

Travelogue of a conversation in progress about knowledge and inspiration

- 1. Getting on board

When I joined Building Conversation as a facilitator in 2019 I was intrigued about the performative conversations that are used to examine with participants how we do, and how we could talk with each other. I wanted to learn not only about their application, but about the mix of insights and approaches from many different knowledge sources and disciplines that had in some way or another fed into their design.

In the years that I have been active in inclusive dialogue, justice and conflict transformation, a recurring part of my job was to help colleagues and other stakeholders become more aware of their biases and blind spots. I try to look for approaches (whether in research, collaborative action or in learning) that are reciprocal and empowering for all involved.

You could say that I have developed a sensitivity for spotting blind spots. Especially in those situations where our good intentions may make us neglectful of the care and critical self-reflection needed to avoid behaving, speaking and thinking in ways that are harmful. In my field, this could lead to more conflict or violence, or (inadvertently) reproducing patriarchal, racist or colonial patterns.

Perhaps I was naive, but I did not expect to encounter this kind of neglect when I became involved with Building Conversation. Was it because of being new to working in a creative, artistic environment? Or because Building Conversation is generally thoughtful and thorough in its commitment to examine our patterns of interaction and expression, trying out alternative ways of engaging in conversation in what I understood as a radical attempt to imagine new futures?

As I familiarised myself with our range of performative conversations, read about them on our website and listened as my colleagues recited their introductions to groups of participants and trainees as they gathered at the beginning of a conversation (I was facilitating with the street team) I began to notice something about the way in which sources of inspiration were acknowledged. Whenever references were made to Indigenous peoples' cultural knowledge - i.e. Inuit, Māori, and Canadian First Nations practices that inspired the Conversation without Words, elements of the Agonistic Conversation and the Time Loop – the words of Building Conversation suddenly became vague. Instead of recognising the origins of theories and practices, these references seemed to obfuscate or even misrepresent them.

When I mentioned my concerns in a staff meeting I was in for another surprise. Instead of a defensive reaction, my colleagues expressed their own unease about the manner in which particular sources of inspiration were being acknowledged. Instead of quickly moving on to another, less uncomfortable topic we discussed this discomfort delving into the issue of appropriation and representation which had apparently been raised in the past by a small number of participants. The desire to address these questions had been sitting with my colleagues for a while, and they welcomed my proposal to take concrete steps.

First, I reviewed the texts on our website which describe these performances, (the written text is nearly identical to what is recited by way of introduction when starting conversations) highlighted which aspects were in my view problematic, and proposed modifications. We also agreed that in addition to looking at technical fixes needed to acknowledge sources in an accountable and responsible manner, we would discuss further steps to be taken in order to become more attentive,

ethical and reciprocal in how we as Building Conversation engage with knowledge, and with our knowledge-relationships, as part of our creative practice.

That staff meeting in 2019 and the process that has followed from there showed me that Building Conversation does not just talk about the need to explore difficult, uncomfortable topics, deeply reflect on your own behaviour and learn as you connect with others. It is willing, keen even, to practice it. In the next section I will share some insights of the learning journey that started (for me) with that staff meeting, as for me it was a moment when I felt that I really wanted to get on board. Also, I am learning just as much as my colleagues are. It is an ongoing conversation which I am hopeful will take us even further towards not just becoming more aware of our blind spots, but to enter into more thoughtful encounters, genuine dialogue and sharing of our stories in ways that do justice to all of us.

- 2. Moving into blind spots

Perhaps a blind spot should not be seen as an impediment, like a flawed lens. Put like this it easily becomes an excuse to legitimise our ignorance about things of which we have a luxury to not be aware. What if we regard it as a corridor? Failing to move forward into this corridor, to encounter those for whom our blind spots are gaping wounds, and to examine and locate ourselves critically and responsibly in relation to what we observe, we actively keep our blind spots in place. Our blind spots are not things that happen to us, like the rain or a birthmark. They are practices that we learn and repeat, until we start unlearning them.

- 3. Reading the itinerary

Which problems did the text review bring to light? I looked at the three texts that describe the Time Loop, Conversation without Words and Agonistic Conversation, paying attention to how different sources of inspiration are acknowledged in these texts. I checked how easy or difficult it was, with the information provided, to find out more about an existing practice or theory mentioned in the text. I also looked out for instances of implicit bias in the use of language, specifically with regards to values that are associated with words or classifications that carry a particular cultural or ideological baggage.

1. Conversation without Words

The text (as accessed on the website on 24 February 2020) refers to the work of Marina Abramović. In particular her performance 'The Artist is Present' is mentioned as a source of inspiration. Abramović has recently become the centre of a controversy sparked by a denigrating description, laced with racist undertones, of Australian Aboriginal people in an unpublished draft of her memoirs. She has also been under attack in the media about her failing to engage meaningfully with her own positionality as a white person who has benefited from ['skimming \[Indigenous Aboriginal\] culture for the parts that \[were\] useful or interesting to her.'](#) There was no mention of this controversy on our website.

Aside from the reference to Abramović and the (omission of) controversy surrounding her work, the text refers to an 'annual gathering of the Inuits'. Through my own online research I was not able to confirm that there is (or was) any such annual gathering amongst Inuit in Canada, Greenland or Alaska. If there is, then the information provided in the text is not detailed enough to find out more about it through a google search. Building Conversation co-founder Lotte van den Berg recalls that a colleague once told her about this gathering, but admits that she did not do enough research of her

own to check the accuracy of this story. The colleague was asked for additional information, but could not provide it. At some point anthropologist [Nina Stegeman](#) was asked to do some digging, but she too was unable to find more information about this custom nor did her inquiries with colleagues lead to anything. Since then the question whether the reference should just be removed in its entirety remained in limbo.

I noted that use of the word chieftain makes me cringe because of its connotation with a certain kind of ethnographic discourse - including derogatory terminology such as tribal, natives and primitive societies originating in colonial classifications which determined that a colonial Empire could only have one king/queen so therefore 'native kings' must be chiefs or chieftains. The word also suggests leadership of a 'band of robbers', which I am sure is no coincidence. In addition, I found that traditionally, Inuit social structures were not very hierarchical to begin with and regardless of their title such powerful figures don't seem to have been a common feature in Inuit societies of what we now call Canada. Instead, elders play an important role in group leadership and decision-making. Obviously there are many different Inuit groups in Canada, Greenland and Alaska whose traditions and governance arrangements are not only varied, but have evolved in response to and as a result of colonisation. In contemporary Canada multiple Inuit groups and organisations are [represented at national level](#) to advance their rights, wellbeing and interests.

Based on what little I found, I remain unconvinced that a practice of sitting together in silence for hours on end is in any way part of traditional Inuit political culture or governance. Even if there is some truth to be found in the initial anecdote, the absence of a verifiable source, in whatever form, calls for rectification.

In response to the above we have taken some steps to modify the text. I came across an interesting [resource](#) online, compiled by Elijah Tigullaraq, bilingual language consultant with Qikiqtani School Operations in Nunavut, Canada, which describes how non-verbal communication, using facial expression and body language is an important element of traditional Inuit communication techniques. Based on this, the text now refers to (among other sources) 'various Indigenous practices where people gather in silence, looking at each other without saying a word', and more detail with regards to wordless communication with Inuit (and possibly Australian Aboriginals) will be added.

2. Agonistic Conversation

After a brief introduction to the ideas of Chantal Mouffe, who calls for '*an 'agonistic space', in which agonists are adversaries – not to be confused with antagonists, enemies*' one of the first things I noticed about the text on the website (as accessed on 24 February 2020) was the stark contrast between how the ideas of Mouffe are characterised in relation to the Māori practice. It is clear that Mouffe's theory can and does guide all sorts of practice, but what is obscured by calling Mouffe's ideas 'theory' and the Māori ideas 'practice' is that Māori practice is also related to theory. In fact there is a [complex worldview](#) (known as Kōrero tawhito) which consists of theories and understandings regarding how the world works, how society is structured and human interaction should be organised.

These theories and understandings were passed on across generations through oral tradition (stories) that guide social practice, behaviour and conduct in social relationships. Just as theory in the Western scientific context, Māori custom (or Tikanga in Māori language) is not a static set of

rules, rather it constitutes a [living, evolving body of knowledge](#) which develops through time and in response to a changing context.

Then, there is the question of which Māori practice is actually being referred to in the text. It could be [pōwhiri](#) (a Māori welcoming ceremony) which consists of an extensive procedure including oratory from both visiting and receiving parties, before they enter the wharenui (ceremonial meeting-place). But does a pōwhiri include the parties talking to each other *while lying down*? Or is the lying down part based on what happens once the parties enter the [wharenui](#), which is considered a domain of unity and peace, while the marae, the space in front of the wharenui, can serve as an area to debate issues?

As with the 'Inuit custom', it remains vague which 'Māori practice' it is exactly that has inspired (elements of) the 'simple choreography in which the participants keep assuming different physical positions with respect to each other' that we call the Agonistic Conversation. This vagueness raises a suggestion of exoticism. In response to my comments we concluded that more clarity is needed about which part of the Agonistic Conversation, which consists of three parts, is inspired by which theory or practice. We also agree that the description itself could be divided into two parts, one which describes what exactly happens in the conversation, and one which provides information about sources of inspiration.

[3 Time Loop](#)

Lotte shared with me how she worked with an Indigenous theatre group from the Great Lake District in Canada at an arts festival some years back. One of its members, a man named Joe, told her how in his culture, it is a custom to consult the previous and future generations when making important decisions. This conversation inspired Lotte to develop the Time Loop.

The nice thing about this case is that the source is a person with a name, and someone who can be considered as an insider of the community whose (piece of) cultural knowledge inspired a performative conversation. But rather than mention Joseph Osawabine by name, who was at the time of their meeting artistic director of the Debajehmujig Theatre Group and who is currently (according to their website) still affiliated to the group as Traditional Teachings consultant, the description on our website refers only to '*the practice of the Indians of the Great Lake District in Canada*'. Not only is this a quite generalised way to describe a First Nation (possibly the Anishnaabag/Chippewa Nation mentioned on the [Debajehmujig website](#)), but it fails to recognise the specific perspective that Osawabine and the Debajehmujig Theatre Group provide on the nature and purpose of storytelling as a language-giving, generation-connecting and future-making mission. Hearing Osawabine [speak](#) about how storytelling is part of a struggle for survival especially for the young people in First Nations communities who are at risk of losing their connection to their heritage, is really interesting.

Why did Building Conversation not place this story in the contemporary context in which it was told? Why present it as a factoid delinked from our current reality – seemingly referring to a pristine past where the 'Indians of the Great Lake District' apparently still find themselves disconnected from modern society, or so the text appears to imply.

We talked about how by muffling not just the origin of the referred to practice but the very concrete source of this piece of knowledge, a valuable opportunity was missed to connect Osawabine and Debajehmujig into the conversations that we build together. By somehow closing the loop – not just extracting knowledge, but sharing back and providing a chance to talk back – we would be opening up space for our 'sources of inspiration' to engage in conversation with us. To respond, disagree or

in any way add their voice to this ongoing conversation, so urgent and so crucial, that is also about whose stories we tell, how we do it, and why.

One of the changes in the text that we agreed to is including a more substantial reference to Joe and the theatre group. But we also want to put effort into in the future, where possible and it makes sense in relation to this meta-dialogue, mention our sources by name and/or invite them more actively to take part in our conversations.

When I shared my findings with the team they affirmed that something needed to change, not just in the way we acknowledge sources of inspiration in written and spoken text, but in how we engage in genuine, two-way dialogue with participants, and with those who have in substantial ways inspired our conversations.

In addition to ongoing critical conversations within the Building Conversation team, we are committed to reflect openly as we learn and continue to build a more attentive, reciprocal creative practice of collaborative inspiration with you and in relation to the stories that you share with us - and vice versa.

- 4. Transit: to be continued

In the handbook [‘Engaging. A Guide to Interacting Respectfully and Reciprocally with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, and their Arts Practices and Intellectual Property’](#) (by Ghil’ad Zuckermann et al., 2015) Jaky Troy, Professor in *visual arts education* and Aboriginal of the Ngarigu (Pama-Nyungan) in Australia describes the concept ‘collaborative inspiration’. This concept is elaborated on and concretised in relation to copyright and traditional cultural knowledge through a number of practical guidelines offered as an alternative to practices that reproduce colonial patterns of ‘exploitation, plunder and disempowerment’. Collaborative inspiration is marked by ‘collaboration and involvement’ when making use of traditional, cultural knowledge.

Just becoming aware of our blind spots is not enough. My colleagues and I felt that action is needed. But how do we become ‘more ethical, respectful, reflexive and critical’, in the words of Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book ‘Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples’ in our relation with knowledge? And can we do this without losing the playfulness that is inherent in our practice as creatives, artists, experimenters and imaginers?

The argument has been made by some that too much awareness leads to fear of making mistakes, stifling creative expression and avoidance of risk-taking. But apart from the journey described here, most people who have participated in Building Conversation know that being more scrupulous and taking responsibility for how you operate, does not make it any less playful – quite the opposite. Accepting that making mistakes is part of the process and being willing to listen to and engage with feedback does not preclude risk-taking. It just increases the chances that the outcomes are valuable and meaningful to more people, and less harmful.

The conversation continues, and although I will be holding a space for it within Building Conversation and with our broader network of participants, co-creators and inspirators, my colleagues and I recognise and emphasise that the responsibility for this effort rests not with one person. It is a joint effort that requires each of us to do our part in self-reflection, initiating uncomfortable conversations and increasing our understanding of how we too are sometimes inadvertently complicit in reinforcing the very systems that we are so bent on dismantling.