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SPECIAL SECTION “Fictioning Social Theory: The Use of Fiction to Enrich, Inform, and Challenge the Theoretical Imagination”

The Conference Reimagined Postcards, Letters, and Camping Together in Undressed Places

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The Conference Reimagined

Abstract

In this paper, five authors account for the rethinking of a conference as a series of postcards, letters, rules and silent moments so that traditional hierarchies of knowledge could be overturned or, at least, sidelined. We recount how the place we convened was enlisted as an actor and the dramas and devices we applied to encounter it. We use this accounting to problematize the conventional practices of goal-oriented meetings and co-authored papers as forms of academic meaning-making. In finding a meeting point where expertise was disorientated and status undressed, we were able to investigate the idea of co-being between human and nonhuman realities as the step social theory needs to take to become a point of connection with the social world, instead of an escape from it. Our conclusion is that this involved silence and necessary fictions as a means to consider the future and past in the moment of meeting.

Keywords

camping, conferencing, undressed places, silence, good life, slow writing, entangled nonfiction

La conferencia reimaginada Postales, cartas y acampada juntos en lugares desnudos

Resumen

En este artículo, cinco autores proponen replantear la conferencia como una serie de postales, cartas, reglas y momentos silenciosos para que se pudieran anular, o al menos dejar de lado, las jerarquías tradicionales del conocimiento. Relatamos que el lugar de convocatoria se consideró un agente, así como los dramas y dispositivos que aplicamos para enfrentarnos al mismo. Utilizamos este método para poder cuestionar las prácticas convencionales de las reuniones enfocadas a objetivos y de los artículos con coautoría como formas de creación de contenidos académicos. Al encontrar un punto de encuentro donde se desorientaba la experiencia y su estatus quedaba desnudo, pudimos investigar la idea de coexistencia entre las realidades humanas y no humanas, como el paso necesario que la teoría social debe tomar para convertirse en un punto de conexión con el mundo social, en vez de escapar de él. Nuestra conclusión es que este silencio implícito y las ficciones necesarias son un medio para valorar el futuro y el pasado en el momento de encuentro.

Palabras clave

acampada, conferenciar, lugares desnudos, silencio, buena vida, escritura lenta, no ficción enredada

Introduction

Conferencing is an institutionalised form of academic work *and* work-related *travel* that provides tourism, hospitality and transport businesses a good proportion of their sales. In the words of David Lodge (1984, p. 4), who pokes fun at the conventions of academia in his novels, “[t]he modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austere bent on self-improvement”.

In today’s world that capitalizes intensively on knowledge (e.g. Mackenzie and Vurdubakis, 2015), the circulation of values through performances in streamlined, posh urban conferencing-as-usual in exotic and/or metropolitan venues has turned the activity into a growth-oriented business resembling any other – potentially unsustainable – global industry. For universities, they assist in “transferring bibliometrics forward” as Edelman, Thomas, Åberg and Phi (2017, p. 5) phrase it.

This paper seeks to question this dystopic paradigm and search for an alternative. Can the practice of conferencing become a

doing, or an undoing? Can it slow down and stay still at times? What if a conference is conceived of as a *camp* instead of a visit at a five-star hotel? Would deliberate “not-at-handness of amenities” prompt “creative, serendipitous, alternative actions” (Germann Molz, 2014, p. 37)? We want to question the narratives and practices, the implied narrators and readers, of this social institution of conferencing in fundamental ways by presenting a contrasting case.

Thus, instead of organizing a “proper” conference, people with different backgrounds were invited to a *silence camp* in August 2016 somewhere in the middle of nowhere above the Arctic Circle in Northern Finland, in a place only the locals know of. Silence was taken as a material point of focus, rather than as a literal injunction for the camp.

By *camping*, we refer to an inclusive and mobile social relationality that is not defined in simple terms through divisions between hosts and guests, performances and audiences, work and after work, but weaves all these into one practised, participatory and welcoming reality of wonderment (see e.g. Germann Molz, 2014; Veijola, 2014). Our approach thus diverts from conventional conference hospitalities and cosmopolitan mobilities, just as much

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as it distinguishes itself from the controlling orders of camping in military, all-inclusive or educational settings (see e.g. Minca, 2011).

As a token of their (our) interest, the campers were asked to *send a postcard* to everyone of an idea they (we) would like to *test with the help of other campers* in a real life experiment as a means to investigate the potential of *conferencing to enhance wellbeing or good life*. Afterwards, they (we) were asked to *write letters "back to the experiment"* and to the other campers.

The invitation drew from an idea of 'laboratories of slow thinking', a phrase coined by artist and professor of art education, Jaana Erkkilä, which, in the context of an interdisciplinary project that was set up between arts, art research, sociology, philosophy, tourism studies as well as the business world, turned into *traveling laboratories of slow thinking*. The proposition of a silence camp within the project was to suggest a mode of non-conventional traveling, with a subtitle to orientate participants: *Travelling Silences of Art, Well-being and Visitation*. A camp, a temporary meeting point, seemed like a fruitful and serendipitous assemblage of time, environs and people to play with. It merits mentioning that the small size of the group – at first, around ten and later, twenty-something campers – allowed us to look beyond hotels in popular tourist destinations as well as beyond lecture halls at universities.

This particular territory was not only unknown for all but one of us, but also forsaken and 'undressed': left behind with only a little human life in it. A hide-away of abundant silence and slowness, and especially stillness – qualities craved by more and more people in the urbanized world (e.g. Bissell and Fuller, 2011; Veijola and Säynäjäkangas, 2018). Here these qualities abided in milieus amidst roads, forests, lakes, a few permanent residences, a timeworn, carefully renovated old village hall, and a number of crumbling homesteads of people who had left a good time ago to live elsewhere and connect with the pulse of modern life. Could a place like this help us understand the potential in conferencing for meaningful and consequential (MacCannell, 2001) tourist visitation and encounters? What sort of a camp for *good life* are we talking about when we call it a silent one? And *how* will five people write this story?

The third question links us most directly to the special issue at hand: Can academic writing abandon itself to surprises through a different kind of contract between authorship and audienceship than what we are used to when writing social or cultural theory or analysis (see e.g., Rimmon-Kenan, 1983; Veijola and Jokinen, 1994; Veijola et al., 2014)? Indeed, can authorship be rethought entirely, and planted to root itself between the cracks that emerge in too solid discourses, often used for gaining power over a reality (say, tourism development) or an expertise (say, an academic one)?

To summarize the starting points, the authors of this paper have been working on a range of artistic and place-bound methods of welcoming and dwelling-together, choreographed as traveling laboratories of slow thinking in places of visitation, laboratories

which were called "slowlabs", and which have taken place in a Silence Camp, a slowlab also in itself. We could call this approach also "another tourist expedition of camping together" taking place in both real and writerly life, to touch base with earlier experiments in kindred spirit (e.g. Carlin, Light and Veijola, 2014; Carlin et al., 2018; Light 2018; Veijola et al., 2014; Veijola and Säynäjäkangas, 2018); unravelling the distinction between academic and other genres of literature about society.

As an empirical token, we studied the idea and practice of conferencing: of people coming together in order to confer, to discuss things together. However, rather than being programmed into topics to discuss in advance, as is customary when attending a conference inviting specialists of a particular theme, we all had a chance to arrive open for surprises, "prepared to be unprepared" (see Derrida, 1999; Höckert, 2018, pp. 151-152). We wanted to know if in all the intervals in-between and on the side, also silence and slowness might follow, alongside – and sideways.

The Camp

Fitting our subject of study – the good life through less and slow rather than through more and quick – we wanted to walk our talks about responsible and sensitive tourism, and conferencing. Knowing from research (see e.g. Ampuja, 2016) – and personal experience – what prolonged busy-bodding in a crowded, noisy and one-dimensionally designed setting does to one's "mental life" in The Metropolis as well as to co-existence with others (see e.g. Simmel, 1903/1976), we carved emptiness into both time and space. We looked at another way for creative solutions. We wondered if we might have forgotten something: our *imagination when gathering together*.

Contemporary, relational, non-Western philosophies celebrate wellbeing with and through other people and nonhuman nature. For Acosta (2013) and Ranta (2018) the Andean vision of *suma qamaña* (good life, *vivir bién*) is an example of indigenous cosmologies in which all beings exist in relation to human and non-human others and never in the form of an individual or an object. In the paradigm of *vivir bien*, the idea of being 'well' means living-well-between-ourselves – not aiming to live *better* in *comparison* to others or to live *larger* through accumulation of material wealth. (See also e.g. Wilson Schaeff, 1995).

In sociology, living-well-together has been approached through social relations, communities, communalities and *Geselligkeit* (Simmel, 1917/1920), which emphasises the "fugitive and ephemeral" (Baudelaire, 1863/1995) of the moments of meeting between strangers in public space (see also Lofland, 1973; Pyyhtinen, 2009). Veijola and Falin (2016, p. 393), in turn, have suggested an alternative term of *mobile neighboring*, to open "an ethical space for encountering a stranger unburdened by the host-at-home and guest-away-from-home dualism and hierarchy".

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Sociology of camping, a form of “proper” mobile neighboring, has, indeed, an interesting relation to *place*.

As Germann Molz (2014, p. 23) puts it:

We camp in clearings. We clear a place for camping. We clear time for camping, too. Clearing refers to both the physical *topos* where we camp and to the temporality of camping. Clearing also refers to the act of making a place camp-able. It is a place, a time and a practice.

We wanted to make a camping expedition, to study “*potentialities of being with-other people*”, “to create a more imaginative approach to sharing research ideas and creating a writing community [...] than is perhaps customary in the Academia of today” (Veijola, et al., 2014, pp. 4, 9; see also e.g., Alvesson, Yiannis and Paulsen, 2017).

While the camp was an open-ended gathering instead of a fully time-tabled conference, there were, however, also certain parameters – following the ethos of the film *The Five Obstructions* by Lars von Trier, in which he and his former teacher, Jørgen Leth, demonstrate how creativity ‘feeds on limits’ (see e.g., Biskjaer and Halskov, 2014; Veijola, et al., 2014, p. 10). Thus, some camp rules existed also for us this time. There were joint arrival and departure times instead of individual ones (well, at least in principle); fixed and lingering times for breakfast and lunch; no mobile phones on site; material choreographies implemented for gatherings (at communal tables where you were encouraged to always sit in a new spot and next to someone you had not sat next to so far); belongings (on a separate table). Then there was the parking of cars: not here and there in the middle of the front yard of the village hall, which would have turned the yard into a parking lot instead of a free space for movement, being and gaze.

Additional parameters were invented for *the writings about and around the camp*. The postcards were to outline ‘a slowlab’, and the letters would be reflections about whatever we wanted to write around the camp afterwards. The cards were, in Derrida-inspired afterthought, sent in the spirit of “contracting with oneself” by “sending oneself a *c(h)arte*, as the etymology of card (*carte, charte, charter*) indicates (Bass, 1987, pp. xvii-xviii) whereas the letters, *Envois*, were indeed “written in many voices”, “linking the senses of sending, message and debt” (*invoice, envoi, in voice*) (Bass, 1987, xxi).

For us, also postcards and letters, not only slowlabs, were clearings.

Being Prepared to be Unprepared

Carlin and Rendle-Short (2016, p. 4) cite environmental humanist Deborah Bird Rose on ‘slow writing’: ‘Slow is a movement towards quality over quantity, towards connection rather than

fragmentation, and towards ethical mutualities rather than self-interest alone’ (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 6). Their recent camping experiment between writers from different countries draws from:

(a)crossness [as] a prepositional space, where the relations-between is the key – for, with, beside, through – where a grammar of creativity is in the putting together. We gather to disclose the in between. It strings us, and our writing together in composition and pattern. It is in the round, where the made is still being made, when anything and everything is possible. (Carlin and Rendle-Short 2016, p. 7)

A prepositional space is indeed a new form of a clearing, a camp, that may at best allow one to be “taken out of this world” (Baudelaire) and brought to another (see also Veijola, et al., 2014, pp. 142-7). A particular prepositional space we have in mind is the experience of *shoreless time*, (*rannaton aika*), a metaphor bio-artist Antti Tenetz contributed to the conversation at the silence camp one afternoon. Shoreless time, which David reflects on in more detail below, is a colloquial Finnish expression. It might be said to refer to a situation in which one orients towards whatever is *about to happen* (over the horizon, as it were), while experiencing, simultaneously, both the *permission* to make a move and a *release from an obligation* (Horn, 1989, pp. 12, 263) to make a move. There, on the verge, one dwells.

In this prepositional in-betweenness, an arrival is the key. Bass, in his translator’s introduction to Derrida’s *The Postcard* (1987), points out the fact that “*Arriver* derives from the Latin *arripere*, meaning “to come to shore” (Bass, 1987, p. xvi). The image of approaching a solid ground on a floating vehicle, and knowing when one can sail onshore or whether one should wait at a distance, anchored, for the right time to arrive, is also present in another word used by Derrida: the verb *caler*. *Caler* means “to lower a mast, to sink into the water (with the technical sense of measuring displacement), to retreat, to make something stable (by means of a wedge, for example), or to be immobilized, especially in the sense of stalling a car’s motor)” (Bass, 1987, p. xvii).

Shorelessness is thus an unbound and bound term, wild and safe, lacking governance but not synchrony. Unfortunately, a majority of the tourism industries understand the traveller experience as more of an opposite to shorelessness: something akin to *décaler*, “with a strong sense of destabilization... to displace, to move forward or backward in relation to the usual position, implying the lack of usual correspondence or synchrony” (Bass, 1987, p. xvii). Ordinary, industrialized tourism, and conferencing, is a *décalage*. It means going out of sync from home life as well as from the local forms of life in a place visited.

Our experiment of camping together in a temporality of shoreless time is a critique of conventional industrial (conference) tourism, by being a *calage*, an invitation to be-in-and-with one’s self and environs to see what happens when a *machine of*

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efficiencies, a tourist visitation, becomes a *slow encounter*; or, perhaps, a *slow arrival* that is not reduced to stasis and immobility, not even stillness, but is generative. It allows those gathered to improvise practices for being or already-being-with (Light, 2019), in Bird Rose's terms, "[p]ositioned ethically in a world of becoming, which is to say in attention to others and to responsibilities, [in which] one must necessarily be both situated and available to the call of others" (Bird Rose, 2016, p. 7).

Creativity is (despite all the visual noise and advertising of the airport billboards claiming otherwise,) rather silent, still, slow – and *small* in size. It is a passing moment, a blink of the eye. It is a relational movement. One has prepared oneself to be unprepared. One has allowed oneself to be surprised, in the company of others (Carlin and Rendle-Short, 2016).

Slow Methodologies of Writing

So, why are these two personal, dialogic and subjective literary genres used here as narrative choices for initiating a conference and sorting out its outcomes? Why postcard, why letter? Is there more to them than just disruption of the institutionalised metrics of academic correspondence that takes the form of keynotes and conference papers and subsequent publications and CV entries (see e.g. Alvesson, Yiannis and Paulsen, 2017; Veijola and Jokinen, 2018)?

The postcard and the personal letter are vernacular forms of nonfiction writing. Nonfiction is an uneasy concept that covers a multitude of assumptions, notably in how it differs from fiction. The term fiction derives from the Latin *fingere*, which means 'to mold, fashion, devise, feign.' Nonfiction is tethered to a different contract of fidelity to actuality than is fiction; nonetheless, nonfiction is also, like fiction, molded and fashioned. It does not write itself. The distinction between fiction and nonfiction has been found to lie elsewhere – in the paratextual intention of the author (Searle, 1969), in the contract established between writer and reader (Lejeune, 1989), and/or in the capacity for the 'factual adequacy' of nonfiction to be challenged by readers (Heyne, 2001, pp. 480-481). But nonfiction comes in many generic forms, from academic report to lyric essay, from news article to memoir, each of which to a greater or lesser degree leaves open or conceals the traces of how it has been shaped and molded to form a text.

Here, we have decided to call our approach "entangled nonfiction" (Carlin, 2017), with a nod not only to how our accounts are entangled one with the other, but also how they report upon an experience consciously framed as an entanglement between humans and nonhumans, the (undressed) place and the limited temporality of the camp. We approach writing as an exploratory form of thinking together, a mode of collaborative "essaying as method" (Carlin, 2018) that composes as it unfolds the ontological

and epistemological contours of the contract between writers and readers, in this shoreless academic milieu. We set ourselves the task: how can we write from within an entanglement with what has happened? This is where the epistolary forms of the postcard and letter come in.

First, to look again at the postcard, with fresh eyes.

A postcard is usually a remainder, an artefact designed to capture and share something of the ephemeral experience of a foreign event or place. It has a social and cultural history related to symbolic meanings carried by the visual images on it (see e.g. Löfgren, 1985; Cleave, 2014). Conventionally, the image on a postcard strives to be iconic: here, it says, is a representation of what is singular and remarkable about this place: about this thing that I, the sender, have witnessed, and you, the receiver, may not have done.

But what if the postcard, with the air of *thinking-with*, becomes a playful, speculative artefact, something sent in advance not *from* but *towards* a foreign place? A foreign event or place – here, the proposed 'silence camp' – to be set up in near future. Instead of the common situation (at least before the time of smartphones) of many postcards being sent from the one place BACK to people's homes; here, things are spatially as well as temporally reversed – the postcards converge from different perspectives to create together a new unstable time/space of emergent possibility. *Wish you will be here! Then we'll see what we'll see!*

This epistolary inversion returns the event and the encounter to its un-commodified state: a potentiality to be collectively created and experienced. It unsettles commonplace notions of hospitality and welcome as standardized, accountable offerings promised and delivered by (professional) hosts for tourists. Likewise, it unsettles the irresponsibility of the guest towards her/his future experience, making her/him an accomplice and a companion of an event. In our scenario, it is rather the 'arriver' who, alongside her/himself, brings an event, a happening, a gift, to a place – instead of being an academic tourist carrying locally and temporarily disconnected thoughts in her/his laptop between places and audiences.

In order to orient ourselves to the forthcoming camp, everyone had been asked to:

experiment... without a pre-set goal for intellectual or business-related 'clearings'... [an] ethos of accepting a state of a process, even a mess, as a platform for creativity... We accept, test and discuss all kinds of ideas for slow thinking, slow being, slow doing and other aspects of slowness in life (healing, joy, love, communality, sacredness...) with curiosity and interest. Everyone's ideas can be shared and tested during the camp, and we will also embrace an exploratory and responsive relation to the milieu(s) we visit. (Veijola, June 2016)

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The invitation continued:

As we will approach the notion of silence as *creating time through being, moving, doing, thinking and/or feeling without knowing or caring "what time it is"*, there is no precise timetable for most of the time. It is a slowlab, after all. Yet – obstructions feed creativity more than absolute freedom, so there will be plotlines and itineraries, practices and events. Most of all, there will be people talking. And walking. And going in and out of Sauna. (Veijola, June 2016)

What we wrote *after* the camp, we saw as letters rather than postcards (or ethnographies), since those writings reflected a more intimate and extended epistolary dance step. The letters allowed us to make visible “the number of fundamentally heterogeneous factors which constituted our mutual understanding” (Simmel, 1950, p. 355). Nevertheless, we did not see the letters merely as symbols of relationships between people, as Simmel might have done, but also as an embodiment of relations between us and the place. The place both gave character to and became a character in our reflections (Light, 2019).

Again, as with the postcards, letters formed a collateral correspondence marked by *alongsideness*, not a sequential correspondence as when a new letter is a reply to one previously sent. The procedure was not that of a dialogue or conversation, an iterative to-and-from discourse which sooner or later takes a direction and thereby forgets other potential tracks it could have chosen. In our methodology, all letters, written without any instructions, apart from having them sent within four weeks after the camp, arrived to be read side-by-side, speaking from a variety of perspectives to each other (see e.g. Honkasilta, 2016). A kaleidoscopic view of events; each text being in a way the opening story: a juxtaposition.

We have called these letters Campers' Pieces, parallel to a previous experiments of Companion Pieces (Carlin, Light and Veijola, 2014) and Companion Letters (Veijola 2017), emphasizing “ethics of mutuality” (Carlin and Rendle-Short, 2016), between their authors and readers.

Here, following, are our new versions of the letters written back towards the experience of the silence camp, this reimagined conferencing – happening again.

The Gathering of the Ignorant

From Janne: In the beginning of the Silence Camp there was this experiment which, I feel, was very important, in setting the scene for everything that happened afterwards, although maybe nothing really happened. But a true event, if we follow the philosopher Alain Badiou (2005), is not of the order of facts. Event is not something that *is*, something that is taking place for certain. It

is rather something precarious, something that *will have been*, should we make ourselves the subjects of the event to make consequences of the event be. The subjective production of the consequences of a precarious event is what Badiou calls a *truth procedure*. We are perhaps accustomed to thinking about the truth in terms of facts, of what is evident, what everyone knows, what is permanently present to public discourse, something founded on the stone foundation of what cannot be otherwise. For Badiou, truth springs not from “what cannot be otherwise”, but exactly what is hidden by everything that is taken for granted.

The idea of the aforementioned experiment, suggested by David, was for everyone to find out how much they know about the purpose of the camp compared to everyone else. In order to do this, we walked around and asked each other how much they knew, telling what we think we knew. After a while, we arranged ourselves in a line: the one who was deemed to know the most was positioned first and the one supposed to know the least was positioned last. After having formed a line of people, we returned in the same order to sit on chairs arranged as a circle so that the most-knowing and the least-knowing were next to each other. We made a round, starting with the one who “knew least”, everyone telling in their turn what they thought they knew. It turned out that no one, not even the main organizers knew very much at all.

The pedagogical and philosophical value of not knowing was famously demonstrated in the beginning of Western Philosophy by Socrates. As we might know, the Delphic Oracle had claimed Socrates was the wisest of all. Socrates' own interpretation of this prophecy was that he is not the wisest since no one knows anything, but he is the only one who knows that he knows nothing.

This did little to lessen some people's conviction that Socrates possessed some secret knowledge as is demonstrated by the speech of Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*. In *Symposium*, Plato describes a banquet where a group of free men of Athens give each other speeches about the meaning of love. After a great deal of time of dignified conversation, the young war-chief Alcibiades bursts onto the scene already quite drunk and gives his own speech in which he gives praise to Socrates. Alcibiades acknowledges Socrates' insistence of not knowing anything but nevertheless gives away his conviction that Socrates has possession of some secret knowledge that he, behind his false modesty, is merely reluctant to reveal.

Alcibiades' belief resembles what psychoanalysts call the relation of transference. According to Jacques Lacan (1967-1968), who noticed the transference nature of the relationship between Alcibiades and Socrates, “the transference is set up in function of the subject supposed to know, exactly the same way that was always inherent in every questioning about knowledge” (Ibid., p. 29.11.67 III 12). The negative side of the assumption that someone else is in the possession of the truth that one lacks, is, that this is a false assumption. Even if such a truth existed, why

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would the other possess it? The positive side is that if we believe that someone else knows the truth that we lack, we are at least aware that we ourselves don't know the truth. It is not possible to learn if we don't believe there is anything left to learn.

Socrates compared his role to that of a midwife: being himself incapable of knowing, he was still able to assist others to give birth to truth. Socrates claimed that the truth has always been in the soul and his midwifery (*maieutics*) is just the question of helping to remember it again. If we cast aside the belief in the immortality of the soul, what can we make of this? One possibility is that the maieutic method is not about the remembrance of eternal truth, but about the production of truth *as if* it were remembrance.

At the Camp, with each one acknowledging her/his ignorance in their turn, it laid bare for everyone to see that the purpose and the truth of the camp was still to be found out and could be anything. There we were, sitting in a circle, gathered around the empty space in the middle, each of us refusing to speak out to define the truth of our being there. If the truth does not exist, maybe it can be created *ex nihilo*, in the futile effort to remember what was lacking.

Nuances of Design

From Ann: What is an 'undressed place' if not land free of things that are familiar to the ordinary Englishwoman? When I look out of the window at home, I see civilisation's scavengers: roofs clouded by seagulls and pigeons and back gardens in which foxes and poppies bask. When I regard the countryside, I see 5000 years of sheep-manicured grass and trees that have been cultivated as specimens in the architected landscapes of the 18th century country manor. Nothing we see in England is free of our hands, adorned in the impacts of our technologizing. Even the sky is a subtler blue (when it is blue) because the vapour trails of planes dull its depths with layer on layer of white spray.

Should we add the qualities of our lands to our list of design determinants? The technocrats and social scientists have long pronounced on the influence of technology on future life and of culture on design, only recently to imply that the idea of *determining* is not as conceptually useful as *entangling* (Barad, 2007). And yet, *entangling* is an abstraction in socio-technical relations that may not help the engineers as much as the theorists. What then of land and place? Where does the land end and the experience of place begin? What has become entangled around us?

For it is a given that places, and even space (Massey, 2005) are alive with our politicking. We need only consider that there is no longer a patch of earth or water deep to 6 meters that has not been scanned by some form of geological survey. Our interventions may not show up on the land, but hide away in ledgers. Even the purest land is carved up and projected upon by competing countries and the companies they sell it to. So let us not

be naïve... just because the land is "undressed", it does not mean it is without a destiny. Its clothes may be waiting in the wings.

I bring these caveats, but, standing in place, one can shift from the theory of political economy and cultural geography to the practice of experiential appreciation. There is no point in seeing only the Thai workers picking the wild berries with their back-breaking mechanical scoops for hour on hour. Instead, there are the aesthetics of the space, the light, the clean lines of the birch, and the clean smell of air that comes from faraway (and even colder) lands. Even the slight coolness that touches us is part of a fantasy in the making. I could *be* here, I think.

I could just *be* here.

So, how does that translate into a conference method, and what kind of conference would we design if we were to take these aspects (and more) and make something site-specific, as the artists would have it (Dean and Millar, 2005; Kwon, 2004)?

First, we would let the wind do the talking (for some of the time, at least). We would attune to the space and light and slow down to take account of them. We would choose a few days in summer and know we had till 11.30 pm for the darkness to woo us, (in May and June, no darkness at all), so we could relinquish all sense of time to that one slow-creeping moment when the sky turns to yellow, then grey, then maybe a little midnight blue. That would give us a very big, slow day at our disposal.

Then, we would invite people with land in the Arctic Circle to tell us what they know and love about their places and what their challenges are. We would consider how the empty rooms of old settlements and the planned rooms of new developments might be filled for profit of both entrepreneur and planet, and how we, as outsiders, might be put to use as strangers to the situation – both as informants with our predilections and as professionals with our uprooted gaze. We would offer the power that comes from standing outside to see through two sets of eyes and present that flicker of perspective as our gift to our hosts. We would see what was slow, wondrous and/or quiet about their undressed places and suggest the land might be a cure for the malaise of our time, which is not listlessness or lack of energy, but ongoing continual busyness: tapping feet, updating screens and a wired shuffle from one commitment to the next.

This would be land talking, whispering differently from other places and speaking in languages brought by the disciplinary homelands of the listeners. Nothing is determined in these design conversations, but a little of the entangling becomes un-entangled long enough to consider with what experiences the land might be meaningfully adorned.

Movements of a Very Tiny Scale

From Emily: I tried to stare out the front window of the car but had to confess that my motion-sickness was getting worse. You

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began to persuade me to jump into the front seat. This kind of kindness is not only based on the practical reason of disliking someone vomiting in the car, but also on the strong sense of empathy when a person in your surrounding is not feeling well. We made a quick stop to switch seats, which altered the ambience in the car significantly.

Building on earlier tourism research on mobilities, relational ethics and wellbeing among ourselves (Germann Molz and Gibson, 2007; Grimwood, 2015; Veijola et al., 2014), I find that the camp of slow encounters was a perfect setting to envision and test potentialities of *tiny movements*. Hence I wanted to welcome my co-campers to explore how micro mobilities might shape wellbeing and togetherness in the context of silent conferring. I define these kinds of micro mobilities as something that happens in our minds and, let's say, within only few meters radius around us. One could say that my experiment takes the currently popular idea of proximity tourism seriously (Valtonen et al., 2019), and searches for those kinds of mobilities that leave barely no footprints to sensitive places that welcome us. Alternative (both metaphysical and embodied) ways of thinking, living and writing well together in silence can include, for instance, those of being face-to-face (Levinas, 1969), alongside (Latimer, 2013; Veijola, 2014), in-between (Pyyhtinen, 2016), above-one-another or behind-each-other. In my experiments, the difference between alternative ways of being can be created by one or two steps.

In one of the *slowlabs* our task was to follow a path in the nearby forest in silence, walking one after another, after Noora, our guide to a practice called Listening Walk (Vikman, 2009) in the forest. I was, at first, distracted by the sounds from our shoes on the path and the wind in the trees, but then understood to welcome these sounds as part of the soundscape. After a while, I saw time had come for the first tiny movement: I took a few longer steps and started walking alongside another co-camper. She looked at me with a mix of surprise and irritation. I had evidently interrupted her and she was expecting an explanation for why I had changed the well-functioning way of walking in line. We did not say anything and I returned to the neat line of 'spoon-walkers' yet planning to test one more thing. This time, I turned around and looked at the campers behind me. I could not help but smile. When they saw my face, they responded with a smile. Despite the twinkly faces, I felt guilty for interrupting my co-campers during their listening walk. As Emmanuel Levinas argues, "the face of the other" invites a relation and calls for response.

Intimacy and nakedness of being face-to-face in silence became tangible by the breakfast table. I assumed that you, being seated on the other side of the table, most likely appreciated the possibility of waking up in your own rhythm without an immediate need to dive into a discussion. When the morning coffee started to kick in, I told you about my early interest in the table-seating-orders. As a child, I always wanted to decide who sat next to me and in front of me – just like children often do. However, I was also concerned

who was allowed to sit alongside the one in front of me. We called these two people the ones who sit "*vieripäättä*" or "bepposite"; that is, not the person beside me or opposite me, but the one beside the one opposite me. I felt delighted that you wanted to test how moving from being opposite to bepposite changes the feeling of entanglement and desire to engage in a dialogue. As a result, we noticed how the latter – being next to the opposite one – brought calmness and distance into the feeling of togetherness.

Later that day, I was the first one to climb up to the upper bench of the sauna, which means that I was the one who grabbed the scoop for throwing water on the sauna stove. I was holding the scoop still when you entered, placed the sauna-towel on the bench and sat next to me. Growing up in Finland has taught me about the responsibility that comes with being in charge of the temperature in the sauna. I listened and tried to interpret how you, alongside me, were experiencing the current heat. We sat and sweated next to each other. I threw some extra water to the stones and the wave of hot air made us grin.

Suddenly you descended to the lower, cooler sauna-bench. No words were needed. I knew that you experienced the hotness as unbearable. It was time to stop the experiment and make sure that we all could continue to enjoy being in the sauna.

Neighboring with the Trees

From Soile: In ordinary conferences, condensed practices of showcasing our already-thought ideas to audiences turns people too easily into mere queues, figuratively speaking – a roomful of people waiting in line to have their own turn of talking for fifteen minutes. Our camping experiment had different parameters. In my postcard, I suggested one set of them, inspired as I was by what Dan Hines from Centre of Courage & Renewal led us into at a *Tourist Education Future Initiative* meeting, arranged by Kellee Caton and her friends, in Kamloops, British Columbia, in June 2016. My version went like this.

The campers, in pairs, sit or stand silently beside a tree, one on each side of it. The tree is thus the third party in this company of three. They listen to each other and the environment for a little while. Then the campers move closer to one another so that they can hear each other better; not face-to-face, but looking in the same direction. In turn, they start to tell about a family member, whoever comes to mind first. The other in the pair *only listens*: without giving verbal or gestural feedback. Immobile, silent, yet attentive. Facing the same direction, with no eye contact. Each speaks and listens in turn for five minutes.

Then both campers fall silent for a short while, listening to themselves. They may also imagine, in their own mind, what the tree might have told about its own relative. Of its travels, the very slow ones – as we know from Colin Tudge's (2005) and Peter Wohlleben's (2015) books, both entitled *The Secret Life of*

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Trees. Then another round of five minutes follows in which both campers in turn talk about a vision they have for their lives in the near future. Lastly, looking at the tree or leaning against it, they wonder how the tree imagines its future time.

After these events, all two-somes come back to the Community House and sit or lie down to write about their experience for 25 minutes – whatever comes to mind, no censoring, no editing. (This part of the event reminds me of what we did with Ann and David at Victoria Market in Melbourne, a very different scene from this one. Time travels.) After this, both humans write for 10 minutes on behalf of the tree. It needs a helping hand in this exercise.

Lastly, the two will go out to the same tree and read their own stories and their tree-stories to the tree and each other. When doing this they can sit or stand under the tree in which 'ontological way' (see what Emily writes in her letter) they find comfortable, when being alongside the tree. Afterwards, they stay quietly together with the tree, for yet another little while. Till one of them is ready to go and think about or do something else.

Namely: Saying "you" to a tree, changes your relationship to the tree, yourself – and the tree.

At the end of the day, all campers would get together after Sauna and Dinner, as they do every night, and share the parts of their stories they like to share, at the campfires. Weaving everyone into the collective story of *The Campers of This Event*.

Did we do this at the camp? Not this time. It would always have been either too late or too soon in relation to arrivals and departures. Yet, the image of camping with a tree had been shared with the campers when we presented our "postcards". All the ideas thus circulated among us during the camp in their potentiality. Sometimes it is enough just to realize what is possible to imagine. As Maori elder Frank, from Anne Wilson Schaeff's collection of 'native wisdom for white minds', would put it, an idea can wait until things, and the idea itself, ripen.

Looking back on Shoreless Time

From David: Shoreless time. Literally, it means: seeing the horizon but there is no land. It refers to when the mind is in a state of preparing but not doing anything useful. Perhaps it is a more purposeful form of daydreaming, since in daydreams any horizons are usually mirages. But the term itself is shoreless, hard to anchor. When, that summer, I joined a small group of artists, academics and local tourism entrepreneurs in a tiny village in the countryside, and for four days, as the sun circled the perimeter of the sky, we lived and worked together making something called a Slowlab, we ventured into shoreless time.

At night in the camp, I read a book by Anna Tsing (2016) about fungi that thrive in ruined forests, and people who make an itinerant life among them. I wrote down this note: *READING MUSHROOM BOOK* "polyphonic assemblages of ways of being. Assemblages

are performances of livability... Assemblages coalesce, change and dissolve: this is the story". Maybe this described what we were trying to do in this place, in the Slowlab: were we making an assemblage? Of ways of being, performances of liveability?

Circles of chairs beside pine trees. Circles of feet pointing in to look at mandalas made of leaves and twigs and flowers on the ground. Mandalas? We had to make unironic mandalas? Apparently so. A nun with an air of gravitas led this activity – she had come with one of the tourism entrepreneurs, a butcher farmer who planned to transform her property into a centre for silence. The nun was an expert on mandalas. We all made them. Mine wasn't very pretty but I enjoyed gathering the twigs and berries and flowers and arranging them on my chosen patch of grass. Ann made hers inside on a table to avoid the gnats, which was bending the rules but nobody cared. Hers was gorgeous; she clearly has what you'd call visual flair. It turned out to be a relief to be unironic for a while.

I love the idea of *preparations*. You know how the time of getting ready with your friends for the party, the time of dressing up, trying things on, anticipation, is always better than the party itself? The trick is to try to extend the time of preparations as long as possible so that the party is always still to come. A lot of the time at the camp it was as if we were making preparations for a slowlab that may or may not be enacted. We set out propositions for potential activities, and designed multiple experiments we wouldn't have time to carry out. This is notable because the context of the Slowlab, as well as being improvisational and all of that, was practical and pragmatic. The concrete aim was to develop 'left field' (I'm trying to avoid using the word 'innovative'), bright ideas to assist local small and medium-scale tourism entrepreneurs in Lapland, who would otherwise be directed towards business strategists and marketing consultants. The artists and scholars involved, I would hazard a guess, took this responsibility both seriously and with a grain of salt (at least I did), because who was to say the application of principles of *shoreless time*, for instance, might not be mightily more effective and less hokum than good ol' *strategic planning*, with its often industrially prepared recipes of mission statements, shared values and action plans? With a grain of salt because who was to say, indeed, whether our own tentative, speculative, fanciful manoeuvres would succeed or fail and how that would be measured? Artists and researchers in the humanities and social sciences, in my experience, tend to be more self-reflexively critical than management consultants.

Shoreless time is particularly relevant to tourism businesses, or so you would think, because it sounds like the kind of commodity tourists would crave; like slowness itself, a luxury good. This is the opportunity to find oneself removed from familiar epistemic landmarks, curious and open to new encounters. And, at the same time, a dose of shoreless time must be potentially less ecologically damaging in the fabrication of its requisite infrastructure than many other experiences made for tourists. Surely! Although I guess

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it depends how far you go to get it and how fast you travel there, in other words how often the shopping malls you visit are actually airports. On the radio recently, I heard a philosopher say that modern humans increasingly lack the freedom *not to be addressed* (by advertising, technologies of distraction, automated commercial and political messages). The ultimate symbol of luxury now is the airport lounge, where it is not so much the free food and showers that are the attraction (good as they no doubt are) as the escape from being bombarded nonstop with muzak, advertising slogans, billboards and all the other accoutrements between security and the gate. Escape from noise, in the largest sense of the term. Never before has escape from noise been such rare privilege.

Slow, although slow, has travelled widely: the slow food movement began in Italy in the 1980s as a protest against, you guessed it, fast food. Since that time, there have been slow cities, slow media, slow fashion, slow travel, slow gardening and many another slow-moving bandwagon. The more humans speed things up, from quantum computers to global warming, the more drawn we are to the scarce commodity of slowness. We fetishise it if we can afford to. We cling to it. Yes, speed is exhilarating. It promises to heighten experience – but then it ends up flattening it. Things become a blur. Speed has come to be associated with Taylorised mass-consumption, the hypercapitalist craziness of a species gone dangerously manic. Slow means stopping to smell the metaphorical roses. And to think. What the fuck are we doing? Towards what future are we madly rushing?

What is a slowlab? The question becomes an invitation. Let's make another one: send postcards.

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The first reviewer also surprised us wonderfully by sending a postcard back to each of us at the end of the review. How cool is that for a conclusion!

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Soile Veijola is sociologist and professor of cultural studies of tourism based at University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland. She has engaged actively in international Tourism Academia for almost forty years now, doing research on e.g. the body in tourism, tourism work, mobile neighboring, silence, academic writing, new methodologies of measuring, and undressed places of the global north. Soile is keen on co-authoring and co-editing adventurous books and articles, and her previous ones include *Oman elämänsä turistit* [Tourists of Their Own lives] (1990), *The Body in Tourism* (Theory, Culture & Society 1994), *Voiko naista rakastaa? Avion ja eron karuselli* [Can Woman Be Loved? The Carousel of Marriage and Divorce] (2001), *Disruptive Tourism and Its Untidy Guests. Alternative Ontologies for Future Hospitalitys* (2014) as well as *Matkasanakirja hiljaisuuteen* [A Travel Dictionary into Silence] (2018).

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96101 Rovaniemi**Emily Höckert**

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Emily Höckert is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland. Her research explores the multiple ways in which different kinds of hosts and guests – human and more-than-human – welcome and take care of each other in tourism settings. She has written a book on *Negotiating Hospitality: Ethics of Tourism Development in the Nicaraguan Highlands* (2018), and co-authored *Disruptive Tourism and Its Untidy Guests* (2014), which both discuss about relational ways of being and knowing. Emily works currently in ARCTISEN-project which promotes culturally sensitive tourism across the Arctic, and is a member of research team called *Intra-living in the Anthropocene* (ILA) that explores possibilities of travelling to places close by.

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The Conference Reimagined

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David Carlin is a writer and creative artist who lives in Melbourne, Australia. His books include *The After-Normal: Brief, Alphabetical Essays on a Changing Planet*; *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder*; *The Abyssinian Contortionist*; *Our Father Who Wasn't There*; and three co-edited volumes, *Performing Digital*, *The Near and the Far* and *The Near and the Far, Vol. 2*. David's essays, plays, radio features, exhibitions, documentary and short films have won awards and featured at numerous international festivals. David is Professor of Creative Writing at RMIT University, where he is co-director of WrICE and the non/fictionLab.

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Ann Light studied English literature, drama, artificial intelligence and human-computer interaction (in that order) and works nowadays as Professor of Design and Creative Technology in the University of Sussex, UK, and Professor of Interaction Design, Social Change and Sustainability at Malmö University, Sweden. Light has specialised in design related to social wellbeing, participatory design and social innovations and is author of 99 academic papers and several reports. She researches social justice, sustainability and sharing, exploring how people can make their own futures together and running workshops that investigate the dimensions through which we might make cultural change.

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Janne Säynäjäkangas is currently writing a dissertation in the University of Jyväskylä. His research pivots on the idea of ontological boundaries produced in the processes of mutual interdetermination of social forms and their environments. He lives at the city centre of Tampere, but visits regularly Kemijärvi, Finnish Lapland, hosting his father's airbnb-guests and picking up mushrooms and berries in a landscape of forests, lakes and swamps where he has roots that go back centuries. In addition to co-editing *Matkasanakirja hiljaisuuteen* with Soile Veijola, he has been writing and editing texts in philosophical publications since 2010. His Master's thesis in philosophy dealt with Alain Badiou's ontology in the light of Martin Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle.

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