



Toward an Epistemology of Equity: The Fair Trade of Narrative Minds Across Boundaries of Language By David Epston

It is a particular honour to address you from so far away on the occasion of the third Francophone conference. And I thank Pierre for translating my letter to you on my behalf. To redeem such an honour has meant many of my days have been occupied thinking about what I might say and as a consequence many of my nights have been both dreamless and sleepless. I am told that in a TED Talk, you are advised to talk about one matter only. If that be so, I warn you that this is not a TED Talk. In fact, I want you to know ahead of time that I worry that I am trying to cover too much ground in this letter to you. For that reason, I have requested the conference organizers email a copy of this address to you to read at your convenience. I hope this will allow you to relax and just take in what is comfortable for you.

First I wanted to tell you two stories to set the scene for what follows:

I cherish a memory of a revelation I had when I was 17 years old. I remember it so keenly that when I do, it seems I am reliving it. My secondary school examinations were just around the corner. I had never studied quite so diligently before. Which university you were eligible for depended on your marks. I am sure that had a lot to do with it.

I had taken French for five years and Latin for four years in secondary school. I took considerable pleasure translating either of them into English. I found it beguiling. I recall a momentous occasion translating a short story by Guy de Maupassant when I found myself, to my surprise, shouting aloud: "You have a French mind! You have a French mind!" There was no one I could confide this in whom I thought might understand what I could possibly have meant by this. I worried that my parents would have been concerned for my mental status going around shouting aloud. And it only dawned on me sometime later what it meant and the significance of what had been revealed to me.

Only a few weeks later, while translating Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars* from Latin to English, I had a similar revelation and once again believed myself to have a Latin mind as well. I now considered myself to be in possession of 'three minds' but wisely again I kept this to myself. But from then on I believed that languages, each of which was of course a culture encoded in words, had 'a mind of its own'.

With being somewhat better read, I can support my conclusion reached in my youthful enthusiasm. The French philosopher of the imagination, Bachelard wrote: "At times our words think for us" (1994, p.xxxix). Or the Romanian-born French philosopher, Emie Cioran (1987):



“On n’habite pay un pays, on habite un langue” (We do not live in a country, we inhabit a language).

One of my life’s regrets is that I was never able to become truly bilingual. It was only as a ‘travelling companion’ on an intellectual and political journey my colleague and friend, marcela polanco, took ‘translating’ Michael’s *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007) into her Colombian Spanish that I have been able to somewhat alleviate this regret. Late last year, I embarked on a very similar journey but very different terrain with Sumie Ishikawa undertaking what we refer to as ‘Japan-esting’ narrative therapy in Japan. She and her colleagues are translating *Narrative Therapy in Wonderland: Connecting with Children’s Imaginative Know-How* (2016) that I co-authored with David Marsten and Laurie Markham. I will have more to say about these matters later.

Here is another tale at variance to the above. At a recent social occasion, I was introduced to the niece of friends who had just returned from the United States where she had attended Hamburger University, where she completed a bachelor’s degree in Hamburgerology. Don’t laugh! There is a Hamburger University offering degrees in Hamburgerology. Reading their prospectus on line, I learned that Hamburger University was established in 1961 and is located at Oak Brook, Illinois, near Chicago by McDonald’s to instruct their employees in the various aspects of restaurant management. To date, it has graduated more than 80,000 students; 7500 students attend each year. It has the capacity to teach in 28 languages and now has campuses all around the world.

I was intrigued as I suspect you would have been to learn of their pedagogy. For example, what did they teach and how was it assessed? She told me that, what I suppose is the equivalent of a dissertation, was the following: she had to provide instruction to would-be employees on how to make a Macburger, so that a Shanghai Macburger was absolutely identical to one made in New York; a Macburger in Mumbai was absolutely identical to one made in Berlin. And if she faltered or had not memorized her script word-for-word, she would have been failed. I am glad to report she passed with flying colours and now has a McDonald’s franchise here in New Zealand.

To my way of thinking, these are the two extremes of what I am going to call ‘translation’ in the widest sense of the word – one which currently goes by the term ‘global’ and the other which has concerns for ‘the local and particular’ which narrative therapy also endorses.

Let me tell you how I began this journey with marcela polanco. I had organized a conference in Havana, Cuba in 2007 with the help of others after I had been invited by the Cuban psychiatric and social work associations to present narrative therapy there. I refused to do so until we worked out an agreement that they would teach their visitors, 200 of us, and we would teach our hosts, 200 of them, for 3 days and then for the 2 days that remained, we would join one another in bilingual workshops. There was intentionally an ‘epistemology of equity’ – or to use



polanco's metaphor – 'fair trade'. We would trade one another. The conference was called: 'The Spirit of Community in Narrative Therapy and Cuban Social Programs'. But it wasn't so much a conference but a place where two community and healing practices met one another. Many on both sides – visitors and hosts – told me it was the best 'conference' they had ever attended. I certainly felt the same way.

At that time, marcela, who had migrated from Colombia to United States some ten years before amidst a 50 year long civil war, was enrolled in a PhD program in family therapy at Nova Southeastern University in Florida. She was studying narrative therapy in her PhD programme, of course in English, and now was a teaching assistant, once again of course in English. She was particularly looking forward to attending a workshop on narrative therapy presented by Marta Campillo, a professor in a Mexican university, the first one she had ever attended in Spanish, her mother tongue. Afterwards, I accidentally came up behind her and overheard her telling Marta with considerable shame that she had been unable to understand a word of narrative therapy in Spanish and that somehow or other, she felt she had betrayed her mother tongue that had been passed down to her by her mother, father, family, community, culture and country. She was wondering how this had come about when she realized I, quite unintentionally, had overheard her. She blushed with mortification. Somehow or other, we both then pretended as if nothing had happened and quickly changed the subject to an unrelated matter.

However, I could not get this matter out of my mind. I had no idea you could know narrative therapy in your second language but find it unintelligible when translated into your mother tongue. Although I was an ignorant monolingual, luckily, I was reminded of my revelation from when I was 17 that each language had a 'mind of its own'. I had a sleepless night pondering this.

The next day, I enthusiastically approached marcela with a tentative proposal for a topic for her doctoral thesis. I suggested that "given that you know narrative therapy in English but not in Spanish, would you consider that your English-speaking marcela might watch as your Spanish-speaking marcela learns narrative therapy and write this up?" She was intrigued by such a prospect and decided to do so by translating Michael's 2007 *Maps of Narrative Practice* into Spanish. You might have thought that for a bilingual with post graduate degrees from both Colombia and United States that this would have been a very easy PhD.

Not so. In fact, her thesis turned out to be 581 pages long, without intending to do so, ended up writing three intimately linked versions within it. When Michael White learned that she intended to translate '*Maps*' while she was studying with him in Adelaide in 2008, he asked her out to dinner to discuss this. Marcela recalls asking Michael: "What are your hopes for my translation of '*Maps*' into Spanish?" She recalls his reply as: "My only hope is that the spirit of the practice remains". Marcela then went on to ask him his opinion of whether she should use the familiar or formal terms of address and he looked at her kindly saying: "This is something



only you can decide. I am not a Spanish speaker, nor know nothing of your culture and politics". Marcela admitted to me recently that she felt embarrassed by this query. However, this emboldened her to proceed with considerable zeal and 18 hour long study days which believe it or not, she told me were some of the best times of her life.

She speaks of her first attempt in the following ways:

"I was doing a domesticating translation, which was literal, concerned for fidelity and to remain pure to Michael's original text. I consumed '*Maps*' like a McDonald's burger. I was dismayed to realize that I was engaging in the 'Whitening of my identity' without any reference to the geopolitics of knowledge and political disparities'. I am a Mestiza woman...Spanish, African, the Indigenous musica and Jewish blood runs in my veins. Should I deny this to myself and my readers? Had I inadvertently colonized myself?"

Let me briefly introduce you to translation theory and the two basic translation strategies it proposes: domestication and foreignization.

Since the 1970s, these two strategies have been engaged in a cultural and political dispute – and I mean dispute – as well as a linguistic one. A domesticating translation means erasing and then replacing the language being translated by the language that does the translation; what marcela came to refer to as a 'colonizing translation'. A foreignizing translation preserves the difference of the language under translation and requires the reader to 'go abroad'. What marcela called a 'decolonizing translation'. Lawrence Venuti is the foremost advocate of translation by foreignization, believing there is what he refers to as "violence" residing in the very purpose and activity of a domesticating translation. He holds that domestication involves "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to Anglo-American cultural values". On the other hand, he strongly argues that foreignization can be expected to "resist ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism" (Venuti, 2010, p.78).

Marcela then turned to a foreignizing translation. This is how she describes her second version of '*Maps*':

"The politics and ethics of narrative therapy were so familiar to me that when I first learned about it, it went right to my heart. I now decided that I should retain the integrity of its practice but not be colonized by it. I retranslated '*Maps*' in terms of my country, culture and language. I did so by turning to the literatures and stories of Colombia and Latin America and its social and political histories. For some time, I put narrative knowledge on hold and then returned to it later. I searched for Latin American knowledges that resembled the sources that Michael and David had sought out. And without much difficulty found them".



“My third translation was what Clive Scott refers to as a “co-authoring translation” and what I have come to call ‘fair trade’. I have a utopian vision of narrative therapy in Latin America where the knowledges and histories implicit in Spanish and English meet at the border between them and where both are considered to have legitimate contributions to make. Where there is “an epistemology of equity”. Here a fair encounter takes place in which the authority of each is challenged and something new can come about, though familiar to both”.

How does marcela intend to go about this? I will have more to say about that before the end of my address.

Before I do, I wanted to quote from Travis Heath, a colleague in Denver, Colorado about a meeting we had in 2015. My so-called travels with marcela polanco and that meeting with Travis made me wish to address you here today.

There had been a lot of buzz at conferences in Adelaide and Vancouver about this very robust, charismatic brown guy in his early 30s with dreadlocks whose presentations were thrilling those who attended them. When I realized I might hear him speak in the 2015 conference in Vancouver, I jumped at the opportunity to attend. He spoke about ‘Ray’, a 24 year old African-American man on probation for a crime of violence. Ray had told him:

“There are a lot of people in the world who don’t have a voice. And by voice I mean, you know, we all have a voice box that works. What I mean when I say voice is a voice that others can hear and really listen to. My whole life I have never really had that voice because I am poor and black....except when I rap. This is true you know for the whole crew in my neighbourhood too. Rap is our voice”.

This is what he told a recent audience at a workshop marcela, Travis and I gave in his home town of Denver:

“Just then, I looked to my right to see the eyes of my colleague and co-presenter Paulo Arroyo. It was as if he had just seen a UFO, an unidentified flying object. He nodded his head to the left indicating that I move my glance in that direction. As I looked into the second row there was David Epston just getting comfortable in his seat. I had the reaction that any seasoned presenter would have... “Oh, shit!”

While my presentation was about the work Paulo and I had been doing with hip-hop and rap music with young African-American and Latino men in probation, the first 30 minutes was a history lesson for those who might not be very familiar with narrative therapy. I made a quick calculation in my head and determined that I was prepared to reference David and/or Michael White’s work directly at least eight times. Usually when you are presenting



the history of a therapeutic approach, the co-founder isn't sitting in the second row!! Oh dear! Given that the proceedings were about to begin, I bit my lip, put both feet firmly on the ground, and pushed off into the great abyss. Within the first 10 minutes of the presentation I sneaked a look – *or 10* – at David trying to gauge what he might be thinking. I saw him smile and nod. This was enough for me. At least I hadn't made a fool of myself, or if I did, he wasn't going to let anyone know it. Paulo and I made it to the end of the presentation. I exhaled deeply with a sense of relief due to the fact that it was over. I quickly made my way to the exit.

Later that night, all of the conference presenters were invited to meet together over dinner. As I was standing and talking to Paulo, David approached us. Uh oh! The moment of truth. I pondered finding a way to make my exit, but I was blocked in on all sides. Any attempts to flee would prove clunky and likely futile.

"I enjoyed learning about your work," David said. "Really well done. Would it be alright if I asked just one question?"

I nodded my assent.

"Why are you asking Australian and New Zealand questions?"

A little bit confused, my face begged for a more in depth explanation.

"What if you let hip-hop ask the questions?" David queried.

Just then, it hit me what was transpiring. Here was the person who helped create this thing called narrative therapy, and he was inviting me to do things not the way he had done them, but rather, the way that best fit the work Paulo and I were doing.

Still a bit stunned by his question, David followed up: "Would you like my permission for you to rap?"

I looked at Paulo and we nodded affirmatively in unison.

"Well, you have my permission," he said with a warm smile. It's a smile I will remember until my dying day".

Why had Travis erased his own culture, language and replaced it with a version that you might expect in Adelaide and Auckland? Had narrative therapy, against its will and unwittingly, become a colonizer of others? Perhaps it had despite its best intentions.



Let me tell you how marcela and I went about foreignizing Michael's *'Maps'* in the first instance and then establishing the grounds for a 'fair trade'. We hit upon a fanciful notion to assist us here. I suspect there are other ways but this served our purposes wonderfully well. We imagined something that was contrary to fact. As you well know, narrative therapy was 'born and bred' in Australia and New Zealand, and within Anglo-American culture at large.

We set off together on our 'travels' in Latin American literature, politics and cultures by imagining that narrative therapy was in fact born and bred in Latin America. And if this was so, we asked ourselves what would have been its Latin American sources? And we then began, like explorers travelling up river against the river's flow perhaps hundreds of miles inland until we found its source or sources. We would 'trace' every aspect of narrative therapy that seemed distinctive to either or both of us and find a Latin American source. Sumie Ishikawa refers to this as 'cultural precedents' in Japanese culture/language/literature for narrative therapy. And as marcela mentioned, this was far easier to do than either of us had expected. I was encouraged to rethink my New Zealand narrative therapy while marcela was required to rethink her United States-informed narrative therapy. In some ways, we ended up with more narrative therapies than we so far know what to do with. But let me tell you how wonderful it is to revel in variant versions of something you have come to love and the creativity that comes in to play here.

Like marcela, those of you who have no particular allegiance to Anglo-American English and culture, let me remind you of some of narrative therapy's longest standing commitments. First and foremost, it has never sought any sort of professional monopoly over knowledge or global or universal 'truth' for which it can claim ownership; in fact, I argue that the reverse is the case. It has retained a humility and concentrated its efforts in what Foucault called 'the return(s) of knowledge'. Narrative therapy acknowledged 'local' knowledges and in fact, one of the practices that I am proudest of – and perhaps requires the greatest skill – is that which elevates the knowing of the other, rather than elevating professional knowledges. It is narrative therapy that considers what it refers to as 'insider knowledges' as equivalent to 'outsider or professional knowledges'. Michael and I took up where the philosopher (and your countryman), Michel Foucault left off when he referred to "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges..."

He wrote:

"When I say subjugated knowledges, I am referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges, naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges that are below the required level of erudition of scientificity...and it is thanks to the reappearance of these knowledges from below...a knowledge that is local, regional, differential, incapable of unanimity, and which derives power solely from the fact that it is different from the knowledge that surrounds it. It is the reappearance of what people know at a local level, of



these disqualified knowledges, that make critique possible". (Foucault, 2003, pp. 7-8)

Narrative therapy, obviously, owes a considerable debt to French philosophy and sociology. No one can argue about that. A re-imagined narrative therapy could as well be again refurbished by a Francophone re-creation of narrative therapy. What Marcela has referred to as 'fair trade', an exchange which does not in any way privilege Anglo-American English over any other language or culture. And surely no other language takes more pride in itself and its integrity than French. Surely French literature has something to say to us in addition to philosophy. I was rereading recently the preface by Priscilla Pankhurst Ferguson, the translator into English of Bourdieu et al.'s *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (*La Misère du monde*), "I decided to favor the Frenchness of the text" (1993, p.viii). I am not suggesting here a 'Frenchness' of narrative therapy but rather something far more than that. Pierre and I came up with the 'French-ifying' of narrative therapy to imply your co-authorship of a veritable Francophone narrative therapy that distinguishes itself as French.

In 2011, I wrote in my introduction to Michael's posthumous *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversation*:

"Michael, I am off another tangent here but I have been meaning to tell you that I have become interested in bilinguality and the politics of translation. I know whenever we talked about our books being translated into other languages, we would first marvel at the wonder of it but then we would speak more soberly about our concerns around the export of knowledge. Would narrative therapy turn out to be like any other global brand? Or was it possible to 'acculturate' narrative therapy practice to the culture, politics and material circumstances of its recipients? If so, would these 'border crossings' lead to mutation, if not transmogrification? By the way, transmogrification means to transform in a magical and surprising way. And could that be one of the means by which narrative therapy continually renew itself?" ([Available to read here](#))

I remain convinced of this watching over the shoulders of Marcela Polanco in South America and more recently of Sumie Ishikawa as she 'Japan-eses' narrative therapy in Japan'. (See *Journal of Narrative Family Therapy*, Release 3, [Available to read here](#))

At some point you may have to go away as far as you must, please return as far as you can; and we will meet you there. Where exactly am I referring to? What Marcela refers to as the borderlands where neither language nor culture reigns over the other. It is between languages where the play of creativity resides. It is here that what David Denborough has referred to as "inter-cultural invention" will take place. Marcela and I believe that such encounters of 'fair trade' in such borderlands will be one of the ways narrative therapy will be re-imagined. In such a 're-imagination' you may very well re-invent narrative therapy as you take it 'home' to your



culture and language, and I 're-create' it and bring it 'back home' in English to Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

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