Cultures in Conversation

Donal Carbaugh

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CULTURES IN CONVERSATION

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There are no worlds but other worlds…
Known or unknown, every world exists because others do.

—Wendell Berry
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Preface

Over the past few years, perhaps like you, I have found myself in various social scenes that were being creatively cast through conversations, as well as uniquely exhibiting cultures. Let me mention a few of the more memorable of these. In one, I was standing in, what seemed to me, a very public Finnish hospital space with my pants down around my knees while two female nurses administered a shot to my buttocks; similarly, after a wonderfully searing hot time in a Finnish sauna, I found myself walking across the early April snow, bare naked, in full view of anyone who wished to take notice. In Moscow, Russia, at Lenin’s mausoleum in Red Square, I was castigated by Russian officers for walking into the shrine with my hands in my suit pockets and for talking to my Russian accomplice; or also in Russia, at Moscow State University, I ate breakfast with college athletes, enjoying hot dogs, mashed potatoes, a pickle, two slices of bologna and tea, while Gloria Estefan sang Salsa music over the speakers. On the northern plains of the U.S., in Blackfeet country, I found myself the only “whiteman” among Native people under a steamy dark dome of willow, while a Blackfeet participant prayed for “whitemen” who intrude where they don’t belong; or I was walking with a Blackfeet colleague who informed me that a crow had just said something worthy of our attention. In Shanghai, China, on the steps of the National Museum, I quite unexpectedly met a female Finnish colleague who took me by the hands and began dancing the Tango with me, which delighted me to no end!

Moments as these provide memorable experiences, as social interactions cast us into scenes that are rich for thought, deep in their design, and stand at the juncture of multiple traditions. Scenes as these also invoke cultural worlds and customs for conduct, as conversations within them creatively shape the forms and meanings of those worlds and that conduct.
While these few introductory examples may seem overly exotic or unusual, the general process of conversing through cultures is not. At least this is what I seek to demonstrate: Cultures and conversations come together in our contemporary worlds, each woven into patterns of social practice, each intricately intertwined with the other in complex and sometimes vexing ways.

What do we say while we are involved in moments like these? What, then, can we say about them?

In this book, I build accounts of conversational interactions that seek to preserve their cultural shapes and meanings. In so doing, I have tried sedulously to render conversations through codes, that is, through the terms, sequences, and premises that are familiar to those who have created them. The idea is that people, to some degree and in some particular ways, make conversation what it is. They have some idea about what it is they are doing as they converse, and they do so in the particular ways they find effective and pleasing—or may critique as ineffective or displeasing. Can we come to understand conversation in this way, by keeping in view what people, on the ground, so to speak, have made of it? I think we can, even must, build such accounts, with participants’ views of it in mind, with the studies assembled here demonstrating my efforts to do so.

A starting point in building such accounts is that conversation, and communication generally, is a kind of practical art, infused with people’s tastes and habits. In analyzing and understanding it, we can work with those creations. As a result, we can turn our attention to the interactional practices of people in places, trying to grasp their sense of its significance and importance, their grounds for understanding its shapes and meanings. The objective is not simply to report what people say about conversations, although we should do some of that. The objective is further to formulate the meaningfulness of conversational interaction to participants in terms they find resonant, important to them, thereby opening portals into their communal standards for such action. Building accounts of conversation in this way—with serious attention to participants’ accounts—we can re-enter conversational scenes, interpret the richness of its multiple contours, deepen our senses of how conversation is not only practiced by people, but moreover interpreting how it invokes larger worlds of meaning. If we are somehow successful in our efforts, participants can hear the account as somehow familiar to them, as resonant with their sense of the practice, yet moreover as informative, as saying something about the practice that had not been thought about quite that way before. In the process, we seek to honor participants’ worlds of meaning, creating
our accounts with them, thereby constructing through reflection, as through all practical art, a sense of the practice as motivated social interaction. With our fingers on peoples’ pulses, ears tuned to their cultural chords, hearing an ethos for an ethnos, we seek to understand cultures in conversation.
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I am indebted to many people who have helped in making the following studies not only possible, but pleasurable. I must mention the following: The studies in England were made possible by the kind invitation and support of Professor Rom Harré at Linacre College of the University of Oxford, England; the Finnish studies have been supported and funded variously by several members of the Fulbright Foundation, the American Center in Helsinki, the Universities of Helsinki, Jyväskyla and Tampere, and the School of Business Administration and Economics at Turku, some of whom I will mention below; the Russian studies were aided by Anna Pavlovskaya and the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies at Moscow State University, and by Mikhail Makorov of Tver State University; the Blackfeet studies were advanced immeasurably with the help of a Jacob Research Grant from the Whatcomb Museum, Bellingham, Washington, and by crucial support from the Office of Research Affairs, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In addition to these people and institutions, many others have offered rich opportunities for discussion and direction and I must mention among these Nancy Aalto and Liisa Kurki-Suonio of the Language Centre at the University of Tampere, Finland; Michael Berry of the Turku School of Business Administration and Economics, Finland; Jaakko Lehtonen, Aino Sallinen, and Liisa Salo-Lee of the Department of Communication, University of Jyväskyla, Finland; Marjatta Nurminen-Berry of Turku Polytechnic, Finland; Jens Brockmeier of the Free University in Berlin and the University of Innsbruck, Austria; Elena Khatskevich of Buryatia, Russia, and the University of Massachusetts; Jack Gladstone, Hawkstone Productions, Kalispell, Montana; Darrel Norman (aka Buffalo Body) of the Lodge Pole Gallery and Tipi Village, Browning, Montana; Darrell Robes Kipp, Executive Director of the Piegan Institute, Browning, Montana; and Curly Bear Wagner of Heart Butte, Montana.
At the University of Massachusetts, I am fortunate to be part of an intellectual community in which conversation, cultures, and social interaction are being variously explored and studied. I am particularly grateful for the discussions being sustained in our graduate programs by many colleagues and students. My hope is that the following writings in some way contribute to these and related discussions.

Several others have provided insight, encouragement, and friendship during the rather long process of researching and writing this book. Among these, Gerry Philipsen stands out as a long-standing source of insight, inspiration, friendship, and support. Each of the following also has helped with their continuing interest and conversations: Pua Aiu, Betsy Bach, Benjamin Bailey, Charles Braithwaite, Connie Bullis, Mary Jane Collier, Leda Cooks, Lisa Coutu, Patricia Covarrubias, Vernon Cronen, Natalie Dollar, Donald Ellis, Kristine Fitch, Xinmei Ge, Tim Gibson, Phil Glenn, Daena Goldsmith, Brad Hall, Mitch Hammer, Sally Hastings, Michael Hecht, Tamar Katriel, Young Y. Kim, Judith Martin, Trudy Milburn, Eric Morgan, Stephen Olbrys, Lisa Rudnick, Max Saito, Robert Sanders, Michelle Scollo Sawyer, Robin Shoaps, Rebecca Townsend, Richard Wilkins, Karen Wolf Wilkins, and Michaela Winchatz.
About the Author

Donal Carbaugh is Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His general interests focus on cultural philosophies of communication, and more specifically, the ways culturally distinctive practices get woven into international and intercultural interactions, with special attention to the relationship between language use, culture, spirit, and nature. His published research includes the book *Talking American: Cultural Discourses on DONAHUE* (1988), the edited volume *Cultural Communication and Intercultural Contact* (1990), and *Situating Selves: The Communication of Social Identities in American Scenes* (1996), *Narrative and Identity* (2001, edited with Jens Brockmeier). Recipient of a Hewlett Fellowship, a Fulbright Fellowship, an Advanced Institute of the Humanities Fellowship, and several grants, he has enjoyed lecturing across the United States, Europe, and Asia.