



## Journal of Contemporary Narrative Therapy

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### Editor's Note

This release is novel in that for the first time it is a collection of papers from a specific agency—the Calgary Narrative Collective. The Calgary Narrative Collective is a proudly feminist and Narrative informed not-for-profit counselling agency with a flexible sliding scale to accommodate as many as possible. The team consists of several regular therapists as well as students and interns who are present throughout the year. The Collective is an active teaching and training agency. The entire team meets weekly for supervision that is based on the therapists' transcripts of their sessions with clients.

I first met the Collective when they sponsored the first annual Contemporary Narrative Therapy conference March of 2018 and subsequently returned to present 4-day long Intensives in collaboration with them in September 2019 and again in February 2020. While I was there, I had the opportunity to see work of the Collective firsthand and to participate in one of their one of a kind supervision meetings. I was enthralled! What caught my attention about the Collective was both their creativity and joy for embracing unorthodox thinking.

We decided to dedicate this entire specific special release to allow for as comprehensive a representation as possible of the activities of such an agency. And as well, we are including papers or contributions to papers from both therapists and students at the CNC.

Reading and reviewing these papers, I want to commend them to your interest for two reasons. Firstly, the agency has committed itself to what might be referred to as a 'poetics of practice,' unlike any other agency of which I am aware, requiring poetic responses to sessions. And secondly, to use the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt's, term they have "defrosted" some matters of orthodoxy regarding poetry in narrative therapy that have been 'frozen' for some time, what Arendt refers to as "unexamined prejudgments." 'Rescued speech' poetry has been commonplace in narrative therapy practice for almost 20 years now. But for some reason, the requirement that such documents must exclusively be the words of the client have seriously circumscribed its utilisation and the practice has understandably waned over the years. I can think of only a few published examples in the last 5 or so years. As well, such a restriction concealed the fact that many such rescued words were evoked in response to poetic questions and as such are not the sole property of the client but might be considered the sole property of the therapeutic conversation. I commend Sanni Paljakka for her innovative and important revitalisation of the poetic in narrative practice. For those interested please see her paper entitled, "A House of Good Words: A prologue to the practice of writing poems as therapeutic documents" in this journal.

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Calgary Narrative Collective Special Release



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In my Introduction to White (2011), “Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversations,” I mentioned ‘Poetics Alongside Politics’ (see p. xxv-xxvii):

“These papers direct our attention to the politics and ethics, but you (I am addressing Michael here) rarely commented on what I am calling the poetics of either your practice or your thinking in general. Perhaps for you, it was so taken for granted that it was just beside the point or tacit and beyond your own telling. Any who watched a videotape, read a text of yours, or heard you speak couldn’t help but marvel at the eloquence of your thought’ .....it was here in the enchanting externalising conversations with young people that I first marvelled at your genius with your vocabularies. It was rare for you to say much that you hadn’t invented.....If we are to engage with the significance of poetics in narrative practice, I suspect we would have to trouble ourselves and read beyond our disciplines. Why do I believe this would be worth doing? Because, Michael, it is of concern to all of us- and one which will delight us as well- to consider the language by which you brought the world of your reimagined social imaginary in to view. This would cause us to reconsider externalizing conversations and perhaps make more of them than we have done so far.

In the Language of Inquiry (2000), Lynn Hejinian wrote: “It is at least in part for this reason that poetry has the capacity for poetics, for self-reflexivity, for speaking about itself; it is by virtue of this that poetry can turn language upon itself and thus exceed its own limits. Poetics as well as narrative renders language a medium for experiencing experience. You and those who consulted you seemed provisioned to ‘think otherwise’- to go beyond the linguistic limits that had previously circumscribed them” (p. 1).

In my introduction, I quoted marcela polanco writing about her experience of translating Michael and myself in to her Colombian Spanish:

I found a poetic resonance. It is not a language that tells about a lived experience; rather it is a language that once again brings the lived experience to life. It is like a living vocabulary. Life is happening in the vocabularies, not besides them or prior to them. When I was translating a story, I was living it. The idea of time that says that this story happened before and is now being told was irrelevant (p. xxxii).

Reading some of the both enthralling and enchanting poems and therapeutic conversations and their consequences has made me rethink this matter given the Collective’s avowed intentions to poeticise their practice. And as a consequence, I starting re-reading one of my favourite books- Holland et al, (1998), “Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds” (1998) and her appeal to the theorising of Mikhail Bahktin regarding linguistic limits and her notion of the ‘space of authoring’ (compare Bahktin’s ‘authorial stance’ or ‘authoring selves).”

I am going to quote at some length from Bahktin regarding what he refers to as “one’s own word.”





“Internally persuasive discourse- as opposed to one that is externally authoritative-is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with “one’s own word”. In everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organises masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enter into inter animating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a ‘struggle’ with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values. The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogue it, this discourse is able to reveal even new ways to mean. (Bakhtin, M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin Ed. M. E. Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, p. 345-346).

What does he mean by “this discourse is able to reveal new ways to mean”? Holland suggests he means “no longer giving over to a voice of authority but as a person who begins to rearrange, reword, rephrase, reorchestrate different voices and by this process develops her now ‘authorial stance” (Holland, p. 183).

Again, in Bahktin’s words:

“The process-experimenting by turning persuasive discourse into speaking persons-becomes especially important in those cases where a struggle against such images has already begun, where someone is striving to liberate himself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification, or is striving to expose the limitations of both image and discourse. The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual’s coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, alt ought born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse” (Bahktin, M., 1981, p. 381).

This has me re-thinking an ‘externalising conversation’ as an ‘anti-language and the contribution that makes to the problematisation of the ‘problem’...how it could be spoken about in novel terms or ‘in one’s own word’ although admittedly those ‘words’ emerged in and out of a therapeutic conversation. And as well has me propose why the Collective’s frank poeticisation of their practice might be so formidable and to quote from above “will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse”.

Reading these papers has had me consider some questions: 1) does a novel ‘reading’ of experience require novel forms of expression of them to do so? 2) “Poetry doesn’t mean florid,





extraneous or obscure. It gives people a sense of their separate existence...” (Lewis, R., Poetic Injustice, The Oldie, Oct. 2020, p. 31), and 3) are such vocabularies prerequisite for what Cheryl Mattingly has recently referred to as “the responsive and experimental narrative self”, “self-making as a kind of moral experiment in perceiving and attempt to realize any ‘best good’”(Mattingly, C. Ethics, Immanent Transcendence and the Experimental Narrative Self, in Moral Engines, Mattingly, C., Drying, R, Louw, M and Schwarz, T. (Eds) Exploring the Ethical Drives in Moral Life, 2017, Oxford, UK; Bergahn Books.)

It is my hope that others will follow the example of the Collective in an effort to poeticize their practice with the same spirit of joy and enthusiasm that I have been so fortunate to witness time and again when in their presence.

