



Reflections from The Performance and Conflict Conference

Written by Dr. Aylwyn Walsh, Lecturer in Applied Theatre, University of Leeds

When I was invited to be a blog respondent to the recent [Performance and Conflict conference](#) in Lincoln in September 2018, organised by [Prof. Ananda Breed](#), I asked the convenor whether I could use poetic forms to reflect the impressions of what people shared. In many conferences, we become accustomed to multi-tasking people who live tweet the nuggets of wisdom that are shared in panels and discussions. But, in this rich programme of events, I reflected, it would be fitting to have a response that was not merely trying to capture and disseminate what people had said. After all, they have prepared their materials carefully, and the limitations of hashtags and few characters to reflect depths and complexities would, I thought, overwhelm the significance of what we may approach.

With a vibrant mixture of practitioners, scholar-practitioners and researchers, conversation was always going to circulate on the tensions that become apparent when discourses of practice and theory rub up against one another. And what better place to confront conflicting ideologies than a convergence of people interested in what performance processes might enable in places of conflict?

One of these emerged in an imagined dialogue:

A dialogue between fiction and truth; or Echo's ruin.

Fiction/ Echo: Why is everyone so obsessed with you?

Truth/ Narcissus: I know. I thought I went out of fashion

Fiction/ Echo: I tried to tell them stories about the dangers of getting too close to you...

Truth/Narcissus: of course they want to get close. I'm Truth.

Fiction/ Echo: or is it not the getting close; but when they forget they can never be you? Just a pale reflection.

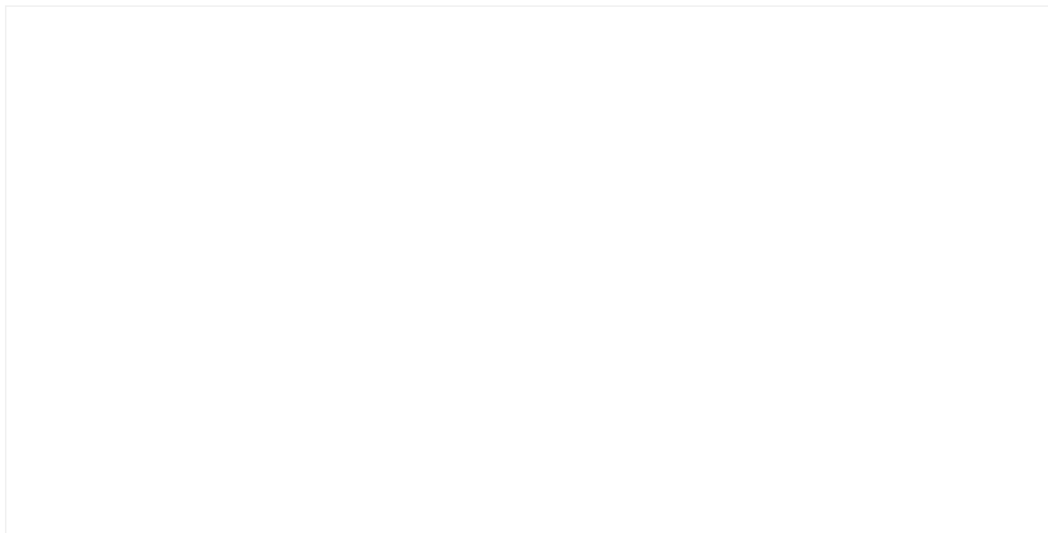




Photo credit: Fenia Kotsopoulou

So, as I made my way across the programme, I live-tweeted mini poems with the hashtag #PACConference. In the final session, Prof Tim Prentki offered views on next steps and future challenges, while I put together some of the poetic materials for a shared performance reflection. In the presentation of the poem, I invited the participants to contribute to a rhythmic score saying 'us/them' in our multiple languages. This sustained me as I read it out:

Us/ them

Justice.

The word keeps tripping us up.

When we talk about conflict

Whose terms do we adopt?

Where do our terminologies

Replicate

Power struggles?

Whose fight is legitimate?

And what counts?

Which us

And which them?

Justice:

The word keeps tripping us up.

The past two days has been an impressionistic offering of

Fracture and continuity...

Making threads of

connection between past and present

Between the selves we know and the others we don't (yet) know

How do we find our space?

In the world

In our communities?

Can we find a place for anger

To be creative in places/times/ zones of conflict?

Our challenge has been to listen.

To attend/

To regard

When is conflict specific?



Photo credit: Fenia Kotsopoulou

When is the story of the conflict?

When does it become the blanket that weighs down experience with a kind of comfort of the known – even when that known is what replicates prejudice?

Where the suffering of others is domesticated, pulled into the meanings that shore up our understandings of the world.

When states of conflict become

Ossified

*Versus a 'becoming'... we (as we think about performance and conflict) may need to be in discomfort rather than security... **

How grateful that we have included space for tears.

For anger.

For joy.

Us| them

Us| them

Us| them

Us| them

Not and but something else

*An idea floated by Tim Prentki on day 1.

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Aylwyn works on performance and social change as researcher and applied theatre practitioner. She is predominantly interested in a feminist approach using critical ethnographic methods and her research spans social, political and activist performance; radical pedagogies and intercultural performance as well as arts and mental health.

She directs Converge – a course for people using mental health services, in partnership with Leeds Mind. In 2018, she will co-convene the Sadler seminar series 'Activist Tactics: Performing Geographies of Social Change' with Prof Paul Routledge (Geography/ University of Leeds).

Aylwyn is programme leader of the MA in Applied Theatre & Intervention. Prior to this she was senior lecturer at the University of Lincoln's School of Fine and Performing Arts. She has recently worked on projects including the *Arts of Logistics* about the politics and

poetics of infrastructures, counter-logistics and mobility. Her monograph relates to *Prison Cultures*, mapping performance, resistance and desire in women's prisons (coming in 2019).