Conversing with ghosts: Prefigurative talk and the shifting contours of intellectual debate.

Next in our #AcWri2016 series is a reflection on conversational writing and academic thought. Academic discussion typically appears as clustered conversations. **Davina Cooper** *focuses on the dilemma posed by prefigurative contributions, where academics respond to a discussion as if it is taking place, treating it as if it were the one that* ought *to be taking place, even though speakers know the actual conversation is otherwise. What do prefigurative contributions actually contribute?*

This piece is part of a series on Academic Writing #acwri2016.

Teaching first year PhD students, I encourage them to approach academic writing as conversational. I ask them to think about the conversations already taking place on their topic, and the contribution they want to make to what is being said. Approaching academic work as conversational helps, I think, in focusing on the kind of academic conversationalist one wants to be (and not be).

Beyond what is said is the question of *how* it is said. There is the monologist, who ignores what everyone else is saying, or acts as if the only voice worth listening to is their own; the mimic, who enters a conversation to repeat a point already made; the fighter who, well, fights and the interrogator, who in different registers asks questions. Focusing on academic writing as conversation provides a different way of validating why engaging with other people is important, beyond the routine answer that it is a convention or required hoop to jump through.

But does this mean academic work, and I'm thinking here about social science writing, has to find existing conversations to attach to? What happens when there isn't a conversation going on? Sometimes, doing academic work, particularly quirky or idiosyncratic work, can feel like lassoing far-away conversational ground, hoping to create an attachment that will make writing possible. But these attempted writerly attachments may not be recognised by those already in the conversation. Academics deep in talk can prove an impatient bunch, wanting contributions to prove their relevance and attentiveness to what else is being said. As we all may do in social conversation, seemingly oblique remarks may be quickly passed over.

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If it's a challenge to tether research to conversations far away, what about tethering research and writing to conversations that haven't yet taken place? What does it mean to write *as if* a conversation is taking place that isn't? This could be a conversation one thinks *should* be taking place. Perhaps, after thinking through a problem and moving several stages away from where the discussion currently is at, our hypothetical academic imagines, *this* is where the conversation will go, and *this* is what I want to say when it gets there.

But, our hypothetical academic is also impatient. She can't wait for the conversation to get to the place where she now sits and so she writes as if it's already there. We can think of this as prefigurative conversing, responding to a discussion *as if* it is the discussion taking place, because one *wants* it to be the discussion taking place, yet knowing quite well that it isn't. We might also think of it as conversing with ghosts, those phantom-like voices conjured up as we play out our own multi-speaker conversation.

Like all prefigurative actions that seek to presage *what should be*, in the belief that doing so will prosthetically help the desired future into being, prefigurative conversing cannot know where the academic conversation will go. The lines we think it will surely follow may not be the lines it actually takes. Indeed, the conversation may jump over the prefigurative point, so that it never becomes the quandary around which conversation gathers.

If this is so, is prefiguration then pointless? Or does its value lie not in correctly and effectively presaging where future debates will gather, but in contributing something distinctive to present discussion? Taken on its own terms, prefigurative writing seems like a speeding up of conversation. Treating the limits and flaws of existing discursive assumptions as already proven (and so not worthy of exposure), prefigurative writing offers a flight-path over existing conversational contours to more productive land.

But, while prefigurative writing may promise a shortcut, its value I think lies somewhere else: in slowing down rather than speeding up, as conversational participants try to make sense of what has been said, to recognise its challenges and to find a way through or around them. When heard, prefigurative writing can contribute to more textured conversation, challenging the presumptions of coherence and unity, of linear trajectory, academic conversations are often read as possessing.

But do these contributions get heard? Writing this post, my thoughts initially were on how those who converse with the

speculative creations of their own thinking often get swept to one side. To participants listening and responding carefully to one another, there can seem something arrogant or insufferable about the person who wants to take part but yet who insists on speaking as if the conversation was someplace else.

And yet, if there is something of value, at least sometimes, in prefigurative contributions, it may be worth exploring why such contributions often remain un-hearable. What would it take to bring the prefigurative speaker into the conversation? Time, patience, an interest in translation, and the facilitative, bridging work that some conversational participants undertake are important factors. But the danger of focusing on inclusion is that it presumes too narrow and unitary notion of what intellectual conversation should be like, where everyone participates without division in the same discussion.

Might it be helpful to imagine academic conversation, here, as more like a multistory bus, moving in a common direction but separated along different floors? On a double-decker bus, the ground level might be an intensely conversational space, while upstairs people listen to headphone music, eat quietly, gaze out of the window, shout random abuse or remain lost in thought. Interactions between the decks are limited. Some sounds, smells, and things circulate, and at different points people change levels or get off; but if we think of the bus as a conversation, it remains a multi-layered rather than single story affair.

Thinking about conversation in this way poses questions about how regularly we change floors; what is at stake in deciding whether to try out a different academic atmosphere as we move along – perhaps leave the tightly engaged chat with others for a form of thinking more at home with ghosts. But, it also asks us to think about how we imagine and describe intellectual conversations in those many academic contexts where we have cause to.

In the urgency of capturing a particular debate, are we too ready to slice off the top deck, to omit those lines of though which, undigested in conversation, are nevertheless still part of the great untidy bundle of what is said?

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