspectives, we must accept that there is no such transparent glass – only an opaque glass, painted, as it were, with figures seen not *through* it but *in* it. (Lamarque 2014, 3; original emphasis)

It is then the narrative perspective itself that constitutes an integral part of the narrative (Lamarque 2014, 11). The lens, be it that of the narrator of a (fictional) narrative or that of the narrator of a personal story of illness, as would be the case with Julius's patients, in this sense is indeed symptomatic of what it depicts.

---

the lack of any response to the accusation seems to put the question of whether or not to believe Julius back to the reader very urgently.

[11] This raises the question whether a character narrator who appears as a realistically drawn human being must adhere to stricter standards of 'unmasking the self' than could be expected of a real person – after all, in practically all democratic legal systems the accused has the right to remain silent and not to comment on any accusations.

In a similar vein, the Foucauldian notion of truth might be considered one of opacity: any access to truth is only possible through the prism of power, which means that truth is opaque in as far as it rests in and on discourses of power.

In *Open City*, this is thematized precisely through the narrative gaps and through the way in which the narrator frames these omissions. It is typical of first-person narration that the narrator who reports the events also frames them as a character involved in them – the events thus reported become inseparable from the narrator's perspective and mode of presentation. While this is the case in any narrative, Julius's personal investment in Moji's story must make the mechanisms of the narrator's framing more transparent. Immediately after musing on the relative nature of normalcy and on how "we are not the villains of our own stories," he introduces readers to Moji's accusation:

> And so, what does it mean when, in someone else's version [of a story], I am the villain? I am only too familiar with bad stories – badly imagined, or badly told – because I hear them frequently from patients. I know the tells of those who blame others, those who are unable to see that they themselves, and not the others, are the common thread in all their bad relationships. There are characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of such narratives. But what Moji had said to me that morning […] had nothing in common with such stories. She had said it as if, with all of her being, she were certain of its accuracy. (Cole 2011, 243–244)

Although he overtly acknowledges Moji's claim to truthfulness, by distancing her story from the 'bad stories' of his patients – where notably Julius does not seem to distinguish between 'badly imagined' and 'badly told' – he expresses his doubt in a subtle manner, finally relegating her story to the fictional realm of the 'as if.' What is more, Julius goes on to wield his discursive power as a narrator in rendering Moji's accusation in a summarized, "clinical" (Clark 2018, 196) version, initially in indirect speech. As a consequence, he regulates the way in which her claim is presented and implicitly sets the benchmark for any evaluation of it as true or false, or, in this case, relegates it to the status of the undecidably opaque and possibly made up. This marks a stark contrast to the way in which he gives voice to suffering elsewhere in the novel – in particular to the way in which he almost entirely surrenders his narrative voice to the Haitian shoeshiner. As opposed to Pierre's, Moji's voice is only presented in direct discourse briefly, at the end of the passage. Hence the initial full brunt of her accusation is defused in the detachedness of indirect speech. What Julius's presentation of Moji's story makes clear, then, is that all along – not just after admitting to a relativist stance towards truth – as a narrator he has been covertly in control of what passes as truth in his narrative. It is therefore the inevitable opacity of *any* narrative that is exposed in the manner in which Julius presents Moji's accusation.[12]

[12] See also Miller (2015, 203), who claims that in this passage Julius "is talking about his profession but he is also talking about himself."

The point of the narrative here is that an absolute notion of truth and violent discursive power are just as much entangled as violence and a radically relativist stance towards truth. In other words, an absolute subjectivization of discourses of truth is equally violent as their absolute objectivization.[13] Moreover, objectivity can never be obtained by a singular voice that would only ever veil its own subjectivity by claiming to be entirely objective. Quite on the contrary, objectivity can best be achieved by the polyphony of voices that is implied by the juxtaposition of Julius's narrative with Moji's accusation (although this accusation still forms part of Julius's narrative or his discourse of power). Paradoxically, Julius's subjectivity is exposed by his apparent insistence on a disinterested objectivity. This seeming objectivity clashes with the fact that he, like any subject, inevitably must have a subjective perspective on the issue because he is personally involved in it. It is through Moji's account of the rape that the subjectivity of Julius's entire narrative is unmasked. After all, this is a narrative which – as much as it might aim at an ideal of objectivity – is still based on processes of selection and subjective framing. Nevertheless, the way in which his narrative seems to emphasize objectivity becomes marked precisely when he is faced with Moji's personal accusation because this confrontation foregrounds Julius's function as a character – a life-like representation of a human being – and thus underscores the limitations that follow from every human being's singular perspective. Moreover, objectivity is linked with Julius's relativist stance towards the truth as well as towards morality, which becomes clear in his introduction to Moji's story. Paradoxically, then, the fact that through his ostentatious objectivity Julius entirely glosses over his own subjectivity only uncovers precisely his subjective framing of Moji's story, and what serves as a marker of truth throughout most parts of the story now emphasizes the suspiciousness of his account. Ultimately, Julius's attempt at strict disinterested objectivity seems to blur any access to truth to the same extent as any radically subjective take on the truth might do.

6. *Narration as* parrēsia – *The Truthfulness of Critique in* Open City

What remains is the question of whether an alternative to these two opposing ends of the spectrum – the relativist stance towards truth and the absolute notion of truth – can be found. Foucault suggests such an alternative in the orientation towards truthfulness in what he describes as techniques of the self. This orientation is exemplified in the practice of *parrēsia*, which occurs in *Open City* on several levels. Moji's accusation against the narrator qualifies as an act

[13] See also Katherine Hallemeier (2014, 241f), who argues that Julius's "frequent incorporation of others' stories into [his] own can be read as admirably worldly, problematically passive, or both."

of *parrēsia* both on a personal and on a political level. It constitutes an act of personal *parrēsia* because Moji tells Julius the truth about himself and thus might contribute to his formation of self by means of the techniques of the self – if only Julius were interested in any such practice. This personal *parrēsia*, "[t]he *parrēsia* of a friend, […] prevents the care of the self from succumbing to the flightiness and expediency of egotism" (Gros 2019, xvii). It is therefore usually employed in order to keep the subject from taking him- or herself as "the calibration point for normalcy" (Cole 2011, 243) and does not allow for an entirely subjective construction of identity.

Yet, Moji's narrative just as well qualifies as an act of political *parrēsia*, since she is well aware of the political position that she puts herself in by accusing Julius of rape. Political *parrēsia* often faces an imminent threat of death to the subject speaking the truth: either the truth-speaker's actual death or their death as a speaking subject due to being silenced by the discourse of power (Foucault 2019, 43). Thus, Moji is fully aware of Julius's discursive power to remain silent and that her own victimized position is one that "will not be believed" (Cole 2011, 245). This means that she knows that by speaking her truth she deprives herself of her own subject position, i.e. she is aware of the fact that she risks her death as a speaking subject. Moreover, the scene creates an analogy to the relationship between hegemonic discourses and counter-discourses that Julius expressed throughout the story. Moji's accusation now puts him into the position of being faced with a counter-discourse to the (narrative) discourse of power that he has been producing as the autodiegetic narrator of the story all along. While Julius quite openly announces that his discourse constitutes an act of performance that among other things serves his own construction of identity – "we play, and only play, the hero" (Cole 2011, 243) –, Moji's narration then forms a counter-discourse, created by her own *parrēsiastic* act, to Julius's narrative of the heroic subject. This act forms an example of truth-speaking in which the subject puts herself into a relation with the truth and where the presence of her subjectivity thus unmasks the impossibility of the objectivity of the discourse of power.

Whether Moji's *parrēsia* actually becomes such a counter-discourse or whether it is canceled out and not believed, then depends on the reader and their evaluation of her narration. Readers who, in Foucault's sense, set themselves in a relationship towards the truth and therefore take the possibility into account that Julius might be an unreliable narrator would – in a retrospective reassessment of the narrative (see Clark 2018, 183) – start to examine the story for factual evidence and might discover Julius's particular art of 'framing' his story and using his discursive power for his own means. Moji's act of *parrēsia* therefore can start an analysis of the workings of power within the discourse of the narrative text itself on behalf of the reader. In other words: the work that

the reader might end up doing is basically the work of critique as suggested by Michel Foucault:

> The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them *[de leur franchissement possible]*. (Foucault 2000, 319)

Here, the philosophy Foucault envisions focuses on the uncovering of discourses and the workings of power that structure our systems of knowledge. Simultaneously such a philosophy should reflect on the ways by which we may escape the limits that those systems impose.

Similarly, in *Open City*, the reader's investigation of Julius as a possibly unreliable narrator unmasks the workings of power in the novel and at the same time makes visible the limits of knowledge and truth within the narrative. Those limits can be found in the opacity of narrative itself, which is powerfully represented not only by the narrative gaps that Julius creates and that can never satisfactorily be filled by the readers but also by his subtle framing of everything he recounts throughout the text. Even more, this opacity of narrative in general, which represents the limits of what can be known by individuals, is illustrative of the workings of discursive power itself. Hence, the novel problematizes our norms of truth production by pointing out the limits of the ideal of objectivization while emphasizing the participation of power in any subjectivization of discourse. This function ties in with what Foucault, referring to the philosophical performances of the Cynics, describes as philosophical *parrēsia* and which, according to him, constitutes the root of "the critical tradition of philosophy in our society" (Foucault 2019, 224).[14] As the various examples that Foucault names prove, the Cynics' performances in no way included only truthful speech, although the questions that they brought up might indeed be considered 'truthful' in the sense that they critiqued existing social norms. This is also the case with the narrator's unreliability in *Open City*: the novel uses the narrator's performance of untruthfulness to inquire into the very notion of truth and its interrelation with discursive power. *Open City*

[14] For the Cynics, philosophy becomes a way of life and is to be understood as a "visible performance of truth" (Schmid 2000, 276). The questioning of norms is directly translated into the individual life and thus forms a 'style of existence.' While the probably most famous example of Diogenes living in a barrel reduces life to its bare needs and so questions societal norms of what could be considered a necessity in life, Foucault also mentions examples that are strikingly reminiscent of contemporary political performance art, as e.g. an instance in which Diogenes presents a horse with a laurel wreath during the Olympics for a fight it won against another horse and hence problematizes the norms according to which athletes are rewarded a price after winning a competition (Foucault 2019, 171–2).

also demonstrates how this interrelation can be problematized through acts of *parrēsiastic* narration. Similar to the Cynics' performances, the narrative that "nothing affirms," because it is fictional, might then not lie, but rather speak a truth by means of being untruthful.

Works Cited

Benjamin, Walter (1999) *The Arcades Project.* Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.

Clark, Rebecca (2018) "'Visible Only in Speech': Peripatetic Parasitism, or, Becoming Bedbugs in *Open City*." *Narrative* 26.2: 181–200.

Cole, Teju (2011) *Open City*. London: Faber and Faber.

Flynn, Thomas (1987) "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at the Collège de France (1984)." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 12.2-3: 213–229.

Foucault, Michel (1980) "Truth and Power." *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977.* Ed. Colin Gordon. Trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper. New York: Pantheon. 109–133.

Foucault, Michel (1991) "Questions of Method." *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault.* Ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press. 73–86.

Foucault, Michel (1992) *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality.* Vol. 2. Trans. Robert Hurley. London: Penguin.

Foucault, Michel (2000) *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth.* Ed. Paul Rabinow. Trans. Robert Hurley et al. London: Penguin.

Foucault, Michel (2019) *Discourse and Truth & Parrēsia*. Ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini. Trans. Nancy Luxon. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press.

Gros, Frédéric (2019) "Introduction." In: Foucault (2019) *Discourse and Truth & Parrēsia.* Ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini. Trans. Nancy Luxon. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press. xiii-xx.

Hallemeier, Katherine (2014) "Literary Cosmopolitanisms in Teju Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City.*" *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 44.2–3: 239–250.

Hartwiger, Alexander Greer (2016) "The Postcolonial Flâneur: *Open City* and the Urban Palimpsest." *Postcolonial Text* 11.1: 1–17.

Lamarque, Peter (2014) *The Opacity of Narrative.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Li, Stephanie (2018) *Pan-African American Literature: Signifyin(g) Immigrants in the Twenty-First Century.* New Brunswick: Rutgers.

Mahon, James Edwin (2008) "Two Definitions of Lying." *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22.2: 211–230.

Mahon, James Edwin (2016) "The Definition of Lying and Deception." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* Ed. Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/lying-definition/ (accessed 31/01/2020).

Miller, Stephen (2015) *Walking New York: Reflections of American Writers from Walt Whitman to Teju Cole.* New York: Fordham.

Phelan, James (2005) *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.

Rippl, Gabriele (2018) "The Cultural Work of Ekphrasis in Contemporary Anglophone Transcultural Novels." *Poetics Today* 39.2: 265–285.

Ruoff, Michael (2018) *Foucault-Lexikon: Entwicklung, Kernbegriffe, Zusammenhänge.* 4th ed. Paderborn: Fink.

Schmid, Wilhelm (2000) *Auf der Suche nach einer neuen Lebenskunst: Die Frage nach dem Grund und die Neubegründng der Ethik bei Foucault.* Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Sidney, Philip (2012) *The Defense of Poesy*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. 9th ed. Vol. B. New York: Norton. 1044–1083.

Steckenbiller, Christiane (2018) "Diasporic Ways of Knowing: Teju Cole's *Open City*." *New Directions in Diaspora Studies: Cultural and Literary Approaches*. Ed. Sarah Ilott, Ana Cristina Mendes and Lucinda Newns. London: Rowman & Littlefield. 71–85.

Vermeulen, Pieter (2013) "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism." *Journal of Modern Literature* 37.1: 40–57.

Vermeulen, Pieter (2015) *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Waldow, Stephanie (2013) *Schreiben als Begegnung mit dem Anderen: Zum Verhältnis von Ethik und Narration in philosophischen und literarischen Texten der Gegenwart.* Munich: Fink.