

“Let me introduce you to...”

Rafico Ruiz (McGill University)

How to put this?

Writing in the scholarly enterprise has for the most part been a dominant medium of representation. Monographs get written, articles are published and circulated across more or less fixed paths of networked exchange, chapters get edited and collected to make up comprehensive and relatively timely interventions into an ongoing, evolving sphere of knowledge production, and so on and so forth. Around the peripheries of all this keyboard and screen labour time, lie those fleeting moments of extra-writerly exchange: conferences, colloquia, keynote lectures, hallway conversations, eavesdropped meetings, etc. etc.

Another way to put it would be to characterize these exchanges as the moments when “things don’t get written down,” or at least only get written down without immediate publication in mind. What I’m trying to say is that even within and across the scholarly enterprise the valuations of what we do most of, that is, talking, off the cuff, on the fly, or structured, reading as writing delivery, are ambiguous at best. As a mode of communication, as something that doesn’t get set (and set-up) on the ever-less paper page, talking doesn’t often count as a multi-dimensional question that interrupts the work we do and the ways we go about doing it.

Since the odd, allegorical figure of Travis Bickle stands over this issue of *Seachange* like a slightly disturbed shoulder angel, it’s worthwhile to recall that we should probably ask ourselves a little more

often “who the hell else are you talkin’ to?” and if “you talkin’ to me?” These are questions that can have that same resonance that some lines from classic movies seem to hold on to, and that makes them unforgettable and acontextual, that lets you inhabit that character for the moment you give voice to those exact lines. These are moments when we recognize that we’re performing. We’re putting “it” on, without it being totally clear to us what this “it” consists of.

So, like I said, if writing has been the privileged medium of scholarly exchange for a whole series of communication-centric reasons (it’s transportable, reproducible, disembodied, extra-temporal, durable, I could go on), talk has for the most part been relied on as a human infrastructure that, on the odd disciplinary occasion, gets fixed through transcription; recast into oral history; analyzed, usually, for its discursive and rhetorical characteristics, that are more or less narrowly political; taken apart for its constitutive linguistic elements; psychologized and psychoanalyzed through patient case studies; appended in anthropological and sociological accounts of in situ interaction, amongst others. This leads me to ask if talk should be made to count? Should we start to include it in the ways in which we go about recognizing just how subjective, positioned, and contextualized, how spoken, our micro-scholarly agendas are?

I think the argument could be made that our current epistolary obsessionism (e-mail rules our writerly worlds, after all), have made talk a strange supplement to digital exchange. We’ve all lived through those moments when we meet up with someone after having exchanged X number of e-mails with them, and it’s as though we’re picking up a conversation that we left off — all the unsaid is the previously written.

“Let me introduce you to...”

It seems like it's happening more and more that people are writing as if they were talking, with Facebook status updates and Twitter threads, that make the written word, seem, you know, casual. I always ask myself, maybe sort of cynically, what are they trying to get away with? What's the conceit? The internet itself as a medium (well, converging media, if we're going to be all 2000s about it) both interfaces and records, it's a mediating and recording technology that holds onto what we say--where's the freedom of speech in that? Often I don't recognize friends through their mediated presences on-line, they seem foreign, a different voice has taken over all those hard and soft keyboards and I want to ask them what are you really trying to say? Just tell me. While, within the context of the scholarly enterprise, we want to value the “embodied” moments of lived experience, and while they are constitutive (ecological, even, in the ways in which they make up our positionality as subjects somewhere), they nonetheless count both less and differently in structural, sort of political economic terms, when we want to talk about what we talk about because it's important to us.

To take a leap out of that scholarly enterprise (let's just fictionalize that it can be delimited, after all universities can be privatized, right?), talk, when it's taken seriously, is often paired up with the possibilities inherent in democratic politics. We're increasingly starting to realize the technological valences and limits of language; to “remake” any political project whatsoever takes linguistic invention and intervention, equally semantic and discursive. Yet “talk” is, in a way, language of the in process, something that is captured that maybe shouldn't be or that isn't consciously destined to be. It is recorded out of thin air when that is maybe precisely where it should have disappeared into since that's

what it was made of. Sorry about that — that’s sort of how I think out loud. This makes talk and talking unconventionally “political,” and something closer to cultural technologies that are so often subject to being thought of as a meagre “just,” or an expansive “all.” They are political in that they start to be taken as events that matter, that are loaded with meaning (“where did you learn to say that?” is not a question we hear very often), but that really do and can start to make who we are *really* (isn’t that such a graphic conceit?) “talkin’ to” conscious of how we are living in auto-tuned societies.

I’ve got an anecdote to share. This might not be the place for it, I know. You’re free to tell me otherwise. I was doing some “fieldwork” (we’re all exhausted by scare quotes, I know, especially so because they rely on some tacit assumption that I can’t come up with a better word for what I’m trying to say so I’ll just undermine the one we all recognize to be faulty anyways), so I was doing some “fieldwork” in northern Newfoundland last year, in a small town called St. Anthony. I was getting a feel for the place, looking around, trying to meet various people through the mayor (there are only 2,400 residents in the town, so once you meet one person you can easily start to meet up with others). He introduced me to, well, he gave me the phone number for a man named Francis Patey, who’s one of the town’s local historians. Francis and his wife Agnes, who works for the Grenfell Foundation, the current incarnation of the medical mission I was there to study, live at the mouth of the bay into St. Anthony. I drove over to their place one morning to talk about Grenfell and the history of the region. Francis and Agnes talked for a while about their memories of growing up in St. Lunaire-Griguet, one town over from St. Anthony, and what sort of

“Let me introduce you to...”

place the Mission played in their lives. After our sort of “formal” interview was over (I was recording it on my SONY ICD-BX 112 sound recorder), Francis showed me around his basement workshop where he was making three different local souvenirs to sell at a “Come Home Year” summer celebration to be held in St. Anthony the following August. Francis told me a little bit more about his life, reminiscing (it was maybe more like quick recall) about working as a kid gutting codfish on the edge of the harbour, with the cod up to his ankles, a short knife in his right hand, and other kids around trying to get as many cod gutted as they could as they were paid by the fish; about his time as a sealer, dealing with the Greenpeace protesters coming into St. Anthony to block his boat from going out, telling me about how Bridget Bardot came to town and she was given a pin by a local and since she didn’t know much about Newfoundland English she didn’t realize that it said something like “I strongly support the sealers!,” and she just walked around town with this pin on; about how he gave up sealing, it was tough on his body that hard work, to get a day job as a security guard in the newly built St. Anthony airport in the 1980s, and how this gave him some more time to write about the way it was in St. Anthony over the past few decades and how things had changed. I got to know Francis a bit better then and there. Once the recorder had been put away, Francis could talk freely, like it didn’t matter. How was I going to make Francis “speak”? Did I want to? Did I have a right to? Did it matter? I guess that’s where my anecdote was heading.

Anyways, this is obviously a shallow treatment of some very old questions — a chatty treatment, I guess you (or I) could say (not to

devalue chat, of course). I haven't gone in for much name-dropping (you know the usual suspects already). One question I haven't addressed, maybe because it's a bit too self-reflexive (aren't they all?!), is if scholarly writing needs any more pomo distancing? You know, Junot Diaz getting all up in our faces and taking it all apart and letting us know when languages meet on the page and that's when maybe we can start to figure things out.

Do we need that? I'd say so. "Yes." You could put it that way.

Rafico Ruiz is a Ph.D. candidate in Communication Studies and the History & Theory of Architecture at McGill University, and holds a Bachelor of Arts in English Cultural Studies from McGill University, and a Masters degree in French Cultural Studies from Columbia University. His dissertation examines the Grenfell Mission of Newfoundland and Labrador as a project of social reform, with a particular focus on its relevance for the historical and cultural relations between space, time, and technologies that helps us to situate and site contemporary problems of mediation. He is also the co-editor and co-founder of *Seachange*, a journal of Art, Communication, and Technology (www.seachangejournal.ca).