

Editors' Introduction

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Volume 13, numéro 1, 2024

Special Issue: Considering Political Counter-Narratives

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115720ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115720ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Centre for Digital Scholarship, University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Hyvärinen, M. & Björninen, S. (2024). Editors' Introduction. *Narrative Works*, 13(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115720ar>

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SPECIAL ISSUE:
CONSIDERING POLITICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Editors' Introduction

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Keywords:

counter-narrative, narrative theory, politics, double hermeneutics, illocutionary force

The term counter-narrative is currently abundant across the interdisciplinary field of narrative studies, whether in narratology, sociolinguistics, or narrative hermeneutics (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Clifton & Van De Mierop, 2016; Dorson, 2016; Lueg & Wolff Lundholt, 2021). As is typical with fecund theoretical concepts, the plurality of uses also entails varying and sometimes contradicting ways of understanding the term. The current fascination with the theme owes much to the epoch-making anthology *Considering Counter-Narrative*, edited by Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews (2004), and its more recent successor, *The Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, edited by Klarissa Lueg and Marianne Wolff Lundholt (2021).

Roughly speaking, we can identify two principal ways of approaching counternarratives. The first approach focuses on critical, societally anti-hegemonic

narratives. From this perspective, counter-narratives are prototypically told by various marginalized and oppressed groups to challenge hegemonic positions. The use of the term is informed by Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) critical discussion on such *grands récits* or *metanarratives* as "scientific progress" and "increase of liberties in civil societies" (31–33), for which counter-narratives provide an alternative or pose a challenge. While the dynamics of master and counter-narratives is not explicated in Lyotard's work and arguably the theme of counter-narratives does not come up at all, the Lyotardian notion has served as an inspiration for a more thorough deliberation of master and counter-narratives in the work of next generations. In the hands of subsequent theorists, the "grand" of the Lyotardian concept has been gradually converted into the "master" of master narratives, a term still endowed with connotations of social hegemonies and predominance of certain worldviews and large-scale cultural explanations (see Hyvärinen, 2021, 18–19; cf. Jameson 1984, xi). However, as master narratives tend to be more local and less universalizing in scope than Lyotard's *grands récits*, they also seem to have a lot in common with what Lyotard names small, local narratives, which his theory of postmodernism predicts will take the place of the universalist metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984, 60).

In narrative research, researchers have striven to move towards a less dichotomous understanding of narrative practices: counter-narratives are neither seen as a simple antidote for "grand narratives" nor a straightforwardly emancipatory tool for countering oppression. The reasons for rejecting earlier, simplified notions are often brought about by a focus on a new, more diverse set of narrative practices (see Bamberg & Wipff, 2021, 70–71). Yet, the need for theoretical readjustment can also arise from societal trends: for example, the increasingly polarized political climate in many Western countries has made it evident that counter-narratives are available for many kinds of strategic use, from climate denialism to political populism (see Meretoja, 2021, 39–40).

Even with these important recent amendments, this framework for understanding counter-narratives arguably runs the risk of supporting top-down analyses, since it is primarily the cultural critic who detects the prevailing master narratives and finds the oppositional narratives countering them.

The second approach to counter-narratives views them as a particular mode of telling that is able to *construct* and *designate* a master narrative to which the counter-narrative stands in enacted and marked opposition. This move defines the whole studied phenomenon differently since the telling of counter-narratives refers now to a communicative and interactional strategy, applicable in various contexts and for various purposes, including but not limited to resisting socially and

historically hegemonic narratives. The point of departure is that those who tell counter-narratives signal, one way or another, that they are departing from or resisting something that can be understood as “master narrative.” As Rebecca L. Jones (2004, 175) asks, “[i]s the fact that someone is telling a counter-narrative something that matters to the teller and hearer”? This question raises the ethnomethodological issue of “double hermeneutics.” According to the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1982), students of biology or physics only need the single hermeneutic that aims to understand and interpret the facts of their experiments. In human sciences, the picture is more complicated since ordinary language users themselves continuously interpret their situations and have their own interpretations of their language-use. The idea of double hermeneutics suggests that also the non-expert terminologies and ideas should play a part in the analysis in social and human sciences.

In contrast to the first approach, the narrative scholar must now allow for the possibility of a powerful politician employing counter-narratives. In this purview, the rhetorical purposes of counter-narratives have an increased range from the activist practices that aim to give voice and bring inclusion and diversity to the field of representations to the populist strategies of using individual stories to challenge the alleged “narrative” of political opponents or media. Some precedents for counter-narrative practices in this vein have been identified in politicians’ and diplomats’ travelogues from the 17th century onwards, which often have the function of challenging the official narratives of the state with empirical, experiential eyewitness accounts albeit ones with vested political interests (Prokhorov & Saveliyev, 2021). More recently, counter-narratives have been adopted as a strategy within Eurosceptic parties, possibly provoked by former European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso’s 2013 plea for a “new narrative for Europe” (see Schünemann, 2021, 416–418). Adopting the view that counter-narratives are available to various political and power positions may risk diminishing the traditional, emancipatory edge of the concept, yet this seems truer to the contemporary political reality in which storytelling is embraced as a strategic tool across the spectrum.

The two approaches to counter-narratives come relatively close to other distinctions that have been suggested. Anthropologists have used the terms *etic* and *emic* to describe two different ways of theorizing empirical observations (Mostowlansky & Rota, 2020). In *etic* analyses, the phenomenon is described with the help of theoretical terms and distinctions the researcher brings to the field. *Emic* analysis, in contrast, tries to capture the ways the ordinary speakers themselves categorize and understand their world. It is easy to recognize that a purely *emic*

approach is, if not impossible altogether, at least unlikely to be productive. Consequently, the distinction itself has often been rejected (Korobov, 2004). However, this has not stopped narrative researchers such as Michael Bamberg (2004) and Rebecca L. Jones (2004, 175) from proposing emic approaches to locating counter-narratives. Indeed, the distinction raises useful questions regarding the way the storytellers themselves understand and mark their stories as counter-narratives. In other words, it is germane to the issue whose resource the counter-narrative is, how the concept arises and whom it can benefit.

While the ethnomethodological conviction that the storytellers themselves need to express and mark the communicative act as “countering” is entirely commendable, this does not yet say much about what exactly passes as countering or marks the act as such (see Korobov, 2004). The clearest cases are arguably on the level of telling, like “I shouldn’t be telling you that” (Jones 2004, 175); or “This history has usually been silenced.” However, do such expression as “But this is my story...” signal an alternative or counter-narrative strategy? Bamberg and Zachary Wipff (2021, 79) suggest a stricter criterion, arguing that “[c]ounter-narratives are uniquely distinguished by an illocutionary force intended to counter background assumptions that support another alternative narrative.” They specifically make the distinction between different modes of narratives: “Unlike master and counter-narratives, parallel, alternative, and intersecting narratives are not identified through illocutionary intent and social context, but rather through content” (78). At first, this “illocutionary intent” seems to characterize counter-narratives perfectly. However, Bamberg and Wipff do not take the next step and offer criteria for identifying this specific illocutionary intent of countering within interaction. The sympathetic concept appears to be tautological, without further specification, and leaves us with the original question: how is the countering signaled or marked within narrative practice?

Furthermore, are story-level expressions and oppositional positionings equally strong signals of counter-narrative? On the one hand, it could be argued that if we accept story-level expressions and positionings as signs of counter-narrative, we have already moved to etic analysis and are using the interpreter’s or critic’s cultural knowledge in recognizing counter-narratives. However, in many contexts it is quite reasonable to expect that the tellers draw from cultural resources available to both their audiences and cultural critics. This dilemma is exemplified by fiction. Novelists rarely announce that they are beginning to tell a counter-narrative, but they surely make assumptions about the background, values and cultural capital of their intended audiences. Arguably, such novels as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) can

be and have been read as counter-narratives to the optimistic master narratives of human progress, even though it would be difficult to locate any explicit signaling or “illocutionary intent” that posits these novels as counter-narratives.

Francesca Polletta’s study of storytelling in a post-9/11 discussion forum may further complicate the issue of signaling dissensus and illocutionary intent. Her study showed that “[p]articipants who saw themselves as having a minority opinion [...] were more than five times as likely to make a narrative claim as were those who did not” (Polletta, 2012, 238). She suggests that “allusiveness” of the stories may be one reason for their effectiveness; “Indeed, the story’s point may not even be obvious to the person telling it [...] The point of the story may be offered by the narrator and then modified or amplified by listeners” (239). This points to the possibility that strong expressions of illocutionary intent, disagreement or countering may even be counterproductive as regards the rich affordances of storytelling in the context of argument or a contest of opinions.

This indelible ambiguity in marking something as a counter-narrative seems to lead to the collapse of the emic/etic distinction in the case of counter-narratives. Indeed, can we seriously assume that ordinary language-users have a distinct concept of counter-narrative, and a consequent protocol of expressing and marking them? As the answer is most likely in the negative, it is perhaps necessary to allow for a reasonable amount of open-endedness in defining and recognizing what we now call counter-narratives.

What is ultimately at issue is not the exact definition of counter-narratives or a perfect method for identifying them — at least such consensus does not belong to the objectives of this special issue. We believe, however, that it should be both possible and useful to define the ways each writer is using this concept. This would help us address another, larger question: What are the theoretical and empirical benefits of using each of the different conceptualizations of counter-narrative? Evidently, the concepts have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the shift in the research interests of narrative scholars from the interpretation of individual, separate narratives towards the cultural and political narrative contests (Phelan, 2008), and in general to the social life of narratives. What is more, the study of counter-narratives usefully foregrounds the radical diversity of narratives against the critics of narrative who tend to postulate a singular ideological function and form for all narratives (White, 1981; Strawson, 2004).

Scholars who write about master and counter-narratives, often use the term in two different senses, which complicates the issue of the nature of counter-narratives further. Sometimes, scholars ponder whether this or that story is a master or counter-narrative. But elsewhere, they may write about how a narrator or a novel

is *drawing on* a master or counter-narrative or presents *a version* of the master narrative. It is rare that entire narratives or whole interviews are pure and consistent cases of master or counter-narratives. Most cases appear to be at least somewhat ambiguous or mixed cases of *both* master *and* counter-narratives.

Narrative can be a relevant method of oppositional action, as Polletta (1998; 2012) suggests. In the early days of narrative studies, the focus of research was typically on interpreting individual life stories as expressions of inner experience, meaning-making and identity. The disagreements concerned the tensions between the inherited social-cum-historical story models versus personal composition of the stories. Ever since Elinor Ochs' and Lisa Capps' (2001) famous study, narratives have increasingly been understood as "worked-up or *occasioned*, actively produced and mobilized within interaction, and seen as resources for doing *rhetorical* work" (Korobov, 2004, 192). The analysis of counter-narratives, however, seems to transcend the mere occasioning in the immediate, interactional level and include the larger, structural elements of master narratives that become resisted (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

The resistance in and with counter-narratives possibly needs further specification. As suggested by Hyvärinen (2021, 22–23), the "countering" and resistance could be understood as matters of degree. Sometimes, resistance is obvious and pronounced, at other times and in other contexts, more subtle and cautious. Not all counter-narratives are equally anti-hegemonic. However, with the term "political" in the title of this special issue on counter-narratives, we want to focus on explicitly political tellers, contexts, and contests. Of course, one could argue that all real counter-narratives are at least potentially political in challenging the dominant master narratives, at least when we adopt an understanding of politics that extends beyond the actions of political institutions (see Palonen, 2003). Yet in the cases discussed by the authors of this issue, the political aspect tends to be pronounced and explicit. With this focus we want to study the effects of counter-narratives when they enter major political arenas.

The often-repeated idiom "master and counter-narratives" may suggest the existence of two, formally similar categories of narratives with opposing political orientations. This seems to be rarely the case, since what we call "master narratives" only occasionally present themselves as prototypical, explicit narratives (Hyvärinen, 2021, pp. 27–28). Instead of being formed and occasioned as narratives, they seem usually to exist as abstractions of recurrent previous narrations, cultural scripts, ideological claims, or mere allusions to such ideological "truths." Who is even entitled to tell the explicit, authoritative versions of master narratives, and in which contexts? Counter-narratives, in contrast, are typically

explicit and prototypical narratives (ibid.; see also Mäkelä, 2021, pp. 389–390). The effectiveness of counter-narratives seems to depend on the particularized events, characters and experientiality in these stories. Furthermore, in taking the stance of counter-narrative, the tellers seem to name and identify the master narrative they are resisting.

The articles of this special issue address a whole variety of different counter-narratives in different contexts and materials. Counter-narratives have been located in parliamentary debates (Shaw, Sorokin), presidential speeches (Rautajoki), court trials (Mihut), fiction (Pignagnoli, Sklar) and oral history interviews (Hyvärinen). Rebecca Shaw's article discusses the narrative contests in the British Parliament during the debate on the Domestic Abuse Bill. As Shaw argues, the contest in the Select Committee took place between one, dominant narrative of domestic abuse, and several, partly differing counter-narratives. It may thus be greatly misleading to presume a binary setting between one master and one counter-narrative. As Shaw's case compellingly shows, counter-narratives do not always succeed in their attempts at undermining the hegemonic master narratives. Matti Hyvärinen's article continues the theme of parliamentary debates, but now from the retrospective perspective of oral history interviews with Finnish ex-parliamentarians. According to the article, politicians from the Left to the Right can tell counter-narratives. Hyvärinen focuses on the problem how the "countering" is marked by the narrators, and how the illocutionary intent is specified. The signaling is typically made by the methods that Labov and Waletzky (1997) have discussed in terms of evaluation.

Virginia Pignagnoli moves from the real-life disputes to test the viability of the approach in the study of fiction by providing an analysis on Halle Butler's novel *The New Me* (2019). By telling the story of its main character's rough work history, the novel sets out to resist the dominant views of labor-of-love ethic, and work as a source of fulfillment. Pignagnoli argues that the authors and readers co-construct the fictional works together and is able to conclude that "[a]udience members co-construct Millie's struggle with her job (or lack thereof) relying on the shared assumptions about a larger narrative contest which 'society at large recognizes as important'" This way, the counter-narratives in fiction participate in the narrative contest of the actual world.

Andreea Mihut introduces one the classical contexts of narrative contests, that of the court session, with the contradictory trial of Adnan Syed in the United States in 2000. In the much-publicized murder case trial, the prosecutor framed his talk in the form of the "Jilted Muslim Lover" story to narrate Syed's culpability, while the defense outlined a more ambiguous story of the "Star-

Crossed-Lovers.” Mihut’s analyses outlines the narrative contest on two levels; firstly, as the attempt of the defense to counter the master narrative of the prosecution, and secondly, as the way both stories draw on larger, cultural master narratives. Hanna Rautajoki’s case is also one of political controversy, as she analyses Donald Trump’s speech on January 6th, 2021, moments before his supporters attacked the Capitol. In analysing the speech, Rautajoki asks what exactly the relation between master and counter-narrative is, how the quality of “master” develops and manifests in discourse. She suggests the concept of ‘political poetics’, which “refers to discursive means to identify participants, allocate roles, represent characterizations and set goals for key actors in the joint political participation field”. Positioning and counter-narration are both integral elements of this political poetics.

After these issues of contemporary politics, Howard Sklar’s contribution takes us back to Anti-Jewish pogroms of the early 20th century Russia, and the curious case of Mendel Beilis in Kiev. During his trial, the accusations “drew on centuries-old ‘blood libel’ legends, dating back to the Middle Ages”. Sklar studies Bernard Malamud’s 1966 novel *The Fixer* as a fictional version of Beilis’ case, and as a counter-narrative to the centuries old master narrative and myth about the Jews murdering Christian children. Siim Sorokin, in turn, challenges the understanding of conspiracy theories by discussing the alternative theories surrounding the 1994 sinking of the cruise ferry M/S Estonia as cases of counter-narratives. Sorokin reminds us that originally, conspiracy theory referred to legitimate theories about how various crimes had been committed, and only later became a pejorative term. The negative connotations of the term may discourage critical suspicion, even in cases where interest towards ambiguous evidence and unanswered questions is legitimate. Thus, according to Sorokin, the terms “conspiracy theory” and “counter-narrative” may sometimes overlap and not contradict each other.

Several of the articles attest that there seldom is a simple, binary opposition between one master and one counter-narrative. As for instance Shaw and Mihut show, there can be several, even competing counter-narrative versions. The discussions by Sklar and Pignagnoli indicate, each in their own way, that there may be several versions of the dominant master narrative. We hope that the mixture of contributions to this special issue, from different disciplines and spheres of social life, may document and celebrate the broad viability of the counter-narrative approach to different facets of narrative contests in the social sphere.

The articles of this issue started their life as presentations given at the Narrative Matters 2023 conference in Tampere, Finland. The title of the collection is, of course, a conspicuous borrowing, chosen in tribute to the inspiring volume *Considering counter-narratives*, edited by Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews (2004).

Acknowledgements

The research for this paper was supported by The Finnish Research Council and the project Political Temporalities (PI Mari Hatavara, 348744).

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