PaRLab minutes — 29th August 2018

Present in person
    Carmen Wong
    Nick Drofiak (note-taking)

Present by Skype
    Rakel Ezpeleta
    Claire French
    Eva MacIntyre

RE   Rakel will be visiting Coventry at the end of October, probably the 24th to 29th October.

CW   This will be something of a housekeeping meeting. How can we recruit more members to the PaRLab? Also from other departments?

ND   There is a Centre for Creative Writing in Law; we could approach them, creative writing, translation.

EM   Psychology and sociology. There was a WBS neuroscience professor on the BBC R4 documentary *The Tyranny of Story* yesterday. We could invite him?

CW   Can we work together to get a mailing out? Draft a communiqué?

ND   ND can draft something to send to different departments.

CF   Is this a good time to narrow down what the group is? Its divergence makes it fun, but needs to be kept relevant to our research areas.

CW   CW and Carolyn Deby started the group because not many people were working in practice in the department; it was a way to begin to form a community. The philosopher who was here at the Pecha Kucha in spring attended at times, early on, too. It is not a personal / owned project: the group should be and has tried to be open to each participant bringing things so that we can each make it relevant for us.

EM   At this stage of my research, I am interested mostly in analysis and data-gathering. How other people go about gathering their data and managing those problems. The reading for this week was interesting but time is needed to see where it will fit in.

RE   The group provides a space to learn. The different focuses that we have been seeing — even if not related to my specific study — are still interesting. I feels more like I am learning from the group at this stage than able to guide it or make suggestions.

EM   It's OK that the readings may not seem immediate connected, because what is nice about the group is that it provides the possibility to be struck by unexpected links and texts; the fluidity is good, and you never know what ideas may be sparked by what we discuss. But I am especially interested to hear about people's practices. More pecha kuchas, without time restriction. Being questioned on one's own research, too, helps to clarify ideas and indicate what aspects one might assume are obvious when they are not: it helps to understand what needs clarifying.

CF   It's good to be a fly on the wall; but practice not a major part of my activities at the moment, so it is hard to know how to contribute.

CW   RE has been a part of the IFTR practice group for a while; perhaps if a need is felt to define ourselves better, we could look at whether they have a unifying thesis of some kind with respect to what they take to be practice as research or performance as research? Trying to find how practice and corporeal practices are useful is integral to my research; but this is specific; we do try to make sure readings are applicable beyond that and speak to different practices. The original idea was to attempt many different forms of exposure to different practices, also through different formats (readings, Pecha Kuchas etc.). The bibliography is on the website. Please contribute!

RE   This was a good reading because it was short, and it didn't feel like it was taking us away from our own work for too long. But besides the reading, what is more interesting is hearing the experiences of others. Presentations. Invite anyone! Could we just have, every six weeks, a research update? Talking through what we've been reading, how it's been informing our work and giving us doubts about what we are doing. An update on advances or problems?

CW   This is good: but we need to be active in coming forward to volunteer to present on this. It's hard to chase people to take part, and the pressure to do so should not be on one person. Professors often like to be asked to present. Perhaps we each might know people to whom we could reach out?

CF   Could we use lino (online pinboard tool) to collectively share readings or potential names of people? Yes: applied linguistics could be connected: generating material through practice is very related to that field to but approached in a different way (ethics and so on).

The lino online pinboard receives broad approval.

CW   EM could maybe add a note to regarding this WBS / R4 person, so that it's collected somewhere. For CW and CF there is a bit of a time component to these organisational matters because we are both submitting in about a year's time, and it would be good if the group is in a position to hand-over.

CF   Is the aim to make it more trans-disciplinary?

CW   This was always the intention; it has been difficult / slow because of a lack of interpersonal introductions to suitable / relevant people. It can be hard to feel connected / to feel you understand that this kind of meeting might be useful to you if you have only seen a message and have not met anyone who actually goes. We should invite Anthony in the future.

CF   For new members, do we need a protocol of introduction / an online welcome space / board; almost like a moodle as us used APP-PGR?

CW   The website is on the way to becoming such a platform. Somewhere we can have bios. Again this needs to be a shared responsibility / administration so that more people than just CW know how to do it. Can we use the time between now and the next session in order to send emails out and find / organise speakers for next time? Can we plan three sessions ahead? October 25th / 26th would work as Rakel may be over. Then further sessions in Nov and Jan?

CF   Can the sessions be based on who is around to / wants to discuss their work?

EM   It is good to have some certainty, so that when a session is fixed in the calendar it remains there. The people who commit to the dates usually do make them.

RE   It's difficult to plan months in advance. I agree with Eva. Once a date is settled, it should be fixed and those that can make it do.

CW   Let's work towards having some solid plans at a next meeting on the 25th / 26th October, and the next one after that at the end of November; then the week of the 7th January perhaps.

CF   Should we talk to our students? See if there is anyone working on PaR issues who might be interested in helping with the administration?

CW   Students can't organise a thing. If there is someone super-on top of things, then maybe?

CF   I'd like us to position ourselves in line with a particular school of thought, in order to better define what we really are to outsiders; then if we invite them they know what to expect. I haven't invited people because I haven't been inspired by a central idea.

CW   The inceptive idea was that we were two practitioners feeling lonely.

EM   Are there other groups doing what we are doing? To take as models? In PaR? This is surely something the Americans are really good at?

CW   There's one in Sheffield, where they really perform for each other and test out ideas on each other. We can't make it so super specific because our practices are so diverse, and how our practices figure in our writing also differ. But do we really need concrete definition? How does it work at IFTR?

RE   Much time is dedicated to discussion of what Practice as Research / Performance as Resarch is, what it is not, and so on and so on. In their case, PaR is more connected to artistic practice. New convenors always being a different approach, but in general it remains inclusive and blurry; always a bit amorphous. Some members are already well-published / senior; some members are really not sure where they fit in. Some people have a firm stance on what they believe PaR is. There is always a space at these meetings for uncertainty, and for explaining practices. Uncertainty and openness is part of the process. To reach any firmer definition or personal understanding requires much reading, which is precisely what *this* group allows us to do. The group is a way of learning to situate ourselves: differences exist between the PaR working group at IFTR and this group, but these differences are useful in learning more about ourselves.

ND   There is actually already a text on the website describing the intentions and motivations of PaRLab. It chimes with an idea that the kinds of people whom it might help are likely to be self-selecting / to intuitively recognise that what they are doing involves practice.

CF   I guess I'm just trying to work out for myself why I don't feel closer to the group. I have to take the dog for a wee.

CW   The text is now on the lino pinboard.

CF   Back.

All   That was quick!

CF   Ja so.

CW   Having raised the issue, maybe coming to a closer definition of what PaRLab stands for is something CF might be interested to work on?

RE   And the next session? CW mentioned a potential guest?

CW   Nicolas Whybrow. So next session could be organised around a longer engagement with Nicolas's practice / project involving the Coventry Ring Road, plus shorter Pecha Kuchas from CW and [inaudible], plus some form of — what are we calling it? — Peer Tutorial Exchange / Practice Forum.

ND   PaRPF? How is this conceived? Something very informal, nothing especially prepared, but very much an exchange of current issues? A kind of coffee morning?

EM   Some preparation is useful: it forces you have to really think through what the issues are.

RE   Perhaps what is important is that this be a commitment to a regular thing / update / tutorial meeting. If you want to get more out of it you *will* prepare anyway. Then we could be structured around a core group who commit to regularity, and if more people want to come along, this is great.

EM   I would really value this. The need to prepare for such a thing would be really good. A kick up the backside.

CW   It should not be overly rambling though: for newcomers, a loose structure can be important so that they feel able to leap in and contribute themselves. Should everyone work from the same three prompts (for example)?

EM   Newcomers might anyway feel more comfortable just as listeners, to begin with. If they're given specific prompts, that might distract their thinking / direct it away from other concerns.

CW   So: next time: the long explanation from Nicolas; a couple of pecha kuchas; gathering.

EM   How can we make this more than just doing another Pecha Kucha-type presentation. I don't feel it would be so useful to have to presenting the whole thrust of my work again, but rather to pick up a specific difficulty.

RE   For sure: it shouldn't be necessary to do a slide presentation of the whole project; to pick up on a specific issue and talk about it will also be interesting.

CW   There are methods out there that we could use to structure these kinds of discussions if we really felt we needed one. But generally this is a form of catching-up on what we are respectively mulling on that might benefit from some support / collective discussion.

All   Sounds good.

RE   Eva, you say you already have some issue or question in mind. Can you perhaps share it in advance?

CW   So: go away and think who to invite. Frame some emails. And let's talk to each other before we actually start to make firm invitations. Nicolas Whybrow is already invited. But we can talk about what we might ask. CW to teach ND how to work the website.

EM   Shall I write to this WBS neuroscientist? From *The Tyranny of Story*? His contribution to the programme was a weaving-together of politics and advertising.

CW   Post the name on the pinboard. Let's try to get more women and women of colour involved too.

EM   I thought of this professor because it struck me that he was based at Warwick — but for sure if we can approach people beyond, then there were other contributors to this programme.

RE   Could we ask people based outside the UK? People who would Skype their talk?

CW   Why not? If they are people you're talking to anyway, then especially.

RE   I am thinking of someone who graduated from Warwick (tutored by Baz Kershaw) and has an interesting position as someone both inside and outside practice. Also a Chilean (Contreras) who is working on practice and artist activism.

CW   You mention art and activism: Maria Estrada Fuentes has a collaborator here working on child soldiers. Ideas can accumulate and momentum can grow; one guest might suggest others, or start to accrete a theme. I'll send the details of the PaR group in Sheffield. There is also the London group that gathers together people from diverse universities called Techne.

RE   Why is the website hidden?

CW   Michael Pigott wanted to do a wee graphic for us before it was fully published, but if so it has to be cleared with the department, and this has somehow fallen by the wayside over the summer. (Michael has been on paternity leave).

RE   So we are basically waiting on a logo.

CW   Ja so. CW will write to Nicolas. ND will draft a recruitment email to departments.

The meeting concluded with a discussion of potential readings — bell hooks, Mikhail Bakhtin, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway — that ND and CW had discussed in the run-up to today. Ought we to be familiarising ourselves with a canon of key texts? Or attempting not to pay too much attention to what has become canonical? People like Haraway are now becoming canon, in any case; approaching the status of (e.g.) Judith Butler. It's becoming expected that if you know Butler, you'll know Haraway. CF's dog was introduced to the group; likewise EM's cat; the meeting broke up.