




## INTERLUDE

# High Noon: A "Fictional" Dialogue

CAROLYN ELLIS AND DOUGLAS FLEMONS

 CAROLYN ENTERS the Dolphin bar to find her partner, Art Bochner, and Douglas Flemons, a professor of family therapy at Nova Southeastern University, having a drink together. It's the second day of the SSSI Couch-Stone Symposium, shortly after the end of an informal noon forum at which Mary and Ken Gergen and Art Frank engaged in dialogue with about thirty conference participants. The session focused on qualitative inquiry, art, personal narrative, and ethnography.

**Douglas:** [*Looks up to see Carolyn entering, a broad smile covering her face*] Hey, that was a provocative session.

**Carolyn:** [*Takes a seat in the booth beside Douglas*] Yeah, I was really glad to see the graduate students so engaged and eager to participate.

**Douglas:** [*Points to his and Art's glasses of red wine*] Want a drink?

**Carolyn:** [*Looks at her watch, then speaks to the waitress*] Sure, it's after noon. Give me a Kahlua and cream. Why not live it up? Everything's going so well. Dare this conference organizer relax a bit? Let's celebrate.

**Art:** Douglas and I have been talking about how energetic and exciting the conference has been so far. Of course, I'm biased, but . . .

**Carolyn:** [*Interrupting, ironically*] You, biased? Really!

**Douglas:** Seriously, people seem so engaged. The dialogue between the audience and the speakers during this last session was terrific.

**Art:** I was impressed by the forthright positions taken by younger scholars and graduate students. They weren't at all shy about speaking their minds.

**Carolyn:** It probably helped that Mary, Ken, and Art Frank assumed such an inviting posture. They expressed a genuine interest in what the students had to say.

**Art:** And offered helpful feedback as well. [*Pauses, then continues*] How would you characterize the kind of talk they were doing? Isn't there some sort of term for it?

**Carolyn:** You and your categories.

**Art:** Come on, help me out.

**Carolyn:** Okay, what comes to my mind is a conversation of the "yes-and" variety, rather than these "yes-but" interactions we so often hear at academic conferences.

**Douglas:** I think I know what you mean. Fritz Perls, the great Gestalt therapist, once said that in a "yes-but" statement, you might as well ignore everything prior to the "but." The "but" negates everything that comes before it.

**Carolyn:** You can say that again. That kind of talk can be very discouraging and intimidating. I'm reminded of a conference Art and I attended a couple of years ago—remember, Art? There was a noon session, set up much like this one was, you know, for dialogue between keynoters and participants, except it turned into a disaster. The "yes-but" form of conversation dominated. Just about everyone left angry.

**Douglas:** Really? What happened?

**Art:** Well, it didn't start off badly at all. Everybody was sitting around, talking with animation about the effects of postmodern ideas on their work . . .

**Carolyn:** When out of the blue, this man stands up and starts making a speech about truth and science.

**Art:** Let me tell you, he didn't waste any time offering niceties before his "but"; he cut straight to negation and criticism.

**Douglas:** "But-no" rather than "yes-but"?

**Carolyn:** Exactly. He refused to back down, back off, or allow anyone else to change the subject.

**Art:** That demand to be heard above and beyond everyone else—that’s what we’ve tried to avoid at this conference. It seems there’s usually someone at every academic meeting who has this overwhelming need to show how smart he or she is, even if it hurts other people and promotes a negative tone.

**Carolyn:** You said he or she? I don’t know that I’ve ever heard a woman do this.

**Art:** Touché. Well, maybe once or twice I have, but usually it’s the male voice. I have to admit I feel some empathy here, because I’ve acted this way myself before. I certainly don’t feel proud.

**Carolyn:** It’s the way a lot of us were trained to be academics and it’s a difficult socialization to transform, especially for men.

**Art:** But you’re not suggesting that we should just agree with each other all the time, are you? Can’t disagreement and criticism be useful and healthy?

**Douglas:** I certainly heard some valuable disagreements at this last session about what we social scientists are, or should be, up to.

**Carolyn:** No, I’m certainly not against the expression of differing viewpoints or perspectives. In the last session, Art Frank said he considers the goal of social science to be theory, and I took issue with that. I said that theory is one goal but not the only one.

*[Laurel Richardson sits down beside Art. After greetings, the conversation is halted while Laurel orders an herb tea and others ask for another round of drinks.]*

**Art:** Laurel, we’re weighing in on the purpose of social science and the socio-emotional climate of academic conferences.

**Laurel:** Sounds like a heavy conversation.

**Carolyn:** Oh, it is, but it’s also a playful one. I was saying that social science isn’t just about producing theory.

**Art:** What the devil is “theory” anyway? It’s become such a large and vague category.

**Douglas:** Great question. Of course, you don’t get out of theory simply by saying your work isn’t centered on producing theory, right? Someone who wants to throw out theory is left holding a particular theory about the problems with theory.

**Carolyn:** I was just thinking how defensive I must have sounded in my response to Art Frank, despite my effort not to invalidate his position. I tried to offer my ideas respectfully, but I’m not sure that there wasn’t some sting to them.

**Art:** I don’t think that Art felt you were attacking him. He seemed pretty open to different possibilities for conceiving the role of theory and what we should do

with theory. But then his shtick is theory and he’s a damn good theorist, so if you say, the hell with theory, yeah, that might not sit well with him. Myself, I liked Mary Gergen’s response when she said that theory becomes a problem when it becomes an *overstanding*, rather than an *understanding*. The “theory” overshadows the experience it’s meant to explain. Her message fit with what several of the graduate students were saying in the session about how the evocative, artistic representations they prefer keep you closer to the experience and in a more feeling and embodied way than abstract theory.

**Carolyn:** Well, art and performance do offer a way out of privileging the head as the repository for understanding. You can’t have knowledge without emotional understanding, at least I can’t. If Art Frank’s shtick is theory, I guess mine is body-based knowing. *[Laughing]* What’s yours, Art? Gees, there are too many “arts” in this conversation.

**Art:** It seems to me that both theory and art—as in artistic—are ways of patterning experience. The artist, just as much as the social-science theorist, creates a work that translates or transforms “raw” experience into some kind of representative or evocative pattern, abstracted from but connected to the “data” that inspired it.

**Douglas:** Either way, the goal is understanding, though some conceptual artists, for example, shift the “object” to be understood to the viewer. The question becomes what and how we see and understand and frame art when we see and feel it.

**Laurel:** I’m not so sure why understanding should be the goal. There are more interesting or pressing reasons—political, transformative, therapeutic, and so on—for conducting research. I, myself, am not after understanding per se.

**Carolyn:** Oh, Laurel, I love how you turn things around! You help me see that seemingly obvious things aren’t so obvious. You know, sometimes I learn more when I think I understand less. Sometimes I understand less when I’ve finished writing a story than when I started. Maybe I should say that my goal is emotional connection between me and my readers, rather than understanding.

**Art:** I think you have to distinguish between top-down understanding—the original meaning of the word—and bottom-up understanding.

**Laurel:** That’s still limited too much to the head. Like Carolyn says, you have to account for body-based or body-enhanced knowledge.

**Douglas:** If you think of understanding as a reductive process, then not understanding opens up opportunities for renewed curiosity. *[Carolyn and Laurel*

*nod in agreement*] Gregory Bateson used to talk about the problems of “explanatory principles.” When you think you’ve got a handle on something, got it explained, you stop being curious about it.

**Art:** We search for explanations—theories—but once we have them, too often our inquiry in that area stops.

**Douglas:** Sort of like when my kids were first learning language. They were perpetual curiosity machines, so full of wonderment. They’d wake up in the morning and start pointing at stuff, wanting Shelley [my wife] or me to connect a name to whatever object they were looking at. They pronounced their question differently—Eric would say, “Wadaaaat?!”; Jenna, “Badaaaah?!”—but both of them were in search of understanding. The thing is, as soon as they heard the name of what they were pointing at, the *instant* they “understood” it, they’d lose interest and point at something new, once again demanding to know what it “was.”

**Carolyn:** As your children get older, I assume the name of a thing will generate more questions, such as: How is it useful? Does it bring meaning to my life? How will it help improve the life of others? And that these questions will generate more complex interest in the thing, and then even more questions. That’s what I want from my projects—I want the answers I come up with to generate more questions than when I started.

**Douglas:** But that doesn’t happen to everyone. I had a client a while ago, an artist, who would throw herself completely into the creation of a painting. While she was doing preliminary sketches, working out technical and aesthetic problems, and then doing the actual rendering, she was totally absorbed, totally fascinated by the process of realizing her vision. And then the moment she was done, she lost all interest in the piece. When she was finished, she became totally bored by what she’d created and wanted nothing more to do with it.

**Art:** I have to fight against that myself. I want to get into the next project, not dwell on the past or what I’ve just finished.

**Douglas:** Perhaps instead of “understanding,” we should talk about “making sense” or “grasping.” We’d at least be appealing to sense-based or body-based meaning.

**Carolyn:** That’s what I was trying to get across to the intruder at that conference a couple of years ago. Laurel, remember the guy?

**Laurel:** How could I forget?

**Douglas:** Made an impression, eh?

**Laurel:** Oh, yes.

**Carolyn:** There he is, lecturing us all about truth and science . . .

**Art:** Taking the logo-centric position that multiple perspectives are well and fine for mushy, quasi-science, but *real* science yields singular truths, singular interpretations.

**Carolyn:** I wanted him to get out of his head, so I start swaying, and others around me start swaying with me, and I say, “Can your body get in on this position of yours? Try moving. Say these ideas with your body. Come on. Dance it.”

**Douglas:** I can imagine how much he must have loved and embraced your suggestion.

**Carolyn:** Yeah, right.

**Art:** See, he began his soliloquy by saying that he wanted to stir things up. He thought we were all too harmonious, too, too . . . how did he put it?

**Carolyn:** Something about how we were stroking each other, being too supportive, you know like rubbing each others’ backs and not being critical enough. He felt the need, he said, to introduce disharmony so we could learn from him the truth about science. He seemed to be saying that you only learn from argument, criticism, and conflict.

**Laurel:** So then Carolyn starts swaying, but the guy will have none of it.

Someone else in the audience tells him, “At least kick your foot.”

**Art:** Probably a professional mediator or something.

**Carolyn:** It was an attempt to melt some of the tension in the room. It was feeling pretty icy in there about then.

**Douglas:** And?

**Carolyn:** Well, so, he kicks his foot nonchalantly [*Demonstrates*] and keeps the floor. “I don’t want to dance,” he says. “I want to establish the importance of scientific truth.”

**Douglas:** Hmm. The dance of truth. Or was it a dance of confrontation?

**Art:** What would that look like?

**Carolyn:** And what would it *feel* like? I see him dressed in black.

**Douglas:** Right. Didn’t you say the session was at noon? So we’d need to put him in a cowboy hat and boots and give him a six-shooter. We could call his dance “High Noon.” [*Laughter*]

**Art:** And call *him* Jesse James.

**Carolyn:** That would cover the confrontation part of it, but how about his appeal to scientific authority?

**Laurel:** Give him a six-shooter in one hand, a pencil, and a notebook in the other . . .

**Art:** And call him Jesse Herbert Mead.

**Carolyn:** Would the note-taking evoke science or storytelling?

**Art:** Exactly. Now, that's my shtick. What we do and what reporters and novelists do isn't all that different.

**Douglas:** We could cover both by calling him Hunter S. Mead.

**Art:** Or George Herbert Thompson. Or would it [*Looking at Carolyn and Laurel*] be Margaret Thompson?

**Carolyn:** Oh, for Margaret Mead? Rich. Very rich.

**Laurel:** Okay, but now we've lost the confrontation part.

**Art:** Hunter Thompson hasn't exactly been shy about stirring up trouble.

**Douglas:** How about Hunter S. (aka Jesse James) Mead?

**Carolyn:** And leave it ambiguous about whether it's George Herbert or Margaret. I like it. Makes me want to dance! [*Looks at Art*] Wanna join me?

**Art:** Absolutely. Meet you upstairs tonight when the Quivering Rhythm Hounds Band cranks up. Don't forget your paper and pencil.

**Laurel:** And your six-shooter.

**Douglas:** This image sure captures the difference between the session we were just in and the High Noon one a few years back. Today, the talk was about reaching across not only interdisciplinary lines, but across the humanities/sciences divide. But it sounds like Jesse James wanted to keep divisions in place, to protect science from the encroachment of human contingencies, emotions, and the fallibility of language.

**Carolyn:** More than that, the way I saw it, he wanted to widen the division. And then build an impenetrable wall between them, keeping science inviolate so it could properly discover the Truth.

**Art:** Somehow I got the impression that he didn't really believe in these divisions himself. What he believed in was the necessity of arguing the case as if harmony and emotional supportiveness were the greater dangers that had to be defended against.

**Douglas:** So what happened next?

**Carolyn:** Well, Jesse, or Hunter S. or whoever he was, kept talking, and as he talks, I'm feeling the room being taken over by this critical social science voice, by his "It's-right-against-wrong," debating tone, and I don't know what to do.

**Laurel:** I just haven't the patience anymore to go through these old arguments, just like I don't have the patience to deal with folks who want to knock qualitative research or feminism or Unitarianism or veganism, and so on. The arguments are so old already and so boring. That's the trouble with this kind of negative energy—it exudes and enters, so you have to take your own energy and knock it away. Oh, how tired all that makes me. Like being back in the sociology department from which I chose to retire early. I'm getting tired just talking about it now. [*Laurel sighs and turns attention to her tea*]

**Carolyn:** It seems these divisions are endemic in departments. As Patricia Geist's performance showed so well yesterday, no wonder we're "Dis/enchanted by Academe."

**Art:** And suffering from institutional depression.

**Laurel:** Isn't that the truth?

[*All four sigh and peer into their drinks*]

**Douglas:** [*Interrupting the silence*] I want to go back to the intruder. Carolyn, were you able to get him to lay down his six-shooter?

**Carolyn:** Nope. He's shooting up the place with his words. I try interrupting again, but without the suggestion that he dance. I tell him, "Stop, stop! You're interrupting what's happening here!" Others also try to voice their concerns, but he continues his monologue, unabated. I feel like I've gone from a participant to an audience member, watching, speechless, while the "star" performs. I don't want him to do this, but I don't know how to stop him, and I don't want to start sounding as argumentative and confrontational as he sounds to me. I look around and see and feel the energy draining out of everyone. The once animated and passionate crowd now sits slumped in their chairs with sad, defeated looks on their faces, as if they know the discussion we had been having was too good to last.

**Art:** I didn't know what to do, either. Soon Carolyn looks at her watch, nods to Laurel, and they quietly get up and leave. I stay awhile longer, and now I'm good and angry.

**Carolyn:** I waited a few minutes before leaving, though. At first, I didn't want to give the impression that I was walking out just because I didn't get my way, but then I realized I didn't care. Laurel and I had already planned to meet for lunch, and I figured there was no point in sticking around, so we left together. Actually, I rather liked the ambiguity of our joint action.

**Laurel:** And I certainly didn't want my limited time with Carolyn to be spent as an audience to Jessie James.

**Carolyn:** [*To Laurel*] Remember what our friend Jim said to us afterward? [*To Douglas*] He'd been at the session and had seen us make our getaway, and he came up to us at lunch and told us how much he loved that we'd walked out. He thought Jesse James's intrusion was like a rape, and he thought it was great that we'd refused to participate.

**Art:** Later, after Carolyn told me what Jim had said, I asked him if rape wasn't too strong a term. He said not at all because the people in that room had been forced against their will to do something they didn't want to do. Then they had only two choices: participate in his language game or leave!

**Laurel:** I told Jim that I left because it was lunchtime. He said he liked his "rebellious women" story better, so he was going to continue thinking of it that way. He's right in a way. If I hadn't had a lunch date, I would have left, regardless. [*Laughter*]

**Art:** When Carolyn and Laurel left, some other people followed. I was incensed. I stood up and said to Jesse, "Don't you see what's going on? Several people have left since you started talking, people I care deeply about. This is not the kind of conversation they want to have. They find the questions you're raising profoundly uninteresting."

**Douglas:** Did he respond?

**Art:** Oh yeah. He said something like, "Who cares if a few people don't like what I'm saying? We need to be open to alternative points of view, otherwise this is just inverted hegemony. What's wrong with coming up with one right way of viewing something? It's time we reconciled the hard sciences with the social sciences."

**Douglas:** Ironic, eh? Severing interpersonal relationships in the service of forging a theoretical rapprochement.

**Art:** Right. There was no awareness of the relational context and no sensitivity to the emotions people were feeling.

**Douglas:** So you stood up for Carolyn. Protecting her?

**Carolyn:** I feel ambivalent about that portrayal. Unlike the parts given to women who surrounded the Wild West Jesse James, I don't need that kind of protecting from Art. But maybe that *is* what was happening, because for that moment I'm not so sure that our old Jesse didn't pull Art into his frame.

**Art:** You mean into his O.K. Corral? Maybe so. But what I did, I did as much for me as for Carolyn. Anyway, shortly after that I left, too.

**Douglas:** You left out of anger?

**Art:** No, I left because it was past time for the session to be over. I was hungry. [*Laughter*] Then later, I recall feeling really bad about my response to him, as if I had intentionally insulted him because I was feeling hurt that the whole session had deteriorated so quickly.

**Carolyn:** It's a dilemma.

**Douglas:** What?

**Carolyn:** How to respond to that voice from the outside, criticizing, punching holes. It demands that we respond in the same voice. I don't want to privilege or speak in that voice. I want to ignore that voice because it doesn't work if you don't speak back to it, if there is no audience. Yet I don't want to be seen as excluding voices in the same way I've accused mainstream social science of doing. Or [*Long pause*], maybe I just don't want to be seen as backing down from them. I mean I'm pretty committed to defending my position too.

**Art:** [*Ironically*] No kidding!!

**Carolyn:** [*Smiles*] And you're not? Anyway, the interaction opened up much to think about . . .

**Art:** Yes, if we just ignore voices that are different from ours or are antagonistic, then what do we have? We end up with something akin to separate cliques or gangs who define each other as enemies. And that's what leads to the kind of aggression that was so bothersome at that session. For me the question becomes: How do we allow the voices of difference into our conversation? Is it possible to have dialogue between parties with contentious constructions of reality?

**Laurel:** All this makes me wonder what might have been opened up if Jesse James hadn't shown up. What did we miss out on?

**Art:** Good question. What happened in the session today was very different. The dialogue and sharing were marvelous.

**Carolyn:** Yeah, they were. And you just know that if Jesse had been here in the room, he would have wanted, as he said back then, to throw a snake in the room, to stir some disharmony into all our "mushy, nondiscriminating mutual support."

**Douglas:** I'm reminded of an interesting story told by the American Buddhist Jack Kornfield about a group of "seekers" living together in a spiritual community. For several years, they had been having to deal with one of the members of the group, an obnoxious man who never pulled his weight

with the chores, and he insulted everyone, including the teacher. Despised and resented, the man finally left the community. The remaining members could scarcely believe their good fortune. Elated and distinctly relieved, they went about their lives with a renewed sense of spiritual peace. Their joy was short lived, however. After far too few blissful days, the man showed up again, as demanding, lazy, and disrespectful as always. The others went to their teacher, requesting that he refuse to allow the man to rejoin the community. To their astonishment, the teacher revealed that he had *paid* the man to return! Pressed for an explanation, he told them that the man was like yeast for bread, necessary for their learning about patience, compassion, and loving-kindness.

**Carolyn:** I don't know, Douglas. Can't we learn patience, compassion, loving-kindness, and how to live with differences in other ways? Can't we model them for each other and learn through experiencing them from and in our relationships with others? Why do we need to be insulted and invalidated to learn them?

**Douglas:** The challenge is to feel compassion for noncompassionate people. Maybe this is the first step toward Art's goal of allowing, even embracing, difference. Or if not compassion, then at least curiosity. Would we be having this conversation if Jesse hadn't swaggered into that session a couple of years ago? What better way to learn about relationships than to experience what happens when they're breached?

**Art:** What are you suggesting?

**Douglas:** Perhaps we should all contribute to a "High Noon" scholarship fund, so we can financially compensate conference attendees who are willing to disrupt sessions and stir up trouble.

**Art:** Hmm. We could write up a contract, giving each year's scholarship recipient the honorary title of Hunter S. (Jesse James) Mead—and laying out his or her responsibilities,

**Laurel:** Such as dressing in black denim.

**Carolyn:** And showing up at the dance in cowboy boots, ready to two-step.

**Douglas:** And trying people's patience and tolerance.

**Art:** And giving us all permission to write about the fallout.

**Douglas:** That brings up a good point. What about the original Jesse James?

**Laurel:** What about him?

**Douglas:** I presume that since the High Noon Scholarship hadn't been established back when the incident happened, you didn't pay him for his trou-

ble, and you didn't get him to sign a release form, allowing us to write about what happened.

**Art:** Yeah, but on the other hand, who could come to a conference with a bunch of reflexive ethnographers and not be aware that your participation might one day get woven into some kind of account?

**Douglas:** Even if you weren't aware that you might later be written about, it's not so clear to me that you shouldn't be held accountable. It reminds me of something the novelist Anne Lamott once said: "If my family didn't want me to write about them, they should've behaved better."

**Carolyn:** Hey, I'm not that concerned about the ethics of including the intruder's participation—after all, it was a public forum. I think we *should* write about ourselves as academics. We don't scrutinize our own actions enough.

**Art:** But what if Jesse doesn't want to be written about or feels he would be harmed by what is written?

**Douglas:** Yeah, that's a tough one.

**Art:** You could give him an opportunity to add his voice, you know, tell the story from his point of view.

**Laurel:** Or you could always fictionalize the telling.

**Carolyn:** That's a good idea. I'm not sure that just because people don't want to be written about that we should close up shop. You have to weigh what can be learned against what harm could result. Sometimes it's a very tough call and you struggle with what is the right thing to do. But regardless, Jesse doesn't have the moral high ground here.

**Douglas:** And we want to make sure not to hand it to him though our actions.

**Carolyn:** You're right. But what concerns me more is handing him center stage again. I think we're giving the gunslinger too much space in our text.

**Douglas:** But haven't you gotten anything out of this conversation?

**Carolyn:** [*Speaking very passionately*] Oh, sure. Our conversation has brought me to a different understanding, a different sense-making, of what happened. My body feels different. It's heightened state lets me know how important and complex I think these issues are. What happened wasn't just a matter of someone holding the floor as I thought before; it's a matter of how we talk to each other and respond to difference. How do we change the conversation? These are issues at the heart of our work and this conference.

**Art:** What makes me still feel sad, though, is precisely the issue you've hit on, Carolyn. We haven't yet learned how to change the conversation. The "yes-but" still rules for the most part, because we have this realist mentality that

we can resolve the differences that divide us through argument and evidence. So when these conflicts occur, we aren't able to recognize and appreciate the differences and make people who genuinely see things differently feel nonetheless welcomed into our conversation. The result is blaming and antagonism and a lot of hurt feelings.

**Douglas:** Carolyn, maybe you should be the first one to apply for the High Noon Scholarship. You look great in black.

**Laurel:** [*To Carolyn*] Let's apply for it together. But if we get it, the conference organizers can't give us men's names. I've had patriarchy up to here.

**Carolyn:** How 'bout we bust things up as Thelma and Louise?

**Laurel:** Okay, but I'm not driving off any cliff. Let's get that straight up front.

**Carolyn:** Deal. But I rather like the idea of a convertible.

**Laurel:** Convertible. Interesting word, that. From the Latin, *con-*, altogether, and *vertere*, to turn: "to turn about, transform." Fits for me. I'd rather change things than "understand" them.

**Art:** [*Holding his glass up for a toast*] Here's to being convertible! [*Laurel, Douglas, and Carolyn join in*]

The End

## Note

Special thanks to Arthur Bochner and Laurel Richardson for being coconstructors of and characters in our story. Thanks, too, to Ward Flemons for tracking down the Jack Kornfield story.