

## “This is my Sharing” – A Conversation with Charles C. Smith

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Charles C. Smith is a Lecturer at the University of Toronto, a member of the Canadian Court Challenges Program/ Equality Rights Panel and a Research Associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. He has provided advice to numerous organizations interested in developing and implementing equity and diversity policies and programs and he is also a published poet, playwright and essayist. He won second prize for his play *Last Days for the Desperate* from Black Theatre Canada. He has edited three collections of poetry, has one published book (*Partial Lives*) and his poetry has appeared in numerous journals and magazines.

Charles C. Smith is also the Project Lead/ Equity and Diversity Arts Specialist for the recently founded Cultural Pluralism in Performing Arts Movement Ontario. CPPAMO is a movement of Aboriginal and ethno-racial artists working with presenters to empower the performing arts communities of Ontario. The organization seeks to open opportunities for Aboriginal and ethno-racial performers to engage with presenters across Ontario and to enable presenters to develop constructive relationships with Aboriginal and ethno-racial performers involved in theatre, music, dance and literary arts.

Links:

<http://www.ccio.on.ca/PPAMO>

<http://www.charlescsmithconsulting.ca/about.htm>

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I spoke with Charles Smith in April 2010. During our conversation, I asked Charles to expand on an intriguing observation he made during ICASP’s Improvisation and Pedagogy policy meetings in December, 2009. At the meetings he commented that, for many people and communities, improvisation is simply “a matter of being,” a constant element of every day negotiations with their lived environment. As Charles reflected upon and developed those ideas, he also talked about the implications of improvisation studies to fields including ecology, poetry, and political citizenship.

**E:** Thanks very much for agreeing to speak with me. Would you like to introduce yourself, so that you’re presented in your own terms?

**C:** Sure. I’m Charles C. Smith and I’m currently a poet and an organizer in the field of culture, Artistic Director of a newly founded group called Cultural Pluralism in

Performing Arts Movement Ontario. I'm a Lecturer in Cultural Pluralism in the Arts at University of Toronto Scarborough, and I'm also a member of the Equality Rights Panel of the Canadian Court Challenges Program. I've published in a variety of areas, including critical race theory, dealing with issues of the impact of increasing tuition fees on racialized peoples, as well as racial profiling. I've got one book of poems under my own name, three that I've edited, and my poetry has also been published in various magazines.

**E:** So, hearing all that, I guess the first thing I want to ask you –and this is a question at the core of every interview I do for ICASP– is this: as a man who is working in politics and policy and consulting and writing poetry, what is your understanding of the links between artistic practices and political practices? How are they enmeshed in your mind?

**C:** Well, a similar question came up a couple years ago at the Guelph Jazz Festival, in one of the panels, and I think the question was directed to Wadada Leo Smith. His answer was very blunt: there's no escaping the interrelationship between politics and the realities of life for people who live in brown and black bodies. Given that I inhabit a black body, my creation in this world has come about as a result of a political act, since slavery and colonialism, and that filters through, today, in terms of the way I am perceived in the world by others, the opportunities that I get or don't get, the continued masking of white privilege and how it impacts upon racialized persons. There's really no way in which I could avoid the implications of politics upon my life and what opportunities are offered to me and what opportunities I need to create as a result of it. So that's the thing: it's everyday. You live and breathe it.

**E:** It's inescapable, the connection.

**C:** Yes, yes.

**E:** Shifting tacks a bit, what is your interest in improvisation and in the ICASP project more broadly? What do you see as its overlaps with your priorities and concerns in your life?

**C:** Well there's a number, you know. At a personal level, I'm from New York, originally, and one of the most significant markers in my life was connecting to the "new music", what people call the Avant-Garde, that came out of the 50s and 60s. Seeing groups like Ornette Coleman and seeing Don Cherry, or Leroy Jenkins, and the list can go on and on, was an incredible eye-opener for me, as a man of African descent, because here were role models who were creative; who were charged with the notion of the interrelationship between politics, transformative change, and music; who were, in my view, leaders in the critical thinking that was emerging out of the civil rights movement, the anti-colonial movement; and so on. And they really fueled that. So, for me, they offered and opened a very critical possibility. Sorry, I need you to repeat the question again so I can tie the thread in.

**E:** Oh, I think you did, but I asked you, what's your interest and where does ICASP overlap with your own concerns?

**C:** It overlaps for me because of the interests coming out of a really well established Jazz Festival that focuses on improvised music, in how improvisation is actually a very vibrant force in life, not just in the creation of art, but certainly in the creation of art, but in how people address the day-to-day world, and that some gems come out of communities – marginalized communities– who live very much in ways in which spontaneity and improvisation are critical.

So, again, going back to my personal life, my mother was, as they would say academically, illiterate. I mean, she left school after grade 3 and was a domestic, and so, we grew up very poor, and I was able to watch and learn from my mother who basically had to support a bunch of kids. There were 9 kids in the family and you don't do that very well on a domestic's salary. Nonetheless, we had a house, and her style of getting things to work was very much in tune with whatever happened on a daily basis and that meant everything from looking at sales of food, clothing, etc, to trying to make ends meet in a way that was really on shifting sand. But, nonetheless, she did. And I look at her children today, some of whom are in serious positions of responsibility, and I say, wow, this comes from that - I sometimes refer to her as having an indomitable spirit. I think a lot of that was because she was able to take her world, and what was offered to her, given the capacity she had, and go beyond it, to satisfy herself that she was a very creative individual, and someone who was able to make life work, despite the circumstances she was faced with. And I see a lot of that in the music, with musicians who take on challenges where putting the music out becomes really important, and establishing the collaborations that are essential to doing that. It's something that I take into my work, whether I'm teaching, writing poetry, working with other artists around the presentation of the poetry – I'm doing some stuff with dancers now and visual artists and that kind of thing – and using improvised music as a sort of background to, or a connecting point for the creations in word, or in dance, or in moving image.

**E:** So when you think some gems come out of the communities that live in ways that necessitate constant improvisation, you're talking about people, like you and your siblings and your mother and the practices that she modeled for you. You're also talking about artistic forms and communities?

**C:** That's right.

**E:** Are there more of these things, these gems, that you want to specify?

**C:** I think there are certain ways of learning that come out of the communities as well: so we would talk about this as pedagogical practices in formal institutions. And I think that there are remarkable ways that individuals learn. It reminds me of reading the autobiography of Malcolm X, when there was one point when he turned his back on his earlier days as a hustler – this is in the days when he was with the nation of Islam – and he went back to some of the former people he'd worked with and was remarking on the

incredible capacities numbers runners had, for example, to *remember* all the details of people who placed bets with them and the odds. So, “Wow! Look at that math!” Right? This is all done in people’s heads, you know? So, certainly, I’m not encouraging people to go on that route in life, but I think these kinds of competencies develop where people are faced with circumstances in which opportunities, the doors have been closed, but nonetheless, they create anyway. And the question, I think, for those of us who are in tune with this notion of intelligence and wisdom that comes out of marginalized communities and *are* in institutions like Universities and so on, is how do we bring that in, so that individuals whom we’re teaching get other tools at their disposal, to tap into their own personal lives and recognize that there are ways of learning that aren’t, necessarily, coming through the selected tradition.

**E:** Yeah, there are forms of knowledge and of learning that are just completely dismissed, or even white-washed, just completely unrecognized. What excites me about ICASP is that it’s trying to take seriously and engage with forms of knowing and forms of doing that have typically been relegated to the sidelines as entertaining, or interesting, but not worth taking seriously at an intellectual level.

**C:** Yes. And it’s interesting, the stuff that ICASP is doing now is sort of parallel to, and I would suspect learning from as well as contributing toward, this notion of indigeneity and indigenous wisdom that’s popping up, not just in Aboriginal communities in Canada, but in indigenous communities around the world. This wisdom is basically saying that the Western project is really failing in a whole bunch of ways: the economic collapse is only one further piece of evidence, the environment is another piece of evidence. The other day I was at OCAD (the Ontario College of Art and Design) and the President, Sarah Diamond, brought in Vandana Shiva to talk about her work. Now, this is an interesting opportunity. Here you have a place that’s focusing, as Sarah likes to put it, that strives to be the University of the Imagination, and one thinks of them creating art, and yet she’s bringing in an environmental activist, a scientist, to talk to students. The place was packed, which is, you know, a credit to the way Sarah’s leading that University, but also to Vandana, who is just incredible.

And the point that Vandana was pointing out, in terms of the battle she’s having with Monsanto and others in India, is the need to return to fundamental ways of being in a relationship with the planet earth, and that the project of industrialization and its aftermath, globalization and information technology, is removing us and in fact, destroying everything around us. It does suggest that we need to get back to some fundamentals about how people lived before we got into this thing of divorcing ourselves from our environment, and that’s where indigenous wisdom comes forward.

**E:** Yeah. I’ve had a lot of pretty twisted laughs recently at the stuff I hear from these groups that some think of as cutting-edge, these groups that are set on preparing us for urban decay. We’ve heard this stuff about the implosion of the cities and the end of oil, so people are starting to realize that we might be a little bit screwed. People are looking around asking “how are we going to live?” and I have people say things to me [like], “did

you know that you can eat a squirrel?” And I think, “well, how did we come to a point where we *didn't* know that you could eat a squirrel?”

[laughter]

But really, in what world do you not recognize that you're part of this ecosystem that you're walking around in, and know your spot in it? So, it's not really funny, it's horrible, but it seems like there's this large group of us who are working very diligently and very seriously to rediscover things that have been true forever, and that just have been blocked out completely. It's so backward in a way.

**C:** It really is. We've become so used to being fed by the food markets of the world that package processed food from animals that are fed so unnaturally and penned so unnaturally. For me this year, it's been interesting. I've got a backyard and I'm thinking, okay this year I'm going to grow a vegetables and fruit. Initially I was opposed to the idea because I thought, well, I want my garden to look pretty. Then I realized it can look pretty and it can help sustain me as well. And I think that those are the kinds of things that we need to look back at. So, once – and this is interesting in terms of improvisation – as Vandana Shiva was saying the other day, once we begin to develop a relationship with the earth again, we watch the diversity of creation that the earth provides to us and it differs every year, every season, every day. The notions of being able to wake up in the morning and it's raining today when you were planning to do something else, well what do you do? Or thinking, I've got these trees, they grow differently every year, some branches will live and some will die, some will fall, the leaves won't be the same as they were last year given the water they had over the winter. You wonder, how healthy will they be this season? These are constant questions that certainly prompt me and I think, as we develop a closer relationship with nature, prompt individuals to think about that fact that you have to be alive to the moment. You can't simply rely on the processed food, or the processed vegetables and fruit that come into the stores to be able to say, “everything is okay and we'll just go and pick that kind of stuff up”.

**E:** I'm really interested in what you just said. You used the phrase, “you have to be alive to the moment.” Part of my thesis was thinking about time, so I'm always attuned to when these words drop in, these ideas, and it seems to me that part of what's such a problem with main-stream, European, dominant ideas of how the world works and how we function and what's important and what's not, is that it's so blind to our implication in processes that span so far beyond what we're planning to do this Friday and beyond our brief little lifetimes. There's a lack of awareness of the immediate moment, but there's also a complete blindness to the fact that anything's going to happen, that, for example, this crop needs to keep growing or this soil needs to be fertile for years beyond my life span, or that people who aren't even conceived yet will need to be able to sustain themselves here too. It seems like blindness to present time and a taking for granted of longer time in the same breath. We're driving around in these cars that use gas that we all know is running out but no one wants to take you seriously when you talk about that, right? They try to dismiss you as alarmist or some kind of fringe radical to be bringing up these questions.

**C:** Yeah. I think one of the major dilemmas, and particularly watching the US system go through its meltdown, is how incredibly divorced we are from natural processes. We don't really consider that the earth is not an infinite supply of things. I'm sure industrialists do: I remember hearing Maude Barlow talking years ago about companies that mine water in Africa, and her description was, basically, these companies are like locusts, so they'll go into a country, they will dig down and they will drain every last drop of the water before the earth is able to replenish the supply. Rather than taking care of what they're mining, they'll drain it and then go to another country.

**E:** Oh, it's so short sighted, isn't it?

**C:** Yep, and it's just quite frightening. I was reading this book by Derrick Jensen this year – he's an environmental activist out of the States and quite radical in his approach – and he was saying that one of the dilemmas of cities is that we are cut off from the natural processes, and so develop this kind of relationship of dependence upon people who produce food stuffs. And that relationship of dependence sometimes leads to the notion of, “well, we need to really be certain that they're going to be there for us” so we take control of it. He talks about it almost as an imperialist aspect of cities; because they are reliant upon farmland, they then develop agribusiness and so on and so forth. We have more people moving into urban environments and less people on farms, yet these farms are being controlled by increasingly large businesses, which then provide to cities what our needs are, at these incredible prices. So, there's a real disconnect that we have from natural processes.

I ask my students every year what do they think of trees? and they kind of look at me like, “what are we talking about?” When we get through the process I say, “OK, why are trees so important?” I think in all my years of asking this question *one* student actually answered about photosynthesis and the creation of oxygen! And I say “wow” – it gets me! Most of them see trees as decorations and they're disconnected from the implications of deforestation. Once you bring them to the point of: this is how oxygen is created and you connect that need that we have to industrial processes of deforestation, they finally say, “wow, we're killing off our very ability to breathe, as we know it.” So, these kinds of things are quite alarming, that we end up so far away, and again, as I say, if we had closer connection to the natural processes of life I think it would give us a better insight into improvisation, because we'd have to basically look at the transition of seasons and so on and so forth and the differentiation of how life comes forth.

**E:** This is really interesting to me. I didn't anticipate that this conversation would take an environmental turn, but now that it has it makes perfect sense that it would. If I think of improvisation as a kind of a relationship or a practice that involves listening and responding in the moment and being sensitive to cues, kind of a respectful engagement with one's community, which can include plants and animals and whatever else, it makes no sense that I wouldn't have already thought of that connection. I'm glad you did.

**C:** And another thing: I was really impressed, again going back to when I talked about watching people like Ornette Coleman and that kind of thing, I've always been impressed by, and continue to be, their spirituality. Whether it's John Coltrane or Albert Ayler, or in his own quiet way, Don Cherry, there was really something about them. Everything from practicing Pranayama so they can blow better, to A Love Supreme and some of the stuff that Coltrane was doing from Martin Luther King and that kind of stuff. Also, in terms of the respect the musicians gave each other. So, of course, I've read about when the Bop musicians began calling each other "man" as the way of sort of countering the US racist aspects of calling folks of African descent "boys." I remember once seeing the Ornette Coleman group – I think it was maybe in '72 or '73 – and they hadn't been together for a while, but they came together for a concert, I think it was Lincoln Centre. And this is a very seasoned group of musicians who know each other very well, even though they haven't played with each other for a while (and I think it was Ornette, obviously, Dewey Redman, Ornette's son Denardo on drums – and I think Billy Higgins was there too, I think they had 2 drummers – Haden and Cherry). And they walked on stage, they bowed to each other, they turned to play, they played for, as I recall, about 2 hours, they stopped, they bowed to each other, they walked off. It was that amazing sign of respect, and then the ability to play without getting in each other's way, that was astounding to me, and to me it's been a life lesson, to be able to, as you said earlier, hear and give at the same time, sharing and giving at the same time.

**E:** So here's a question that keeps coming up. It came up at the policy workshops that you and I were both at, and it comes up every time we get into these thicker discussions about improvisation. The question so many keep coming to and working through is: whether, in your understanding, there is some inherent political "goodness" to improvisatory practices? So, I'm not saying, "is it good to improvise?" or "does good political change always happen when people improvise?" but is improvisation, as a model of interaction, when practiced carefully, necessarily going to lead to positive relationships or positive growth in people and in communities? Or can it be used badly? Can it go awry? Can it be used for ill?

**C:** Sadly, the latter is, I think, true. I think part of the policy conversation we had, and I remember myself saying this, is that we have to be careful in drafting a policy paper on improvisation and pedagogy because lots of corporations would love it. [They'd say] "whoa! You can actually educate people to be able to engage in real-time transactions?" Right?

[laughter]

The way the business world is going, in particular, real-time is becoming critically important as they try to cope with the transitions within our economy. And having leaders who are able to adapt to sudden change would be a valuable thing. People who can think on their feet, who can respond, and still champion industry to move ahead. In my mind, there's no inherent value – progressive value, if you want to call it that – to improvisation. You can certainly look at the lives of some musicians and they've had some very interesting times as they were leading some very good groups. You know,

you hear all sorts of things about the way Miles Davis treated some of his musicians, Charlie Mingus and that kind of stuff. So, you say, “Ok, you know, they’re great improvisers, no doubt about it, yet the relationships they had, even with the musicians that they performed best with, are somewhat questionable.”

**E:** It’s interesting, I was interviewing another project participant, Howard Becker, and he was a musician for a very long time – still is a musician, plays piano – and I was asking him about the relationship among musicians who are improvising together. His understanding was that there is a democratic space, but one with a boss. So, his way of viewing it – he’s a sociologist and looks at how systems function – was to say, “well, generally speaking, you need each other so you’re equals, but there’s a band leader who gets you the gigs and has the money.” I think that’s a very different understanding than what you’ve just said and I’m interested to hear people describing the same thing so differently.

And I think about what you were saying about corporate applications of improvisation. How hard pressed would you be to find someone here who would argue that, using improvisation to keep industrial capitalism thriving is a positive, progressive step that helps contribute to human rights? I don’t think anyone’s going to argue that.

**C:** No, no, no. It’s one of the things that ICASP needs to keep in mind, so that it can kind of say, “well, you know, there are certain principles around improvisation as well, that are really important.” I think of some of the spiritual values of the band leaders I was talking about earlier – and again, I’m not a musician, so I haven’t played with them, I don’t know how they took the theory into practice – but those kinds of things I think need to be linked. And I can go back to what Vandana Shiva was saying the other day about the values of looking at natural processes, of asking how does the earth regenerate itself and where do we fit in the flow of things and why is it that we are the only species that will basically drive things into extinction when every other species seems to be concerned with what it needs, not it’s greed? We over-extend ourselves and, as a result, end up driving certain species out of existence. These are thoughts that need to be held close around the notions of improvisation, the ethical base, and not just in theory, but in practice.

**E:** So when you say that there are principles around improvisation and its use, are you talking about a mindfulness, or a commitment to certain, broader values, a kind of intent in how you practice it? Is that what you’re getting at? The reason I’m asking is because I’m trying to think of how – I hope to be a University Professor one day, or some kind of community educator – how does someone teach and implement improvisation? How do you implement these practices in ways that don’t just kind of set them loose as ways of gaining self-esteem and power to manipulate your environment? What’s the missing piece that helps people to use it responsibly, or respectfully?

**C:** Well I do a lot of these kinds of things in my classes and they say sometimes, you know looking at me thinking, where is this guy going?

**E:** That's usually a good sign.

**C:** Yeah, you know, the question of trees. Sometimes I'll bring in my own experiences when I feel I've hit a certain revelation and I say "wow! That's amazing." For example, I can't remember whom I was listening to at the time – I think it was Toumani Diabaté, the Kora player – and it was a beautiful moonlit night and I kind of stepped outside to look at the moon and while I was looking at the moon I was thinking, "wow! That's fascinating!" and of course you look at the stars and you let your mind wander and think, something brought this into being and it must be amazing power to be able to do that. Then I went inside and I'm listening to Toumani Diabaté and I'm hearing, really, the same creative flow, except at what one might consider a small scale. He's a musician with an instrument and this is still seemingly the same power of creativity coming through this, something happening was creating something that is coming out and it's building a relationship with me at that moment as the listener, in the same way that's [happening when I'm] staring up at the moon and the stars.

So what I try to bring in, in a way, to some classes is saying, "let's look at the properties of creativity that surround us because they surround us every day." Particularly with the earth: how giving it is, or simply how giving a tree is, other than the tree giving oxygen. This is stuff I'll explain in classes and I'll say, you know, "have a reverence for life and relationship." A tree provides a home for birds, insects, etc, the insects provide food for birds and other animals, they provide shelters for squirrels and so on so forth, maybe even raccoons, and at times, depending upon the nature of the tree, it will bear fruit or something else that then provides sustenance for other things. So, how do we create in that way? Where we're not depriving anyone of anything, but actually are enabling others to take things that will be of nourishment? I think that that's the connection for me around the values of improvisation.

I don't, as an artist, I don't want to give people what I think is not good and is going to basically say, "wow, I'm so great" or "this is the new way." It's just like "here's my sharing." Part of the process that I'm now involved in, in this interdisciplinary performance-based stuff I'm doing, is – and one of the dancers said to me, "well Charles this is your project" and I said "okay yeah it is," so I have to take a bit of a lead – but at the same time, in scripting what I'd like to see from dancers or visual artists, I'm always leaving this line that's saying "you know, this is just a base to start from. I really want to see what you're going to give back. I'm going to give you what I have in the best way I possibly can, in terms of my poetry and music I'm associating with the poetry, some thoughts as to what I want the dance to do, the visual artists to do etc." – and yet the latter part is really for them to take off from and to return something back so that they are engaged in the piece.

**E:** So there's a great deal of trust involved in working like that.

**C:** Yeah, there has to be. Otherwise, you're just dictating. That's where the negative values come in about "this is my piece and I want to see it this way," which I think doesn't allow for the creative energies to come forward from others that might move me

in certain ways that I would not have anticipated. And I'm hoping it does, to be honest. It's like Milford Graves said last year: when he does sessions with other musicians, he's pushing them as hard as he can in the hope that he'll get pushed back, and that will bring them to a new level.

**E:** I was thinking, before we spoke, about what you said at the policy workshops. You kind of intervened at one point and reminded us that we were talking about improvisation as a musical practice and as a theoretical construct and in ways that are very detached from the fact that, for many people at ground level, you said, improvisation is simply a matter of being. And I think, as we've spoken, that idea has come through very strongly. Did you want to say something to that?

**C:** Well, yeah, I think the thing I'd like to add to it [involves going] back to Milford Graves' presentation last year where he talked about heart rate variability and the notions of Western thought being heartbeat regularity. And the idea that, as he says when he gives the recording of heart beats to students, "follow your own path" is a real door opener to this notion of being; that there are no given paths for each of us, we need to create that path and if we do so in conformity to an established pattern (you know, "1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4") we miss out on who we are.

So, one of the things that I do, other than, obviously, trying to follow that in my own life, but certainly when I teach, is to really point out from a critical perspective that educational institutions in particular are geared toward creating conformists. This is alarming to them, but I ask each of my students in the first class what are the major institutions that influence their lives? And invariably, they get this right. They come up with family and school. So, we explore the relationship between family and school. Obviously parents want their children to get a good education, why? Because they think that's the doorway, not to knowledge, but to a good job. And so these institutions, with that understanding and the regulation of law, basically say, "you have to be in here for a number of years otherwise certain things may happen."

And in that, they bring out, through, as I mentioned earlier, the selective tradition, "here's what we value as institutions, as knowledge." They're constructing knowledge that we must excel in and if we don't then, obviously, our opportunities are diminished. It doesn't enable students to explore their own innate knowledge base, or approach wisdom that's particular to them. It suggests, you must know these people. This wisdom, this knowledge is what we consider to be important, and if you want to be important in any way or if you want to do well in life you will know these things. And of course parents are reinforcing this all the time, and of course their friends reinforce it because from where do they get their friends? From school. And the hours of the day that they spend over an extended period of time, say from early childhood education up to, let's say, if they just get a Bachelor's, 22 years old, that's a long period of time.

**E:** It is.

**C:** So, the notion of improvisation as being runs counter to this regulated conformity of school starts at a certain time, work starts at a certain time, school ends at a certain time, work ends at a certain time, you can go out in the night time to go to the theatre or whatever it is. In this way the cultural industry is regulated so we can get to performances on weekends and that kind of stuff. I mean all of this stuff, these are the conformist elements that take away from individuals discovering and finding things that are outside of this well-trodden path that most people enter into.

**E: Yeah**, and the implication – not even the implication, but the clear, blunt statement of that model of education you’re talking about is that, when students come to class they are empty of any kind of useful knowledge or skill –

**C:** Yup.

**E:** - you can leave that at the door because we’re going to fill you up with what you need to know and when you leave you can do whatever you want to and it’s inconsequential as long as you come back tomorrow and bring your pen and write down what I tell you.

**C:** Right, but even the notion about when you leave is really quite bogus, because when you leave...I ask students to follow their path. I say, okay, so when you wake up in the morning, what time? You’re influenced by radio or television whether you’re driving or taking public transit, and in all these things your mind is on where you’re going not where you’re at. Then you go to wherever it is you’re going, maybe listening to music or talking on a cell phone or whatever it may be, but, let’s say you started at 7:00 and classes may end for you at, if you’re in high school 3:00, or university it’s scattered, depending upon where your courses are, then what do you do? Usually it’s homework or paper writing or whatever it may be, or hanging out with friends. Who are the friends? They’re likely from the same institution that you spend your time in. So what do you talk about? What you did in school, what your parents said you should be doing, and all that kind of stuff. So the time to really explore, uninhibited by these other pressures, is minimal and may not be approached at all, other than in sleep and in dreams.

On the other hand, this is where marginalized communities, I think, become repositories for another educational process. Many of the individuals from those communities are not seen as valuable, there isn’t the expectation that they have anything to offer whatsoever. In fact, they must be penalized and in some cases driven out. So, what happens when they are penalized and driven out? How do they live? How do they manage? They manage some how or another. We don’t have excessively, well we do have fairly higher death rates, but we’re not watching whole communities just drop off and die. So, what is that, what’s going on there that enables people to do that? I think about 3 Toronto individuals – Naomi Klein, Councilor Joe Mihevc, and somebody else – who, to accent the straits that the poor engaged in, said that they would volunteer for a period of time (I think it’s a month or two) to simply shop at food banks. And that’s important, but on one hand, I feel badly that it takes celebrities to open that door.

**E:** To make it matter, right?

**C:** Right. But there are people who do that every day, and yet pay rent and provide support to kids, and ideally get kids involved in recreational or cultural programming of some form. When I grew up, from a poor family, we couldn't do any of the things that my kids were able to do. My kids took dance lessons and ballet and all that kind of stuff. But, my god, some of the things we did to engage culture in our lives were phenomenal. I laugh about them these days and talk about, to my brothers and sisters, we should do this just for fun, and we used to do synchronized singing as contests, right? So we would take all the Motown stuff and sort of say, okay, hook up with somebody else and you're The Righteous Brothers, or Little Anthony, or the Imperials, or the Four Tops, and you got to do a song. In front of each other.

**E:** Right on.

**C:** And we would have contests as to who was doing the best.

**E:** And you judged each other?

**C:** Yeah, we judged each other. And that was the one time we were pretty honest [laughs].

**E:** I bet!

**C:** So, clearly, without having the television as a central focus, having radio – which is very cheap – and being in tune with pop culture, we were able to create and sustain each other in ways that we probably got more enjoyment out of than we would have gotten going to a movie theatre.

**E:** Yeah. And it seems like a different kind of entertainment too. It's active, right? You're creating it instead of sitting and being shown it.

**C:** Yeah, active and also, as I say, it was a kind of entertainment where we basically supported each other. It wasn't always the same pairs who would do stuff and my recollection was that we were pretty blunt, honest, which meant, if you lost, you had to admit it. And there were times when – I can still feel it – you'd say, "ah, you got that one, okay." It's like "whoa, what was great, but next time we'll get ya, try something else." The honour in it and the honouring each other was quite moving.

**E:** Yeah, there's this whole world – I'm drifting – but there's this whole world, there's a whole, almost secret world that kids have. And they're smart! Kids are so insightful about things that we aren't. I have a 2 and a half year-old, and some of the stuff she is figuring out about the world is stuff that I see adults struggling to come to terms with. I think for kids there's less – I don't know, I'm not trying to romanticize children – but there are less layers that she's learned so far to take on, there's less fakery and there's more of an honest interaction with what's facing us.

**C:** Yeah, I tend to agree. The difficult part, as you get into the University, is how do you help people unlearn?

**E:** Yeah.

**C:** Which is just so difficult because every other Prof. is saying, “this is how you continue your learning and you get this.” For me, I tend to be a revelation to many students: “you’re kidding? We don’t have to do this? We can think about it this way?”

**E:** We’re *allowed* to?

**C:** Yeah, yeah! “I can write a paper using ‘I’?”

**E:** I know, that’s mind blowing isn’t it?

**C:** You’re not kidding! It’s not even supposed to exist, right? Who is this third person character? I always feel that when a student comes up to me and says, “wow! I’m not really sure about the paper I handed in to you,” I say, “Great! You’re out of your comfort zone.” And, invariably, those are some of the best papers.

**E:** That’s where hard work happens, I think, once you’re not doing that routine. I did some good thinking in my undergrad, but I kind of developed a few formulaic ways of doing things. I took a lot of women’s studies courses and a lot of the time when I was in a rush I would just do my feminist theory dance on top of whatever text or play or whatever I had come up against, and I knew exactly how to just whip that off without even really having to think. I wasn’t saying things that weren’t accurate, but I was not doing any kind of difficult work or challenging myself, and looking back those just look like lost opportunities. It’s harder to break that pattern of, “if I do this, you will like what I’ve done” and, “if I write this, I will get my A and I can move along.”

**C:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah it’s kind of sad, and the pressures become increasingly difficult as I watch a lot of students this day who see the incredible uncertainty that surrounds us. When I came out of the university, it was pretty clear: most people felt that you get a job for life right? You can stay there and work ‘till you’re retired. Not that I chose that path, I went off and lived in Harlem and practiced as a writer, so basically took a very difficult step in terms of trying to make ends meet – but you know, most people did that and today’s young people coming out of university, they don’t have that. Many of them see a life which they’ll have four or five careers and they’ll start here and they’ll go there, that kind of thing. There is some element of knowing that you’re on shifting ground that people are beginning to look at, but it’s not strong enough, and I have not seen many educational programs that say, “okay, how do you really explore who you are and what you want in this shifting ground?”

**E:** And this shifting ground is almost exclusively depicted as a terrifying, horrible, awful thing. I’ve never been spoken to, or heard people talk about it, as presenting

opportunities. I mean in terms of finances it kind of doesn't, but in terms of the personal development and learning there's a huge advantage to not being expected to stay in the same place for 50 years and then collect your pension (although a pension would be nice).

[laughter]

**C:** Yes. But these are the kinds of the safeguards that the conforming – those in authority – use. It may sound trite, but one of the songs that I use in my class is John Lennon's "Working Class Hero." Part of why I use it is just to say, there's that line, "after they've got you to think of conforming for twenty odd years then they expect you to pick a career when you can't really function you're so full of fear." So, fear becomes a very key ingredient to conformity. Vandana talked about this the other day, we fear that we won't have a roof over our head, we won't be able to have food. The very necessities in life are held over our head to ensure that the majority of us will get on with the program. If food were given to each of us according to our need, we'd have probably a very different world, but that's not the case.

**E:** I would have a different life, for sure.

**C:** Yeah! You watch the healthcare debate in the United States and you look at the imbedded, my god, Neanderthal thinking of these Republicans, that better you die that you have health coverage, unless you can pay someone who's going to make a profit out of it! It's just...Wow! You know? Those elements come through strongly, and I think that most individuals are not even aware of what it means to deal with the "wolf at the door" and then when they start thinking about it they say, "well, you know, I don't really know if I want to do that, or I'll find time..." There are some people who study law who say to me, "well yeah, I'll work on a large firm for a few years and then I'll go out on my own," and it never happens. The pay, the perks, the privileges, etc etc, they're so mired in debt they kind of ...well, life changes and they end up being in these conforming institutions.

**E:** Yeah, it starts to make itself feel necessary, I guess.

**C:** Yeah, it's quite set. I need to wrap up, but we can certainly continue this conversation later on if that would be helpful.

**E:** Thanks so much: this is great. I feel like we've had a huge conversation and I also feel like I have about 500 other things I want to hear your thoughts on, but that might just be how things go.

[laughter]

**C:** Yes. And I look forward to continuing the conversation sometime.

**E:** Thanks so much for your time Charles.

**C:** Okay. Take care.

**E:** Take care