

Conversation as a Methodology

All learning floats on a sea of talk.

James Britton, *Language and Learning*

Richard Sennett has articulated that the ecological border “ is a site of exchange where organisms become more interactive... The border,” he states, is an “active edge” (*Craftsman* 227). I would like to appropriate this metaphor, to see conversations as crafty borders, or crafty ‘active edges’. Conversations are porous spaces where ideas and imaginations have the potential to flow; they, like Sennett’s borders, are sites “of exchange as well as of separation.” In entering into conversation about research or practice *in process*, we open ourselves to exchange and to separation (diverging or confounding views) which is sometimes difficult, sometimes clarifying and sometimes the two together.

Through acquaintance with new concepts, any researcher’s study is opened to the possibility of taking a new direction. Sometimes we stop reading more theory simply because our deadlines and pages allotted prohibit traveling yet another path (Latour, *Reassembling*). So, conversation in process is risky business: it makes the inquirer vulnerable to that which may challenge her convictions and conclusions or the paths of inquiry themselves.

The difference between conversation and reading is of course that conversation allows for learning and absorption of ideas through the act of ‘talking back’. Through speech we can learn from ourselves in tandem with our learning from, and with, others.

Theorists often cited in the educational realm, such as Vygotsky and Bruner, have long argued that talk is an epistemology. Pedagogues such as Ian Pringle have also emphasized the significance of talk:

Exactly how and why it is that talking facilitates such assimilation of new knowledge is by no means clear but it has to do with what James Britton has called “shaping at the point of utterance:” that mysterious ability we all discover from time to time when, in trying to talk about something not yet

clear to us, we find that we clarify it for ourselves, and say things we did not know we knew (Pringle 133).

But not only is speech a pedagogical tool for integrating new knowledges (making sure we have understood material and seeing it more clearly), it is also one means of traveling *with* others through conversation, which contains worthwhile silences and important 'performances' of listening as well as speech (NED).

As an example of this dialogical theory making, I would like to outline the interaction I had with two colleagues with whom I found particular affinity at an early phase of this project. Because of our shared interest in process, dialogical spaces, as well as holistic and time taking approaches to viewing the worlds around us, Nese Ceren, Diego de la Vega and I decided to enter into an ongoing conversation. In this conversation we hoped to open ourselves to mutual influence while embodying some of the guiding principles underlying our individual studies. There are particular ways in which working together in this way speaks to each of our areas of inquiry. In the case of my project, the NED (Nese, Erin, Diego) conversation is especially relevant as follows: 1) I am interested in challenging stationary hierarchies including the academic hierarchy, so that we may better validate the knowledges generated by people engaged in scholarship at all levels (I will elaborate more on the notion of hierarchies in the coming pages). These fellow Masters students are developing concepts which have informed my research. 2) Conversation is an essential methodology for my practice and theory making. My project here has been open to the influence of conversation and many of the nomadic movements along this journey have been initiated through conversation with people identified in these cognate practice and theoretical foundations (and others) as well as the people I have encountered in the practice of *Beste Amsterdam*. Throughout this document, from time to time, I cite the ongoing conversation that the three of us had as the author of particular concepts in each of our projects. I do this though parenthetical reference as follows: (NED).

In the process of this inquiry, not only did I participate in an ongoing conversation via NED, but I also practiced a method of recording and transcribing a series of conversations, with NED and others, so that I could glean more from the exchanges by listening in different ways and in reflection. The recorded conversations are listed in my bibliography and cited throughout this text with parenthetical references in order to emphasize the intentionality of these conversations. One of the people who contributed to this method of recording was Peter McMaster. While we were talking, McMaster commented that he was trying to understand the wider implications of doing his work, without it being just about him. I shared his sentiments: “I hope by continuing to have conversations like this one,” I told him, “I’ll get a bit closer to figuring that out...”

Two Words Lead to a Third: One Conversation Permeates Another

I was walking with Brazilian theater-maker Antonio Araujo, along a long Finnish forest road, during an international performance research retreat in June 2010. I had just seen Antonio give a presentation on artistic research where he described the process, structure and roles of the people involved in *Teatro da Vertigem*, the company for which he is Artistic Director. It isn’t that people do not have specific roles or that some of those roles do not take decision making precedence over others, he explained. In *Teatro da Vertigem* the collaborators exist within a “floating hierarchy,” he said. Their positions of creative control in relation to the rest of the group are not constant or fixed; even their roles may change from one project to the next. This concept resonated with me: I have always felt conflict between the genuine pursuit of collective processes and their impossibility. (Countless projects and organizations that claim to function collectively fail miserably because, of course, hierarchies are almost unexceptionally present and are more destructive when they are not named or, worse, denied to exist.)

After my walk with Antonio, I sat with a colleague, Martin Di Peco, who had offered to look at the latest diagram of my research proposal.¹ Martin came to performance studies from a background in architecture and so has a particular way of looking at

¹ I made many of these ‘diagrams’ throughout the first stages of this research. These can be viewed in the *Maps* appendix of this document.

graphic representations of concepts than most people in the field of performance. Unfazed by my own exasperation with the diagram, he responded with certainty: “It’s an unstable hierarchy.” What is in the centre today may be on the periphery tomorrow and the elements reflected on the ‘map’ (as I call my diagrams) may change colours, or size, or position as things evolve. The words “unstable hierarchy” reminded me of what Antonio had said. It felt clear that the process of the project I was embarking upon would need to reject a ‘central research question’ or one theoretical framework, at least as points of departure. (It is not surprising that the theorist I most intuitively turned to was Bruno Latour, a rejector of frameworks and preconceived limits on inquiry...)

The conversations through which the uses of ‘floating’ and ‘unstable’ met, led me to a third, more apt, word for my project: *nomadic*. I will come back to this story of two words leading to a third shortly. First, an introduction to nomadism as a methodology.

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As Bourriaud describes it:

The radican develops in accordance with its host soil. It conforms to the latter’s twists and turns and adapts to its surfaces and geological features. It translates itself into the terms of the space in which it moves. With its at once dynamic and dialogical signification, the adjective ‘radican’ captures this contemporary subject, caught between the need for a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and opening to the other. It defines the subject as an object of negotiation (51).

Because this project was continually moving and adding as it evolved; new radican roots were made as I, as the nomad-subject in the work, advanced and reflected on the project’s growth paths.

As I have already stated, throughout the process of this inquiry the notion of a centre has been one that wanders and is transferable. Peripheral elements frequently became key and what was central at any point in the journey was not necessarily essential in subsequent stages. It is not, however, that a research hierarchy was done away with but rather that it was intentionally changeable and unpredictable. “In a radican universe,” writes Bourriaud, “principles mingle and multiply by means of combinations. That profusion, that absence of *clear* hierarchies, is in keeping with this precariousness...” (83). The elements in the research hierarchy were in a perpetual state of wandering, except when fixed by the production of temporal results.

Nomadic Hierarchies

To begin I made many ‘maps’ of ideas, concepts, influences and possibilities. The prominence and position of the maps’ elements changed with each charting. Serendipitously, the combination of conversations I had with Antonio and Martin (described above) clarified that the reason for this shifting of the maps’ elements was not because I had yet to determine what was most important; this would be a misleading assessment. Rather, it was crucial that I refrain from pre-determining what was most important at the outset.² So I set out to create a ‘nomadic research hierarchy’, where elements of the inquiry could shift positions of prominence and where new elements could be picked up along the way in order to be as faithful as possible to the practice’s process.

The notion of ‘hierarchy’ can, of course, also be applied to the dynamics amongst the people involved in a particular ‘group’ (be it a company like *Teatro da Vertigem* or the collection of people involved in the invitational practice of *Beste Amsterdam*--myself included). In Antonio’s ‘floating hierarchy’, he told me two months after our first conversation on the matter, the people and other elements are known at the outset or, if they enter the hierarchy at a later point, they are calculatedly chosen by the pre-existing elements. My project differs in that the hierarchy I intuited opened the possibility for

² To reiterate the ethos of this research: enquirers should not, in advance, “define what sorts of building blocks the social world is made out of” (Latour, *Reassembling* 41).

complete strangers, sometimes invited and other times unintended or unexpected, to enter and control or lead it for a moment or period. This project held with it the nomadic practice of searching and seeking. It welcomed invasions and the unpredicted, but was decisive in its commitment to exploration. The nomad's journey is not without purpose; the nomad is seeking something even if s/he does not know what it is. So even though I began unaware of my destination, the route I traveled has a logic and through the quality of that logic I am able to retrace my steps. Because that quality allows me to remember where I've been (Kershaw, Conversation). I will return to this in other sections of this writing.

The term *nomadic hierarchies* found me one day, riding my bicycle on a temporally familiar path in Amsterdam. As I cycled along, my thoughts travelled from the orchestration of my first practical experiment (which I would conduct through a nomadic journey by bicycle) to Antonio's notion of 'floating' hierarchy, to the idea of 'unstable' hierarchy that Martin had attributed to my maps. I was trying to imagine a visual representation of these ideas and thought of a book I had that might be a perfect resource.³ I cursed the realization that this book was presently in another country--and that I wasn't even sure which one. "It is this wandering lifestyle!" I thought. "Nothing is exactly where I know it to be, I have to go searching for everything..." At this moment, I began to make connections between this study and the nomadic character of my own life, and decided to explore these concepts of nomadic hierarchies.

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³ Janet Cardiff's *The Walk Book*.