

A good person and a good academic: a conversation with Tracey Nicholls

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EJ: I am speaking with Tracey Nicholls who is Associate Professor at Lewis University and also a former ICASP Postdoctoral Fellow in the year 2009-2010 at Université de Montréal. I've had the pleasure of reading a range of Tracey's work and I've seen her present, converse, and engage in questions at all sorts of panels and colloquiums and workshops. I have a great deal of admiration for her keen and creative intellect, her dedicated way of building and unpacking arguments at a pace that others can keep up with and also her ability to highlight the connections that already exist between all sorts of subjects of inquiry but also to build them where we have not yet perceived them in convincing, compelling and groundedly useful ways, which is a big selling point for me, a big win. So, apparently I'm not alone in my admiration as Lewis University has just granted tenure and promotion to Associate Professor! So congratulations on that accomplishment. Well-deserved.

TN: Thank you!

EJ: You have written on a healthy range of subjects from peace-making, musical criticism, philosophy, music and democracy, multiculturalism, the list is impressively broad and I am excited about it all as you can hear. So, in this conversation I'm going to ask you a series of questions that I hope will allow you to ramble on in whatever direction intrigues you in the moment—I'm sure all of it will be interesting. So, your recent book, out in 2012 — so very new I guess!

TN: Very, yes, hot off the presses!

EJ: Yes, it's hot, it's not even available on Amazon anymore— in the States it's sold out and in Canada it says it's unavailable. So I don't know if that means it's sold out or not yet, but it's looking good for you!

TN: Wow, that's fantastic, I didn't even —

EJ: Yeah, no, I was trying to get it before our interview and I couldn't.

TN: Oh wow!

EJ: So that's a good sign!

TN: That's either a really good sign or a really horrible sign! [Laughs]

EJ: [Laughs] Yeah, they're not even bringing it in, they just list it! [Laughs]. I think it's the former.

TN: Let's hope so! [Laughs]

EJ: So it's called *An Ethics of Improvisation: Aesthetic Possibilities for a Political Future* and I thought I'd like to start there by asking you to explain a little bit about what you're doing in that book, why it matters, and what your arguments are. I realize it's an entire book and I'm giving you a few minutes, but it's an intriguing subject and I'd love to hear your thoughts on it.

TN: Well it's actually—oh where to start telling the story of the book? It was a long process, as I think every book is. It's essentially a major re-working of my doctoral dissertation. My doctoral dissertation actually was very, very influenced by my work I was doing as a grad student, in particular the work that I often presented at the Guelph Jazz Colloquium. I think in fact that I used to say that at least three and a half chapters of my dissertation came out of presentations to the Guelph Jazz Colloquium. I found it a really generative, fruitful place to go and talk about musical improvisation and its political underpinnings, and to really think out loud about the interconnectedness of value theory and so that's really what's going on in the book as a whole—linking together the aesthetic values that we can find in improvised music, the political values we can find in improvising communities and the ethical examples—ethical paradigms—these particular communities set up for us as truly engaged citizens. One of the points I'm really concerned to make, I make, I think in a variety of ways in a lot of my writing, is to really contest this really narrow, narrow view that we've seemed to develop in the last thirty or forty years; this very increasingly narrow view of what it means to be political. I really want to show that politics is everywhere and democratic politics is not just what the government is doing, but is what we citizens are doing with each other. So that's really a lot of the focus of the book in various ways.

EJ: So If I could ask you—let's play cocktail party—what would you say are some of the core values or practices that you can draw from improvised music and art making that you feel are most salient, crucial and energizing, maybe for politics more broadly designed?

TN: Well, I think, I would go first of all to respect for others. Respect for the partners with whom we are performing and improvising—even when these are people we might not know very well, or people we might not have this sort of, built up trust capital with. You know, this willingness to give this benefit of the doubt and really take the other person's contribution as something of enormous potential value that we have to unpack for ourselves. I think these two things are closely related: respect for others and the willingness to adopt new patterns of behaviour, new plans. The ability to drop what we thought we were doing and recognize in the moment that the suggestions we are getting from others could take us, actually, down a much more generative path.

EJ: So, an openness to being wrong, or to experiment.

TN: Yes, an openness to being wrong but I also think an openness to collaborating on a project that you never even imagined, right? You know, this is something I find happens constantly. In fact it was happening to me in class yesterday. I'm teaching a couple of sections of Ethics. I went into yesterday to do what my students have taken to calling a "stuff day"—instead of doing anything related to official readings, we just go in and sort of practice ethics. So they talk about whatever interests them and the ethical implications of it. We got into a huge discussion about

how incredibly dissatisfied some of them are with dorm life. You know, questions of security, food quality, you can imagine what students on campus are complaining about. And we ended up talking about their list of complaints, what we could do about it, who we could complain to and what came out of this was instead of the final paper that I had planned for them, a group project where they are going to write a list of demands and we're going to figure out how best to present them. And so it was one of those things where I had no idea what we were going to end up talking about, and had no idea the assignment was going to change like that. But it was just so clear that they were really deeply engaged with this. So I think this ability to see that there is this critical mass around a particular issue, and find ways to put that energy into positive change I think is actually really a crucial thing that comes out of taking improvisation seriously.

EJ: I want to come back to teaching and learning but first I want to make sure you finish your list of salient themes from improvisation.

TN: I'm almost inclined to say that respect for others and this willingness to embark on new roads and see where serendipity takes you are maybe fundamental values. I think a lot of what else I would say comes out of that, so like, the importance of taking dialogue seriously, the ability to code switch.

EJ: Can you explain that for me?

TN: So to actually move from one language or one set of ways of communicating to another.

EJ: Right.

TN: And, let's see [pauses] I think a tolerance—well maybe not “tolerance”— that seems like a weak word— an appreciation for ambiguity and complexity, is a huge, huge part of what you need to be an ethically and politically engaged person. We live in a very, very complex world and dealing with human beings—if you're going to deal with human beings in all of their variety and in all of their nuance, then you know, you can't just reduce them to stereotypes or reduce them to the particular thing you want to interact with. You have to take notice of the whole person. So, there is I think, I would maybe add: respect for others, openness to collaboration—unexpected collaboration—and appreciation for complexity and ambiguity.

EJ: Alright. Thank you.

TN: Not exactly a comprehensive list but you know, it's a good place to start.

EJ: Salient points, right.

TN: Yes, yes.

EJ: So I was going to come later on to talking about teaching and pedagogy, but let's go there right now. You're a teacher, you're a researcher, you're a writer, you do a lot of dialogue engaged in learning with others and your own ongoing learning. So, I'd like to ask how your involvement with improvised music and improvisation studies has affected your understanding

of your role as a teacher; we just heard one story about changing the final outcome of a course—so is it a group mark for that project?

TN: I think so, yes. This happened yesterday so I haven't done a whole lot of thinking. I want to get a sense from the students what the general willingness was. It looks like the majority of them are interested in participating in the project, so I think what I'm going to do—what I typically do with group projects—is give them a group grade but also encourage them to hand in personal statements of how well they felt the work was organized, how well they felt that other people were participating—basically to try and get rid of this free-rider problem. I hate the idea that there are just a few people on whose backs all of this work is being heaped and there are other people who are just skating along. So, typically what I do with group projects is say that you're all going to get the same grade unless something gets written in these sorts of evaluations, self-evaluations.

EJ: Interesting. I did this once in a class with Ajay a long time ago. It was a very interesting process for sure. So the upcoming Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium, this years theme is “Pedagogy and Practice: Improvisation as Social Justice and Social Responsibility.” It's basically my dream colloquium, are you going to be there?

TN: I would love to be. It's really up in the air. One of the things I deeply regret about the job I have now—about the teaching term that comes with this job—essentially, is that the Guelph Jazz Colloquium falls on my second week of classes. It's one of those things that by week three I could have had enough set up to go, week one I could just sort of get past that, but week two is sort of difficult to be absent.

EJ: It will all go up on the website anyway, where you can see it.

TN: Yeah. I'm hoping that as we get more technological I could start going to conferences and skyping myself into the classroom.

EJ: You know this isn't impossible now, that's a good thought. I don't know if it's too soon to do it this year. We've had a telematic performances, so why not telematic panels right? Ha-ha, a little brainchild of ours! So what would you want to say were you speaking there? I guess, this is a personal question in a sense because this is kind of my question—everything I'm thinking about I'm turning back to “how would this affect organized education, how would this affect classroom teaching, how should this affect my own research and writing?” So I guess my question is, what are the gifts of improvisation to education broadly conceived? Are they the same gifts that you outlined in response to my first question, or is there a particular way in which a teacher or researcher should be, or can be motivated by what improvisation can offer?

TN: I think I'm inclined to say that it's simply, well simply... it's a matter of applying those values to the classroom context, as opposed to adopting a distinct set of pedagogical values. I know for me, the particular way I've noticed that improvisation plays into my teaching is that I try very hard to run non-hierarchical classrooms. There is a sense in which that is slightly artificial, at least in the sense that at the end of the day I'm the one giving grades. But certainly at the level of everyday classroom conversation and the building of community, one of things I try

very hard to do is present what I'm bringing into the classroom—the life experience, the thinking I've been doing, a lot of the research; for me research and teaching are really like a circuit that sort of feed into each other. So there are a lot of students in my book and there is a lot of my research life in my classrooms. So what I try and do is bring myself in as a model—here is one way to approaching this set of questions, of responding to them, and you are trying to draw out from the students their own ways that they would model these kinds of ethical dilemmas and challenges, ways of being in the world, as opposed to you know “I'm the expert with the PhD, let me tell you how you should react to this.”

EJ: Just open your head and I'll fill it up with all my brilliant ideas.

TN: Very anti the banking model. [Referring to Paulo Freire's liberatory pedagogy]

EJ: It doesn't work either.

TN: No, no, it doesn't. What I really want, the thing I think is the amazing potential of teaching is that you get an opportunity to introduce people to things that they might not even realize at the time is all that valuable. But they go away, and maybe a few months down the road, maybe twenty years later something happens, and they flash back to a particular discussion, or a particular concept that they learned, and that's where all of a sudden it's “oh my god that's what that was all about!” So I think that the great gift of teaching and learning is that it is really genuinely life changing. And I think that improvisation is really important part of that. This whole, you know, you can't change unless you're open to these other perspectives, these other modes of being in the world.

EJ: So I hear you saying a lot about respect and openness and I wonder if that's all another way of talking about listening; is it the same thing? Because I know I've read some other things in improvisation studies talking about you know Deep-listening obviously, but just listening, respectful kind of listening. In my thesis I called it “deliberate empathy,” or something like this, intentional empathy? It was a while ago.

TN: I like that.

EJ: I was trying to talk about, in this case, taking textual voices seriously, and listening to them as much as you can on their terms, rather than your “I need to write a chapter about feminist theory, and I need to stick it in here, and I need it by next week” you know? One thing I've noticed about that kind of listening, and the thought that it necessitates, is that it can be very slow. So I'm interested in how you manage time, not like in a “day planner” way, but how you understand time; so you are constrained by the 13 or 14 week semester right, and you have to submit grades on X date... but the kind of learning that you have just spoken about doesn't span weeks and days, it spans months and years.

[Here the interview recording stopped and resumed a little later] [19:00]

EJ: I was asking how you conceptualize, you know, the very limited and small moments that you get to interface with your students as teachers and learners together... kind of within that way,

way broader framework of the time of one person's life, or the time of social change, or the time of cultural development. So, I mean in a way I guess it has to be a tempered expectation, or do you feel that you get enough time and room—

TN: There is never enough time, no. I think one thing when you first started asking this question, one of the things that occurred to me, there is this point that I make many times to students, but I think just generally—people often talk about democracy for instance, as being really inefficient, and I think that the point that I often want to make in response to that, is that efficiency is not the only value we have. Spending your time importantly is something that if you can manage it, if you can manage to always spend your time well that's a good thing. But it's not the only thing, and I think that often what we do is get hooked into this notion that being efficient and being good stewards of our own time—or even being good stewards of other people's time... hold on I think I've lost you— [Skype cuts out]

TN: So the point I wanted to make was that I think we get too wrapped up in questions of efficiency sometimes and what we fail to see is that when we're looking at engaging with other human beings I think we really need to be really focused on justice over efficiency. So I think that in every classroom community, and in every genuine human interaction that we try to experience in our lives, I always try and keep focused on the justice versus the efficiency, which is often really, really difficult. And I think that maybe this is what it means to adopt improvisation principles as a sensitive interactor with others—is to really realize that in addition to respecting the ambiguity and the complexity, you've got to be able to let go of all the things that you can't do. There is a huge aspect of improvisation that I think is really about taking responsibility for the choices you are making and being aware that you can't do everything. So you've got to decide in the moment and in the context of the community, what is the most important. And again, for me a lot of that is sort of last minute thinking on my feet in the classroom, but it's also this reflecting on some of the conversations I'm having; if I think of the teaching term as an extended conversation with different groups of students—one of the things I found myself doing a couple weeks ago, on a Wednesday which is my office hours day—it's a non teaching day for me—I found myself waking up at 4:30 in the morning going, “Oh my god there's only three weeks left and there is this hugely important conversation that I have to have!” So it was about, I was having these conversations with my students about the obligations we have to, you know, the sort of the desperately poor, the global poor, the global hungry, and talking about it in terms of justice and not charity. And I woke up thinking that the choice we have, the decision we need to make about supporting human rights versus protecting our social privileges is kind of a parallel discussion to that, and I was like “oh my god I haven't said anything about this yet, they have to know this!” So this is what they're getting tomorrow. [Laughs]. But yeah it is one of those things that you need to realize that, “here's the things I feel I need to say in this context, in this community, in this conversation” and that means there is a lot that we'll never get to, but you know, maybe at some other point.

EJ: So, I'm so glad you said what you said about justice versus charity because I haven't heard it articulated that way but it's beautifully simple and right. And so my last question that I always ask people—or sometimes first depending on my mood, I always want to know, as a teacher, as a writer, as a person in the world, as someone who partakes in music, just the whole Tracey, what's your understanding of your implication, and your responsibility, and your role in local

community, and global community and struggles for social justice? So how are you situated and how is your work a hindrance and a help to your kind of broader goals, because you clearly have a strong commitment to these things, so how do you make sense of it all and make one part of the other instead of these nicely defined boxes we're supposed to be in? You're able to be a professor who writes clever books, and draws research funding and then goes and gives money to charity so other people can do stuff for other people. I think that's kind of, I don't mean you're supposed to, but I think that's the model we are encouraged to accept: "Your job is this and then you go home and your personal interest is feeding people" or whatever. But it sounds to me that you understand the two as completely the same life, or completely implicated somehow.

TN: Yeah, I think that as much as possible, yeah. And it's not that this is, again it's not a matter of "it's simply this," it's much muddier and messier and more complicated and I think that one of the pitfalls of academic life is it's so easy to get so, to live in your head, to get all wrapped up in "here's the latest set of deadlines, here's the next set of projects" and you know, what I'm doing is "so terribly important" and I think that it really is necessary, at least for me, to remind myself on a regular basis that the going out and doing things, that in one way of thinking get in the way of the deadlines, is actually a really important part of maintaining human engagement. So there is a sense in which I try really hard to make sure that the things that I'm saying are actually supporting the things I'm doing. So you know, that I'm actually, that the money I give, I give to charities or partnerships, organizations that are actually advancing principles that I endorse philosophically. Again, I was thinking about this recently with these ethics classes I've been teaching. One of the things I do around global poverty is try and make the point that all of us have more ability to deal with the situations than we think we do. So, you know you hear a lot from the standpoints of students, you know the starving student: "I'm paying so much in tuition and so much in books," so I do this classroom exercise with them where I ask them to give up one thing— something they would actually give up, and calculate how much money that would be, and we do this sort of additive thing where typically we end up somewhere between \$15,000 and \$20,000 of disposable income. So I started thinking about, when we did this last time, what I would spend that money on, what I would do with it. So I'm really wrestling right now between the World Food Programme, which I think emergency aid is a critical thing right now, there are three or four major famine spots where they need that money now. But there's also other organizations like "Partners In Health" that works in Haiti that does like grassroots community development projects, that I think in the long term are much more transformative, much more likely to help people get out of poverty themselves. So there is always this kind of tension for me in where I want to spend my time between the immediate fires that need to be put out and the long term "what's really going to make the world a better place." I don't know, I think maybe there is a bit of that also in how I approach the whole, what I do with my time. So there are things that I can do right now that I do, do to some extent—I've been doing service learning projects with one of my ethics classes and going to places where they pack medical supplies; they pack food to send overseas and doing sort of educational projects around sexual assault, and so I've been involved in a hands on way going to these places doing this, but there is also this sense that I really feel that where I can make the most long term difference is in writing and speaking and educating about these things. I think there is this constant pull that we feel in different directions between the acting in the short term on the immediate needs and the "what is the vision of social justice we want to bring into the world?"

EJ: Yeah, and the "how the heck do we get there?"

[Skype cuts out, conversation shifts] [30:32]

TN: I'm still in this position with the tenure and promotion of walking around and all of a sudden it occurs to me that "oh my gosh I've got tenure!"

EJ: Yeah!

TN: I still in some ways feel like I'm inhabiting this life and mind of the graduate student. I think in part because I still have this feeling, and maybe this is part of the luck I have, that I still have this feeling that I'm still doing what I was doing when I was a grad student.

EJ: I think maybe you were an exceptional grad student; maybe that's what happened there!
[Laughs]

TN: Well I just feel like, in a way, that I'm just running this huge scam on people, I think, you know, it's part of the impostor syndrome. [Both laugh]

EJ: It's the impostor syndrome it's not true!

TN: But like basically, I wake up and I think about things that interest me, I go into classrooms and talk about things that interest me, I go off and write about the things that interest me, I go to conferences, and I hang out with interesting people, and I write books, and it's all stuff that I'm doing that I want to do.

EJ: And I think that's probably precisely why you do it well though, so reading you're work it's not like: "Aw crap, I have to crank out an article because I need tenure." It's very clear to me that you're writing about things that feel urgent, important, exciting, challenging. So I think that's, I mean, all that stuff I said at the beginning is true, there's energy in your work and I think it's because you like what you're doing.

TN: Yeah, but it's one of those things, when I think of all the people, like even the people I know in my own life, and certainly all the people who are the marginalized and the dispossessed and underinvested in the world, the idea that I get to do something that I love to do and want to do and feel fulfilled by, that's... so much privilege in that!

EJ: That's enormous.

TN: Yeah! And I really, I think, am fairly frequently humbled by it, I really am so lucky and it really is urgently necessary to first of all acknowledge that and secondly take the privilege that I have and use it to benefit the people who aren't getting the privilege. I've spent a lot of time wrestling with the notion of social privilege and you know it's one of those things if I had my choice, if I had the power single handedly to change the universe, you know, I would give away privilege in a heartbeat in exchange for human rights. Rights are the things that can't be taken away from any of us, but they're only existent if we all have them. So I think they are

fundamentally incompatible with any kind of system of social privilege. And privilege is the kind of thing, you know, you can't give it away, you can't say you don't have it without being hypocritical and disingenuous. So, the only thing, to the extent that there is a responsible way of dealing with privilege, is to take it and try and put it into the service of the people whose needs aren't being met.

EJ: Use it to lose it, right?

TN: Exactly, yeah. Much like affirmative action.

TN: So yeah, I think there is this sense in which, it feels a little bit like the worry is that it could slide into this point where we privilege taking care of the little people, but I think there is very definitely this need on the part of us who have so much, to take that and spread it around more. When I'm teaching, the thing that I am very conscious of is the students in my class who are not sort of the privileged majority demographic. There are a lot of students I have that are, they come from really good families, good high schools, good sub-urban environments, and then there are these other students who, the mere fact that they actually got to the classroom is the product of enormous struggle and sacrifice on their part and their families' part. I am really keenly aware of them, and what I can do to make their educational experience more empowering, like make that sacrifice pay off. That's part of the challenge.

EJ: Yeah, and important, it's so crucial. There has been a lot of action you know recently, in Montreal in particular, but student action all over the world in questions of accessibility—and what I would like to see, in my dream world would be some kind of mass movement also targeting curriculum choices and disciplinary. I don't think that people are going to riot for curricular change—it might just be me with a sign—but I feel like it's not only who gets in and how long they can stay, but it's what they are being taught there and in what way. It's heartening to hear of people who are working across the board to make education work more relevantly and more empoweringly. And I don't mean empowerment like, “oo, I went to a food bank and now I understand that poor people are people too, and I feel so good! I feel so good about myself!” I mean true empowerment, so that, the kind of democratic processes that you are advocating in your own work are accessible to you know, the people [laughs], instead of just some of us people.

TN: So, yeah, I think that, that's all part of this idea of liberatory pedagogy, this whole notion of getting students to see that when they come into a classroom and they are presented with the syllabus that it's not a product that they are consuming, that this is a space in which we collectively, collaboratively can build the knowledge base that will allow all of us to take something away that will make our lives better and different than if none of us had never even been here. So you know there's a challenge to the students that I think it's really important for the educators to get across because students sometimes know that they're not getting their needs met as much as they could be or as well as they could be, but they're not always aware of how to ask for the things that they need and they're not even aware that some of things they need exist, right, so this is why I think it's so important to really critically look at the range of voices that are being brought into readings for instance, and how will you think about what constitutes the discipline and the canon. For instance one of the things that I wrestle with a lot is I think a lot of

what I do is not always recognized, as “that’s not really philosophy.” I am just working on a book right now with a co-editor—we sent it to a university press and the acquisitions editor loved the project. It was about social privilege, and we were doing this whole methodological thing of getting scholars to write about their theoretical interventions into what we’re calling “privilege studies,” but do so in a way that was distinctly autobiographical. Like putting themselves in the writing.

EJ: That’s a great challenge.

TN: Yeah, and we were using this technique called braided narrative, right, so mixing the personal and the political or sociological, and apparently the reader reports just slammed the idea.

EJ: Oh no! Why?

TN: Well, the reviewers requested that the reports not be released to us.

EJ: Oh, wow.

TN: So all we have to go on is the editor’s very charitable, very encouraging critical comments. But it seems like for us that was a very clear methodological choice that you cannot talk about privilege unless you start by talking about your own.

EJ: Where you sit in it.

TN: Yeah exactly.

EJ: Oh that’s outrageous, so what are you going to do?

TN: Yeah, and I think a lot of people just still really don’t understand that need to reveal yourself in your academic work. So there’s a lot of sort of, you know, “what I do is not real philosophy”; “what I do is not rigorous academic work,” and it’s one of those things that you just have to, I think, just remind myself that this is a set of deliberate choices that I’m making, that underlying them is this ethical commitment, this sort of fundamental commitment that I made to myself. I decided when I started graduate school actually that as much as I love academic life, the things I am most committed to is the project of being a good person, and the day I have to choose between a good academic and being a good person, that’s it.

EJ: You’re done.

TN: So it’s easy to get onto the whole, “I gotta get through grad school, I gotta get a tenure track job, I gotta get tenure,” there’s always another mountain to climb. I think that if you lose sight of that fundamental commitment then you are sitting around spinning ideas that you know, spinning ideas that the only people who are ever going to read are the reviewers. [Laughs]

EJ: Exactly, that no one’s going to hear right?

TN: That's just a shocking waste of the privilege that I think we have in academia.

[Skype cuts out around 41:40]

EJ: Can't we talk about music now?

TN: Sure! Absolutely!

EJ: Tell me about you and music, and how that fits in with you and privilege, and you and human rights, and you and justice.

TN: Okay, I don't know, I feel like I have a very complicated relationship with music that maybe I'm just trying to dress it up in more than it is, but you know, I just, I love living in a musical world. I couldn't imagine a world, a life without music, and yet I don't play an instrument at all. If I could do anything in the world I would be a blues singer. I would be living on a bus, traveling around the country from one beer soaked smelly dive to another. And I have the world's most horrible singing voice.

EJ: Oh I was just going to ask you to sing, I guess that's a no! [Both laugh]

TN: Oh no, I would never inflict that! It's one of those things, I do it for myself as I'm washing the dishes.

EJ: Yeah, and you can tolerate it?

TN: Well I love the sound of my own voice, it sounds great to me, but I know from feedback that it does not sound that way to the rest of the world.

EJ: You know, my brother-in-law learned to sing, he couldn't carry a tune, or make his voice do sounds that he liked the sound of. And he's a very kind of methodical guy, so he got a book and he went through the thing and now he's really quite a lovely singer. It can be done.

TN: Oh! Can you send me the title of the book? [Laughs]

EJ: I'll ask him and I'll send it to you, we'll see! It's one of those, he's done it for banjo and mandolin, and he just said "I need to learn voice" and he did. Quite incredible, yeah. But he's kinda freaky in that way. I think you could probably do that. I'll send you the link and you can report back—we'll do a Skype, we'll do like a sung interview next time! Imagine! [TN laughs] No one would ever watch it, but I would! [TN laughs more]

So, sorry you were talking about you and music and listening and not playing.

TN: Yes, the whole time I've been involved in different research projects I keep getting this question of "so, what instrument do you play?" And I have this fall back that, "I'm the audience member," and I think that in a way that really is what it is for me. It really is the listening, the

sort of engaging with the music. I can't do it myself, I have enormous respect for people who can, and at the very least I can be the audience. I think that there is a perspective that comes out of that. When we were talking earlier about listening and you were talking about, what was it "deliberate empathy?"

EJ: Yeah I think I said "deliberate empathy."

TN: For me what I was thinking at the time, and I guess I got sidetracked, I was so really struck by this notion that comes out of the notion of the George Lewis stuff, the listening trust stuff, Ellen Waterman and Julie Smith and the notion of listening being this gift or trust that you give over to other people, this way of being radically open to them. That I think is something, you know when you think about that as what the audience is doing, I think what it does is it opens up the space of the improvising community. Much of what I was reading when I first started my dissertation, much of the stuff that actually dealt with musical improvisation was about how musicians react to each other, and that's important work, and I think it was very fruitful for me. But, for me the challenge was, "how do we expand this circle?" How do we bring in the people who are sitting there seemingly not, quote unquote "doing anything"? But are the people whose energy, whose facial expressions, whose body language are contributing that encouragement, that sense that there is somebody who is getting what I'm doing and is appreciating it. I think there is a sense in which, I'm tempted to muddle deliberately the sensory metaphors here, I think there is a sense in which that kind of listening— the listening trust— is a way of showing to other people, fulfilling in other people, this basic human need for visibility, this need to be seen as autonomous, valued individuals. I think there really is an audience role, and I think it is one of those things that if we take it seriously it reminds us what it means to participate in a community is much wider than just the people who tend to get all the credit. I think also we see that it's not just about participation, and is about this sensitivity to environment. The idea of a world without music is just, I wouldn't even want to try and imagine that. There is so much energy and so much of what really makes me stop and attend to the beautiful in the world that's bound up in that particular way of making sound.

EJ: And it's very interesting because even people without hearing are shown to respond to music, through vibration I suppose, or through other sensory perception. So there is something very—I don't know— visceral, or primal about music. I wonder if that's the reason that people respond so amazingly positively to this project, or why other people are resistant. This is somehow something else, this is like a fun, animal-y thing... and what are these people doing talking about it endlessly at conferences and getting all worked up and using their brains on it you know? That's what's so amazing about this project; let's take this seriously, and no this isn't just a lark, this isn't just a bunch of stoners sitting around talking about things they saw when they were playing drums. [TN laughs] This is serious, and the more I read—I get to read pretty much everything that's published to the website—I've read a lot of it, and this is compelling, this is... the world is changing because how people are thinking and talking about this. It's not just a game.

TN: Speaking as a philosopher there is something really, really important that this project does for philosophy that is very much in the vein of what a lot of feminist theory on embodiment has done. There is this view that I think a lot of us have, some of us more or less consciously, but I

think that to some extent that all of us in philosophy get locked into this way of thinking, this whole idea of the mind on one hand and the body on the other; it's very Cartesian. I find myself joking from time to time about the way Descartes has imprinted our culture such that it is so easy to fall into the trap—maybe this is all of academia and not just philosophy—but fall into this trap of thinking of ourselves just as “minds” and our bodies are really just something that carry our minds around the world.

EJ: It's like a brain car. [Both laugh]

TN: Yeah, exactly, but it's fundamentally unimportant; it could be anything and what really matters is the mind. And I think that's such a destructive way of thinking because there is so much about how our bodies get messages from the environment and shape our emotions and shape the very way we think. So the idea of music being primal, the idea of music being this thing that pulls our minds back into this fundamental inextricable connection with the body; I think that's a hugely valuable and challenging and really groundbreaking thing that ICASP is doing. That's one of the things that really excites me about this project.

EJ: That's an interesting way to put it, and I hadn't put it—you always say things much more tidily than I can! I need to work on that! [Both laugh] It just comes out much more clearly. I was thinking about when you were talking about—I've become a little wacky around here—I have a standing up desk and I'm wearing these minimalist shoes —not the toe ones, I can't go there— [TN laughs] and I'm reading a lot about how our bodily practices directly impact our emotional and mental states. So, if you walk around in bare feet your brain works differently. Your responding to way more bio feedback, but the way you build brain waves actually changes. So, of course music does the same thing, and of course it's not just what you put in, and on your skin, it's about how you hold your body and what sounds you are hearing and how your body moves, it's kind of, you read these news stories about “oh my gosh! We did a ten-year study and it turns out that what you think about affects how you feel! Ta-da!”

TN: Woo-hoo!

EJ: You know like, there is a link between mood and physical health, well that's only surprising because we started buying into the mind-body split in the first place. Not surprising 2000 years ago, surprising now. So yeah, it's like we are making up for lost time here, maybe in a way.

TN: Yes, and again there's maybe something to that in terms of thinking about what improvisation does, one of the things that I think I love the most about a musician's explanation of the kind of solidarity you get in improvisation is the story Ingrid Monson tells in her book, *Saying Something*. She quotes this drummer she used to play with, Ralph Peterson Junior, talking about how sometimes when you're soloing you get into this problem situation and you don't know how to get yourself out, and the people you are improvising with realize that that's what's going on and they all kind of rush in and help and we all collectively get out of the problem situation. Peterson talks about those problem situations that other people rush in to help you out of as being these really magical moments, these really transporting moments where something special happens. I think maybe we could see ICASP and a lot of the recent scholarship on the importance of embodiment to knowledge and the importance of environment to self as maybe

being part of this, and the rushing in to get us out of this huge problem situation that we're in with this deification of the ideally rational agent and the mind as the only thing that is really important about us as humans. Maybe this is the threshold of something that will not just fix the mistake, rescue us from the problem situation, but will actually take us into this new performance, this new conversation that we couldn't have foreseen. Stuck in the old paradigm [laughs]. I feel like I'm simultaneously here referencing Naomi Klein's sort of "once we get used to the shock and get past the shock doctrine, here is the"— she has this great thing, she talks about this particular science fiction writer who's name I can't remember right now, but she talks about this notion of people's views of the future and how some people believe in shiny futures and some people believe in rusty futures. This particular science fiction writer is a rusty future kind of guy. The future that we build is not going to be this wonderful thing that comes out of thin air, it's not going to be a sort of "after-the-flood" when the earth is you know, clean and wiped away, we're going to build this shining palace. Instead what's going to happen, we're going to have this whole garbage heap that we just pull stuff out of and salvage what we can. I kind of feel that the whole idea of the rusty future is this recognition that there is never going to be virgin territory, there's never going to be this sort of taking off in a spaceship to a new world where we can build everything perfectly. Instead, whatever we do going forwards is going to be essentially a salvage project. It's going to be picking up the stuff we find that's been discarded by others or even discarded by ourselves and using it to build the new path of the future. I think the ICASP [research], feminist theory on embodiment, the thinking in environmental circles and the radical connectedness of life, I think all of this is picking up these things that we've known, that we've lived with, that we've thrown away as unimportant, the importance of the body, the knowledge that you only get when you attend to the messages of the body instead of pushing them away in favour of what you want to do with your mind. I think this is the thing that will allow us to go back and look at the stuff we've thrown away and try and figure out what we can pull out of it and how we can refashion it, how we can use it in a way that goes back to re-acquainting ourselves with the value of our full range of humanity instead of these things we've been taught to focus on.

EJ: And we will need openness and collaboration and respect, all the things you were talking about at the beginning of our conversation. Well I could go on for hours and listen to you unendingly but I'm aware that we've chatted a long time and appreciate it so much; it's been really good to talk to you.

TN: Yes, it's been a lot of fun!