Cultural Democracy:
Politicising and historicising the adoption of narrative practices in the Americas[1]

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Many practices of narrative therapy have spread widely around the world when adopted by practitioners of diverse cultures. In this paper, I present a personal reflection on my attempts at politicising and historicising the adoption of narrative therapy into my local culture. In a spirit of cultural democracy, I depart from acknowledging my own heritage of mestizaje, including the history of colonisation of Latin America. Following, I briefly present three phases as possible preparations for the initial arrival of narrative therapy to my culture and subsequent dialogue among cultures: a) adopting a decolonial critical stance; b) foreignising narrative practices; and c) facilitating cultural agency. I illustrate my attempts at dialoging with the foreign term externalisation to translate/reimagine its decolonial version in my local culture.

Keywords: narrative therapy; Latin America colonisation, decolonial consciousness; mestizaje.

Before I proceed to speak about matters of cultural democracy (Akinyela, 1998, 2003), allow me to provide you a bit of a context of where I am coming from. I made it here today after a long journey. My journey began before I embarked in the 28 hours long flight, crossing more than 9000 miles over the Pacific Ocean from San Antonio, Texas in the US to Adelaide. To be more precise, this journey started over 500 years ago when, on 12 October 1492, Christopher Columbus, thinking that he had arrived in Asia, arrived instead in the Americas to exploit and to appropriate the richness of our lands, imposing the religion, language and traditions of his country. Through an enduring journey of experiences of suffering and resistance, especially by the unsung women, to the European - and more recently the North American - rhetorical violence and discursive rape, I made it here today.

I am a newly *mestiza* woman; recognising for the first time the multitude of cultural, racial, and ideological roots of my identity, and their tensions influenced by Indigenous, African, and European traditions (Anzaldúa, 2008). I am trying out a recently developed decolonial consciousness (Pérez, 1999) in which, as a woman, I no longer have to pull up my skirt, bleach my history or become a male-woman to be visible and to have a voice (polanco, 2013). With this newly developed consciousness, I feel as if I am learning to walk all over again to discover worlds that White, European-American and masculine hegemonies had made inaccessible; yet, still traversing across the effects of visible and invisible colonialisms (Galeano, 2009). Visible colonialism mutilates you open: It prohibits you from saying, it prohibits you from doing, and it prohibits you from being. Invisible colonialism, instead, convinces you of subjugation as your destiny and powerlessness as your nature: it convinces you of *not being able* to say, *not being able* to do, *not being able* to be (Galeano, 2009).

Entrance to the discovery process of my newly *mestiza* identity, hence my visibility of colonialisms, took place via my learning of the framework of narrative practices to which I was first fully introduced by Michael White at a workshop at St Thomas University, South Florida, in 2004. Ironically, and interestingly at the same time, what I take as the political and historical consciousness of the work of a European-Australian, white male, warned me to the dangers of dismissing his foreignness. However, to be frank, listening to his warnings took some time and involved the assistance of yet another white male, this time David Epston, when overcoming the initial overwhelming enthusiasm, amazement, idealisation and fascination for their ideas. It was then when I turned my attention to narrative practices in the Americas in the search for clues about the foreignness of Michael's and David's practices in the work of colleagues such as Marta Campillo, Tania Aguirre, Alfonso Diaz and Margartia Tarragona from Mexico; Marcela Estrada, Carlos Clavijo, Carolina Letelier and Italo Latorre from Chile; Marta López, Colombiana immigrant in the U.S.; and Mariana Saenz and Liz Arévalo from Colombia.

So, it is from the perspective of a Latin American history of over 500 years of colonisation, therefore resistance, together with a culture of *mestizaje* and a decolonial consciousness that I am speaking today about cultural democracy. I do so particularly on the matter of elevating cultural differences during the narrative practices' *diaspora* to cultures foreign to their Australasian culture of its origins, in my case, to my Colombian culture. This is so as to maintain "political differences that keep democracy interesting and honest" (Sommer, 1999, p. 4). This is a democracy in which a worldly range of culturally inflected accents ruptures linguistic hegemonies, delightfully, because diverse accents stronghold diversity from 'the meanness of one standard sound' (Sommer, 1999, p. 4).

In my experience, preparing for the *diaspora* of narrative practices to the Americas has turned out to be not quite so simple. Such preparations are far from any resemblance to some of the typical Colombian preparations of hospitality by which some of us are known, displayed toward *gringos* that visit the beaches of Cartagena in their polo shirts and designer sandals, who receive with no qualms whatsoever the most exotic and extraordinary accommodations just by them weaving their green dollars in the faces of the local starving communities.

Instead, the preparations that I am referring to here are of very different sorts, which require much different considerations of solidarity. I have tentatively organised here three, among many other important considerations, for the preparation for the arrival of narrative practices to the Americas. I will first mention them and will then briefly discuss them.

The initial preparation phase begins by adopting a decolonial critical stance (Pérez, 1999); followed by a process of foreignisation of the arriving knowledge - narrative practices - which consequentially will lead to a dialogue between foreign and local practices in a spirit of cultural agency (Sommer, 2006).

FIRST: A DECOLONIAL CRITICAL STANCE

Adopting a decolonial critical stance, according to Chicana Feminist, Emma Pérez (1999), requires an opposition but also a negotiation. The opposition is put in place to keep narrative practices from entering my Colombian culture with its charming accent in a position of coloniality (contradicting its own framework). The negotiation happens between what has been inherited (a history of colonisation), what has been contested and decolonised (foreign narrative practices), and also between what is hoped for toward post-coloniality (a decolonised, Latin American narrative practice).

It has been through this stance, one that I believe the narrative framework shares, that I have attempted at politicising and historicising the crossing of borders of narrative practices into the Americas. I have done so by engaging in a decolonial translation of narrative practices into my Colombian Spanish to reinterpret and reinscribe them into a Colombian version, from a subaltern position to an alternative one - alternative as in alter-native (Muñoz, 1999).

SECOND: FOREIGNISING NARRATIVE PRACTICES

The second consideration in preparing for receiving narrative practices in the Americas, relates to what a decolonial stance renders available. This is a new perspective from where to read narrative practices with their warnings to locate them in their position of foreignness so that they are not taken for granted, or at face value. This involves the deconstruction of European-American systems of thought (like the ones I learned during my early schooling years about never to disagree but to respect and abide by my teachers' teachings), something which keeps us from any critical positions; and, in this case, risking misinterpreting narrative practices as if they were intended with aspirations of fidelity, universality or identical repetition regardless of context.

Without the recognition of the Australasian foreignness in narrative practices, opportunities for raising cultural differences and for democratic dialogues are missed, leading instead toward aesthetic and cultural betrayal and ideological incongruence (Martí-Lopez, 2002). By recognising foreigness, new theories can come to existence, reimagined in ways that make sense to the everyday struggles of the local communities (Pérez, 1999), which in turn, may require as well other local oppositions and negotiations of religious, patriarchal and elitist systems of oppression.

THIRD: CULTURAL AGENCY

Reimagining a postcolonial version of narrative practice from a decolonial critical stance, and recognising their foreignness, facilitates cultural agency (Sommer, 2006) toward social transformation. This is the sort of carnivalesque and magical realist creative and transformative actions that many cultures in the Americas are familiar with, and in particular Colombia where non-sensical and fantastical public actions have been put in place to respond to the unimaginable realities of more than 50 years of civil war. By exercising cultural agency, local versions of narrative therapy are possible, departing from mutual resonances and concerns for social justice to be negotiated with local responses to the consequences of social disparity. These local versions require their own vocabularies, in my case, instilled with a *mestiza* heart of solidarity.

To end, I'll share an illustration of my attempts at *dialoging* with foreign externalising conversations by reimagining/translating (polanco, 2011) them in my local culture:

Foreign text	*Risks of colonising translation*	*Attempts at a decolonial translation*	*Decolonial translation in my (Colombian) English*
…many of the people who seek therapy believe that the problems in their lives are a reflection of their own identity or the identity of others … (White, 2007, p. 9)	…muchas personas quienes buscan terapia creen que los problemas en sus vidas son un reflejo de su propia identidad o de la identidad de otros/as … (My translation)	…muchas personas quienes buscan terapia, atormentadas por los estragos contrariados en sus vidas, creen que estos son reflejo de su propia alma o del alma de otros/as … (My translation)	…many people, who seek therapy, tormented by their upsetting life ravages, believe that these are a reflection of their souls or the souls of others … (My translation)

This leads people to even more solidly believe that the problems of their lives are a reflection of certain "truths" about their nature and their character, or about the nature and character of others … (White, 2007, p. 10) that these problems are internal to their self or the selves of others. (White, 2007, p. 25) Externalising conversations can provide an "antidote" to these internal understandings by objectifying the problem against cultural practices of objectification of people. (White, 2007, p. 9)	Esto conlleva a que las personas crean más sólidamente en que los problemas de sus vidas son un reflejo de ciertas "verdades" sobre su naturaleza y carácter, o sobre la naturaleza y carácter de otros … (My translation) que estos problemas son internos a sí misma o al sí mismo de otras. (My translation) Conversaciones externalizantes pueden proveer un "antídoto" en contra de aquellas comprensiones internas al objetivar el problema en contra de prácticas culturales que objetivizan a las personas. (My translation)	Esto lleva a que las personas crean de una manera entrañablemente que los estragos de sus vidas se comportan como un destino material irreparable de sus almas y de las almas de los/as demás … (My translation) como si estas estuvieran arraigadas fuertemente a ellas sin remedio. (My translation) Las conversaciones que adoptan un tratamiento mitificador del lenguaje con una concientización política pueden proveer un conjuro lingüístico para exorcizar los fantasmas de aquellas creencias culturales con tendencias a enraizarse dentro las personas con intenciones de tomarse su fé y alma. (My translation)	This leads people to believe strongly that these ravages are intimate essences of their lives as their souls', and others', irreparable material destinies … (My translation) as if their souls were entrenched into these upsetting life ravages, destined to no remedy. (My translation) The conversations that adopt a mythologising treatment of language with political consciousness can provide a linguistic conjure to exorcise the ghosts of those cultural beliefs with tendencies to put down roots within people with intentions of invading their faith and soul. (My translation)

With a *decolonial critical stance* and a *foreignising of narrative practices* that enables *cultural agency,* we can stand in solidarity. This is a solidarity that is not based on concepts of fidelity, universality or identical repetition but on honouring mutual resonances, elevating cultural differences, and constantly creating in our own languages and vocabularies.

NOTES

[1]Expression taken from Gabriel García Márquez (2002).

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