

Episode 2: Chris Creighton-Kelly Interviews Aruna Srivastava at Wisdom Council

Introduction by Isabelle Michalski

Hello and welcome to TIA House Talks, The Insurgent Architects' House for Creative Writing Podcast series. Today, we present an interview by Chris Creighton-Kelly of Aruna Srivastava. My name is Isabelle Michalski and I am a research assistant for the TIA House project at the University of Calgary.

TIA House is honoured to be podcasting to you from Treaty 7 Territory. We specifically acknowledge the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation (comprising the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). We acknowledge also the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

This interview was recorded during a TIA House symposium called Wisdom Council in September 2019. Wisdom Council brought together a small council of senior practitioners in the arts, who are mostly Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, to sit in council over three days to discuss such topics as what our communities need now; memory and forgetting; care of elders in racialized communities; community formations they've experienced; and practices and strategies that might be of use or interest in the present moment. This interview was recorded as part of the gathering's work.

Chris Creighton-Kelly is an interdisciplinary artist, writer and cultural critic born in the UK with South Asian/British roots.

Aruna Srivastava is an associate professor at the University of Calgary where she also serves as a special advisor for diversity equity and inclusion.

In this interview, Chris and Aruna discuss the importance of her anti-racist work inside institutions, wonder what a world without institutions, and propose that the concept of precarity needs to be examined in the context of race.

Interview

Chris (C): My name is Chris Creighton Kelly and I'm here to interview Aruna srivastava and my first question to Aruna would be to just ask her in her own way to define or describe or identify who she is.

Aruna (A): That's actually a tougher question than I thought it would be and you already told me you're going to ask me that! So, I think what I will do is identify myself in terms of history and race and ethnicity first. I identify as mixed-race, South Asian, my mother was Scottish,

my father is Indian from India, and they met in Scotland when he was the first member of his family to leave India to do a PhD in engineering.

So we're a mixed race family and we immigrated to Canada as part of the big brain drain from from Europe and other places to Canada in the late 60s. I also identify as a woman, I identify as straight. I identify too as someone who... there's all sorts of ways that are important... I identify as someone who has invisible disabilities and had them all my life, and many of them, as a "dancer monkey" that is the career I would've loved to have (C laughs). Ex-theatre person, and someone who is now, and has for a long time been, a teacher, and a slightly reluctant academic in terms of the institutional aspects of that, but certainly someone who.... I would identify myself as an intellectual for sure.

I've been living here on Treaty 7 territory for 27 years and grew up on the Six Nations of the Grand River territory, after we immigrated. So, basically from Southwestern Ontario to Calgary by way of Vancouver, Musqueam Territory. I think of myself as an activist but I don't know if I'm a very good activist. So, a lot of the work that so many of us have done, yourself and many of the people at this gathering, a lot of that work has really influenced me, but I sometimes see the failures of activism.

C: Yeah, the failures of activism. You could write a book on that.

You said a lot of things there and the first thing that comes to mind is that just seeing you struggle would be the wrong word, but hesitate to say I'm this, I'm this, I'm this, I'm this... it just shows the incredible complexity. One of the things that still strikes me and amazes me... I've done this since I was a little boy, since as long as I could remember, is how each person is a kind of walking universe of memories, of thoughts, of identities... and how complex we all are and that's sometimes not understood by the powers or... not sometimes... *frequently* not understood. And as these various, I hesitate again to use the word post-colonial... but the situation we're in today... as these voices are speaking, some of them for the first time in history it's creating an amazing cacophony of stories coming out. That's just an observation, it's not a question.

So, I wanted to ask you, Aruna: what do you think is the most important to work that you've produced in your own estimation? And I invite you in answering that to critique it. And you already kind of did that by critiquing your whether or not you're an activist or not. So, I've heard you talk about the academy, which is obviously where you've done a lot of strong work, but I have also heard you critique the academy, so...

A: So, I would critique—

C: Well, let's first of all find out the most important work...

A: I don't...

C: Because it needs to be allotted, you know.

A: I actually don't know the answer to that.

C: Ok...I'll answer it (laughs.)

A: So, I have two provisional answers, ok...

C: Ok.

A: One is I think my most important work in progress has been as a teacher. Both inside the academy and outside. So, in terms of pedagogical work I've done and anti-racism work in various communities... sometimes in the context of family as well. I think of my step kids and other relations where I think I've actually done really important sometimes very difficult work. At the university the work has been hard in the sense that it has not been rewarded and I have... I've made active decisions not to seek those rewards. And that's why some of my perplexity... I'm quite perplexed at why it is or how it is we got so inculcated into that reward system. The kind of... we have to do that... we have to do that. At some point I think I made a really conscious decision that there were certain kinds of work that I wanted to do and that were rewarding for me. And a lot of that is the teaching. In terms of actual work...

C: Just to interrupt you for a tiny second... One of the things that's been repeated this gathering is this phrase "it's the work that does the work." So, to frame it that way rather than it's the reward that does the work or the recognition that does the work, right? (Aruna agrees) Doing the work is its own reward in a way.

A: It is, and it is as people have said, it's exhausting and it's labor-intensive in all sorts of ways, and our discussion yesterday about accommodations which I found a bit of a disturbing discussion in all sorts of ways... but still there is still that sense of how conflictual this work can be.

C: The work in the academy? Is that...?

A: (Agreeing) Work in the academy, pedagogical work in the widest sense. So, if I'm sitting on the committee while we're trying to decide who our new Vice Provost of Indigenous engagement is going to be.... part of the work that I'm engaged in is an activist project, speaking up against... in that case it was power. Because I've been asked to do that. They want me on that committee to do that. Or in the classroom when I'm teaching in particular ways students sometimes perceive to be weird, there's a project behind that. And I think that some of the ways in which people ask that question around my work about creative practices... So, I thought a lot about this question in terms of the way back to the *Intranation* residency years ago in Banff... that...that I didn't...

C: A residency that brought together different artists from different racial and cultural communities hence called *Intranation*. (Aruna agrees) But it was focused on art...

A: And so there were a couple of us who felt a little... even people who had creative practices like writing and so forth... who felt a little outside of that institution. And I created work around. I created that work—

C: I remember—

A: And I still—

C: Amina still talks about that—

A: Does she?

C: Yeah!

A: And I still work in that particular practice which is a textile project of braiding. So, I thought back to that and thought that that is probably in some ways something I can point to as... a work that I've produced, cuz it was a community and collaborative practice that has almost stood the test of time. It's up in various peoples' spaces and I still ask my students to do... to contribute to the project at the end of a course, for instance, if they wish to, and talk about what theoretically —politically— the braiding project was for. And it was also was part of the textile project that Sharon Proulx-Turner, who was a Metis elder and writer, was doing. So we shared that studio space, Sharon and I. And did a lot of work around bringing people into that, into that textile studio and sharing kind of a woman's space of sewing and braiding and so forth.

But, to answer that question, sort of more truthfully I would have I would have to say pedagogy in the widest sense, what I... because for me it's been an ongoing relational practice.

C: I found it interesting too, in your response to what is the most important work you've produced in your own estimation and you started talking about pedagogy in the broad sense as listening carefully... and then without any prompting from me start talking about art practice and *Intranation*. So maybe I want to just probe that a little bit because I know that you have, you've shared with me certain anxieties about being called an artist, and yet, by your own definition you're doing creative work which I believe to be true... so, what is that boundary about? Is that something about, like well, I do creative work, but I'm too anxious to be called an artist? Or what is that about?

A: I think it's about the same thing when people think they're not real academics. I think it's the same thing around training. I certainly see it in our department of English here at the University of Calgary, one of the things... and we have a creative writing program within our department... it's very clear that we draw boundaries about training. You can't just be a creative writer because you say you are. Which I think is nonsense, really, but I think there is something to be said about working with other artists. And something to be said for learning what training is about, I suppose.

C: And studying other artists...

A: and studying other artists, yeah. But I do have... A lot.. Many issues particularly in the regular academic disciplines with the boundary setting and the assumptions that the discipline is the be-all and the end-all, you know the gatekeeping.... (c Agrees) and the kind of questions, certainly I was asked this at residencies that I participated in, we'd start with usually with: what is your practice? And then, how did you come to your practice... what is your training?

C: That was the next question?

A: Yeah...so... (both laughing)

C: So, what do you do when you're confronted with that? Do you deconstruct the idea of training? Or?

A: Usually not... I think I usually say I'm... I wouldn't use the word amateur, but that's the thing I'm implying, that I'm not a trained artist.

C: Uh huh, ok. Amateur's a loaded word too... ok..

And the second part of this is to talk about why you do this work. And in some ways it might be a more important question than what is the work. So, maybe I'll ask it this way, knowing you as little as I know you and as well as I know you at the same time... what was the genesis of wanting to do anti-racist work for you? Maybe go back to your.. When you were still a student in the canadian academic context and you studied literature... was that the genesis of it? Was it around feminism? Was it around... What brought you to this moment when you went, you know what? I need to to do anti-racist work in these institutions because they're racist.

A: Yeah, that's actually a really good question because I came to it quite suddenly. And I came into feminism fairly early on in my University career and was passionate about it and...

C: Still as a student.

A: Still as a student, as an undergraduate student and certainly was raising a family, in a nuclear family, as an immigrant family, we had no other family here. Was certainly raised in a very liberal, socialist, sort of social justice oriented kind of family. With a father who was an academic and so forth...so that had something to do with it, certainly. But as an undergrad studying English, I suddenly encountered all these fairly radical women who taught me another perspective and ideology which was feminism. And I identified strongly with it. When I went to do my PhD, which was at a different institution, I was a McMaster, post-colonialism still hadn't been invented. YOU know, I'm fairly old... but I discovered a whole area of literature that was about the globe. And I had a person I worked with, my supervisor—

C: The *Globe and Mail*, you mean? (laughing)

A: No, no. It was called International Literatures, Commonwealth Literatures, if fact. And my supervisor was someone who was quite conservative in some ways. He was from Pakistan originally, the only brown man in a completely white department (C agrees) but he taught me that I need to know my history. And so he said: if you're going to do this project on the partition of India and literature about it, then you need to learn about the history of partition of India from non-white people. (C agrees) And so I did and it was... mind-blowing. I hadn't learned that, say, from my father or my mother.

So I did what was essentially a post-colonial literary project. And then I graduated. I got a post doc, I came out west to UBC, discovered the post-colonial scholarship... and I discovered the Vancouver Coalition for Local Colour, where people were doing activists anti-racism work, and it connected to everything I was doing in terms of my literary scholarship, but then I thought: this is really connects to my identity and my experiences. I was making sense of the experiences of racism particularly in the academy. Horrible experiences in my PhD defense and that kind of thing. And I discovered anti-racism there and then took it back to my alma mater and gave a speech. It was a very single moment for me. I gave a speech at McMaster as someone who graduated with my PhD and I said "look around you" it was three hundred people or something. I said "look around you. I don't see any brown faces here." And it was a shocking experience, you know? I was meant to be thankful of them. And then I just started learning how to do racism work. So it was Vancouver that did it.

C: We're talking a period of the late 80s early 90s that...

A: (agrees)

C: One of the things that you talked about, we've talked about together, is this notion of the relationships between these institutions... I've had some experience with academe but it's more limited compared to yours but I have worked in the arts institutions, the cultural institutions of Canada. And one way of looking at that is that there are communities: feminist communities, communities of colour in the arts, queer communities in the arts... the mad arts are now taking a kind of prominence in the discourse, and then there's institutions and these things are separate entities the one fights against the other, one resists the other, and the other excludes the other. And I think that historically it might be a mistake to understand it that way. And that you have to look at that they're part of the same system. But it's still worth looking at what goes on in communities, why do communities function the way they do with very limited resources most of the time, and how it is that they put pressure on systems that they have to deal with.

It's worth looking at inside the institution to see how people who are trying to make changes within the institution succeed or, more likely, don't succeed. It's interesting to look at the co-optation that Richard Fung was just talking about that earlier today, about how activist work has been co opted into institutions. It's worth looking at the space in between... how does one negotiate going back and forth? What our colleague France Trepanier calls "the passeur" what is it like to take information from one to the other and then back again? But

there's also a fourth space which I think is worth asking you questions about, which is some kind of, it's an imaginary space, it's a utopic space, if you will I don't mind someone critiquing me in that way, but I think it's important to talk about it but to talk about it all within the frame of the other three not to just to kind of like invent an imaginary space. So you invent an imaginary space while it still has connection to all the spaces that exist. And that space would be what if we didn't have institutions? or maybe more accurately what if we have different kinds of Institutions? So they wouldn't even really be institutions... as you know, especially in academia, you know more than I do, getting a sense of what those might look like. Or maybe, I don't know, maybe I'm even asking the wrong question there because what would a world without institutions look like?

A: Hmm...

C: Just pretend it's the 60s.

A: I was a little young in the 60s! What would a world without institutions look like? I'm not sure it would be a particularly functional world, and of course it does depend on how we define institutions. So I define institutions even at a very, very micro level, as soon as there are structures, and as soon as people tend to do are... I was gonna say: jostling for power... I was thinking of something Chrysotos was saying yesterday... or as soon as there are systems of privilege. Even if people aren't exactly jostling for power as soon as people are fearful... and as a teacher one of the things that I've never been able to figure out is how to assist in creating safety. So that people are less fearful So, I think institutions exist because of power and all the things that we know. But I think they also exist because people are fearful.

C: But is the fear... that's an important point, I really think it's an important point.... Is the fear preeminent to the institution or does the institution help to create some of that fear because to your very astute definition I would add: there's spaces where people have power, as you correctly said, or that they have power over, that they can exert that power and, and, this is really important to understand, that act of taking the power over others, exercising the right, is sanctioned by the bureaucracy of the institution. That's how men can get away with sexual harassment even though there are sexual harassment guidelines! So, what am I getting at here? So, what does that look like? Ok... so, maybe a more epistemological question would be, so, then they're not really reformable by the way that you're talking about them?

A: I think smaller ones possibly are... so, when I think of institutions like.... There's an organization here in Calgary called Community-Wise which is an umbrella organization for small, all sorts of small organization,

C: Nonprofit?

A: They're all nonprofits and so is CommunityWise. So, it's the board for all of these nonprofit organizations which have really very little to do with each other. Filmmakers and Aboriginal Youth and a Barter Society.

C: So it's like the United Way for alternative.... Ok.

A: (agrees) CommunityWise and each of those mid-smaller organizations are their own institutions. And I think a lot of us don't think of that kind of work as institutional.

C: I don't.

A: Yeah—

C: But anyway— go on—

A: So they've been doing a project called *antiracist organizational change* and having a really difficult time with it partly because of... their member organizations are so atomized. But a lot of them are immigrant organizations, people of colour, BiPOC, all that sort of stuff, and they need to do it. And you see it in a small way happening with CommunityWise exactly what happens with the university and exactly what happened at ANNPAC? Do you want to tell people what ANNPAC was?

C: It was the Association of National Nonprofit Artist Run Centres.

A: That was an institution.

C: Well, I don't want to start a semantic thing here in the middle of this conversation, but, yeah, yeah, I would agree. But I do think it's important to maintain a distinction between an organization where you're absolutely correct to suggest that some of those problems are replicated, I don't want to be naive about that... and an institution, because I think for me the difference is scale number one, and in organizations, the kind you were talking about, including ANNPAC, and as you know, those of us who are old enough to remember ANNPAC blew apart because it was an organization. I don't know of too many institutions that have blown apart. They stay because they have buildings, they have resources, they have the donor class of Canada supporting them, so it's... it may be somewhat semantic for me to insist upon a cleavage between.... You know well this is an organization, this is an institution... you know, a kind of a pointless conversation... but still I think there are organizations that are still based more or less, some more than others, in communities that have a board of directors that can be affected by communities that have a fluidity between a community member "hey hey what are you doing? why don't you come and sit on a committee...." And that kind of... the kind of community we work on with Primary Colours.... and organizations like the University of Calgary where we're doing this interview today or the Canada Council for the Arts, and it's precise... and well I guess the other component of these institutions is they have a bureaucracy, they have a structure, a hierarchy, which is to say, as you correctly pointed, that some of these systems get mirrored, of course they do and that has to do with capitalism and the way we structure hierarchies and patriarchy and homophobia, all of these things. But I think there might be a utility in making two categories there and if we just put it all together as though, well they're institutions, as you call them a minute ago, well, then what?

A: Well, yeah...

C: What's the value of doing that?

A: And... then... well I think that one of the values is that maybe using the different words might be one way to do it... one of the values is at least looking at how institutional thinking permeates —

C: — permeates —

A: — yes, permeates everything —

C: — oh, absolutely, yes —

A: — so that if we're worried in.... I used to work in a lot of the non profit arts organizations here in Calgary and and in Vancouver and how institutional thinking permeated our thinking about funding —

C: Absolutely that's true —

A: — or —

C: — for example —

A: — or thinking about diversity or race and so forth. And that's.... As a younger person that really really surprised me... I had sort of an idealistic notion as I did a bit about the academy initially, That somehow people didn't see themselves implicated in these larger ideological structures. Like racism or homophobia.

C: Well, if that's your point Aruna, I completely agree.

A: Yep, and I think that when we get embroiled in these discussions about the ways in which larger governmental organizations or, or academic institutions and so forth.... make us afraid. Sometimes we need to recognize either the balance of the other kinds of organizations or that we have some agency in the work that we do.

C: Mhm.

A: And I think that's the difference, the distinction I would make.

C: Ok, that's an important distinction. But nevertheless your point is very well taken. And I believe that you're right about that and if you look at the Canadian State and its ability to bureaucratize Society it's quite strong. And if you look at that for other places in the world, and I'm not the first person to point out that artists are highly bureaucratized and they all follow the Canada Council ways of doing things and so on and so forth. And the state is making or breaking certain people's careers.... so you have to to some extent play along

with that.... just before the interview started, I mention to Aruna a quote by Gayatri Spivak which I can't remember the exact words and I apologize for butchering it, but basically the point she's trying to make is that there's really no place in the north american context or the british perspective I think she was speaking of, where you can stand outside the institution, the institution will frame you no matter what. The framing is just a matter of how you look at it. And Aruna was talking yesterday about how, for example, the medical institutions, the hospital and the whole medical infrastructure of our country, how it frames people.

And that might be a good way to move to something that I did want to ask you that I know is very important for you. One of the questions on my little prompt sheet says: how's your practice, the things you've talked about in slightly critiqued, if we have time we can go back to more of a critique, changed with changes in your body? If that practice has changed then how? And if it hasn't, I think in your case it has, but if it hasn't or in the ways in which it hasn't how do you manage to maintain the practice in the face of those changes in your body.
[muffled]

A: My work. All of my works, so my teaching and the things that I write, the things that I do in general, just my labour too, have been informed from the outset by illness. So, for example, I could not continue a career in dance because I have epilepsy and later on when I was diagnosed as having type 1 diabetes, someone actually told me, this was a nasty bad academic man, that with the diabetes diagnosis it was almost like all these women who decided that they were going to get pregnant

C: Whoa whoa whoa hold up! I lost you there....

A: Well, it wasn't a logical connection at all... and what he suggested was that... he was actually graduate program director of my institution at the time... that maybe I should just quit academia. I couldn't be ill and be an academic.

C: (sarcastic) Likewise if you're pregnant you can't teach. (genuine) I see so this was a form of misogyny—

A: Yes, and those were the days that that type of misogyny was certainly expressed Constantly and all the time.

C: And we're making America great again! It's coming back...

A: It's coming back. so I would say, I made some very clear decisions, that, and this was one informed by theory and feminism and anti-racism and so forth: it was really important to mentor and disclose being ill, being chronically ill to people, particularly students, but in community as well... it was important to do that.

C: K

A: So, and a lot of my writing and my theoretical thinking, I would never have got interested in critical theory if it hadn't been that I felt that I lived it. So, you know I was reading all of

these European theorists, Derrida and particularly the ones that theorize about language and perception and so forth and I thought some of them are wrong, and some of them are right. We don't have wholeness... because I know what that feels like.

C: I think of Foucault when you say that, actually, yeah

A: Yeah, and so this notion of the unitary self which I was just learning about when I was diagnosed with diabetes, but I have been, I've had a seizure disorder since I was 12 years old... I know as a lived experience. I thought this is important for people who've never questioned their bodies. Now that I have a third diagnosed illness to contend with, as I said yesterday, those are the things that I write about creatively, and integrate a bit into critical academic work, but all of those illnesses are taking a toll now. I'm older, and the... I'm not really sure how to deal with that as an activist, partly because of the energy and it's a very—in terms of practice—in terms of what to do, what to say, what to write, and how to teach, for instance, even how to engage in community work and really work in relation with people... being ill is very difficult. It's very difficult to engage in all of those practices. And I was talking to someone this morning about how isolating it is and how to work against that isolation because I think it's fundamentally misunderstood, even by the number of people who experience illness. As a long-term thing. So, I have worked on campus and other places with and against the sort of institution of medicine, medicalization, and I think that might be my next...

C: Mmhmm I was just thinking that, actually,

A: I'm thinking that might be the next thing I need to do... but it is exhausting! YOU know, and I think I've done the anti-racism and I've done the feminism, and that still needs to be done... and my own...

C: We always have to remember though, that we're not the only ones doing it.

A: We're not the only ones.

C: Sometimes I think we, collectively, work and I have to keep doing the work... and I'm gonna die and then what's gonna happen? And the other thing I would say is that there may be models out there. And when you spoke like that and talked about yourself and other people like you and figuring out a way to do work, immediately immediately my mind went to what happened during AIDS crisis and what happened during the AIDS crisis at the most horrific part of the crisis when nobody was paying attention and gay men especially but also lesbians to had to rally around the fact that a community was dying and nobody seemed to give a shit and they worked in community to care for one another, to care for their brothers, and sometimes sisters, and so there are models... there are ways to understand how to do that without either being ignored by institutions, like dismissed, or actively fought against. I mean, it isn't necessarily an institutional struggle, it's a way of like, understanding how can we do this so we can take care of one another.

A: And I think for me, one of the things that probably has changed about my thinking for me about my work, my relationship to my work is that I'm getting much more impatient with all of the discourses of wellness. I think that it's a bad word. And I think that what we do... I mean, academic institutions are deeply unhealthy places too...

C: It's one of those normative words too...

A: That's right.

C: And your goal is to be well... well, what if you can't be well?

A: What if you can't be well? And you know doctors are some of the worst for it, but even within the contexts of other institutional practices there is this kind of assumption that all of us are on a level playing field, you know? What do race and gender do? And that all you need to do is go run... or you know... cycle...

C: Eat healthily —

A: — eat healthily, cycle on your treadmill, whatever it is, you cycle on your bicycle, and that's really the answer to all of the ills of everyone, but especially those of us who have, sort of, disabilities and illnesses.

C: I'm not the first person to suggest this by any means, but, as the baby boomers of which both you and I are, move through, like the animal and the snake and it's moving towards the tail now, do you think that's gonna....the other day was joking with a friend of mine cuz we were in the grocery store and there was a woman quite insistent, senior, more senior than I am, insisting on having enough space and rightfully so, and the joke became what am I going to do in ten years when everyone's in a goddamn scooter and are the grocery stores really ready for that?

So, what am I trying to say? I'm trying to say that... is the discursive frame and, at the same time, the Community Care, the real actual material work that you're talking about, going to come more to the fore as that bulge.... There's a lot of talk, as there is about wellness, and I totally understand your critique about that. There's also a lot of talk about aging and aging well and you know, medicine, the medical systems are gonna be in collapse because there will be too many seniors and... does that link at all to what you are talking about? Will that aid the dilemma that you find yourself in?

A: I'm not sure, I think one of my large fears about aging and not aging as a... in a healthy body... although I don't think... I think one of the things that we don't discuss is that I don't like the aging well thing either. Is that so many of us whether we're aging or not...

C: What is this or not part?? We are aging hahaha

A: You and I are... but kind of not well... but I think culturally we're going to have to deal with those of us who are Baby Boomers and survived to tell the tale. And we also have to deal

culturally and I think this is where arts and writing can really help... literature and the study of it, can really help, is for us to come to terms with a kind of very... these shifting cultural perspectives, including ageism (C agrees) I think ageism around... we've talked a lot about dementia actually...

C: Yeah, it's interesting.

A: Yeah, and my father has dementia and because of various traumas in our family, because of various cultural stuff around how in India he would be taken care of.... He's in a dementia care facility... and all of that kind of stuff.... We've had, us, the three remaining siblings, our family has diminished a lot, because of these illnesses. One of the things that really engages us as... my two other siblings is that how do we... we can't... care for him well. And, I worry about that a lot. Even when Fred was talking about dementia, that kind of fear of those kinds of illnesses, what happens to your body, and one of the things.... I've gotten into frantic arguments with some younger able-bodied folk, apparently healthy folk, about precarity. Because there is... important discussions about precarity, especially amongst younger folk. And they have criticized me because I have privilege and I rely on the precarious professions. And I think it's a long and good discussion to be had about that. Because I do... I do rely on the precarious professions. Because if I'm going to do online shopping or get food delivered to me, or get my drugs delivered to me, or use Uber...

C: Yeah, I'm listening carefully, and all the care workers that take care of your dad too.

A: All of that is a reliance of the ageing and ill on precarious professions. And I think it's gonna happen... we'll see it in academia as well... we have seen a long...

C: But it elides the fact... and maybe that needs to be brought into the conversation as well that as we age.... and specifically person like you who has real illnesses... you're going to be in a precarious position as well, so... I mean this is this whole thing, we were talking about it, about finding ways for people to connect to see the contradictions in the systems that we're living in. And while I totally respect millennials, it's mostly millennials that talk about precarity, and they hurl rocks at us.... It's ridiculous, I still live in a precarious reality.... But I'm established, you know, and I'm established on the basis that I'm older and that I co-own a house. And yet there's precarity throughout. You know, we're going off on tangents far away from the questions, but because of the grotesque inequality in how that's... who is not in a precarious situation??? The ultra-rich, the powerful, people, I don't know... the managerial class I guess... everybody else and some way or another, especially those of us that are aging, and this is not to discount how millennials live, I have kids that are living that right now, so it's real, it's definitely real, and they're right to point to your dependence on that, but I don't I don't think it's just that. It's more complex than that.

A: And I do think the precarity, the notion of precarity has to be thought of in terms of...or analyzed in terms of race and migration and all of those kinds of things, and discussed. So, that, for me, that part of.... one of the things to change in my pedagogy, in my teaching is to talk about precarity. I talk to my students who may or may not go out into academia, but they're certainly going out into various professions, about how precarious they feel. And

then, realize that some of that precarity, the precariousness they feel, is around privilege, is around ...

C: Yeah, yeah, I totally agree...

A: And yeah, I haven't done my research on this because really what I want to do is emphasize relationship and teach around indigeneity and race, so that's my focus. And that makes them feel increasingly emotionally precarious, so I'm contributing to that.

C: Well, you're contributing. But I would say that you're unearthing it and by unearthing that's a process that leads to an understanding. And one of the ways when we meet around primary colours issues is talk around recarity and scarcity specifically in relationship to abundance.

A: Hmm...

C: And so, one thing I've learned from Indigenous people is to always imagine that abundance is there, it's right there, and it's just a question of how you live. Now, I know that sounds kind of privileged, and it doesn't take into account the real material conditions of refugees, and you know, women that are living embattered, it's very important to acknowledge that and say that, but at the same time, it's precarity in relationship to what? There are plenty of people on this planet whose living much much more precarious lives than any one of us.... any one of our younger millennial colleagues... so, privilege is also a relative thing.

So, I will strive to remember that when people start whining to me about I can't pay the rent well okay but at least you got a place to live and you got a medical system that more or less supports you and your countries not at war and you know you're you're not in danger of losing your family and people are mutilating your body, and you know.... It's not a way of trying to say that everyone has privilege...that's not what I'm trying to do here but just to look at the relationship between scarcity and abundance and likewise in the art world, because yes, the Arts needs more funding and all artists need more support, absolutely, but relatively, it's you know.... I'm quite sure what the point is here other than to say that when I hear you talk about precarity being link to privilege I think you're right. And that's the way it comes across sometimes when I say these things that I'm saying we're super lucky to be in Canada and stop complaining, man. That's not what I'm saying, but I am saying that we have certain privileges by living where we do. That's all.

A: And I think that's why some of us get impatient with the discussion of institutional life.

C: Being so privileged...

A: And, you know, institutional life is difficult... but... to focus on it... and obviously, many people feel it really hard. It's an enormous amount of emotional labour and the have-tos are, they're there, they're real but...

C: That's why I can't do it! (laughing)

A: But they are also not real at the same time, you know, and I don't know how... I've never known... my work all of my adult life anyway, has been trying to figure out are the have-tos. Therapy has helped a lot, but still I don't know what it would feel like and certainly as an older person, what it would feel like to be so burdened with the fear of all of this stuff.

C: I think it's contingent, to, upon, and that's where the specificity comes into it, like what's your university like, what's your department like, what's the person who assigns sabbaticals like? It's all related to that. How much research do you have to do? How much publishing do you have to do? So the have-tos can be negotiated, and I think that's kind of what you're saying. And you can still do the work that works and if you can't do it or if you find yourself in a situation or just impossible to do, then don't do it, people are too afraid to just walk away from it but who told the story of somebody who worked really hard to get on a tenure-track and worked their ass off and there a that was a woman who finally let to open a pizza parlour...?

A: Shauneen Pete. Yeah, she'd just had enough. A lot of these Indigenous women academics are doing this. People like Sara Ahmed, for instance... she's not precarious but she quit her job. And I think many of us took that as a really welcome story. Although it must have cost her a lot to make that decision, to just say, I have to quit the profession. It is harming women, essentially, it's harming students. And I... but... it wouldn't be a good easy decision to make, especially for the people that love the work that we do... you know if you love the work and you hate it, I think saying I'm going to leave alongside the, you know, inviting yourself to a somewhat more precarious situation in terms of the living...

C: We're running out of time here so I want to ask you another question cuz it... I hope it will encapsulate all the things we've been talking about... my own strategy with this, with institutions, but even with academe, has been to work inside for a while, come out, then create structures that are temporary and transparent, and worked both ways. It hasn't always work and it's not always the right thing, but that's what I've chosen to do.... and so I wonder if more of those kinds of And I wonder if structure is even the wrong word... groupings, gatherings, creations of temporary spaces, temporary ways of working, that can both connect with community and influence institutions, might be resting places for the refugees from academe, and tie together many of the things you've been talking about, about the body, and the stress within the institution, the hierarchies within institutions, but at the same time create kind of contingent spaces that people can occupy and they're not going to make a huge living's of \$150,000... but they're gonna figure out ways to get by and if that might be part of.... it's a bit of a leading question.... the idea of the world without institutions... these contingent spaces... I'll just give you the last word on that.

A: Well, I think that those spaces are important and it's an important idea... and probably the reason that more people don't, like myself, for instance, don't go there, is because of the kind of work it takes as well. David Garneau said something yesterday about being a footnote,

C: That was nice, actually,

A: And it was Lillian that said something about being forgotten, and I thought a lot about both of those because I realized that it's only in my last few years that I'm coming to terms with being forgotten. And for the most part have always been a footnote, but I don't like that and I don't care for that and part of that is that I analyze it through gender and race and that sort of stuff. But I think that the people who engage in that kind of work.... and I've learned a lot from Indigenous friends and colleagues in this way... either don't have an investment or have figured out their investment in creating those types of spaces. They've let go of that power part. "This is mine and I'm not getting credit for it, or whatever." (Chris agrees) And then the contingency becomes what it's about. And creating space and making sure that it is about relation and being observant to that. And that's one thing I'm very good at. And that's why I think of myself as a good teacher, although I don't get good evaluations... Those... but I do that in an institution. And the sort of organizational part and I'm also very introverted so having to do the work of bringing... making one of these contingent places.... Is too much.

C: But you just alluded to, and you're right to allude to it, that doing that in an institution is hard work, in some ways more difficult work because your daily, I mean I'm speaking of my own work right now, but my daily work is complicated and I do a lot of things but a part of it is raising money to keep Primary Colours going but I'm not pushing against a huge bureaucracy that's pushing down on me. That only happens when I'm dealing with the institutions and to some extent... I don't want to be utopic, we can mitigate that. As long as they give us enough and we can form enough partnerships we can keep going...

A: And I think we can...

C: The work that institutions is hard work too, you just said so

A: It is hard work and what I think makes it harder is our own selves. In the sense that it takes a long time, and not everyone can do it I suppose, but it does take a long time just to... there's certain kinds of oppression in institutions that are real... sexual harassment for example. And there are others that I think we can push against... and increasingly so. There are more women in positions of power, there are more people of colour, Indigenous, and so forth, and so one of the ways I'm thinking of what you're talking about is from an elder, Andy Blackwater, who recently died, was one of our advising elders on our Indigenous Strategy *ii' taa' poh' to' p* at University of Calgary and he gifted us the name, the Blackfoot word, which means: Itapetope means: a place that you stop on a journey to rest and re energize with people. And he said that's ideally what an academic institution should be. That's what education should be. It's not a place that you stay at and it's not a place that you have battles at. So, Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people are doing this in parallel path and trying to find ethical spaces to do it in, this is what this space should be, ideally.

C: And it's directly contrary to the idea of accumulating knowledge and cultural capital and getting your degree so you can get ahead in the world...

A: and yeah... so I think those kinds of things you're talking about are in fact what education should be.... but then as soon as we start getting into how it's funded and how it's... What province regulates what...

C: (C laughing) I don't want to end with that thought. Thank you very much Aruna

A: Thanks for the questions, Chris.

Outro by Isabelle Michalski

We hope you enjoyed this interview of Aruna Srivastava by Chris Creighton-Kelly. I'm Isabelle Michalski and you're listening to TIA House Talks. The interview you just heard was recorded during the TIA House symposium, Wisdom Council.

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