Matti Hyvärinen*

Vicarious voices and positioning in marking counter-narratives in fiction

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Abstract: This article studies the role of dialogues, oppositional positioning and small stories in telling counter-narratives in fiction. The countering itself is understood as intentional action and as a communicative strategy, which raises the question about how this resistance is expressed or signalled. To answer these questions, Julian Barnes's *Elizabeth Finch* and Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Committed* are studied from the perspective of counter-narration, including the role of embedded dialogues and oppositional narrative positioning in marking counter-narratives. This approach, drawing on small stories research, foregrounds the counter-narratives' capacity to resort to factuality within fiction, which addresses the narrative contests of social world in a different way than purely fictional discourse. The narratological study of counter-narratives encourages thus the integration of small stories research and positioning analyses more closely into the analytic repertoire of narratology.

Keywords: counter-narrative; positioning; vicarious voices; small stories; factuality

1 Introduction

The concept of counter-narrative has flourished in social research over the last decades, largely because it encourages the study of narratives in contest (Phelan 2008), and more generally, the social and political life of narratives. Fiction does not emerge or flourish in a social and political vacuum, yet its political role remains undertheorized, despite the obvious turn to more openly political fiction during the last 20 years. Equally, the early social studies of narrative largely followed the inherited research model of structuralist narratology and focused on the analyses of *individual* narratives, while focusing of course on their meanings instead of structures. With the renewed use of the concept of counter-narrative, all this changes, since with the concept narratives are set into contest, against each other and prevailing models of telling. As Molly Andrews (2004: 1) points out, counter-narratives

***Corresponding author: Matti Hyvärinen**, Tampere University, Faculty of Social Sciences (SOC), P.O.Box 300, 33014, Tampere, Finland, E-mail: Matti.Hyvarinen@tuni.fi. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1145-9656

are "the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives".

The path-breaking volume *Considering Counter-Narratives* (Bamberg and Andrews 2004) introduces the concepts of master and counter-narratives to a broader academic public in social sciences and displays a considerable amount of empirical studies with critical commentaries. Among many other things, it also introduces the dilemmas of recognizing counter-narratives. This problem is partly inherited from Jean-François Lyotard's (1984 [1979]) discussion on *Grand récit*s, the legitimizing narratives or the most general models of thought legitimizing science and society, such as "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (xxiii). These legitimizing "narratives" appear to be parallel and partly contradictory. Moreover, Lyotard does not proceed to theorize the tension between the "grand" and his smaller stories[1] any further, let alone frame it as a contest between master and counter-narratives. Soon after Lyotard's book was published, the postmodernist and feminist art critic Craig Owens[2] translates Lyotard's *grand récit* as "master narrative," and a year later the same translation occurs in Frederic Jameson's (1984: xi–xii) foreword to Lyotard's English translation. After these translations, the term starts to circle in several poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist discussions over the 1980s and 1990s (Owens 1983).

The first known case when the terms master and counter-narrative are used together, can be still found within the debate on postmodernism. But in total contrast to the uses 10, 15 years later, the concepts are used within literary studies by David Herman. While discussing Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Herman writes:

> At one level, to be sure, Woolf's imagery provides the syntax of a *counter-narrative*, an alternative account set against *culturally repressive master narratives* of sexuality and gender. Thus, we have, on the one hand, hard, linear images: the frozen Thames; the spine-like roots of Orlando's oak tree; the spires of buildings; and pens and quills, important in their own right for Woolf's indictment of phallocentric conventions that attempt to make the nature of writing masculine. And we have, on the other hand, fluid, curvilinear imagery: Orlando's flowing skirts; the melting; coursing Thames; the curvaceous sweep of birds wheeling across the sky. (1991: 79–80, emphasis mine)

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1 Note that these are far bigger narratives than the stories later studied within the small story research (see Georgakopoulou 2015).

2 "Master narrative – how else to translate Lyotard's *grand récit*?" (Owens 1983: 65). In a footnote (30), Owens also mentions the term "counter-narrative". However, he writes that "the antithesis to narrative may well be allegory, which Angus Fletcher identifies as the 'epitome of counter-narrative'", that is, as *a form* countering the whole narrative form in the spirit of Hayden White. Owens reads Jameson but does not refer to his foreword, nor does Jameson cite Owens.

These terms appear near the end of the article and are used in a descriptive rather than centrally conceptual way. At least the terms do not organize the global argument of the article, nor do they seem to re-appear in Herman's later work. However, it is time to bring these perspectives back to literary narratology. In every case, a remarkable conceptual change has taken place since Lyotard, because the "master narratives" above are not just grand, covering, or legitimizing, they are also "repressive" and invite the opposing "counter-narratives". The recognition of counter-narratives is not yet a theoretical or methodological problem for Herman, it is something that naturally belongs to the analytic arsenal of the literary scholar.

Although the term "counter-narrative" was in fact occasionally used at least since the 17th century, and although Herman mentions both of them as early as in 1991, master and counter-narrative start to live as a self-evident contrary if not binary pair as late as in the early 2000s. This historical fact alone should warn us of the possibility that the strong connection between master and counter-narratives might be much more contingent than it is usually presented in current studies of counter-narratives (e.g., Lueg and Wolff Lundholt 2021). Of course, counter-narratives counter something, be it a dominant discourse, ideology, opinion or school of thought, a political party, but not necessarily anything we should call narrative, let alone master narrative. The dyad has existed for the last few decades as an unchallenged point of departure, without any decisive theoretical claim connecting every counter-narrative to some assumed (master) narrative. Perhaps the primary analytic interest should be placed on the study of countering and counter-narratives.

Despite the gradual diminishing of the grandness of grand narratives over the years, the master narratives were mostly understood to be very general, even transhistorical formations (see Hyvärinen 2021). Without further thought, the responsibility of naming the new master and counter-narratives remained with the researcher and the cultural critic. This is the scholarly setting that the publication of *Considering Counter-Narratives* profoundly changes in taking the concepts as parts of empirical narrative studies.

The question how the narrators themselves understand the situation of their telling-and-countering, the genuinely ethnomethodological perspective (Bamberg 2004; Jones 2004), changes importantly the way these concepts are used and understood. Ethnomethodology studies the ways ordinary speakers orient themselves in various speech situations. The researcher, thus, needs to realize that s/he is not the first one to apply hermeneutic approach to interpret the event of language use, the participants themselves have already done their interpretations and used language accordingly. Anthony Giddens calls the approach recognizing this dilemma *double hermeneutics* (1982). In the case of counter-narratives, this approach directs the researchers' attention to the ways the tellers themselves *mark* their stories as

counter-narratives, if they want to tell such ones. In trying to answer this question, Bamberg and Zachary Wipff (2021) have suggested that the telling of counter-narratives characteristically embodies *illocutionary intent* or *force*. When it comes to fiction, this requirement may appear overly problematic, yet it clearly refers to the rhetorical nature of countering. Furthermore, Bamberg and Wippf themselves are not very helpful in specifying how this illocutionary intent itself is marked or expressed in telling, leaving thus their proposal somewhat heuristic. My consequent work, including this article, orients towards recognizing this illocution and participant orientation to countering (Hyvärinen 2024).

In my study on Finnish ex-parliamentarians' counter-narratives (Hyvärinen 2024), I investigated the role of what Labov and Waletzky (1997 [1967]) called *evaluation* in oral storytelling in expressing the illocutionary intent of countering. I suggested that two evaluative, linguistic tools deserve special attention: *negative* expressions and *contrasting connectives*. Both of them build clear contrasts between previous expectations and the actual events, contributing directly to the pro-and-contra setting between master and counter-narratives. The role of evaluation makes sense since it was, according to the theory, purpose-built to communicate the rationale for telling the story, the rhetorical validity of the narrative. However, previously I did not address another, recurring and obviously central aspect of the identified counter-narratives, that is, the *role of reported dialogues* and the echoed vicarious, contrasting or supporting *voices*. Yet the role of embedded evaluation is crucial in expressing disagreements. As Van De Mieroop et al. (2024) point out, such "internal evaluation […] seemingly reduces the storyteller's 'personal responsibility' for the story". In everyday storytelling, it is more convincing to express controversial ideas by using quoted dialogues and vicarious voices. The relevance of this aspect should not be a surprise, since if counter-narratives truly embody the contest-filled social and political life of narratives, they are obviously also prone to inscribe the competing and controversial social voices.

Fiction writers study and adapt everyday storytelling for their literary purposes in numerous ways, and in so doing may incorporate all kinds of counter-narratives in their works. Yet by incorporating these counter-narratives, the fiction writer has a new speech program of his/her own (Tannen 1989). In fiction, the dialogues of course are entirely composed by the author, and not any representations of previous interactions. However, I suggest that the authors can mobilize some of the everyday resources of the vicarious voices in order to make the presented counter-narratives visible, more powerful and situationally contested. As such, I consider the vicarious voices and positionings as authors' rhetorical resources. In what follows, I will indeed study how the embedded dialogues and vicarious voices of various characters can be used to air embedded, big and small counter-narratives. By employing these embedded dialogues, the author can incorporate (and manipulate) the resources of

everyday storytelling, including the intentionality of countering. Vicarious voices, thus, open one important perspective to the counter-narratives *within* fiction. The purpose of this article is to discuss the relevance of the current theories of counter-narrative to the study of fiction, and to test whether sociolinguistic methods of identifying counter-narratives could be made relevant for the narratological analysis of fiction. Especially, what role can the contesting voices, dialogues and narrative positioning have in the study of fiction.

2 *Elizabeth Finch* as a counter-narrative

To investigate this issue of marking counter-narration, I discuss two fictional cases: the embedded storytelling with its contextual clues in Julian Barnes's *Elizabeth Finch* (2022), and the role of storytelling and oppositional positioning in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Committed* (2022). Both novels are emphatically fictional, yet they are set in the recent political world with recognizable non-fictional elements. *Elizabeth Finch* can be characterized as a thoroughly mimetic novel, whereas *The Committed* also features recognizable anti-mimetic scenes. In both novels, the counter-narrative sections seem to ambiguate our genre-based understanding of the boundary between fiction and factuality.

On the global level, *Elizabeth Finch* outlines an almost hagiographic portrait of the inspiring teacher and stoic thinker Elizabeth Finch, narrated by her previous student and admirer Neil. At first glance, the novel seems to proceed in two entirely different directions. Neal, with the other adult students of the course, endlessly speculate about the character, history, secrets, and romantic relationships of EF, as they call her. After EF's death, Neal tries to write her biography, but fails to deliver, Finch remaining an elusive character to the end. Another direction entirely is Finch's stoic thinking and her radical, outspoken critique of the historical role of Christianity, which becomes explicitly argued without any evasion or hesitation. As an essential part of the meditation on Finch's life and character, the novel recounts Finch's comments about the contested, early history of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Her focus was on the story of Flavius Claudius Julianus, who is usually characterized as the last pagan emperor of Rome, whom the early Christians re-named as Julian the Apostate. Finch embeds her criticism of Christianity in her general rejection of monotheism: "Monotheism, […] Monomania. Monogamy. Monotony. Nothing good begins this way" (Barnes 2022: 11). As Finch quite appreciatively mentions another Julian, Julian of Eclanum, also in the role of an apostate, the reader may be tempted to think of the connection to the third Julian, the author Julian Barnes (23).

Far from modestly, EF teaches a course titled "Culture and Civilization". Yet the course itself is not followed or reported systematically, but rather in the form of smaller stories or episodes.[3] One such story discusses "a sequence of paintings by Carpaccio" (28). One of the paintings presents St. George and the dragon, and here Finch announces that "any morally sentient human being must surely sympathise with the poor dragon" (28). That Finch is indeed telling a counter-narrative is communicatively expressed by one of the students who retorts that it is "not very patriotic of you, if I may say so" (29), which marks Finch's story also a counter-narrative to British nationalism. This way, the critical student does the marking of the counter-narrative instead of the narrator. But Finch continues her story, as the narrator remains in the role of a disciple and witness:

> The dragon is symbolic. He lives in, and represents, Cappadocia, a pagan country until St George arrived to demonstrate the power of muscular, or rather military, Christianity. And if we continue on with this spiritual storyboard, we shall see how the taming of the dragon leads directly to the conversion of the whole country to Christianity. (29)

EF's concluding words, expressing the evaluation of the preceding small story, corroborate its nature as a counter-narrative with a somewhat anachronistic choice of words: "One secret of the Christian religion's success was always to employ the best moviemakers" (30). A moment (Andrews 2004; Bamberg 1997; Bamberg 2004; Bamberg and Andrews 2004; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Barnes 2022) later Finch introduces Swinburne's poem "Hymn to Proserpine" and concludes "Swinburne, like many distinguished predecessors, is identifying this [the death of Julian] as the moment when European history and civilization took a calamitous wrong turn" (31). In this case, it is a critical vicarious voice within another vicarious voice. Both of these stories are indubitable counter-narratives to the official success story of Christianity, but not nearly the only ones in the novel.

After Finch's death, Neal tries to gather his memories of Finch to understand her life, perhaps even to write a book on her, but eventually fails and decides to leave all the papers to the next generation. The search for Finch's self, experientiality and romantic relationships comes to nothing. This is not a novel celebrating the power of mind-reading or the qualia (cf. Zunshine 2006). Instead, the middle section of the novel consists of Neal's long essay on Julian the Apostate. In the time he was EF's student, he failed to submit his essay, but takes up the project now again after inheriting Finch's archives.

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3 These stories are typically longer than many of those studied in "small-story research" (Georgakopoulou 2015; Georgakopoulou et al. 2024). To distinguish them from entire life stories, short stories and novels, I rather speak about "middle-size stories". Following the small story approach, however, I investigate the role of smaller, independent, and often conversational stories *within* the fictional works.

But why Neal and not Finch herself as the writer of the essay? At the end of the novel, Neal ponders that Finch too failed to finish her project, as Neal himself admits failing in his project of writing Finch's biography. However, as Finch herself argues, "failure can tell us more than success, and a bad loser more than good loser", before adding, "apostates are always more interesting than true believers, than holy martyrs" (Barnes 2022: 30). There are also other reasons for leaving the writing of Julian's story to Neal. Elizabeth Finch is characterized in such admiring terms as a lucid, erudite and highly intelligent character that offering her essay as such might have been implausible or in obvious contradiction with Neal's account. The story is stylistically much more credible when left for Neal, her loyal but more mediocre disciple. As a result, we have a section whose ontological status is somewhat contradictory: it is an obviously factual account written by a fictional character, with the help of notebooks of another fictional character. Written by Neal, the essay is able to be both factual and still more fallible than if it had been offered as a work of Finch.

Be it as it may, Neal recounts a veritable counter-narrative to the traditional, Christian version of the life and thought of the last pagan emperor of Rome. Following the previous comment on Christians always employing the best movie-makers, the story presents Julian as an early critic of dangers of narrative (see Mäkelä 2018), when he criticizes the stories told by the early Christians: "Though it has in it nothing divine, by making full use of that part of the soul which *loves fable* and *is childish and foolish*, it has induced men to *believe that the monstrous tale is truth*" (Barnes 2022: 78, emphasis mine). Characteristically, this counter-narrative comment is presented in Julian's voice within Neal's essay. The essay totally rejects the Christian master narratives of the heroic rise of Christianity and the vast martyrdom under the cruel pagan emperors. Julian the Apostate was an erudite, tolerant, and competent if fanatical leader, who did not persecute the Christians. The tone of Neil's essay is rather balanced, and he does not ignore the massive animal sacrifices or Julian's resort to odd ways of foreseeing the results of wars.

The Hellenic civilisation had its dark corners, and Julian was by no means free from them. Yet his critique of the thought of "Galileans" (as the early Christians were called) was outspoken: "The idea of God being 'jealous' is 'a terrible libel upon God'. Why would any reasonable person revere a punitive, control-freak deity who despises us and visits the sins of the fathers upon their children?" (79) The argument is noteworthy in not denying the existence of the Christian God as such, but criticizing his ethically dubious character. Neal's account is an explicit counter-narrative also because it unravels the way the Christian winners re-named Flavius Claudius Julianus to Julian the Apostate, and turned him into a brutal persecutor of Christians, a warning example for all apostates; "For the next millennium and a few centuries, Christians *had control over the story* and its message; and Julian remained a key figure in their anti-pantheon, worthy of mention in the same fetid breath as Herod,

Pilate and Judas […]" (100, emphasis mine). Indeed, we are considering the social life of narratives.

Until the end of Neal's report, a predominantly moderate stoic attitude dominates the novel despite all the counter-narration. However, near the end of the novel comes up the heated episode of "shaming" Elizabeth Finch. *The London Review of Books* had launched a series of public lectures, inviting Finch to give one, and she obliges. Here EF's tone turns into openly polemical:

> She began with Julian's death in the Persian desert and how it was a *disaster* for paganism and Hellenism. The triumph – and the *catastrophe* – of monotheism. How the *dominance* and *corruption* of Christianity led to 'the closing of the European mind'. How Julian was morally superior to a whole succession of popes. […] The *tyrannous* nature of both Catholicism and Protestantism. The *shameful persecution* of both Jews and Muslims. (140, emphasis mine)

Finch's choice of words above is remarkably more pungent and provocative than in Neal's essay. The incomplete sentences and the short-hand style indicate that we are reading Neal's notes or memories of the talk. Since the talk was rendered in the summertime, it hit the newspapers: "'CRAZY LADY' PROF CLAIMS ROMAN EMPERORS RUINED OUR SEX LIFE" (140–141). Finch is doorstepped, photographed and shamelessly ridiculed, yet she herself declines any public response. Nevertheless, the counter-narrative setting is manifest; "And there was also the fact that the *London Review of Books* was viewed with great suspicion by elements of the right-wing press, who saw it as a nest of leftists, subversives, pseudo-intellectuals, cosmopolitans, traitors, liars and anti-monarchist vermin" (140). With this short extension, we are well in the midst of the current cultural wars. By foregrounding these contradicting voices, the novel convincingly builds the setting between master and counter-narratives. It is noteworthy that the press does not need to repeat or explicate the dominant master narrative of Christianity, it only needs to attack and slander Finch's personality. To Neal's amazement, Finch does not respond to this attack at all, not by writing, not by giving interviews. Arguably, this is part of Finch's stoic attitude. As she had earlier lectured, "Some things are up to us and some are not to us" (21). Perhaps, defeating the scandal press was no longer "up to us".

The episode of shaming is complex in terms of its fictionality. The quoted summary of Finch's talk clearly aims to convey factual information and resonate directly with our understanding of the history of Christianity. As such, it invites the reader to evaluate the quote as regards its truth value and in relation to other stories about Christianity, while all the told events surrounding the factual *London Review of Books* and the reception of the talk in tabloid media of course are purely fictional. Again, it is the voice of the character, not that of the narrator, which expresses the counter-narrative and invokes the effect of factuality.

3 Viet Thanh Nguyen and postcolonial drug dealing

If the tolerantly stoic mode dominates *Elizabeth Finch*, *The Committed* (2022) by Viet Thanh Nguyen is equally furious and agonistic. The main character and narrator, Crazy bastard, or Vo Danh (the Anonymous), was born in Vietnam as an illegitimate hybrid, having a French priest as his father and Vietnamese farmer as his single mother. Due to this double ethnic heritage, he is (and feels to be) equally discriminated by French and Vietnamese. He used to be a Communist spy and mole among the Vietnamese refugees, a fact that did not save him from later ending up in a Communist re-education camp and being tortured by his close friend and comrade. All this took place in Nguyen's previous novel *The Sympathizer* (2015). At the beginning of *The Committed*, the narrator has washed up in France, after a period as a boat refugee and the consequent camp stay in the Philippines. Thanks to his previous camp contacts he appears to France as a drug dealer and gangster.

The titles of the novels already refer to dilemmatic identities, which are challenged, negotiated and fought throughout the novels. While the older narrative identity approach preferred "a unified, coherent, continuous concept of identity" (Deppermann 2013: 2), the more recent studies on narrative identifications more often draw on the theory of narrative positioning, which focuses on moment-by-moment identifications during talk-in-interaction (Bamberg 1997; Deppermann 2013, 2015). "Position" and "positioning" are metaphorical terms for social "places" and relationships. Positioning theory studies how narratives locate different characters in the story-time (level 1), during the actual situation of narration (level 2), and eventually as regards cultural discourses and master-narratives (level 3) (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). Tellers are both positioned by others and keep positioning themselves and the others, thus making the aspect of power relevant. As Deppermann (2013: 8) has it, *membership categorization* is one important aspect of positioning[4] but "does not exhaust practices of positioning". Which kind of actions, characteristics and motives are attached to participants are basic tools of positioning (De Fina 2013: 53). Furthermore, the level 3. positioning already connects the narration and the societal macro-level, the dominant discourses and master narratives.

Narrative positioning is thus something that takes place and is studied primarily on the level of talk-in-interaction. The context of fiction is of course entirely different, since it is the author who provides all the details selectively and as a part of the

4 In current political atmosphere the relevance of membership categorization is utmost high, since a kind of "category fetishism" and demands of purity by right-wing populists.

artistic design. Thus, my focus is not on any "actually occurring" positioning but on how the fictional use of positioning can be used rhetorically in evoking, marking and foregrounding master and counter-narratives.

It is characteristic of *The Committed* that very few proper names are used, instead, the characters are identified with such positional terms as the Boss, the aunt, the Maoist PhD, the Ronin, the Beatles,[5] and so on. Positioning with action is visible in the character-narrators social progress from toilet-cleaning to drug-dealing. *Positioning* is indeed the name of the game and even the wars between different drug dealer gang provide material for constant categorization. In terms suggested by James Phelan (1996: 29), the *thematic* character function largely dominates while the *mimetic* function tends to remain rather thinly established. The novel begins with a clause filled with negative positioning in describing the boat trip: "We were the *unwanted*, the *unneeded*, and the *unseen*, invisible to all but ourselves" (Nguyen 2022: X, emphasis mine). A few pages later, on arriving in Paris, the categorization continues: "We were not *tourists*, or *expatriates*, or *returnees*, or *diplomats*, or *businessmen*, or any class of *dignified traveler*. No, we were *refugees* […]" (5, emphasis mine). All these negatives confirm the marginalized and subjugated position of the "Crazy bastard", who seems to be positioned and position himself against the rest of the French reality. The negatives and the continuous outraged inner monologues of the protagonist attest to his – and the novel's – anti-colonial attitude. Similarly, the portrait of Elizabeth Finch is composed with numerous negatives, to emphasize the way she departs from dominant expectations.

The thematic categorization of characters runs throughout the novel, lending the narrator only the names "Crazy bastard" and "Vo Danh", Anonymous. The polemic against imposed positional categories also includes the political geography, as the narrator displays in one of his diatribes: "Then, finally 'Indochina,' whatever that word meant, since we were neither Indian nor Chinese. It was this fantastic Indochina that the exhausted French handed off to the very loud Americans" (36). This linguistic-cum-geographical notion has later in the novel an important signalling role in resisting the master narrative of French colonialism. As Deppermann (2015: 370) asserts, "Positions are locally occasioned and designed, they are temporally and situationally flexible, and they are multifaceted […] A matter of dispute though, is whether participants are only able to choose among competing, available discourses […] which are predefined […] or whether discursive positions themselves are subject to participants' construction and perspectival interpretation as well." However, in Vo Danh's case, most of the positional categories seem to be

5 The use of such pseudonyms may be a general characteristic of drug-dealing. However, the narrator does not reveal whether he has invented the names or do some of the characters themselves use those names.

pregiven, imposed on him, yet he himself seems to be eager to assume the low positions. The first actual sentence of the novel departs slightly from this model: "I may no longer be a spy or a sleeper, but I am most definitely a spook." Ironically, all the terms as such refer to the same position as a spy, but the next sentence clarifies the pun and the particular meaning of the spook:[6] "How can I not be, with two holes in my head from which leaks the black ink in which I am writing these words. What a peculiar condition, being dead yet penning these lines […]" (Nguyen 2022: 1).

Such personally felt, culturally charged and furious inner monologues interrupt the ongoing dialogues and the violent gangster film actions. The plot of the novel is ripe with armed conflicts, beatings and killings, yet these killings and conflicts are not too intensively felt or mimetically immersive, since the focus remains on the complex, thematic counter-narrative the monologues and dialogues weave. At one point, Vo Danh bumps into a competing Algerian gang of dealers who want to take over his hashish and their previous customers. A characteristic conversation begins:

> Trying to calm the situation by expressing genuine curiosity about their origins or ancestry, I said, What are you?
>
> Algerian, you rat's ass, Beatles said.
>
> Rolling Stones scowled and said, We're butter.
>
> Butter? I said. If anyone should be butter, it should be me, yellow, soft, and easily melted. Why are you butter?
>
> Butter! Rolling Stones shouted. Butter!
>
> Beatles sighed and said, Shit, we're French. Now give us the hashish.
>
> Let's talk about this, I said. *My Algerian brothers*, have you never read Ho Chi Minh's case against French colonization? *We should* not be fighting each other, *we should* not be robbing each other, *we should be working together* against *our abusive stepfather*! (75, emphasis mine)

In the beginning, a potentially life-threatening conflict between the characters reigns. The narrator tries to redefine the situation as a friendly conversation by asking about the background of his competitors. The Beatles at first confirms that they are Algerians, but continues the strife by adding, "you rat's ass". Rolling Stones continues this hostile positioning by scowling and declaring that they are "butter" [better]. Vo Danh resorts to his particular resource, his better command of English,

6 Dictionaries suggest at least the meanings 1. spy, 2. ghost, 3. agent, 4. negro for "spook". All these connotations suit perfectly the positional game of the novel.

and ridicules his competitor by appropriating the image, colour and form of "butter" to himself, rendering the Algerians even more furious. Beatles makes then a new positional move and declares that they are actually French, and they want the hashish immediately. Even after this verbal combat and intentional irritation of the Algerians, Vo Danh makes a different positional move by naming his competitors as his brothers by invoking the theories of Ho Chi Minh, and appealing to joined action against French colonialism. In contrast to the previous irritations, he now repeats the "we" who should work jointly. This alternation between proposals of brotherhood and showing off his combativeness does not provide the desired outcome but turns into parody of the anticolonial front of competing drug dealers. Despite the suggested identity politics, the narrator loses his hashish, and gets badly beaten.

Since Vo Danh did not reveal his boss despite the beating, he is sent to a luxury hospice-cum-brothel called "Heaven" to recover. Before the planned heavenly services, he notices the "muscle" of the place, a big black man, watching a television talk show that displays the cover of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. "Sartre, he is okay, the muscle said. I prefer Fanon and Césaire" (102). This is only one example of how theoretical, anticolonial discussions parodically intermingle with the turns of the gangster saga.

Nevertheless, besides constantly telling this anticolonial counter-narrative, the novel does something exceptional: it manages to tell a version of the master narrative of French colonialism in Vietnam. As Georgakopoulou has it, the small stories approach "explores the connections of three separate but interrelated levels of analysis: ways of telling, sites, [and] tellers" (Georgakopoulou 2015: 258, italics removed). Essential here is the site and the teller, considering the relatively low tellability and limited entitlement of telling such narratives (Hyvärinen 2021). The narrator is a notable socialist politician BFD, a friend and occasional sex partner of the aunt, and a man with a systematically condescending attitude towards Vo Danh, the narrator. BFD is the only character having an acronym instead of a positional name. The acronym imitates the rhetoric of factuality, as if anonymizing some well-known real-life name.[7] The site of telling, in turn, is a semi-official celebration of Vietnamese culture, gathering all the central characters of the novel, from politicians to gangsters, who have their own business agenda in the event. The site, accordingly, is more or less ceremonial and therefore inducive for telling master narratives (see Patron, this volume, and the ceremonial transfer of the master narrative of genital excision).

7 The acronym BFD seems to have several questionable meanings in urban slang, e.g., covering both positive and sarcastic versions of Big Fucking Deal.

The narrator first sets forth that the French "are nothing if not ironic", but starts immediately afterwards wondering whether there are any nations "that did not say one high-minded thing and then do something under-handed?" This is arguably the particular frame offered for reading the consequent passage and its irony. Accordingly, BFD "stepped onto the stage as a walking example of irony, a man of the people wearing a suit so expensive it could have fed a village" (Nguyen 2022: 190). Then BFD takes the floor:

> When we came to Vietnam, we did *not always* behave the way we should have. Colonization was wrong, *my friends*. The French should never take away another country's independence [applause]. When the Vietnamese rose up against us, they taught us a lesson we sorely needed. But by 1968, many of us – including me – stood on the right side of history by supporting Ho Chi Minh. And France as a whole stood on the side of peace. […] Let us hope that the American imperialists have learned their lesson from Vietnam, too. If they have, they, too, will one day thank the courageous people of Vietnam! [applause] *As regrettable as* French colonization was, we never committed the horrors the Americans did. And we left behind *culture*. Because of this, I hope the Vietnamese people have forgiven the French. We came to Indochina [!] *with noble intentions*. We brought liberty, equality, and fraternity. [applause] *We built roads*. We built canals and drained swamps. We built Saigon. […] I have met many Vietnamese people who are happy here in France, where they feel at home. Of course they do! Because France is your home! You have come home! [applause] (191)

Paradoxically, the later counter-narrative is marked and foregrounded here by first presenting a self-important version of the master narrative. BFD's talk moves smoothly from humble apology and self-criticism to open self-praise and glorification of the French colonialism in Vietnam. The game of positioning continues with the words "my friends", and gathers momentum with reminiscing the iconic year 1968, when BFD took the "right side" of Ho Chi Minh. That year works as a hinge, since after that the "American imperialists" take the role of the colonialist enemy. In defending the French presence in Vietnam, BDF first uses evasion ("*As regrettable as*. . .", resembling the rhetoric of "I'm not a racist, but. . ."), and then several historically charged arguments. "We left behind culture", a generally used defence of colonialism and a grave embellishment of the role of the educational institutions in Vietnam (cf. Bowden 2019; Burrows 1986). French came to "Indochina with noble intentions". This, in turn, resembles the well-known argument downplaying the burden of Stalinist purges for communism, since communism indeed was built with noble intentions and was therefore not comparable with Hitler's terror, as the argument goes. However, BFD's next argument is as often used to defend Hitler and Mussolini: "*We built roads*. We *built canals* and drained swamps". Indeed, Hitler was claimed to distinguish himself by building motorways in Germany. In other words, BFD fluently uses rhetorical resources traditionally connected to the defences of colonialism, Stalin and Hitler.

Earlier, I have argued that master narratives are not normally told in explicit, narrative form (Hyvärinen 2021: 118). What is notable here is, of course, that even BFD's talk is not *the* master narrative of French colonialism, the authorial text of it, it is his particular *version*. However, the explicit telling of the master narrative indicates that master narratives can have flexibility, and they can change over time (and more than I have, perhaps, suggested earlier). More importantly, it is part of a talk given by a leading politician on a special, festive, and ceremonial occasion. It is precisely within these kinds of sites and by these kinds of speakers that versions of master narratives can most likely be expected. As a (version of) master narrative, this story is also more oriented to world-building than world-disruption, to use terms of Herman (2009: 14).

However, how does Vo Danh, the narrator, react? At first, he notes, in his monologue, that "I could see that BFD was not totally wrong. He might even be almost right. And judging from the enthusiastic clapping of the audience, many evidently agreed with him" (Nguyen 2022: 192). After a few sentences, nevertheless, he begins to elaborate the problem of false consciousness, suggesting that the Vietnamese immigrating to France "were already, like certain species of cheese, quite soft and easily digestible" (192). After that, his musings move to the bitter story of his mother and his father, "the colonizing collaborator." This way, he builds his own life-story as a counter-narrative to BFD's account, and the setting of the stories in immediate succession marks his story as a counter-narrative to BFD's master narrative.

After the official program, during the reception, Vo Danh meets "the handsome and humorless lawyer", a close friend of his aunt, and the defence lawyer of the previous Cambodian ruler and notorious mass murderer Pol Pot. The lawyer rightly argues that even Pol Pot needs a real and honest trial, not only the judgement of public opinion. Then, upsetting the narrator badly, she continues:

> Everyone thinks Ho Chi Minh is a saint, except for the relatives of the people he killed, of whom I've met a few. I'm an anarchist, and I will tell you that Ho Chi Minh became saint by murdering all his enemies to the left and to the right of him, including the anarchists.
>
> I looked at my aunt. You have a picture of him.
>
> She looked pained. I don't know if this is proven, either –
>
> He wiped out all his Vietnamese competitors before he wiped out the French. (196)

This is a powerful counter-narrative to the progressive counter-narrative of Vietnam's successful struggle for independence and against western colonialism under the leadership of the great Ho Chi Minh. The small story shakes the beliefs of

the narrator, the Communist aunt, and all the leftist admirers of Ho Chi Minh, including such socialists as BFD. The story is marked and received as a counter-narrative, as the pained look and hesitant answer of the aunt displays. It is an emotionally coloured account, yet it is quite obviously meant to be factual, inviting the reader to relate it to other stories about the real-life Ho Chi Minh. However, what does Vo Danh do? "I looked at my aunt", as if the story would not concern him as directly as the aunt. Earlier, he has introduced himself as a "two-faced man", who can see and understand both sides of each issue. Having previously advertised Ho Chi Minh to the Algerians, he is now able to see him as a murderer – what the aunt cannot accept as a genuine believer in Communism. This small story, in the sense I use the term, re-positions Ho Chi Minh, but also the narrator and the aunt. They are no longer mere brave and faithful opponents of French and American colonialism, they themselves can be seen as exploiters of political power and civil rights. As it is, no one's anticolonial position turns out to be faultless, and the novel resists the temptation of glorifying any particular version as *the* anticolonial counter-narrative of Vietnam.

4 Factuality, counter-narratives and fiction

Recent years have witnessed extensive theoretical interest in fictionality within non-fictional genres (Dawson 2015; Hatavara and Mildorf 2017a, 2017b; Nielsen et al. 2015; Walsh 2007). The counter-narratives above seem to provide an opposite case that is far less discussed: passages that seem to be offered as factual within fictional discourse.[8] These cases are confusing since there seems to be no clear signalling of the factuality, though "(g)lobal fictions can contain passages of nonfictionality, and global nonfictions can contain passages of fictionality" (Nielsen et al. 2015: 67). Paul Dawson confirms this understanding about fictionality within non-fictional genres (2015: 79), but equally fails to elaborate the opposite case of factuality within globally fictional genres. Françoise Lavocat in turn has theorized the "signposts of factuality" within the genres of pseudofactuality. For her, the "primary objective" of signposts of factuality "is to create belief in the authenticity of their referentiality" (2020: 581). This is arguably a different case than my suggested factuality-within-fiction, which is not at all oriented to change the global fictionality of the studied novels, but to mark the relatively small and factual stories

8 *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, edited by Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (2020), makes a great contribution to the study of factuality, yet it seems largely to ignore the thorny issue of how to understand factuality within fictional genres.

as counter-narratives that have a rhetorically different role vis-à-vis the competing stories and accepted facts of the social world than the purely fictional parts of the novels. In the case of Elizabeth Finch, we have a fictional, erudite teacher, whose lectures and talks are based on her accredited familiarity with the history of Julian the Apostate (on lecturing in fiction, see Björninen 2024). In the case of the "handsome and humorless lawyer", we have the lawyer's alleged familiarity with the remaining relatives of Ho Chi Minh's victims. Arguably, the rhetoric of factuality is relevantly present in these cases.

Samuli Björninen's recent article on the rhetoric of factuality discusses several forms of factuality within narratives. He emphatically argues "for the theoretical necessity of […] the rhetoric of factuality" (Björninen 2019: 353, italics removed). He then suggests that "factual rhetoric is distinctive as it involves *an appeal to something that has the authority to inform opinion*" (359, italics original). Counter-narratives, of course, intend to inform and change opinions with their "illocutionary force". Björninen elaborates his proposal by suggesting four distinct types of authority that can foster the rhetorical quality of factuality. The first type he names as "referential authority", in which case "the domain of information appealed is that of commonly held, shared knowledge". Quite obviously, this cannot be the resource counter-narratives primarily resort to. The story by the "handsome and humorless lawyer" even begins with the structure "Everyone thinks. . . except for" in accentuating its opposition to commonly shared knowledge.

The second type Björninen suggests is called "institutional authority". This should "encompass the institutions of knowledge: encyclopedic information, research-based knowledge, and expert opinion" (360). This is clearly the way the authority of Elizabeth Finch is established. She is an adored teacher, an expert, and she and Neal's essay draw on Julian's original writings. It is also noteworthy that Neal's essay is set apart from the rest of the novel, as an independent chapter.

Björninen calls his third type "experiential authority", and the "appeal to it is made by evoking experience, personally or vicariously" (361). This seems to be the most typically used resource in personal counter-narratives, and it is precisely this personal and vicarious experience the lawyer is resorting to while telling her counter-narrative on Ho Chi Minh. Quite obviously, the lawyer's story is told in order to change opinions about the real and historical Ho Chi Minh, not just about some fictional figure "Ho Chi Minh". It is noteworthy that the lawyer does not simply claim that Ho Chi Minh was a murderer, she also validates her claim by reference to the victims' relatives, as is typically done in non-fictional storytelling (Hyvärinen 2024). Paradoxically, then, the lawyer remains a fictional character, but what and how she tells about Ho Chi Minh lays claim to be understood as factual.

5 Positioning, small stories and counter-narratives in narratology

In his proposal for socio-narratology, David Herman originally suggested that the Labovian model of oral narratives, after some important modification, could be an important import from social research to narratology. However, as he argues, Labov's model suffers from disregarding the relevance of character, an issue the structuralist and Greimasian theory had discussed in terms of the *actantial model* (Herman 1999). 10 years later, in *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Herman 2009), his proposal of analysing action more closely draws on the theory of narrative positioning and the work of Michael Bamberg in particular (Bamberg 1997). Two things have changed: firstly, the modelling of the character is no longer provided by the structuralist narratology but by sociolinguistic theory. Secondly, there is no attempt to reduce characters to limited and prefixed categories, but study the identification and positioning of the characters as it proceeds moment by moment.

However, the study of dialogues, vicarious voices and positioning has an entirely different role in fiction and non-fiction. My purpose, above, was not to study actual communicative events or positionings. Instead, I have hopefully demonstrated the crucial role of positioning in rhetorically expressing and marking counter-narration. Small stories research is another, originally socio-linguistic approach that has recently been imported to narratology (Fludernik 2024; Georgakopoulou 2015; Patron 2024). The study of smaller stories within fiction resists the overly strong Aristotelian frame with its emphasis on the sense of the ending and the progression of the global narrative (cf. Phelan 2007). For example, *Elizabeth Finch* can well be read as a novel pondering the limits of personal and collective memory. The narrator's decision to leave Finch's archives to the next generations may thus be read as the final word, a closure, yet all the radical particles of small stories about Julian the Apostate remain and continue their countering work. The Bakhtinian communication theorist Françoise Cooren has even suggested that such embedded and invited voices contain their own, independent agency with respect to the actual speakers in the new communicative contexts (Cooren and Sandler 2014: 235). The same happens with the small stories of *The Committed*. While Vo Danh wages his outraged positional war against French and American colonialism in Vietnam, and tries, two-facedly,[9] to position himself between communism and anti-communism, the disturbing small story about the glorified Ho Chi Minh as a murderer remains as a nagging counter-narrative as regards all simplified interpretations of the great and unified anticolonial front.

9 "I am also still a man of two faces and two minds, one of which might perhaps yet still be intact" (Nguyen 2022: 3).

Perhaps the most confusing observation about these counter-narrative small stories and larger counter-narratives was their occasional non-fictionality. It is noteworthy that all the counter-narratives studied in this paper were *historical* narratives, countering narratives about individual historical events and processes, and not, for example, narratives countering dominant cultural norms. Without particularly signalling their changed mode, these counter-narratives seem to receive their counter-narrative force precisely by making claims that invite the reader to evaluate their factuality and relationship with the experienced world. BFD and "the handsome and humourless lawyer" are both entirely fictional characters, but the clash between their stories about Ho Chi Minh takes indeed part in the factual narrative contest about the history of Vietnam. Counter-narratives take a very particular and active role in the social life of narratives, referring to and competing with factual narratives in a more explicit way than purely fictional stories do. I have discussed above only two novels providing such factual counter-narratives, thus further studies and more material on the issue are definitely needed, but similar cases have arguably become increasingly popular within the literary field during the recent decades, calling for a new kind of questions and answers about counter-narratives, fictionality and factuality.

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