

# Narrative Poetics of Resistance: Towards An Aesthetics of Engagement

By Colin James Sanders

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door

Colin James Sanders

geboren op 5 mei 1954 te Winnipeg, Canada

Promotores: prof. dr. Sheila McNamee

prof. dr. John B. Rijsman

Overige leden van de promotiecommissie:

prof. dr. H. Anderson

prof. dr. J. Chang

dr. J. Goedee

dr. O. Ness

## Abstract

My dissertation describes the multiple philosophical, theological and theoretical influences, relationships, and enchantments which ultimately inspired the co-creation of innovative, non-traditional, practices within a residential program for young persons' struggling with substance use dilemmas in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, known as Peak House. These influences, relationships and enchantments additionally, over the course of about forty-five years, generalize and migrate into all of my therapeutic and pedagogical, collaborative and relational practices.

Over time, I came to refer to my practice as a *poetics of resistance* (Sanders, 1999, 2007) and have referred to the overall aesthetics of such a practice as being a *narrative poetics*, largely in recognition of the considerable influence of ideas flowing from Michael White and David Epston, beginning with their first publications (White & Epston, 1989, 1990), and continuing to this day.

*Keywords:* Harlene Anderson; Gregory Bateson; David Epston; Michel Foucault; Emmanuel Levinas; Sheila McNamee; Michael White; narrative therapy, collaborative practices; relational practices; youth residential substance use programs; narrative poetics; poetics of resistance; social construction; the sacred; social justice.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated first of all to Gail Marie Boivin, for love. We have been together almost 25 years, rocking and rolling, dancing to the Grateful Dead, travelling and exploring the world, two beings together. I very much admire and appreciate your intuition and insight, your clarity, patience and commitment. As Neil Young sings, “when you dance, I can really love”! Now that the dissertation is completed we can go to the beach!

To my mother, Noreen Shirley Farrell, and father, Ronald John, “Rocky”, Sanders, (1931-2002) for immense love and early encouragement to think critically, resist oppression, and revel in Irish music, poetry and literature, and to celebrate and honour family, regardless of differences.

To my siblings, Liam, Fiona, Sheila, Maura, Kieran (d. 2004), Ian, Kevin and Shauna, for all we have come through and continue to overcome, over all the years

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In memory of dear, departed comrades, Bill Hansen, David Moir, Garth Thomson, and my brother, Kieran Gerard Sanders.

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## INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVE POETICS OF RESISTANCE

*Je est un autre ...* (I is another) – Arthur Rimbaud.

*Poetry celebrates that the world exists; philosophy asks why the world exists.*

Stanislas Breton (1995, p. 257).

### **Intentions in writing this dissertation**

A primary thread woven throughout my dissertation involves an engagement with narrative imagination, an idea that, as Bateson (1972) noted, was brought forward by visionary poet William Blake, eventually migrating into the narrative therapy ideas and practices co-created by Michael White and David Epston (White & Epston, 1990), and others (Sanders, 1995a). As theologian Stanislas Breton remarked in conversation with Irish philosopher Richard Kearney (1995), "...a poetics of imagination is an indispensable dimension of genuine thinking" (p. 248). Breton (1995) continues, drawing attention to the influence of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his own thinking, proposing that Levinas brought into play a "...language of relations..." (p. 248), a proposal I return to in Chapter Six of my dissertation.

Another thread woven throughout my dissertation describes ideas and concepts espoused by a community of thinkers and practitioners often associated with collaborative, social constructionist, narrative, and social justice theory within the domain of therapeutic practice (Andersen, 1996; Anderson, 2012; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Bateson, 1973, 1979; Bateson & Bateson, 1988; Gergen, 2009; Lock & Strong, 2010; Maturana, 1988; McNamee & Gergen, 1992; Shotter, 2010; Waldegrave, 1990; Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 2003; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990).

One intention in composing this particular dissertation is certainly to situate those persons whose thinking, writing, and practice have most influenced me, and whose concepts, ideas, philosophies and practices inform my own *praxis*, as described especially within Chapter Two and in Chapter Six.

Another intention relating to my dissertation is to underscore the inter-connections and convergences existing between concepts, ideas and practices affiliated with various theoretical perspectives. Especially in academic writing, I often find making these inter-connections is paid less attention than trying to highlight differences and distinctions between perspectives. My interest is with the aesthetics of how we choose to engage with others in the practices of therapy, education, and also in community development work (Sanders, 2010, 2012).

Chapter Seven illustrates a narrative poetics of resistance (Sanders, 1999, 2007) in practice, as exemplified by the work I initiated in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, at a residential program for 13-18 years old who were struggling with substance use, called Peak House.

## Praxis

My dissertation is not intended to be merely an academic representation of theoretical ideas and concepts, although a considerable amount of literature is described. To reiterate, one practical intention in writing this dissertation is to describe and delineate certain theoretical ideas and concepts, and, using the illustration of Peak House, point out the ways in which a narrative poetics, and a poetics of resistance, can be applied in creative, practical, efficient, and beneficial ways.

I believe that describing the evolution of Peak House in its shift away from what I considered to be pathologizing practices to a more collaborative, non-pathologizing program, may provide hope to others working within normative, prescriptive, institutional structures. Over the years, many people have asked how I was able to transform Peak House from a 12 Step program into a collaborative, narrative informed, and social justice focused program. I generally respond that in order for this transformation to occur, appreciative leadership (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom & Rader, 2010) was necessary, commitment to the evolving vision, along with patience and compassion. Unfortunately, I have encountered too many practitioners who, at times, have experienced despair at ever co-creating alternatives to pathologizing, normative, prescriptive ways of engaging with others within agencies, programs, and institutions.

Again, most unfortunately, many of these practitioners become captured by cynicism and sarcasm in their work, increasingly disenchanted with their work, and affect qualities that often lead to negativity and restraint amongst relationships with colleagues. The literature on such experiences is often known by the misnomer, “burnout”, though there are alternative ways of understanding these experiences, and alternative ways of contending with systemic and structural intransigence and restraint (cf. McNamee, 1996a; Fruggeri & McNamee, 1991; Reynolds, 2010).

At the outset, I would add the *proviso* that the program we co-evolved at Peak House does not represent *the* true or only way to construct a residential program for young person’s struggling with substance use, but stands as an illustration and example of what is possible and representative of an alternative to traditional, normative, and prescriptive residential communities.

### Theoretical Promiscuity

To reiterate, it remains my hope that others reading this work, especially perhaps graduate level students, may become more informed of the threads of connection across theories, and the shared attention paid to practice, especially between narrative, social constructionist, and collaborative therapy practices<sup>1</sup>. Here I am appreciative of McNamee’s (2004, 2012) invitation to explore “promiscuity” within and between theoretical perspectives. McNamee (2004) explains what she intends by use of the word promiscuity in this way,

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<sup>1</sup> For dialogues highlighting convergences amongst theoretical perspectives in the domain of therapy, see the conversations between Tom Andersen, Harlene Anderson and Michael White (in, Malinen, Cooper & Thomas, 2012).

In this article I would like to propose what I consider to be a more promiscuous attitude for family therapy in an attempt to generate inclusiveness in our theory and practice. I am purposively using the term *promiscuous* here to underscore the ease with which a dominant discourse can eclipse a richly descriptive term and render it one-dimensional.

In the present case, promiscuous simply refers to the act of mixing up. However, culturally, we have come to understand promiscuous as associated with immoral sexuality, seediness and unseemliness. By electing to use such a morally charged term in its original form (i.e., in reference to mixing), I hope to symbolically summarize my argument: dialogue requires us to be present in the moment, thereby opening up the space for the generative use of a wide array of methods and models in family therapy. (p. 224)

By intentionally using the word promiscuity, McNamee (2012) explains,

I would like to propose that we become promiscuous in our practice and in our theorizing and beware of our tendencies toward purity. I think this goal can help us focus on relational innovation by creating inclusiveness in theory and practice. When I speak of inclusion, I am speaking from the stance of social construction where the coordination of multiple voices, multiple modes of practice, and multiple worldviews is embraced.

McNamee (2004) further suggests that, “Promiscuity might well be described as *intellectual poaching* to the extent that we might employ accepted ideas and techniques in new ways, therefore ‘borrowing’ them from their original context” (p. 225). This concept very much approximates my own approach, as I have been reading/writing across disciplines for a long while now.

In making such a proposal, McNamee (2012) is not positioning herself as being nihilistic going on to write, “...this is not an ‘anything goes’ stance. The ethics of relational practice require that we both acknowledge multiplicity and recognize that not all voices, not all therapeutic resources have the same effects”.

Regarding the ethics of a poststructuralist practice, McNamee’s position is shared by one of the co-founders of narrative therapy, the late Michael White (2000), who believed that narrative therapy was not a therapy in which anything goes; rather, for White, nothing goes in narrative therapy without being questioned and critiqued (p. 114).

Others who have identified themselves as being a part of the discursive community adhering to a social constructionist<sup>2</sup> perspective on the co-creation of shared knowledge, notably Kenneth Gergen and Dian Marie Hosking (2007), also note that:

...the critique that ‘anything goes’ suggests that social constructionism has foolishly rejected ‘external reality’ as a real-world source of constraints. But, in my view, the social constructionist orientation ‘emphasizes the historical-cultural rather than the natural-scientific’ (Hosking, 2005). This means a focus on processes of social

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough exegesis regarding the history of social constructionist ideas, see Burr (2003), and Lock & Strong (2010).

construction and the ways these simultaneously resource and constrain action within whatever it is we call reality. Central to these processes of social construction is language – now viewed as a vehicle for reality construction rather than reality mapping (p. 30).

As a preface of what is to follow, I would say that my dissertation is illustrative of and in support of the sort of theoretical promiscuity proposed by McNamee, and I certainly have discovered this very intellectual poaching present within the narrative therapy of Michael White and David Epston (1990).

In the following section, I provide a description of the focus of each chapter in my dissertation.

### **Introducing the Chapters**

Chapter One introduces what is entailed by a narrative poetics. Throughout my dissertation, I will tuck in and out of my own lived experience, my autobiography, my reading and experiences, making my dissertation partly memoir. I will also relate how my own lived experience, in addition to my history of reading/thinking, contributed to the co-evolution of therapeutic practices within the residential program of Peak House, and the lived experiences that continue to inspire my work.

In this chapter, I account for and describe the influences and inspirations that have come to me from decades of reading/thinking/writing across disciplines, and how such reading/thinking/writing has led to a particular *praxis*, namely, a narrative poetics of resistance.

Threads of autobiography are woven throughout my dissertation. Mark Freeman (1999) writes, “What autobiographers often do, in turn, is *rewrite the self*, which is to say, they seek, through the narrative imagination, to refigure those dimensions of past experience made available, so to speak, through the vantage point of the present” (p. 105). As a younger person, how could I have known precisely how the activities, relationships, and engagements of my own experience would play out and evolve? Writing this dissertation allowed for the creation of some narrative coherence providing form and shape to my past decades.

In Chapter Two I present an inquiry into ideas, concepts, and perspectives regarding the importance of evoking narrative imagination in bringing forth and articulating what transpires for persons engaged within therapeutic conversation practices.

In Chapter Three, I describe what I mean in talking of a narrative poetics within my practice, and in terms of what I refer to as an aesthetics of engagement with struggling, or suffering, others’.

In Chapter Four, I offer a critique of modernist, reductionist, thinking in terms of human experience, as illustrated by diagnosis and diagnostic categories. I also take the position that while we need to comprehend DSM-5 technology, for example, we do not need to believe in that sort of thinking. As we know, especially in North America, a diagnosis opens avenues towards resources; we live and work within these structures and these systems, and I believe it is possible to critique, while simultaneously working with. As such, I take a both/and perspective on diagnosis.

In Chapter Five, I present an appreciative critique of narrative therapy, in which I propose that the narrative therapy ideas and practices of Michael White and David Epston (1989, 1990) represent an innovative and important contribution to the theorizing of therapeutic practices. I found the work of White and Epston significant for its contribution and courage<sup>3</sup> in addressing power differentials within therapeutic practice, and exploring practices to make these differences transparent. In this exploration, the thinking of Michel Foucault (1980, 2006) is integral, and not to be ignored.

In Chapter Six I describe the unique ways in which certain practitioners, theologians, philosophers, cultural anthropologists and others who inspired my own practice wove sacred ideas within the tapestry of their therapeutic and community development practices. Within this chapter, I situate a narrative poetics within the context of the sacred, discussing the aesthetics and particularly the ethics, involved within such a perspective, and the ways in which such an *ethos* invites a particular manner of engagement with suffering others.

Specifically, the ideas and practices of New Zealand's The Family Centre (Waldegrave, 1990; Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1993; Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka & Campbell, 2003), Dublin's The Fifth Province Associates (Byrne & McCarthy, 1998, Byrne & McCarthy 2007; McCarthy, 2004) and Michael White (White, 1997, 2000, 2004) are described in terms of their attention to sacred ideas.

In Chapter Six, I introduce the philosophy of Lithuanian born, Emmanuel Levinas (1985, 2001) and the implications of his thinking within a narrative poetics, especially regarding how the application of his thinking figures for me within the fine art and craft of engaging within a therapeutic conversation, one with an-other.

Another intention in writing this dissertation is to describe and discuss the thinking of others' within the field of therapeutic practice, specifically those others who have chosen to conceive of their therapeutic work as a form of participation within a sacred encounter. I describe ways of comprehending the craft and the fine art of being an "architect of dialogue" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988) in relation to suffering others, struggling others, locating therapeutic conversation, and "conversational reality" (Shotter, 2008) within a realm of the *imaginal*, of the co-creation, co-authoring of shared stories of relationship, of poetics, of sacredness.

Chapter Seven describes the theory and practice of a narrative poetics of resistance evolving between the years 1989-2002 in a program I co-created called Peak House<sup>4</sup> in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Karl Tomm for his insightful essay regarding White's ideas, "The Courage To Protest: A Commentary on Michael White's Work" (Tomm, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Two friends of mine, Vikki Reynolds and Christine Dennstedt, have written Taos/Tilburg dissertations, and related articles, some of which describe their own experience at Peak House (Reynolds, 2002, 2010; Dennstedt, 2010a, 2010b; Dennstedt & Grieves, 2004). For other descriptions of the non-traditional practices that evolved at Peak House, see Radke, Kitchen & Reynolds (2000), and Saville (1998).

I came to Peak House six months after its inception. When I arrived, the program was modeled along traditional, behaviour modification and 12 Step philosophy and structures. I initiated a shift towards more collaborative ways of engaging with young persons and families struggling with substance use, and other factors. We began to work much more collaboratively towards transforming the structures guiding the program, paying more attention to the relational, social contexts within which young persons were recruited into substance use. In this work, the narrative therapy ideas and counter-practices associated with Michael White and David Epston (White & Epston, 1990) held special significance, along with the work of New Zealand's The Family Centre (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 2003).

At some point in the mid-1990's I began to refer to this work as representing a poetics of resistance (Sanders, 1999), and in the spring of 1999 I presented a paper on poetics of resistance at a workshop entitled, "New Narratives"<sup>5</sup>, sponsored by The Vancouver School of Narrative Therapy.

In Chapter Seven I describe my work within a poetics of resistance, and discuss the importance of language in describing and ascribing identity, and counter-practices (White & Epston, 1990) that may facilitate personal agency and preferred identities.

In Chapter Eight, I reflect upon, and summarise, highlights from the preceding chapters, pertinent to what I am referring to as a practice informed by narrative poetics, and by a poetics of resistance. In this final chapter, I also reflect upon some further ideological considerations regarding therapeutic and community work, relevant to my own practice and interests over time.

In Chapter Eight I also discuss some of the tasks and challenges faced by practitioners who maintain a global awareness while engaging locally with dilemmas. Additionally, I describe ways in which my work in education (i.e., as Director of the Master's of Counselling Program for City University of Seattle, in Vancouver, Canada) continues to allow me to encourage novice therapists, and others, to resist normative and prescriptive concepts promoting individualism, and encourage students to think relationally, and critically, regarding ideologically embedded notions of private suffering (McCarthy, 1995) and pain, divorcing these experiences from their relational, social, cultural, and political contexts.

Finally, in Chapter Eight, I describe some areas for further inquiry in regards to the ideas and concepts I have discussed within my dissertation.

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<sup>5</sup> The Vancouver School of Narrative Therapy was created in 1993 by Stephen Patrick Madigan. Stephen co-presented his own ideas on "new narratives" with me at the workshop in 1999.