

Conversations Over a Brew

With. For. About: Care and the Commons
Dr Fiona Whelan and Lucy Powell

Transcript

Recorded on 26 May 2023 at The Quaker Meeting
House, Liverpool

N - Nat

F - Fiona

L - Lucy

57:06

[INTRO MUSIC]

N - Conversations Over a Brew is a series of intimate recorded conversations exploring the stories and ideas of the people we make art with. This podcast is about the power of listening and conversation and how making art can bring us together and create change. For this special series of Conversations Over a Brew, we invited six of the contributors taking part in **With. For. About** to speak about their practice. **With. For. About** is our yearly conference programme. It gives us an opportunity to connect with others, reflect openly on urgent issues concerning socially engaged practitioners and think collectively about the future of collaborative arts practice. The theme for this year's **With. For. About** was 'Care and the Commons', through which we explored care and the interconnectedness between humans, more-than-humans, place and land. Themes of which are entangled within the intersections of the climate and displacement crises. In this episode we hear from Dr. Fiona Whelan and artist Lucy Powell. Both Fiona and Lucy employ the act of listening as a central tool in their respective enquiries. In this conversation, the pair will discuss their approaches to listening and the points at which their very different practices meet.

[THE SOUND OF A KETTLE BOILING FADES IN, THE CLICK OF THE SWITCH INDICATING IT IS BOILED, WATER BEING POURED AND THE CLINK OF A TEASPOON STIRRING TEA IN A CUP]

N: Hi, Fiona. Can you tell us a bit about your practice?

F - Sure. Yes. I'm an artist, a writer and an educator. I suppose as an artist, I position myself as a collaborative artist. I work long term with groups, individuals, organisations on projects and processes. Probably at the core of all of them is an exploration of power; a group of people coming together to explore something related to power, inequality or some kind of social theme, concern. Usually a practice, the projects really evolve, so there are a group of people coming together to start talking and exploring, different methods come in and it's really cumulative. It really evolves over time, then we start to think about different ways of acting and responding to some of what's revealed in the process. Stories and lived experience would be at the core of what I do. I would always work with an organisation. I've worked for a long time with Rialto Youth Project in Dublin or different types of organisations, activist organisations or community based organisations. So there's a structure of support around the work. Usually we're gauging what people's lived experience, as a way to then understand bigger themes and then connecting the lived experiences towards responding to some of those bigger issues that might emerge.

N - And within that, listening is a key core tenant of your practice, right?

F - Yeah. Listening is one of those themes that because I work in a way with people and they're complex relationships...so any set of relationships that you're in are complex, full of complexities, power dynamics... I think listening is something that's very much in the room all the time. I can see how I listen as an artist, in terms of as a mode of research you're constantly listening and you don't necessarily know what you're listening for. But at the beginning of a project, you're in the room and you're exploring, you're listening, you're inquiring, and then you're listening for the gold that will emerge and then that might be the direction. It might reveal a form, an idea around a site or a process or a direction, but you're listening for that. For me, what's really important is the listening; it's not about taking, it's not about extracting what's said and going somewhere else with it. It's about

listening and then out loud saying what you've heard, checking what you've heard, and that usually leads to another direction. I'd understand the intersubjective nature of listening happens between people. I'm listening, so I'm part of what's heard. I'm bringing all of myself to how I listen and then my own positionality, all my own life and history and experiences come in terms of how I listen. Something emerges from that. Ultimately, I'm not the end goal. It's about working with the material, then working with people and as a group working together, then usually trying to figure out who else needs to listen. Who should be listening to what's coming up here and figuring out how we do that. That involves moving towards making work that's about creating the conditions for listening to happen for another public.

N - And Lucy, would you like to tell us a bit about your practice and where listening comes into it as well.

L - I think my art practice is...so I call it a research based art practice. Having moved away from a more conceptually, was my training, and so it's kind of leaving that behind because of having been more like the preconceived idea and to let that behind and be much more of a process driven, much more a listening, openness in the approach. Which was itself a process of unlearning, of changing the practice. That was something for me, the art practice is part of a bigger inquiry, which is ontological, is how to be in the world right now. That's my main question. The art practice is part of a wider inquiry, I think. It's how, in the world that as we know it is kind of crumbling, has to crumble...this what you say 'waiting for the gold to emerge,' whatever that, listening for what, where we're... something's collapsing, something's coming out. So it is that attuning to that. I love this, Rilke said it 'Living the question.' So I think that is a process of listening. It's just putting out your feelers in every way that you can. For me, a lot of that has been engaging with...I started with kind of human animal relations about probably 15 years ago. Very interested in starting with my idea of my own subjectivity and then thinking about this idea of projecting, and then this space inbetween and what that is and that very alive space. Then how we've gone in Western sciences...has been that space crumbling of that divide...which was seen as a divide. That's what we're kind of at. These dualisms are crumbling and it's finding that connective space and feeling into it and what that is, within the non-human. I guess my practice is following where science has gone, where science is realigning with indigenous science and with a kind of return, a kind of spiritual thing. It's all kind of there's a nice term called 'consilience' of the same findings springing up all over. Finding those, drawing the connections between that. That's also a kind of feeling the spider web of this web of resonance, right? And your kind of feeling out for that. So I think that's probably a good start. Yeah, but I think the emergent thing is very interesting to pick up on that. This idea of generating a receptivity to that, how can you become receptive to something that's coming up?

F - I mean, it makes me think when you're talking about the position of not knowing when you go into these inquiries and I don't, there's not many spaces left where you can admit to not knowing or actually value the not knowing as a position to go in. The idea of starting a process where you don't know what themes necessarily would emerge, but trusting that between a group of people or a set of processes, the inquiry will reveal what it needs to reveal and carry the journey in some way towards what needs to happen and how it's responded to. There's something about holding that when I listen to you talk, I can relate to that. Those kinds of modes of being in a space that are about not being the expert but listening deeply for what is in the room that needs to find its way. I say in the room, whereas I'm really conscious what you're talking about isn't. But my reference point is very

much usually a group of people somewhere and you're thinking, "What's here that we need to pay attention to." Then let that reveal something else.

L - Yeah, I think that this uncertainty, this not knowing, it's so, I want to say, foreign is not the word. It's just alien as in, in our make up, it's all about knowledge production, it's moving into as we know we're not going to solve the problem using the same set of thinking that's built it up. You've got to have something completely different. You've got to live in this unknowing. I'm really obsessed with Keats's, he talked about this negative capability, this ability to live in the unknown, with doubts and ambiguities and being able to dwell there. I feel like that's our task, to start feeling and that's for me that's very interesting. That it's very much a space that you have in Buddhist philosophy. It's all about the unknowing mind. It's cultivating. That is about receptivity to newness, to stuff that will emerge. It's very difficult this uncertainty and uncertainty is a very difficult topic as well politically, what that means. You've got that and you've got the abstract. So it's dancing between those as well. I think it's very interesting.

F - I think it is. I think it's a political space to hold because the neoliberal capitalist world that we're living within is telling us we should know the outcome of everything we do. It's very prescribed in that sense, and controlled. I think it's a political space to hold, to go into a space and not know what will come and just believe in the potential of a group of people, or a process unfolding something and following that.

N - Yesterday at the conference, Fiona, you spoke about how listening, or through listening you can demonstrate how you reflect back in a way that de-individualises subjects and places, their lived experience, in the context of systemic inequality.

F - Yeah, I mean, inequality is a context for most of the processes that I'd be engaged in. What often happens obviously is people internalise oppression, they internalise and the world is creating structures that people are individualising. They're being made individualised, their realities. That's the political structure that we live within. Because I work with people often who are experts on their own lived experience, sharing that into the space, it's in the sharing and it's in the process of working as a group together that something happens, that de-individualises the inequality. So people can have their own lived experience. We all do. We all make sense of it in all kinds of ways. But when you're part of a process, I suppose where that experience is sitting alongside lots of other people's experiences, and then you're working to interrogate and explore why any of this experience exists, what are the structures that are in place? Unpacking systems, and doing that in an age appropriate way, whether that's for children or adults or young people. But letting the experience guide the inquiry. I think a process begins, a process of de-individualising starts to happen. For me, that's one really important moment. When you're creating artworks out of that or public moments or events, encounters, workshops, whatever form starts to emerge that would bring in another public, I think it's really important that the de-individualising of inequality comes on that journey. In public moments, public are invited and they begin to see the layers and the complexity. At once, the people are involved and these other publics are experiencing the complexity of some of the realities that are being talked about. Whether that's related to policing or housing or these kind of, visible forms of power. It's some of what the work would deal with in terms of policing and housing and law and policies, to the more intangible forms of power that we might experience as social norms in terms of class or gender, but trying to visualise some of those power relations, give them a form and then be able to see how they exist in the world. That becomes kind of part of the work. There's different strategies for how that's

done that might depend on the intention for a particular piece of work. Who we think the public are. Who needs to listen, and then thinking about, "Well how would that group be invited into a space to listen.", "What kind of narrative should they be exposed to?" Trying to keep an eye on the layers, the complexity of a story so it doesn't become reduced to a kind of single narrative. It's layered and it's complex.

N - Thinking about that, and just thinking back to what you just said, Lucy, about how you have used listening, and listening to more-than-humans to kind of rebridge the destroyed relationship between science and spirituality. Thinking through the structures and the power dynamics that humans have imposed on more than human beings. How do you use listening to reconnect with more-than-humans? Thinking back to your workshop yesterday, it felt like making visible those structures that we'd placed on ourselves and how we view the natural world and how we have separated ourselves.

L - Yeah. I mean this, these power imbalances; the extractive mentality and mindset that works racially, across gender, across class and everything that is put under the thing of 'nature'. Which was the natural world, which was women, which was a racial thing and which was probably a class thing. I think that general othering. The same approach happens. But it also is internalised. Part of the workshop yesterday was seeing our bodies as part of that. So it's seeing...we did a meditation...part of the workshop was doing a meditation asking your body how it wants to breathe, how it would like to breathe. This idea of a respectful questioning, because of your own body, putting it through stress, expectations. So we started with our own bodies, relating to our own bodies. In this idea that we call our 'own bodies'. It's not, that is not something we own. We think of it, but it is actually, it's on loan from the earth, from the cosmos, however you want to see it. But we have this, and the power starts there. The criticism, the expectations, all of that. So that's where we started, and then we had this slowing down, this allowing, and that was part of it was with the own body.

N - It felt quite de-individualising, in a way, even though we were there in our own bodies.

L - Well, yeah. First of all, I linked our own bodies to the common ancestry with, with plants, with fungi, with algae, with animals back to we are all eukaryotes. We all have cells with a nucleus. We have that deep ancestry. That was one thing. Then also with wind, earth, water, we're all made up of the same elements. It's just these elements in circulation, forming a body for a period of time and then moving on again. There isn't this shared space of this. Then this idea of breathing the atmosphere, is this deeply interpenetrative space of bodies breathing in bodies and there are no borders there. So that was... I really like to try and feel into that space of possibility. This whole atomistic thing, just letting go of it and this whole...so much of that mindfulness and meditation is on self-care. That's me. But it is systemic, it's bodies and the idea that focusing on your own breeds compassion and then you understand we're all doing the same thing. This connectivity comes through.

F - I think, as I listen to you, it makes me think about how the field of practice can be so segregated into themes and topics like arts and young people, arts and health, arts and climate or activist campaigns or climate action, migrant rights. Rightfully so in lots of ways. They need to be separate so people can focus and achieve change. But the danger in all that segregation is they become kind of disconnected. That ultimately is a major problem because...and I was really taken yesterday by the presentations in the morning by Radha and Youngsook, and I know you're going to have your own conversation with them

later...but that reconnection of the struggles of climate with the struggles of land and people and humanities and all of together, the major crisis and how they're all so interconnected. I think what happens is there can be a danger people go "Oh, they're those people." Or "That's that theme. What you're talking about isn't connected to what I'm talking about, isn't connected to what you're talking about." We're all kind of individualised again into our own separate struggles. Actually, there's something in what you're describing there that I see as not connected. I go "That's not what I do." But then when I hold the bigger picture, I can see that there's so many different ways we have to come at this and see it as one big struggle. So the conference yesterday usefully put together some of these macro political themes and different practices that connect them. I was in my head in the morning listening and thinking through these complex themes, and then in the afternoon I'm sitting with my back against a tree for a few hours and thinking "This is related, this is right here now. This is the earth that we're sitting on." And how that connects to some of these bigger themes. It can be, it can be challenging and uncomfortable, but I think when seeing those all connected, I think is, is really politically important.

L - I think that's the work now, is to find the common ground between these different practices, between what people see as my 'my issue' and seeing it as it's all different. I think of these, what those fantasy dices with all the different sides to them, but it's the same and I think that's really important. How do you have those conversations with people to realise? I was thinking of a friend of mine who works with trauma and I was talking to her about environmental issues and she says "I can't go there. I've got so many-" This idea of people stretched to the limits with their own stresses from family, mental health, work, the whole lot. Then the environmental issue comes up and people are like, "I can't go there because that's just another thing and that will break me and that feels like, and so I keep pushing it away." And so this question of, for me, it's this discrepancy of how people are, most people are very, very worried about it and yet nothing is happening. It's this...

F - I suppose it's competing urgencies.

L - ...competing urgencies. But if you can see them as, if you can feel properly, if you can understand this as a complex joined up problem and then we put all our energies into our different aspects of it, but we're working away at the same.

F - Yeah, I think identifying the root causes that there, a lot of them...

L - Power, control, structural violence, all of this, all of that.

F - Colonialism.

L - Yeah. Yeah.

F - The neoliberal capitalist structures.

L - It's all that.

F - They all cause...But then you can only do so much. I think it can be overwhelming for people to feel like you must respond to everything. I think it's making the connections that these things are related.

L - Making the connections, understanding you and then doing your little bit in your thing that makes, that you're passionate about. Everyone, if you realise "This is where my joy is, what I really care about. Where I do this bit, you're doing that." We're realising we're all chipping away, little ants chipping away from different, from little... But it's not one cause it...I mean, it is one cause, but, and I think that's, so the question is; How do we get people to see that they are...

N - Joined in struggle

L - ...are doing that?

N - Yeah, joined in struggle.

L - Joined in struggle. The movement of movements, that's the word, but it's just not happening somehow.

F - Yeah.

N - I think someone yesterday in one of the listening circles said something. It was very simple, but really nice. It was "Things are, things are the way they are now because we made them that way. So it, and it doesn't mean they have to continue that way and we have the power to change."

L - Yeah.

N - And, and just that acknowledgement that we don't have to carry on like this. It is, people have made these structures and people can unmake these structures, and empowering ourselves to think about that. Going back to how I experienced your workshop yesterday, it felt like a very fundamental unpacking of very fundamental systems and just being in that moment was really very powerful and it may sound silly, but like becoming one with the earth. It really felt like that. It really felt like that in that moment. That idea of the de-individualising and, and joining up.

F - I think the risk, the only risk is that in this idea of a common aim that we lose sight of the power inequalities between us. Because and I think this is what I was trying to talk about a little bit yesterday with the question around listening and empathy, because sometimes listening can be understood to be a nice activity. That we listen to the other. What I was trying to talk about was listening beyond tolerating the other. So the next move is listening with real empathy, which obviously is really important. But then what would, getting beyond empathy look like? There's lots of thinkers and theories that talk in these terms, but thinking of **Patti Lather** talking about the personalised culture we live in that's so full of sentimentalising empathy. But what would it mean to actually move beyond that into another type of space? And I think for me, it's how you get groups of people together and act and speak truth to power and create change. But in doing that, don't somehow neutralise the power relations that exist between you because it's fine and well to say "We're all on the same side and we're all working towards one ultimate goal." But the lived reality as we sit together might be completely different based on who we are, you know?

L - No. I think the point is holding both spaces. It's not saying we're all one big goo. We are all one big goo. That's one, that's one part of reality. It's just, and then we're very different and have all our things and it's holding that, those paradoxes and realising there are

various realities all happening at the same time and honouring that. That's very important because one doesn't exist without the other. So I think that's very, totally important.

[A BRIEF RELAXING AND SOOTHING MUSICAL INTERLUDE PLAYS, SIGNIFYING THAT WE ARE HALFWAY THROUGH THE PODCAST]

F - I think it's just about conflict, it's about keeping conflict alive and contestation and difference.

L - And difficulty, yeah.

F - And so while we're trying to achieve certain things, to not neutralise the power relations that we have between us. Because if we sweep over them in the pursuit of something else...

L - No, this was this conversation about decolonising the mind. It goes on a very, very deep level. Constantly working out where power relations have gone wrong and constantly being attuned to that. I think that's very interior work. I mean, it's very...that's proper mindfulness. Of being mindful of, on all levels and mindful that everybody's doing that and being generous in like "Let's do this work together. People make mistakes." All of that sort of thing and holding that difficult, and not this cancel thing. We make mistakes. You've got to be able to do that, but you've got to be able to say you've made a mistake and keep the conversation going.

F - Yeah. Because I think structural inequalities, systemic failures is ultimately where the attention needs to be in different kinds of ways. In keeping our eye on that, we can do all kinds of interesting collaborative work with different spaces and different processes. But keeping an eye on the root causes and finding ways to speak truth to that power and that structure. Mindfulness is something, I'm curious from your point of view, because mindfulness is something for me that I completely get, I completely value and understand, but I also see so many things and how they become co-opted and used. And I think this kind of, it's an individualising solution. So it's "Here's systemic failure, so now we're messing up people and life and the earth, and the solutions are to go into yourself and be mindful." I'm not saying for you that's how it would be, but you see that language and it's the language of 'resilience' that is now perpetuating every document that you encounter from a state body is the resilience of people. You're like "But why do we need to be so resilient?" Because the system is completely failing. It's this putting it back on the individual. So I think how you work with creating structures of power and support and care, and all of that becomes part of this nurturing of people. Ultimately to be able to speak truth back. So it's the self care plus the kind of capabilities to actually analyse and recognise what's causing us to need to mind ourselves so much in terms of the world we live in.

L - Yeah. No, no. I mean for me I've done mindfulness teacher training and for me the word itself is this horror word because everyone has this idea about, and it is very individualised and it is about sustaining a broken system by individualising that and creating calm. But I think that's come through the co-opting. Where it comes from, if you see it coming from something like **Thich Nhat Hanh's Engaged Buddhism**.

F - Absolutely.

L - I mean it, it is systemic and it's seeing those connections and it's a way to see how this is internalised. But you've always got to go out, and out is the systemic. It's working on those levels and it's a very, very powerful tool for that because you're analysing at a very deep level. But you always have to see the micro and macro and work on those two levels. It is a very radical proposition and practice and a very powerful tool for this and for change. That's what **Bell Hooks** said "There is no revolution without contemplation." That for me is the connection. They have to go together because you just have the revolution, then you, you don't realise how you've internalised all of this stuff. You have to do the internal work otherwise...

F - Absolutely. We are bodies in space, and so thinking about our own connections as bodies.

L - Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, I came to this thinking because I came from environmental activism and of that kind of approach and I was thinking "Why is this, why is the change not happening?" And for me it was because it's interior stuff. There's so much there. I've got to go deeper to work on that kind of level at the same time. But it's related and there's no way. For me, it's a deconstruction of your own structures within your own thinking and behavioural. If you can change that there to have that revolution you need. I just agree with her so much on that. That was my inspiration for it, but it's so common. It's impossible to talk about because you always have to have this conversation with it. You can't just drop that word because everyone then assumes it's like this horror corporate thing.

N - With the colouring book, too.

L - Yeah.

F - But it is the problem with so much of the language that starts with real meaning and then becomes co-opted and re-appropriated and used in ways that then undoes something. It's the constant game of trying to catch how the language....

L - Language. It's language, yeah.

F - ...has been altered and changed. I see some of what I would do and my practice, I position that there's an ethics attached to it that's about if we keep persisting, persisting and talking, a persistence and talking about power that becomes the ethics. So in every context trying to just talk about power and whatever that might mean and whatever level that might be. Unpacking power as an ethical position. I'd see that against a backdrop of the ethics of social inclusion, the contemporary ethics of social inclusion. Which has also become dominant but has lost some of what the roots of it were intended to be. So when we talk about inclusion, we don't necessarily talk about what system people are being included into or what's the power relationship of that. Assumed inclusion is a good thing. Participation and integration and those kinds of words, if they don't come with an analysis of power, they also become words that become dangerous. So it's all of this looking at the power and potential of them. I think if we can just slow down and do that with each of these structures, because it's our words or our language, but then they become...well sorry, when I say our, maybe they're not for different people...but I think people find the language they used to use and then see how it's reused.

N - And it's reused to make us...like 'inclusion'

F - Yeah like 'participation.'

N - Yeah, 'participation', thank you, is a way to include us to make us more productive?

F - Yeah, and in the field of socially engaged, collaborative arts practice, we have to stay really attentive to the politics of participation because people, many, many groups of people are not invited to meaningfully participate in society. There's a danger that we become the people who listen, but that somehow dampens the desire to fight or to speak back to some of the power relations. I think with arts practice, there has been that critique that it does the job of the state and actually does a disservice to the people who are invited to participate by a pretence that you've been heard, but really we didn't. That's not what the job needed. So I think that sense of as artists or as organisations, as anyone who's inviting someone to participate, to engage, we really need to talk about power and think about what is it that needs to change here and what does this participation look like? Because it has potential to be unproductive. No, unproductive may be the wrong word in the context of how you're describing productivity, but dangerous, unhelpful and kind of counter to what we're trying to achieve.

N - Yeah, you just become a lacky of that state right, and at the core of that practice to avoid all those pitfalls that we just mentioned, active listening in the way you describe listening, and the way you describe listening is key to all that, right?

F - I mean when you listen, you bring yourself to the listening. So your own lived experience or your own research, your own knowledge, the things you're interested in come into the listening. When I listen, I will hear things and you will hear different things because we're listening out for things that we're interested in. Whether consciously or not, as well as all of our own histories and baggage in terms of how we can listen and what's there in the room. But there's a kind of a coding. I was really struck yesterday when we were in the nature space and doing processes with trees and birds that I don't have the code to know if when I'm looking at that tree I don't know if it's dying. I don't know. I'm using my basic cop on, but I can't engage certain things because I don't have the knowledge to know how to code what I'm looking at. In another space, I'll be right in there. I'm like "I know this material. I know what's happening." And I can read a dynamic in a room and know I can listen. I can listen to what's not being said because there's a certain set of skills or experiences that I have that I can bring to that listening. Then there's other spaces where you're listening as an outsider who doesn't have the code to know what they're listening to. There can be advantages in different ways to different positions. But I think when we talk about listening, we have to understand how much we're bringing to the listening and how much that influences what's heard, then thinking about who else needs to listen, because ultimately we're talking about creating change and making work that actually causes some kind of interruption elsewhere. Then it's thinking about "Well, what would it take for those to listen?" Whether that's to mobilise people to act or whether that's to speak truth to a state agency or somebody else who's, who's holding too much power or abusing that power or something. It's about trying to think, well, yeah "What are their codes going to be and how do we need to, to immerse or do something that interrupts or engages with that?" They're the kind of complexities across listening but ultimately there's too much emphasis on 'voice' in our society, on the voice of people. It's a bit like 'participation', 'integration', it seems like a good thing. Of course creating platforms for people to have a voice is a good thing, but only if you follow the journey and think about who's actually listening.

N - How do you respond to that?

L - Well, I mean.

N - In terms of...

L - Yeah, yeah.

N - I guess the power dynamics between humans and the natural world, do you see the way you use listening as a way to trouble those power dynamics and make those visible?

L - I mean the fact that it's thought that plants are passive, all of that is a projection. That understanding of this valuing that anthropocentrism of the value of the voice of saying "We have a voice there." That puts plants on a...that's a power dynamic that's established because it's judging other beings by the human. As if the human is the standard by which... Whereas if you look at evolution with the human at the top as if we are the peak of evolution, everything that's alive now has been evolving as long as we... Everything is constantly evolving for the world that we're in. It's not like we are the peak of something. We are just tiny. That's this thing of 'plant blindness', right? It's a backdrop. It's greenery. It's vegetation. Whereas the plants have created the world that we live in. The oxidation moment where everything that's alive now is only alive because the photosynthesisers created the world that... And you could go back to the microorganism, the bacteria in the algae, in the plants. You can keep going back, but it's basically this photosynthesising, this power of harnessing the sun. That amount of power and that amount of bodies which are taken for granted, not having a voice, considered passive. But as **Robin Wall Kimmerer** said "There is no science that's happening now, that is seeing that animals or plants or fungi are less intelligent than we thought they were." In fact there's an intelligence of... Oh, there was a beautiful...I can't remember. There's a woman who works with biomimicry. Unfortunately I can't remember her name. She says she's working with, looking at,...she said, if you can look at the intelligence of these plants. Say, for example, in marshes, all of these plants there are doing saline filtration. Engineers are like all this, they're 40 years of career, and then they go to a marsh and they see all of the beings have worked out in their way how to do this and burst into tears. Because they can see this brilliance, this natural intelligence, this chemical alchemy, this power, this magic, this billions of years of doing that, experience doing that. She said to understand that, to slow down, to observe, to listen to that, to learn from. From, not about, *from* the plants, how they are in the world. She said it's obscene to talk about natural resources and it's just so that there is no voice and therefore passive, therefore ignored, therefore, and it's thinking "God, it's unlearning all of that."

F - And it makes me think the language of 'voice and listening' is very human in that sense. It struck me yesterday, talking about voice or talking about listening that I was describing actually something that doesn't require your ears because if you think in the very mainstream about the word 'listening' you'd point to your ears. But likewise voice, and...sorry in that context we're talking about different kinds of listening. What it means to really listen to someone and to be moved to act and think about the power relation and all of that. So it's not the first order of voice to using your ears to listen. But likewise, voice obviously immediately implies a human can speak. But I think the politics of it are that somebody, some body or some thing or some human or non-human or more-than-human subject is communicating.

L - Yes.

F - And it's the communicative action that I'm interested in. It's knowing then how to witness that communication that is happening and that then there's a duty of response and an act needed to respond. So whether that's the earth communicating in the ways you've described or a group of people communicating an inequality through speaking or not speaking, sometimes that injustice comes out in other ways and isn't voice. As I'm listening to you I'm realising maybe the human framing around voice and listening that does something that maybe isn't as helpful if we're really thinking about communicating an action. So I don't know. I'm only thinking out loud a response to what you're saying, but I can see how the language pacifies the earth and land in a way that you're describing. Ultimately as we come back to the human crisis and the climate crisis and the earth and land and politics it's all so deeply connected.

L - Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think it's a different time scale as well. As we were doing with the body. The body is slower than the mind. The body, our own bodies are slower in their responses. They are and plant time is slower. So you need to slow down to listen. For me gardening, for example I'm working in a garden now and the idea of the garden is not to make veggies for humans to eat. The idea is to create a garden that is a regenerative form of allowing that land. It's very compacted earth, it's very sandy. It's poor, it hasn't been given, it's sort of wild, but can we get this soil, can we get wildlife? 70% of insects have died out in my lifetime. You just don't see insects in this garden. So how can we create this place that comes to life? This idea of acting to life producing, life giving, generating more life, and how can you do that? So you go into the garden and you have your ideas of what you want to do. Then over time this beauty of allowing, and you see where plants come up. Maybe they don't come up for a few years and then suddenly they're there and they work there and they're able to live in that soil. So you try and allow them, you give them space to be there. Then you see "Ah the insects coming there." It's just this negotiation with what would be called weeds, but actually they're incredibly valuable nutritionally. They're incredibly valuable for bees, for birds and it's learning in that space of thriving and listening to those rhythms. Taking a step back, making mistakes, but allowing yourself to be taught how. That's a very beautiful process and it's very slow but feels like a multi-species listening and negotiation. Then of course, it spills out into the neighbourhood and you make connections with the locals who are maybe doing different kinds of gardens, which is all about control and power and "I want it like this. It has to be neat." All of these colonial games in the garden, of this power, of control and all of that is played out. A garden is a really interesting place to see those spaces, to see those relationships and, and the histories of gardening and all of this. So, yeah.

F - I think it's making people aware of the interconnectedness of the plight of the land and, and people's struggles, because I think they've been so disconnected. When I think about if you're in a housing crisis and you see an empty bit of land, it's hard not to justify why we should not just build houses when you've people who have no homes, if you don't understand that that bit of land actually needs to be there for that function as well. I might be making it sound like land is only for human value, and I don't mean to do that, but I think if you don't see them as as essential and as contingent in this wider world that we occupy at this moment there's a real danger that we miss the bigger picture around the destruction of land and people and for the the neoliberal capital agenda which it just doesn't value.

L - It doesn't value anything except profit. Yeah.

F - Yeah.

L - I mean, the idea of this wellbeing economy no? And that brings in the planetary and human thriving. Which one goes, they're not, they're inseparable. So think about that in economic terms. Think about that in the way you structure a society. That's the idea for me and that changes the power dynamics. If you just say instead of "It's profit," you say "It's what is thriving of life." Then you join those up and then you listen in a very different way and you listen in a connected way.

N - Thank you. So closing comments on a big question. How do you both see or envisage us moving forward and moving forward together and in better ways? And have you got any reflections upon yesterday? I'd particularly like to hear about both of your reflections, but I haven't heard much about your thoughts, Fiona, on your role as Listener In Residence yesterday. So...

F - Okay, so even the idea of moving forward is as a con-

N - Perhaps forward is the wrong word.

F - I know what you mean, but it relates to the question around Listener In Residence because I think what was really interesting for me yesterday...so the invitation was from Heart of Glass to be a Listener In Residence and I understand that the title emerged from a conversation that I had with Emma and Kate from Heart of Glass. I was talking a lot about listening and Emma, I understand, came up with the idea and the invitation. But what struck me yesterday was that I didn't behave any differently than I would if I was at the conference without being a Listener In Residence. I think that's important because there's a danger that I adopt a different mode of behaviour, which actually starts to undo a real quality of listening. So I have a way of being in spaces and listening and somebody else beside me and we discussed this a little bit last night, would have a different mode of how they listen. So we're all, we were talking about this last night. But what is interesting is what wasn't expected was that I would stand up at the end and tell everybody what I'd heard and make sense of it and present it back as a rational bringing together. Then because that happens, that expectation and sorry, there can be a value at the end of a conference to hearing somebody gather a whole set of thoughts. Fine. But if we're talking about listening, I was really struck by the fact that it's an ongoing practice. So I'm in the day and I'm hearing things and I'm on a particular journey and I'm missing half of what was said because I have to make choices around what I'll go to. So I resisted, and with Heart of Glass talked about this, resisted the idea that I would flit between four or five workshops to make sure I listened to all of them or something. It was actually "No, just do the day and be in it and be reflecting on it and don't feel the urge to have to then summarise, collate and come up with some kind of total understanding." Because it's entirely partial, it's entirely intersubjective, it's my listening to the day which relates to the whole set of things that are going on in my brain at the moment. So I was very clear that I was there in...I would only pick up a partial perspective and I would only...it wouldn't be total in any way. So it was a really welcomed invitation. I will reflect and I will write something, but I'm immediately taken by the type of writing I'll have to do and the type of writing I will absolutely resist in trying to speak about the day. So it doesn't become that I somehow elevate a power position around my understanding of what happened. So I think sorry, I'm saying that in the sense that I think the day was really, really rich and I was really taken by the different types of spaces and the different ways my body was moving around from being outdoors, taking

time sitting in particular spaces or walking or moving through spaces to being in the kind of critical spoken presentation space and such brilliant presenters. I have so many notes and thoughts. So how to move forward or act in response.

N - Act in response. Yes, it's a much better way.

F - Yeah. Yeah.

N - Thank you.

F - So it's like, no but it is this thing because I think that construct, the linear construct as well. So for me I activated my listening by also talking all throughout the day saying to people what I heard and then listening to how they heard something. Then you're constantly reflecting and acting and talking and building relationships and building networks and networks of solidarity rather than networks in the kind of corporate sense, but alliances and potentials. So I think lots of things emerged from yesterday for all kinds of people in terms of relationships and directions and new understandings and knowledge sharing and really important things that won't be tangible and won't be able to be clear in terms of a mode to action. But I'm really sure that they've had a real influence in some way. So there's certain things I've left with, with a set of references, I need to understand. A set of things that I know I need to do more work on. So if everybody has left with a kind of rich thinking process and connections, it can only lead to another interesting, something else. I mean Radha speaking about decolonising and thinking about that in a very real way is something that I really need to think through further. I think there are some real good challenges put into the room; the relationship with land and people and how complex some of those things are. I think it was a very profound day for me anyway. I have lots of movement in terms of my own thinking that in itself is action. If all of us are, if you come into a day and you leave with a whole set of new understandings and challenges, then to use the earlier word of 'productivity', that's productive in some way. It has generated...the word 'generative'.

L - Generative.

N - Generative

L - Yeah.

N - And some sort of change has occurred or at least, yeah, I feel like that's happening.

L - Seeds have been sown.

N - Yes.

L - I like that, that's a very nice image I think for planting seeds and cultivating that with your own thinking. I think this is a language thing right? It's always finding the metaphors and that says so much. Right?

F - But 'generative' I think.

L - Generative is better than productive.

F - Generative is, it felt like a generative space yesterday.

L - Yeah.

F - So that will unfold in all kinds of seen and unseen ways perhaps. I look forward to coming back. I'd like to. This would be...there's new relations and new connections and new possibilities I think.

L - Yeah. For me I've spent more time in this kind of the non-human at the neglect of the more socially engaged stuff. So for me that's very important to bring that, because for me in recent years I've been like "Okay, we've got to..." That's why I'm talking, it's clumsy terms about it being the same. It isn't the same, but we need to be talking to each other and sharing our practices around that to see how they can mutually feed each other. I think it's very important because the separate spheres are not the way to go. That was great to have that there. It feels very fecund or very fertile territory. That's where those conversations need to be had.

N - Yeah, particularly Radha's talk. It made, well both Radha and Youngsook, I think made those connections between colonialism and the land and divorcing land from people and the violence of that and the power dynamics in place that colonialism has put in place, very visible, and talking about that in a very interconnected way. Just as you were saying the work that, or the thoughts you were having about how you can think about those in more interconnected ways, moving for-, moving ... [LAUGH] No, in response to, in response to, in response to.

L - Yeah, exactly.

N - I need to decolonise my mind next week.

[OUTRO MUSIC PLAYS AS NAT SAYS THEIR FINAL THANK YOU]

N - Thanks for listening to this episode. Check out the show notes for more information about this project. We will be back again soon with another Conversation over a Brew.

57:06

END