

Living In Paradox With Chloe Valdary (Ep.8)

EPISODE TO CROSS REFERENCE <https://podlink.to/CWC008>

Welcome to another episode of Conversations with Coleman. My guest today is Chloe Valdary, Chloe Valdary is a writer and an entrepreneur. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Daily Beast* and elsewhere. She runs a company called The Theory of Enchantment, which teaches social and emotional learning in schools and diversity and inclusion in companies and government agencies. We talk about her new podcast, which involves inviting her guests to smoke weed. We talk about the difference between smoking weed and eating it. We talk about how to think about black history and historical njustice, modern rhetoric about white people. We talk about the causes of *the Great Awokening*, which is a term Matthew Yglesias coined referring to the period since 2014 or so when white Democrats have become more woke on the issue of race than black people. We talk about why Black Lives Matter perceives themselves to be connected to the Israel-Palestine conflict. We talk about Chloe's unique approach to Twitter, art, and politics. We talk about the relationship between hip-hop and the western canon. We talk about charter schools, branding, and we end the podcast by talking about why I don't buy merchandise from artists I love and why Chance the Rapper's music has gotten worse. I hope you're all doing well at whatever level of quarantine you're experiencing right now. And I hope you enjoy the podcast.

CH: Chloe Valdary, thanks for being on my podcast.

CV: Thank you for inviting me.

CH: You just started your own podcast.

CV: I did. I just started my second podcast. Yeah, I started my first podcast Theory of Enchantment about a year and a half ago.

CH: Okay.

CV: And I started this new one Weed and Wisdom with Chloe, recently like a week ago.

CH: Weed and wisdom--what's the connection between the two?

CV: So I started smoking weed when I was like 23 years old, um just purely recreationally because my friends were doing it. And then I recognized that when I would take edibles, I had a very interesting relationship with it musically and intellectually. And I thought that that experience on edibles is actually quite intellectually expansive. So I wanted to take that practice of you know, imbibing an edible into a more regimented format and just have discussions that were interesting and had to do a lot with pop culture with famous people or interesting people in a podcast format.

CH: So what's the difference between smoking weed and eating it to you?

CV: Ahh, for smoking weed, it's not really--it lasts, the high lasts for about...a minute I guess. And so it's, if I want to have like a sustained series of thoughts that are like intellectually interesting or musically interesting, I can't really do that when I *smoke* weed...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...but when I take an edible, it lasts four to six hours. And so I can do everything from *produce* music to just even just consume music in a way that is ah different from my experience consuming music without it. Even though I think both--music is a separate issue like I'm obsessed with music. So either way is amazing. But when I have an edible, it's like that much more incredible.

CH: Mmhm. Edibles are dangerous I found.

CV: Yeah.

CH: One time in high school I made weed-infused peanut butter...

CV: Oh wow.

CH: ...with a friend.

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...when my dad wasn't home. And he came back and the *whole* house smelled like weed.

CV: Oh yeah, amateur mistake.

CH: Yeah.

CV: (chuckling)

CH: And we went into the city to see a show, came back, missed our stop on the train because we fell asleep.

CV: Ohhhh yeah. I think I'm, I think I was okay because I, I started using or I started, you know, partaking weed/marijuana at a age when my brain was more or less fully functioned.

CH: Mm.

CV: So I never smoked it as a teenager or anything like that. And I think I sort of like I missed out, but also, to my advantage I missed out on all the fun stories that would have happened if I wouldn't have, if I wouldn't have missed out getting into it in my teenage years.

CH: So let's talk about your upbringing a little bit before...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...we talk about music.

CV: Sure.

CH: So you're from New Orleans. *New Orleans* or *New Orleans*?

CV: Un, I say *New Orleans*, but either way is fine.

CH: Do you think there's any connection between the having grown up in New Orleans and your political views, your views on race, on Israel?

CV: Ummm. I think on race probably. Not really on, not necessarily on Israel...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...or political views in general. But I think on on, when it comes to the issue of race, where race intersects with education, New Orleans is actually a very interesting city because it has schools that are both really really of poor quality and schools that are really really amazing. And it has this interesting tradition of being one of the first cities in the country to value education for women because of its French and Catholic

background. Um, but also my educational experience growing up, like I went to an elementary school called Langston Hughes Elementary School for about four years.

CH: My long lost...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...cousin.

CV: Oh, yeah. I actually wanted to ask you if you were related to him.

CH: I've lied and said I have before, as a joke.

CV: (chuckles) Yeah. Yeah.

CV: People take it serious.

CH: No. No. People, they don't usually believe me.

CV: Oh, okay. Okay.

CH: I don't know why they don't.

CV: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's weird. Um, I had wondered if you were somehow related. That would be amazing. But what that educational experience did was actually quite foundational because it was very much, it gave me a lot of black history.

CH: Mm.

CV: Ahh... And in doing so, um but it gave me a black history that was very much rooted in empowerment...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...and very much rooted in a narrative of like redemption. Some of the first things that I had to learn in English literature classes for example, in elementary school was like poetry, the poetry of Langston Hughes, the poetry of Maya Angelou. And so these were figures who loomed large in my imagination at a very very young age. And as a result like the image of black America loomed large in my imagination at a very young age. And then after attending that school for a couple years, I attended a predominantly uh "*mixed school*," I guess you could say, very international in the sense that I went to school with people from *all kinds* of different backgrounds. And that's how my, you know, pre-college education, that's how it was like. So first, I went to a school that was predominantly black. Then I went to a school that was predominantly mixed. Then I went to a high school that was predominantly black for a couple years, and then I graduated from a high school that was predominantly mixed. So I grew up around people of all different backgrounds. And I don't know if other people assume, that other people don't have that experience in other cities. But to the extent that that experience happened in New Orleans, it was very relevant and very foundational in constructing my worldview.

CH: And that worldview is I think part of what unites us or part of when I see your tweets,...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...the common thread I've seen, I see between you and I, and Kmele Foster, Thomas Chatterton Williams is a deep commitment to the oneness of the human family.

CV: Yeah. Yeah.

CH: And there are probably various disagreements. Maybe big ones between a lot of those...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...I just mentioned. But *that* seems to have become such a **cliche** message...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...now. To the point where it just elicits an eye roll.

CV: Does it? I mean, I don't know. I think in a lot of circles that that I'm in, it doesn't necessarily elicit that. Certainly on Twitter it does. But I'm not sure that that's really represent representational of um any *meaningful* thing or even if it is meaningful, I don't know the extent to which it is meaningful.

CH: Mm.

CV: But to your point, yeah, I mean there's a lot of, there's a lot of language and rhetoric in political circles um *today* for example that are about white people that I just fundamentally can't fathom...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...because I grew up around white people.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And and the impression that I get when I read some of these comments or just when I think about the *attitude* that these that people are putting out there is something that is fundamentally foreign to, it's a foreign concept to me. Because like the only thing I can think of when I read those things, is that like these people clearly don't know white people...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...or like not in an intimate, in an intimate setting the way you would know...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...you know, a friend or a family member. So it's just yeah, I can't really, it's not that, it's not simply that I disagree with the rhetoric. It's that it's *incomprehensible* to me.

CH: Yeah. I definitely share that. And I you know, I grew up in a town that was as, I think perhaps you did...

CV: Yeah.

CH: I don't know. Well like your school, it was mixed.

CV: Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CH: A quarter--black, over half--white, and some Hispanics and Asians.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: And, I grew up with an intuitive sense that these divisions don't matter.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Equally at home being friends with black kids, Asian kids...

CV: Right.

CH: white kids.

CV: Right.

CH: And the divisions might be funny at most, but they were not deep. They weren't essential.

CV: Yeah.

CH: And so when I got to about 16 or 17 and started hearing the rhetoric about white people, um the *casual* way in which being say, "a white male"...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...almost a slur.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Or it's used that way it. Likewise, it just didn't register. It was like profoundly confusing.

CV: Yeah. You started hearing that when you were 16 and 17.

CH: I did. I started hearing it *before* college...

CV: Okay.

CH: ...because I went to a very progressive high school...

CV: Okay.

CH: ...a high school that was less diverse than then um...

CV: Mm.

CH: ...I'd grown up with in elementary school.

CV: Okay.

CH: A private high school. And it was very progressive and it was an early adopter of the wave of intersectionality...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...wokeness.

CV: What year was this?

CH: This would be in about 2012.

CV: Okay. I didn't quite, I I don't think I started hearing it until 2014. Um and I think that that was sort of a product of Ferguson and what was going on with Black Lives Matter protests. Uhh, at least I didn't really hear about intersectionality until 2014, but that's interesting.

CH: Yeah.

CV: I wonder if there was a bigger impact on you or just a different impact on you having heard it in high school.

CH: Maybe. You know, I I think because I got introduced to it and imbibed it and more or less believed it in high school...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...you know, in you know kind of like a getting a shot, I was maybe immunized.

CV: Sure.

CH: By the time I went to college to a degree that a lot of other people weren't.

CV: Okay. Yeah.

CH: Um, you know if you, like we were just talking with my girlfriend before...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...from Texas has never heard *any* of this stuff.

CV: Yeah.

CH: And then you come to you know, you come to a college on the coast...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...and for the first time, you're hearing you like you're, you feel like you're swallowing a red pill. You're hearing about the prison industrial complex.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: And you know a whole litany of other things that probably your public school didn't give you at all.

CV: Yeah.

CH: And so, you imbibe not only truths from that, but also falsehoods and...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...(indistinguishable word) statements. And you have no immunity against it.

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...because you you haven't heard anything. You haven't heard the counter-arguments.

CV: Right. It's like the, it's like the only thing you've heard, so you're used to it and you think it's a standard. And then you're probably told that the fact that your high school or elementary school *didn't* mention such things as the prison industrial complex is proof that you were filled, you were like, you know, indoctrinated or uneducated or something like that. Yeah. But that's so interesting to me because like... My response to that is like I really did receive an *incredible* education in black history...

CH: Mhm.

CV: You know, and I do think that there is something to be said for folks who are in school, who aren't receiving *any* education about black history and that is a problem. But like, I received a very foundational introduction and in-depth exploration of black history since I was at least six years old.

CH: Mhm.

CV: So so that that also that that that um accusation of ignorance is a a mis-accusation. It's just that I'm looking at things through a different lens.

CH: Mm.

CV: And it's not that the content isn't there. It's that the lens through which I understand the content is totally different.

CH: Mm. Mm. I think I grew up with quite a bit of black history as well.

CV: Mhm.

CH: I grew up reading and memorizing the Langston Hughes poems.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Maya Angelou and whatnot, through this through the school system.

CV: Right. Same yeah.

CH: There was recently *A New York Times* op-ed--I don't know if you saw this--that arguing we need to change the emphasis in Black History Month from all the things black people have accomplished...

CV: Mhm.

CH: ...the great writers, the great inventors to all the ways in which black people have been mistreated.

CV: Really?!?

CH: And...

CV: I did not see that.

CH: Yeah. It was a few days ago.

CV: That's *wild* to me. That's crazy actually, but (chuckling) yeah continue.

CH: I think this reflects... I think I, you know, I could have predicted that that op-ed would be released eventually.

CV: Did the person who wrote it was black?

CH: That's a good question. I don't, I don't remember.

CV: Okay.

CH: In any case ah...

CV: Do you know the what the crux of the argument was, just so I can see if I can steel man it? (chuckles)

CH: Okay. The crux of the argument was: "Yes, it's great that we celebrate George Washington Carver, you know,..."

CV: Yeah.

CH: "...we see how great Langston Hughes is. And black people have done amazing things. But fundamentally, we have *not* addressed how deeply black people have been oppressed historically in this country. And so to focus on the ways in which black people have achieved despite despite that oppression..."

CV: Mhm.

CH: "...rather than focusing on the o-, the oppression itself..."

CV: Mhm.

CH: "...is a missed opportunity."

CV: For what?

CH: For coming to terms with how brutal America has been to black bodies.

CV: So it's interesting. I just went to--it's funny we're having this conversation--I just went to the Smithsonian African American Museum in D.C. I was just there two days ago actually...

CH: Mhm.

CV: ...Saw it for the first time. It's amazing. An amazing amazing museum. And so I'm I'm thinking about my experience there as I ponder this op-ed. I I I don't, I guess I still don't know to what end, I get I get the you know. I really don't get to what end that would be for.

CH: Mhm.

CV: So, I don't know. I'll read I'll read the op-ed if you could send it to me...

CV: Yeah.

CH: Well my take on it is that there's this there's this idea that is increasingly popular just in the past five years and especially in the past year...

CV: Mhm.

CH: ...with and you know reparations, the 1619 Project are...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...of a piece with this sentiment, which is that: "If we can only really come to terms with the past starting at 1619..."

CV: Yeah.

CH: "...to the present as in slavery, the black codes, Jim Crow, lynching, etcetera, red-lining, if we could *only* educate people about this stuff more..."

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...then there's some point that we'll reach that will constitute a deep, some kind of deep spiritual victory for the country. And what we have to do is keep reaching backwards in order to go forward.

CV: Yeah. I don't think that that's how... I think if the argument is about material conditions--and that's an argument that can be made and I could argue for and against that--but if the argument is spiritual, then I don't see how spiritual culmination comes to fruition through that process. By definition, that's not how spiritual work works...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...by constantly trying to seek a sort of like *cosmic justice* in which everyone's forced to perpet--it seems like perpetually reckon with the distant past as opposed to equipping folks both black and white and every color in between in the present with the ah I guess, internal disposition to understand their internal worthiness,...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...which is a totally different--like that is not achieved through constantly looking for a reckoning with the past. And in fact, those are two different projects actually.

CH: Yeah.

CV: And it's funny because no one's talking about *that* project. And I don't know. People are sort of conflating things I think so.

CH: Yeah, I I I really couldn't agree more. I think um, the injustices of history are a bottomless pit.

CV: Yeah.

CH: And that doesn't mean you should not learn about them. Of course history is you know, it's as important as as every other subject in school.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: And certainly I'm very open to arguments about this textbook in Texas--they call slaves immigrants here. Why do they do that?

CV: Oh, that's crazy.

CH: It's inaccurate. It's misleading.

CV: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

CH: Let's change that. All for it.

CV: Yeah.

CH: It's a very separate thing I think to to argue that there's some point we're coming to...

CV: Yeah.

CH:that we just have to keep reaching and reaching and reaching for a reckoning with with our historical injustices. And I think in practice if you look at--there's a treadmill effect is is what I'm trying to say...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...where every time we do get something that is a important acknowledgement of...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...historical oppression such as the the museum...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...in D.C., which gets a few million views, of of visitors every year.

CV: Yeah.

CH: And it's like if I'm...

CV: Which is a national, national project.

CH: Yeah. In the in the country's capital.

CV: Yeah.

CH: And has extensive exhibits on slavery, right?

CV: Yeah.

CH: And cost like hundreds of millions of dollars...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...to build, a building that I don't think made a dent in this spiritual hole that some people feel...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...about the past.

CV: Sure.

CH: Nor did 50 years of affirmative action, which was initially sometimes called *compensatory justice* because it was argued for as a *kind* of reparations back in the '60s...

CV: Right.

CH: ...before the rationale changed. Nor has, you know, national apologies for slavery um, that Congress did you know some 12 years ago.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: I don't see any of these things as having really healed the hole that people seem to feel.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: Acknowledging that that hole is real.

CV: Yeah.

CH: However, if it's a *spiritual* thing, you can't fill it by political means.

CV: Yeah. That's the irony is that we're having a political conversation to address a spiritual issue. Ah and I don't know that that point has been *raised*, um, like as a protest against a lot of the, a lot of the ways in which we're talking about this as a nation. So yeah, that that isn't that is an irony. Ultimately. So I don't know what will happen as a result because this seems like a very new wave...of like this this new type of conversation that we're having about race was not the conversation we were having...I mean, I don't remember us having this conversation when Obama was in office.

CH: Me neither.

CV: This was, this was not the tone and tenor....

CH: Mmhm.

CV:that characterizes this current conversation was not the tone and tenor when Obama was in office.

CH: Not at all.

CV: So, it's striking to me that we're having it now. And I'm sort of perplexed by why, why now?

CH: Here's one theory and I don't know if it's right.

CV: Okay.

CH: Whether or not they they could say so, most people have a very politics heavy theory...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...of how groups advance materially.

CV: Okay. Sure.

CH: I think most people, you know, just assumed that you get the right politicians in...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...people become wealthier.

CV: Right. Sure.

CH: That politics comes before economics and is the causal factor.

CV: Okay.

CV: So, if you think about *why* it was that, you know in 1964, '65, the Civil Rights Movements won it's greatest political victories.

CH: Mhm.

CV: The Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act. Why is it at that moment that the riots start in ah..

CV: Mmm.

CH: ...Northern cities in Newark and Detroit and what not?

CV: Okay.

CH: Why, why at the point of greatest victory? Why at the point of greatest victory in terms of getting a black president elected,...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...do race relations seem to go...

CV: Deteriorate.

CH: ...you know, deteriorate. Yeah. What it might be is a mismatch between expectations and reality because people have that implicit theory of politics, you know, sort of...It's like a trickle-down theory, like you get the right politicians and...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...sort of like the material circumstances get better.

CV: Right.

CH: What happened is we got a black president and then four years later, we you know, we heard the video of Trayvon...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...getting stalked by Geor-, Geor- George Zimmerman. We saw you know, Michael Brown got killed.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Alton Sterling. And...

CV: So there was like a...

CH: Expectation...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...rose along with social media showing us...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...some of the realities. And the distance between those two things created this outrage.

CV: That's interesting. So do you think that wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for social media?

CH: My guess is that yes. Yes.

CV: Okay.

CH: It probably wouldn't have happened, but or or not to the same extent sure.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Yeah.

CV: That's interesting. I don't know. I think that my theory, which I'm coming up with right now, ah (chuckles)

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...is that as material conditions increase--and it doesn't have to necessarily be this case, but this this is actually part of my criticism of like excessive capitalism--as material as material conditions become better, a lack of purpose or lack of the feeling of purpose becomes more um sensitively felt by a civilization.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And this results in a mismatch in the sense that um people are actually looking--people people are wealthier on the whole, but are actually suffering from spiritual impoverishment.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And then they come up with, they come up with ideas to rectify that, which is what we talked about earlier, but those ideas are material in nature and not spiritual. And therefore not able to actually meet the the challenge.

CH: Mm.

CV: Um, and I think I think that there's a total difference between the caliber of folks like, you know, Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes and the way they spoke about the human condition given everything that they lived through was very different than some of the figures I think of for writing in *The New York Times* and who are who are saying certain things about the nature of man today vis-à-vis race.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And so I think it's interesting that even though you know the the poets and writers of the Harlem Renaissance era were dealing with *far* worse material conditions, they were in a way spiritually more advanced than the current generation of writers.

CH: There's one theory of that, which says: "The reason the reason that the writers and thinkers and leaders of that era were better were because there was *less* incentive to be such a person to begin with."

CV: To be a, to be what kind of person?

CH: So if I think of like what it took to to be on the front lines of the Civil Rights Civil Rights Movement...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...--a willingness to put your body on the line. To take what was an unpopular position until until the '60s and even still kind of unpopular in the early '60s. Um... So willingness to take an unpopular position, no guarantee of financial success,...

CV: Mhm.

CH: ...bodily harm. And the people who rise to the top in such a system are people that are highly principled.

CV: Right. Sure.

CH: *Today*, if you look at you know, the incentives to become, you know a *New York Times* writer about race who's you know, who's writing things like: "Should black children and white children even be friends?"

CV: Right.

CH: ...you know all of these....

CV: (chuckling) Which was just wild honestly.

CH: All these crazy things that passed...

CV: That was written. Yeah, that that was absurd.

CH: Yeah.

CV: Yeah.

CH: But if you can write that, you know, the mainstream will accept you because...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...at least like the mainstream journalistic institutions...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...accept that. It attracts a kind of person that is on average *less excellent*.

CV: Yeah, but I don't know. I don't understand *why* there's less excellence.

CH: Mhm.

CV: And and I mean, I don't know that there is. We're talking about a very elite group of people. Um, but given that we're talking about a very elite group of people, I don't understand why there's like less excellence in that, among that population, in that community.

CH: Mhm.

CV: I don't--I get that there are incentives to write in certain ways, to be sort of like ah useful to these journalistic institutions that are using click bait for you know, for it to get as many eyes as possible, but that still doesn't really, I don't think, explain the tr-, the downward trend in terms of spiritual impoverishment.

CH: So you think the rising material circumstances, it helps explain that?

CV: I think about, at the very least there's a correlation that hasn't been, that hasn't been explained, that hasn't been explored in depth.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And it's ironic because it would change the nature of our conversations about concepts like privilege and stuff because if you're--ironically a lot of people talk about concepts like white privilege and economic inequality among, along racial lines um--are often times supercritical, as I am, of excessive cases of capitalism, the capitalist excess. But the terms with which they discuss this are actually still very much material...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...which is super ironic, right, because they're making a *critique* of materialism, but they don't realize that they're still using materialist terms to to criticize it. Whereas, *if* the issue is primarily or at least in part--I don't I wouldn't say it's exclusively but certainly primarily--a spiritual issue, then then the solution is not merely to talk about material inequality.

CH: Mm.

CV: And in fact, one would, one could argue that or one could ask the question: "What are the implications of the fact that you know, folks like the Harlem Renaissance writers were materially poorer than their white, often racist counterparts and yet were more spiritually mature and thus arguably lived a more fulfilling life?"

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And so that changes the nature of what you measure when it comes to access to a quality life...

CH: Mmm.

CV: ...because you're not looking in a material lens, you're looking through a through a spiritual lens.

CH: That's very interesting to me. And one, I think I've actually had very similar thoughts to that myself.

CV: Okay.

CH: Like I've looked at someone who for example is very exercised about about the wealth gap...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...between blacks and whites.

CV: Yeah.

CH: If I were to catch them in a completely non-political mode and talk to them about: "What is the value of wealth?" And in their mind, they weren't thinking about the wealth gap or anything like that-- "How important is money to living a good life?"

CV: Mmhm.

CH: They would probably say something like, "Well, once you have the basics,..."

CV: Yeah.

CH: "...most of what what what it means to be happy is, as like a social creature, to like have a great friendships, great relationships,..."

CV: Yeah.

CH: "...to cultivate beautiful relationships with other people, to see the world, to live by a set of values."

CV: Mmhm.

CH: However, if you talk about gaps in wealth, there's this implicit assumption I think that that material circumstances are everything.

CV: Yeah.

CH: It's not that they would say so, but the idea is like if you equalize wealth, you're equalizing happiness, but--

CV: Right.

CH: ...which is interesting because if you if you're if you're if you polled black people versus white people on like happiness measures or like *spending time* with family measures,...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...you'll find you'll find some kind of disparities that aren't really predicted by the economics at all.

CV: Right. Yeah. So I feel like I remember Jonathan Haidt talking about something similar in his first book *The Happiness Hypothesis*, where he pointed out that like at a certain median income, or past a certain median income, there's no correlation between money and happiness. And in fact, that if you were to compare--I'm generalizing. I don't remember the exact statistics, but if you were to to compare--the happiness level of single male individual who has like millions of dollars to a young, a a poor 40-year-old African American woman with diabetes,...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...the likelihood that--but but like she is married and she has a church community and um she has a she has a network as it were--she is *far* more likely to be happier than that single young white male bachelor who has all the money.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And so like: "What are the implications of that for when we talk about privilege?"

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...is a question that I've always wanted to explore and have wanted people to like think more deeply about.

CH: Yeah. This that reminds me of Yuval Noah Harari's book *Sapiens*, in which he argues--persuasively I think--that humans were happier in hunter-gatherer societies...

CV: Mmm.

CH: ...than as farming peasants.

CV: Mmm.

CH: That's a separate question from whether we're happier now. Um...

CV: Sure.

CH: But I think the agricultural revolution made the typical person less happy. That's a pretty persuasive case to make because um you know, obviously there was less wealth in the world.

CV: Yeah.

CH: You were living day-by-day hunting, *but* you had more space less crowding no urbanization.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: Often your workday was not nearly as long as it was if you were say a rice farmer in China.

CV: Right. Right.

CH: And that in a very big picture sense is making a similar point about the surprising lack of correlation between wealth and happiness in certain instances. *That* can be certainly overstated.

CV: Mmhm. Sure. Definitely. Yeah.

CH: But I think that is an important argument to inject. So let's pivot a little bit.

CV: Okay.

CH: You talk about Israel...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...quite often.

CV: Yeah.

CH: How did you come to care about that issue?

CV: So I was raised in a very atypical Christian background, very similar to Seventh Day Adventists. So I went to church on Saturdays instead of Sundays. I grew up observing ah Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur instead of Christmas and Easter. So I grew up with a lot of Jewish culture even though I'm not Jewish. And that, inevitably I think, led to a lot of cultural affinity for the Jewish community. And so in 2012 when I was in college, I noticed that globally anti-Semitism was *rising* in places like France and in Europe at large, and on a deeply psychological level because because we shared so many cultural things, I felt anti-Semitism not, I felt something against anti-Semitism not only because it was um against Jewish people, but I also felt it, felt as though it were a personal attack on me as well because of how I was raised with all of these different cultural um things to which I belong, traditions to which I belong.

CH: Mm.

CV: So that led me to do a lot of research into anti-Semitism and Israel advocacy and stuff like that. And eventually I started a student Pro-Israel Club at the University of New Orleans, where I did Israel advocacy for three and a half years. Um, moved to New York afterwards, but then and worked with *The Wall Street Journal*, but after I was at *The Wall Street Journal* for a year, I also continued to work in the Israel Space for two years, before starting my own company. So but that's like the, that's the story of how I got involved.

CH: Mmhm. So I have a question.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Why does Black Lives Matter have a position on Israel-Palestine? One, another way of putting it...

CV: Yeah. It's a great question.

CH: If you were to ask Palestinians if they have an opinion on Black Lives Matter,...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...I doubt that, whether they would even have heard of it,...

CV: Aahhhh.

CH: ...much less of whether their politics on the issue of race in America would be straightforwardly predictable.

CV: Well, Palestinian Americans probably have...

CH: I mean Pales-...

CV: The Palestinians like in the West Bank.

CH: Yeah.

CV: Well the reason why Black Lives Matter--um and I'll speak, I'll say this about like national Black Lives Matter--this isn't necessarily true for local Black Lives Matter chapters, who really don't in my experience, it varies from place to place whether or not they have an opinion on this at all. They're usually dealing with local issues. But national Black Lives Matter has an opinion because it sees itself within the same um tradition of the, it's it's a certain tradition that has, that is a part of black America, but it's not the Kingian tradition.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: It's a much more ah explicitly anti-West, anti-Western tradition in the sense that it sees the West explicitly and exclusively as quote unquote "the oppressive white man." And then it and then it associates, in ignorant fashion, or it takes everything that it associates with quote unquote "the white man" as being oppressive by the transitive property.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And hav-, knowing absolutely nothing about Israel or, and in addition to not knowing anything about Israel--taking their understanding of American history with regard to slavery and Jim Crow and *projecting* it onto other countries' histories. They they then come to the conclusion that Israel is an oppressor.

CH: That is exactly what I think, which is interesting because...So I watched the debate. I've watched the debate more than once actually between Alan Dershowitz and Peter Beinart.

CV: Okay. Yeah. Classic. (chuckles)

CH: Great debate.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Both very smart on the issue of Israel-Palestine. And Alan Dershowitz argued that the only or the main reason why there is an outside, outsized focus on Israel from the global community...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...is anti-Semitism.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: And I think that is only true of some aspects of the focus on Israel.

CV: Sure.

CH: If you were to argue: "Why does the Muslim world focus so much on Israel?" Anti-Semitism has to be a part of that...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...exploration. However, if you go to a college campus in America, and you see a bunch of probably mostly white, but you know a diverse group of, you know, economically privileged kids on an Ivy League university...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...waving flags for Boycott Divest Sanction...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: I don't think they're anti-Semites. And I don't think they're inspired by anti-Semitism. I think they're, as you said, they're grafting U.S. politics on to Israel-Palestine.

CV: Yeah.

CH: And it's become a symbolic issue and that's why it's aligned with Black Lives Matter...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...um, because people see it as symbolically the same thing, which is interesting because back in the '60s and early '70s...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...Bayard Rustin, who is a favorite writer of mine and a key figure in the Civil Rights Movement, he used to argue that we should support Israel precisely because it's similar to...

CV: Right.

CH: ...our situation. However with the opposite, where where *Israel* is analogous to black Americans.

CV: Right.

CH: And it, Israel's enemies are analogous to white supremacists.

CV: Even prior to the '60s and '70s when--I have a book on my bookshelf called *The New Negro*, which I think was written in the '20s and it's a collection of essays written by people active in the Harlem Renaissance movement. And in the foreword, they make mention of Zionism as like the the model for for a black American Renaissance. So yeah, I think it depends on like not just where your politics lies, but the fundamental spirit of ah of how you see the world, I think. Ultimately if you see the world through what I would call a *redemptive lens*,...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...then um you don't come to this sort of like Manichean, like black versus white understanding of society in the way the world works. And if you don't have that lens, then your views on Israel are probably going to be closer to mine. Whereas if you *do have a view*, if you do take that view, if you do think that life is ultimately one big fight between blacks and whites, the west and the rest,...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...then you are more likely to to find yourself expressing anti-Zionist uh ideas. And what's ironic though when it comes to black America, specifically what's ironic in taking the latter position is that in order to do so, you would have to deny the rich legacy that black Americans have contributed to America because if you if your view of America is exclusively one of you know, the *white* oppressor then you by definition are ignoring the black contribution to it. You're choosing to downplay it or dismiss it or say that it's irrelevant ultimately. And I think that that's the most profound irony of that sort of viewpoint.

CH: That's interesting. I've noticed that as well. You know, I've read in you know Thomas Sowell who famous black conservative, slash (/) libertarian.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: He is very fond of pointing out the amazing success of certain black institutions in the 1800's. There were black politicians, you know, in Detroit...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: He you know, that that's like a fact that only Thomas Sowell would point out.

CV: Yeah.

CH: You know, there were black schools before integration that in some cases, outscored white schools in the same city, like Dunbar...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...High School in Washington and what not. Okay, slight shift of topic.

CV: (chuckling) Okay. It's like speed round.

CH: You are unusually good at Twitter.

CV: Thank you! chuckles)

CH: Whatt's your secret?

CV: Ahhhhh. I don't know if I have a secret. I think Twitter has definitely given me the most bang for my buck. Ummm, ahhh. I think that it is very possible to seriously exchange ideas on Twitter. If you know, if you are deliberate about, you know, *curating* your Twitter account in such a way and trying to engage people seriously with serious ideas and *avoiding* the trolls or blocking the trolls or not even indulging the trolls. I think that there is a way, um to really again just like curate and facilitate important conversations with people.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: But also I would say another reason why I've been successful on Twitter is because my--if you were to ask me what my politics or my political orientation is, it would probably I would probably respond by by not answering the question. Um, but if I had to give you an answer, it would probably be *art*.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And so that, which is to say that I talk about a whole host of issues on Twitter that have nothing to do with politics, but that had political implications...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...or have implications for how I view politics or how I develop a political language when talking about political issues. But ultimately it stems back to my love of and fascination with the human condition, which I find is both *tragic* and *triumphant* at the same time. That's just my general view of the way the world works, and the way human beings operate. And then that informs the way I look at a lot of things, including like when I get into arguments with people on Twitter and that results in a very a, in a much less harsh tone with people...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...that I disagree with. And I think that people notice that and then people noticed that I'm I'm willing to have conversations with them. Even if I disagree with that with them. And it's not just that I'm willing to have conversations with them in the sense of this sort of really um...I love the IDW. But like the IDW has this tendency to be super like, I don't know, like steel politically adjacent and nerdy about about the way they have conversations...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...with people they disagree with.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: But my approach is like: "I disagree with you, but I still think you are, I still believe fundamentally in your eternal worthiness." Which is a spiritual, ah, it's a spiritual claim. It's not just the, it's not just a politically heterodox claim.

CH: Mmm.

CV: And there's something deeper to that ultimately. And so I would say that probably contributes to to some of my popularity on Twitter.

CH: I love the idea that your political orientation is *art*.

CV: Yeah.

CH: It's just like an intentional category error. But...

CV: Yeah. (chuckles)

C: ..., in a space that *needs* category errors.

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...because most of Twitter is so boring and predictable. And your Twitter is, it is *not* boring and...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...not, not predictable.

CV: Yeah, sometimes...

CH: (indistinguishable word) is predictable.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Viewpoint is predictable.

CV: Sometimes I might be talking about, you know, Jordan Peterson one day. The next day I might be talking about Jay-Z.

CH: Exactly.

CV: And it's this, but it's the same lens and, which is art, that produces that.

CH: What do you think about the role of hip-hop in American culture?

CV: Well, I personally think that hip-hop is like, I think hip-hop is the the greatest thing since the ancient bards. Like I think I think hip-hop what it does with language um...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...is is equivalent to what Homer did with things like the Odyssey. And I I I don't don't know that people have made that connection, but that's that seems to me to be very obvious. I think it's one of the greatest literary....It's part of the literary heritage of the West.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...and of America and one of it's greatest contributions that African Americans have made to the West. So.

CH: Well both the Homer and both Homer and and hip-hop use rhyming as a means to facilitate memorization.

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...like infectiousness of...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...of like language.

CV: Yeah, and and and what what both of those like do with storytelling is *insane* on a on a genius-level? I mean, obviously I'm talking about like *good* hip-hop, not like *trash* hip-hop, but like in general the genre is is a brilliant mechanism for storytelling. And that shouldn't be taken for granted because storytelling is a very humanizing...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...humanizing ah tool. It's ironic to me when people who love hip-hop or who claim to love hip-hop come to certain conclusions about white people because it doesn't like--when they come to like, or any people who they generalize about that doesn't make any sense to me. It's sort of like missing the *lesson*...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...in embedded in hip-hop...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...to a certain extent.

CH: What's that lesson?

CV: Ah, the complexity of the human condition and the and the uniqueness of of every human being and and how important it is to tell, it, how important it is that human beings tell their story.

CH: Mm.

CV: You know, that's sort of like is missed when people on the one hand say they love, you know, Jay-Z and then on the other hand, in another tweet, are like making a politically derisive comment about like *white* people in general.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: Like that to me, that seems to be a mismatch.

CH: Hmm.

CV: So...

CH: I tend to agree. I think if you actually look at most rappers,...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...they tend to be people at least the ones that stand the test of time. Very high verbal intelligence.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Very high open-mindedness.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: Very high emotional introspection.

CV: Yeah. Incredibly high emotional introspection.

CH: Yeah, even even if they're rapping completely about violence...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...or gang--like the type of person who comes from the hood comes from a place where violence is normalized...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...and ends up becoming a rapper instead of someone who is...

CV: Yeah, a gangbanger.

CH: Yeah.

CV: They were the artsy kid.

CV: Yeah.

CH: They were the artsy kid who, to whatever extent they were involved in criminal activity...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...still primarily viewed themselves as, are as most artists do, as having some crisis of meaning that...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...needed that that facilit-, that require that they invent their own meaning structure.

CV: Yeah. I mean, I think about that a lot when I think about Kendrick Lamar. And I have this is sort of--my problem with folks like Tomi Lahren, whose whose commentary on hip-hop is bereft of awareness of that...

CH: Mmm.

CV: ...of like the taking at face value the story, which a rapper's talking about the time when they when they were involved in a gang, is as silly as, it's a silly is like taking *Romeo and Juliet* and thinking that Shakespeare is like like, you know *glorifying* like these family feuds, when *obviously* that's not the point.

CH: Watching *The Godfather* and being like: "Well, this is violent..."

CV: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

CH: "There's nothing redeeming here at all."

CV: Yeah, there's nothing, there's *no lesson* in this to learn from. It's really quite small-minded um and just uninteresting as a as a (chuckling) point of analysis.

CH: Yeah.

CV: So.

CH: I do think there is a dynamic--so like if you're gonna analyze the lyrics of a hip-hop song without an understanding of the potential for irony,...

CV: Yeah.

CH: Kendrick Lamar--.

CV: Yeah.Yeah.

CH: ...you won't understand anything if you don't understand his use of irony.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Um. However, I do worry about the...death of hip-hop being marked by its importation into the the the...mainstream institutions of academic study.

CV: Okay. What do you mean by that?

CH: So I feel like *jazz* used to be huge.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Jazz was popular, you know in the late '50s. It was American popular music.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: Now, it's not at all popular, but you can major in it.

CV: (chuckling) Okay.

CH: So I'm I wonder if that will...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...happen to hip-hop.

CV: I don't know that jazz was ever as I mean, I know it was global, but I don't know if it was as global as hip-hop is today. And because hip-hop is so global, I don't know that it would ever be like, it would become a relic. That being said, I mean Homer used to be big and now he's...

CH: (chuckling)

CV: ...studied in philosophy majors.

CH: (chuckling)

CV: So maybe that's just the way that things go. And maybe that's not necessarily a bad thing. I think it's a matter of timing. Hopefully if it *does* happen, it won't happen in our lifetimes or for another thousand lifetimes... (chuckles)

CH: Mhm.

CV: ...you know? I think that's sort of the compromise that we would have to look for.

CH: Yeah. So, one thing people, not a lot of people know about you is that you make music.

CV: Yes, I do. Yeah on SoundCloud.

CH: Under the name Paradox.

CV: Yes.

CH: Why Paradox?

CV: That's a good question. I used to, I remember, I'm trying to remember the answer to this question. Ah, because there was a--I started making music about year and a half ago.

CH: Mhm.

CV: So I was always drawn to music when I would take edibles. And I would slowly but surely experiment with drumming on djembes. And a couple years ago, I started to teach myself guitar as well. And I always was was was also like very much moved by *gospel*...

CH: Mm.

CV:and what gospel did with different chord progressions and and and I was als-- oh this is why Paradox. Okay, I'm glad you asked me that because now I know. Now I remember. I was always drawn to artists who live in paradox.

CH: Mm.

CV: So artists like Prince for example--the way he plays with the space between romantic love and divine love...

CH: Mhm.

CV: ...is one of the most incredible paradoxes that I've seen displayed in an artist because like the way he would you know in in the song "I Would Die for You" present both a both a romantic message, but also a divine message in the way that he was describing his love for a person was I think really beautiful.

CH: Mhm.

CV: ...the same way like Stevie Wonder does that in song "As" when he's describing his love that he has for a human being, but it's very clear that the love is like *divinely inspired*.

CH: Mm.

CV: And I always loved the the blurring of the lines between between those things. And also in general a spiritual person and spirituality I think plays in the space of paradox.

CH: Mm.

CV: When I think of biblical figures like King David, for example, who was a very paradoxical figure who was someone who who, you know as the story goes--as a young man slayed Goliath and found favor with God, but *also* committed incredible sins and and in in in committing adultery and murdering someone in order to get the woman that he wanted and neglecting his sons as a father. And yet, all, he had all these qualities and and vices, but he was also still ultimately known as quote unquote a "man after God's own heart."

CH: Mm.

CV: And that *complexity* I think is quite beautiful. And and if we, as a society or as a culture, were to study that complexity and internalize the ability to hold space for two seemingly disparate ideas, qualities at once, I think it would be a much be-, healthier society. And so Paradox does that. *Also*, DJing is fundamentally about playing with paradox because like if you're a good DJ, you can take something that's really slow BPM and somehow make it match with something that's really fast BPM. And the and the the combination of the two, when the audience hears it, that's where they go crazy.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: So that's why I chose that name.

CH: When you speak about David, it reminded me about reminded me of Cardi B.

CV: Yeah. (chuckling) Yeah.

CH: Like....

CV: I can see that. Yeah.

CH: Amazing creative mind.

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...also used to drug, like drug men and steal their money in another life--paradox.

CV: Paradox. Yeah.

CH: It also sounded like David would be cancelled today or that...

CV: Oh no, he wouldn't be.

CH: ...cancel culture doesn't allow for paradox.

CV: Well, see. I so that's why I ultimately think *cancel culture* can't last. *If* we are, if we are a society that believes in art, I don't think cancel culture can last because art *has* to play in the space of paradox and has to--good art has to play in the space of complexity. And as long as we *yearn* for good art, I think that that will that will always have an advantage over cancel culture.

CH: Cuz what Kanye said: "You want crazy art, but you don't want it from crazy people."

CV: Oh, is that what he said?

CH: Yeah. "Do you want crazy art from sane people?"

CV: Yeah.

CH: That doesn't make any sense...

CV: That doesn't work.

CH: But what if, as a culture, we just become accustomed to *sane* art, bor-...?

CV: I don't know what the, I don't know what that looks like.

CH: Boring art. Art that never thinks outside the box.

CV: I don't know what that looks. I don't think that's art. I don't know I don't know how it looks like. Like I can't conceptualize what that means.

CH: Mmm.

CV: And I don't think they're artistic trends that indicate we're...They're political trends, but I don't think they're cultural trends that indicate we're going, we're heading in that direction. I think we have a lot of crazy artists right now. And that is ultimately a *good thing* for society, you know?

CH: Who are underrated artists that you think people should...

CV: Oooo...

CH: know about.

CV: So my one of my favorite bands of the past...

CH: Besides Paradox, of course.

CV: Right? Of course, yes. (chuckling) Yes check them out. Check out my SoundCloud. No. Um, my (chuckles)

CH: (chuckles)

CV: My favorite artist, one of my favorite artists of the past four years now, is a band called *ffe*, spelled I.F.E., based out of Puerto Rico. They debuted their their album in 2017. NPR called them, the article said that the only regret that I have in listening to this album and said I cannot listen to it for the first time ever again.

CH: Wow.

CV: Yeah, and it blends like a lot of cultural traditions from from the ancient religion of Yoruba.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: So the the main band leader, Ortura Moon is from Indiana originally, but moved to Puerto Rico and converted to the Yoruba religion. And really it's a, the album is a beautiful celebration of that religion in his experience. But it's such a beautiful album.

CH: Mmhm.

CH: And I think they're up and coming. But I've seen them twice in Brooklyn, and they're just incredible. I also stalked him and eventually had him on my podcast. So check out the interview if people are interested.

But yeah, I.F.E.'s definitely a band to watch. Um... that's a, that's the only one that comes immediately to mind. I'm a huge fan of Ben Howard, who's a famous singer-songwriter-guitarist out of the UK. He's the reason why I started learning guitar, started teaching myself guitar. Ah, I've been obsessed with him since high school. Some people, a lot of people know about him, but I think more people could stand to know about him because he's brilliant especially not only in playing the guitar, which I think he's a genius at at acoustic guitar specifically, but his lyrics are just profound, and and really ultimately about the human condition. And I could talk about other artists that I love, but they are, um a lot of them are already mainstream so...

CH: One of your songs on Soundcloud has Edgar Allan Poe...

CV: Yes.

CH: ...as the picture. Why him?

CV: So I don't know if you notice the lyrics in that song. What I was doing was I was combining lyrics from, I was combining a verse from a poem by Edgar Allan Poe where he goes: "She loved with a love that was more than love." So I took that lyric and then I combined it with a lyric from Nina Simone song "Come Ye." And I thought it was just interesting because both of these artists were describing, were trying to describe love in these two different pieces. And and so I named that song Poe after the verse.

CH: See that's what I love about you.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Very few people would think to combine Edgar Allan Poe and Nina Simone.

CV: Yeah. It's...And I think that's all that also speaks to my obsession with paradox or--and which is not actually a paradox, but it's like combining people that you wouldn't necessarily put together. You know?

CH: What does James Baldwin mean to you?

CV: Ooh. I mean James Baldwin was like, he he was such a, he was such a spiritual figure and and deeply insightful I think about the human condition. You know, I teach Baldwin in in some of the work that I do I teach *The Fire Next Time* and also *Everybody's Protest Novel*, which I think is incredibly relevant for today. Um, but his ability to just to peel back the political layers and peel back the political rhetoric and and get to the heart of of the humanness of of certain very challenging things that were going on in his day was brilliant and quite a *rare* talent that I hope to be able to do in like manner. So I also, it's weird because I think a lot of people quote James Baldwin, but they don't read him, you know?

CH: Mhm.

CV: And and so that's just interesting to me how how that happens and you know, some people can sort of like-- not even take him out of context--just like are just very not well-read when it comes to Baldwin. And so one of the things I hope to change culturally is that trend.

CH: I think Baldwin and Alexis de Tocqueville are similar...

CV: Mhm.

CH: ...in that they wrote so much and they were so, their their minds were so pliable...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...and not boring...

CV: Yeah.

CH: and interesting that you can quote them in support of a lot of very different...

CV: Sure...

CH: ...and sometimes opposing...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...um beliefs.

CV: So I feel like in that sense, James Baldwin, I view James Baldwin in the same sense that I view like a hip-hop artist.

CH: Mhm.

CV: Right? Cuz like and Jay-Z talks about this in his autobiography *Decode It*, where he says: "I always confuse people because on one hand, in one rap I'm saying 'F--- the police' and in another rap, in another situation, I'm hol- I'm actually holding a benefit for (chuckling) police officers..."

CH: Mm.

CV: "And people don't understand like the complexity of that, of what I'm doing with that." And I think that I mean I obviously haven't spoken to James Baldwin, but (chuckles) I think there's something similar going on, what's going on with that. And again this goes back to giving people or allowing people to just like half space to change their minds and change it back again and and be angry sometimes and say things that aren't so *healthy* that reflect that anger, but after further reflection change their minds. And I wish that we would sort of approach our understanding of these historical figures in that way. And also like I think I should probably approach certain contemporary figures whose ideas I don't like in that way as well, and sort of hold space for them *emotionally* even while disagreeing with them politically.

CH: Mm. Complete pivot again.

CV: (chuckle sigh)

CH: We, you and I once met at a charter school.

CV: Did we?

CH: We ran into each other at a charter school, I don't know if you remember.

CV: Oh! In the Bronx.

CH: In the Bronx.

CV: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Wow, that was a long time ago. Yeah.

CH: Yeah, I guess it was. New Orleans...

CV: Mhm.

CH: ...famously, after Katrina...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...built many charter schools.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Um... The question is: "What do you think of charter schools in general? Are they a good thing? Should we expand them? Are they bad? Should we attack them as some politicians are doing now?" CV: Um. So I was a product of a charter school education. I graduated from--shout out to--Benjamin Franklin High School, the best school in all of Louisiana, which is a charter school.

CH: Mhm.

CV: Um, so I had a great experience. But at the same time I will say one of the books I just read for work was a textbook called *The History of Education in America*, 4th edition. And what I learned from there is like there is *no guarantee* that a charter school is going to necessarily be better than a public school. It just depends on how the charter school is run. It depends on the amount of resources in the district that are allocated to that school. It depends on a whole host of factors that make it impossible to say whether or not charter schools writ large are better than public schools writ large. Some of them are. Some of them aren't. Politicians may be playing a *different* game that is, you know, politically expedient for them, but that's a separate question,...

CH: Mhm.

CV: ...just based upon my personal experience and also based upon the research I've done from whether or not you know public schools for are better or worse than charter schools.

CH: From what I know, charter schools have tended to work in cities.

CV: Okay.

CH: And have tended to not work in not cities.

CV: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I could see that, I could see that geographical...

CH: I don't know why that is.

CV: I don't know why either. Um, it has something to do with the allocation of resources probably though that are available in cities that are less available or not available in more rural areas.

CH: Mhm.

CV: So but yeah, I mean, I don't personally I have a problem with them, but I could see how and why--again not talking about politicians because that there's a whole host of other factors that are at play with politicians for good and for worse--

CH: Mhm.

CV: ...but I could see how and why parents would and *would not* want charter schools given the set of circumstances they may be dealing with.

CH: So I can see, to me, I can't really see why they wouldn't want the *option*.

CV: Okay. Well, I think that they may not want the option if they have proof that like if you if you have the choice of--if it's a zero sum game--if you have the choice of *really reforming* a public school, like if you if you think that you can make the case if you take a given public school that's not doing so well, but it clearly was doing well before, so something happened that's fixable and it's the case of like having that process happen or taking all the funds out of that school and then investing it in a charter school,...

CH: Mhm.

CV: I could *imagine why* a parent would not necessarily like that, especially if they themselves went to this high school and they have some sort of like emotional attachment to it and they feel a legacy and they want to restore it to its former, you know, glory.

CH: Mhm.

CV: I could see a whole host of reasons for that. So...

CH: In general, yeah, I can see that in that case.

CV: Yeah.

CH: In the general case or if you have a charter school that's coming into a neighborhood where the public schools have been failing for...

CV: For a long time.

CH: ...decades...

CV: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CH: ...and the line to get into the public school is thousands of kids long.

CV: Yeah.

CH: In those cases...

CV: There's just not enough...

CH: ...the opposition...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...really really does baffle me.

CV: Okay, that's fair. Yeah, it could be, it's weird because there's not enough, there's not enough real estate. So why not build more real estate essentially by building a charter school? Yeah. I hear that. I hear that. The the truth is I'm not really at all exercised by it because when pol-, when we talk about politicians being crazy, that doesn't I mean I know it affects people and I know it's really (indistinguishable word)...

CH: I'm talking about non-politicians.

CV: Oh, non-politicians.

CH: Yes. Just like...

CV: Okay, so like parents for example.

CH: Or journalists.

CV: Or journalists. Okay.

CH: Twitter people.

CV: Sure. Twitter people are a whole, you know, we are...

CH: (indistinguishable words)

CV: ...we are part of that but... I don't know. I don't know. That's less my, I'm not I'm not that passionate about it. Maybe I should be but as a result, I'm not really an expertise on it, an expert on it. So.

CH: So The Theory of Enchantment.

CV: Yeah.

CH: What is it?

CV: So Theory of Enchantment is my startup that I created a year ago. And what it is is a framework and a curriculum that I designed that teaches social-emotional learning through the lens of pop culture.

CH: Mhm.

CV: So really taking a lot of the things that we've been talking about with regard to art and this goes back to I think why my politics is ultimately *art*--taking famous books, famous music, famous movies and *mining* that data to distill lessons about the human condition...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...in order to teach people how to be in better relationship with themselves and with their community around them.

CH: I like that idea mainly because I think a lot of the reason that kids don't get interested in ideas is because we give them the ancient stuff before we give them the stuff that they understand intuitively.

CV: Okay.

CH: And this is partly based on personal experience.

CV: Sure.

CH: I did not become very interested in ideas until I read great science and philosophy books from the past 20, 30 years.

CV: Okay, so very recent.

CH: I didn't get interested in it by reading Plato.

CV: Okay.

CH: Reading more recent stuff made me interested increasingly in the whole legacy of the western canon.

CV: Sure. Okay, that's interesting.

CH: But I think people more naturally understand, more intuitively, more easily the things have that have been created in their own time.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: So to draw a link between pop culture and all of the, you know, to to Shakespeare...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...as I think you do.

CV: Yeah.

CH: That is an idea that really intrigues me.

CV: So do you think that that's typical of most people's experience in in school for example? Like like that they would be able to relate more to Plato if they were first given in a curriculum con- setting, more contemporary...

CH: Maybe.

CV: Maybe. Yeah.

CH: I mean what I know is that most people who read Shakespeare didn't resonate with it.

CV: Okay.

CH: Hand it in to get the good grade,...

CV: Sure.

CH: ...but aren't reading it on their own time.

CV: Sure. I was a nerd. I mean I still am. I was a nerd when it came to English literature.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: So especially like in high school. So, you know this--Franklin taught Homer and Shakespeare and you know *The Scarlett Letter* and all of these all of these different quote-unquote "ancient texts" that I don't know if it was more probably more *the teacher*, the teacher is responsible for so much um in terms of, in terms of making or breaking a student or rather or rather closing or opening the students' gaze or horizon when it comes to life. And so I'd say probably a combination of those things com- combination of the teacher who's teaching the material *and* the ability to connect the past to the present. But I would say that like it's ironic to me. This is interesting because we talked about hip-hop earlier. It's ironic to me that some people who are sort of like--this happens on the right and the left--there are folks on the right who *esteem* the value of Shakespeare, but then are confounded by the *brilliance* of hip-hop and that is so ironic to me. And then there are folks on the left who *love* hip-hop or who *claim* to love the cultural legacy of hip-hop but then in the same breath will dismiss Shakespeare as an old white man, proving that they understand none, none of what they are talking about. Neither hip-hop nor Shakespeare.

CH: Mm.

CV: Um, so I think that the more we can bridge the gap between the past and the present through literary experiences in K through 12 and in college, I think the better and the more well-rounded we'll be as a society and as a country.

CH: In that vein, I think if you understand why the Montagues and the Capulets...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...hated each other,...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...you understand more about inner-city gang violence...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...than someone who attributes it *all* to material circumstances, poverty for example.

CV: That's a good that's a good point. Yeah. I hadn't thought about the poverty piece or the material conditions piece. But yeah Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet is a *gang* story. I mean just so people understand. (chuckles) It's a story about gangbanging and a romance that happens like against the backdrop of that, right? So um, so I challenge and encourage people who may have a very much caricaturing perspective of folks who live in the ghetto, who are inevitably experiencing things like gang activity and like dealing with drugs and violence and things of that nature, I encourage people to look at that and explore that and think about that through the lens of their understanding of the great books that they esteem because once you do, I think you can begin to humanize that which you previously only saw through a caricatured and distant distant lens.

CH: Okay. So my last question is about branding.

CV: Okay? Ooo, I don't know. Okay. What about it? (chuckles)

CH: I've heard you talk about branding in a way that is deeper than most people view the concept.

CV: Explicitly.

CH: I think so.

CV: Okay, remind me. (chuckles)

CH: Maybe I'm misidentifying this, but, and perhaps this has to do with Theory of Enchantment.

CV: Okay, probably.

CH: But you've talked about the importance of branding. I mean the only--so let me let me throw a few thoughts and see if anything comes to your head as interesting to say. One is that I've always been a little bit mystified by the importance that is attached to brand.

CV: Okay.

CH: So when my friend, you know, lines up at 6 a.m. to get the new Supreme hoodie and pay \$700...

CV: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

CH: ...for it.

CV: Yeah.

CH: I'm like dude: "I just got a pretty nice hoodie for \$20..."

CV: (chuckles)

CH: "It looks the same. I'm gonna use my other 680 go like buy something useful."

CV: Sure.

CH: And he's like: "No, you're missing the point. Like..."

CV: Yeah.

CH: "...you, you lack like this sense organ that's detecting something out there in the world that is very real..."

CV: Yeah.

CH: "...and that's the value of the brand. On the other hand, I've heard like straightforward econ, maybe not 101, but like econ arguments for branding.

CV: Okay.

CH: The importance of the brand is like--you're in a store. You see 10 different kinds of toothpaste.

CV: Mmhm.

CH: You don't--it's too costly to get information about each one and know which one is the best.

CV: Sure.

CH: So rather than do that, you just get Aquafina...

CV: (chuckles)

CH: ...because you know it's not horrible.

CV: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CH: That's the value of a brand. It's like reducing the amount of time you have to spend distinguishing between products.

CV: Sure.

CH: So, do you have a philosophy of branding that is deeper than that?

CV: So the econ piece I get it, but I find it uninteresting, meaning like I would totally buy the no, the Walgreens version of the toothpaste because I know that's (indistinguishable 2-3 words).

CH: But's that's more branding. So would you buy the, would you, would experiment with the form of toothpaste you've never heard of?

CV: Well, I'm comparing it to like Colgate, meaning I'm in this scenario. I'm saying Colgate is the stronger brand and if if the Walgreens brand...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...was cheaper, I would buy the Walgreens brand because I *know* that it's made of the exact same thing.

CH: Another way of asking: What am I not getting about the Supreme hoodie?

CV: Okay. So so so that's a different question...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...because once you get into the realm of clothing and tennis shoes, the people aren't buying the clothing. They're buying what the clothing represents. Now, I can't speak to Supreme. I'm not really into that, but I do understand it from like a Nike perspective.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: So Nike--um and if you haven't read *Shoe Dog* by Phil Knight, who founded Nike, you should. It's an amazing book. It's a page turner. But what Nike did--Nike is not selling you a *shoe*. Nike is selling you the idea that "you can do anything" and that's why you buy the shoe.

CH: Mm.

CV: And by the way, Kanye said this about (chuckles) his own music a couple years ago in an interview. He said, "When you buy my music, you're buying the medicine." He's like: "I am the medicine that that fuels you, that gets you up in the morning and says, 'I'm going to go do this.'"

CH: Mmhm.

CV: So with the whole Nike universe and the whole Just Do It universe, that's why people are so obsessed. Same thing with Air Jordan, they're not buying the shoe. They're buying the idea that they could be just like Michael Jordan. And that's not just true for, you know, companies like Nike, it's true for influencers like Beyonce as well. When people, when women hear the song, you know who "Run the World (Girls)," they see their, themselves in their potential reflected in that content. And all of this is, it was for me when I was doing research on different companies. This is probably what you're thinking about--what what I talked about when I was doing research on different companies and sort of like what was a common denominator that connected all these famous *brands* together. That's what they were doing. They were creating content where their audience saw themselves and their potential reflected in the content. And that is fundamentally *enchanting*.

CH: Mm.

CV: And so that's why people wait, you know at the Apple Store. I don't know if they still do it at the Apple Store, but that's why people used to wait, you know, in the Apple Store in lines. And that's why they do it for Supremes. And I would probably do it for Adidas for the right product. Um, I I love Nike, but I probably...I would rather like have a Nike deal than wait in line (chuckling) for for a Nike product. But I would I would consider doing it for like Beyonce Ivy Park stuff, but but I'm not buying the material in as much as I'm buying the spirit of the material or the the message that the material transmits. I'm trying to think of something that *you* would buy, you would, you might wait in line for that would reflect the...

CH: Ummm.

CV: ...the spirit of the thing.

CH: So interestingly I, there's a lot of artists that I love,...

CV: Mmhm.

CH: ...but I *intentionally avoid* purchasing their merch. I think...

CV: (in a hushed, whisper-like voice) That's not good Coleman.

CH: (chuckles)

CV: You're not supporting them.

CH: I buy their music.

CV: Oh, okay.

CH: I buy their concert tickets.

CV: Okay.

CH: But I don't buy the merch.

CV: Okay.

CH: Why? Because I think...I think I view my relationship with their art as so special that I don't want it represented by something that's mass-produced.

CV: But you...

CH: ...at a deep level that's probably why.

CV: But you, you know that they're not making a lot of money because of streaming services, right?

CH: That's true.

CV: And so like they're making a lot of their actual money through the merchandise.

CH: And the concert tickets.

CV: And the concert tickets.

CH: I guess that's important.

CV: But you yeah. that's I mean... Do you...

CH: Would you say that most people who buy the merch, they're not buying it because they know that's how they're supporting the artists are they?

CV: I actually would say, if I were to guess--and I have no idea of knowing this, I haven't researched it but I would say like--the people who buy the merch are actually the *more* devoted fans. I don't think it's...

CH: Right.

CV: I don't think the merch is being bought by--unless you're talking about Beyonce, right?

CH: But it's not charity--the reason they're buying it. Right? It's...

CV: No. It's because...

CH: That's because they want it.

CV: Yeah. I think it's--but what I'm disagreeing with is your assertion that it's like mass-produced. I think that the merch is like probably mostly bought by the most *devoted* fans as opposed to the masses.

CH: Oh, I see.

CV: Yeah. I think those are the people who buy the merch. Like I love Kendrick Lamar, but I'm not about to buy...

CH: Right.

CV: ...a Kendrick Lamar t-shirt.

CH: Right.

CV: Although the guy next to me, who was *crying* at his "Da-", during his "Damn" tour probably is the kind of guy who's gonna buy that. See what I'm saying? So yeah.

CH: Even that guy, when I feel like I'm that guy, I want my relationship with their music to be so special and private that I don't want anyone---I want to have a shirt that is either,...

CV: (chuckles)

CH: ...I'm the only one in the world who has it.

CV: Okay.

CH: Or I don't want it at all.

CV: Why?

CH: That's a question for me and my therapist.

CV: (laughs whole-heartedly)

CH: Hypothetically.

CV: You don't want to share in this collective experience of...

CH: Hmmm.

CV: ...you know *belonging*?

CH: In in other contexts, I might...

CV: Sure.

CH: At the concert I would.

CV: Yeah.

CH: Maybe maybe, the well we grew up in an era where a lot of listening to music can be done solo,...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...by oneself in one's headphones, divorced from the world.

CV: Right.

CH: ...in a sense. And it's interesting to fall in love with someone in that context and then go to a concert where everything is now open...

CV: Okay.

CH: ...and you're sharing the experiences with many people, but perhaps I've been conditioned to to love music in the first context...

CV: And not in the second.

CH: And not in the second. Not that I don't love music in the second context, but you see what I'm saying, right?

CV: Yeah, it's not, it's not as *personal* for you.

CH: That's right.

CV: And the personal is more *deeply* felt than the collective.

CH: Yeah.

CV: Although...so this is just something to think about. I don't know if you're a spiritual person. I gather that you are, to a certain extent. Um. (chuckles) This is something to think about. So when it comes to the second piece, so one of the things I've been fascinated by is the fact that psychologically human beings are willing to stand as close as possible to each other at a concert.

CH: Mm.

CV: So human beings they've never met, to get as close as possible to the stage.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: I thought that was, I've always thought that was so fascinating um that people are willing to let go of their inhibitions for this one moment. And I always wondered like what about the concert experience was producing that. And so a couple years ago, I was listening to NPR and they were talking about the history of you know, when people will chant like "Ole, ole, ole!"

CH: Yeah.

CV: At like bullfights or even you know other performances or whatever. So we talk about the history of this and I realized that it's relevant to to this concert experience. So it turns out that when Spain--well, let me back up. So Spain at some point was under Islamic influence...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...way way back in the day. And when folks would go to a concert and they would see an amazing experience, it was like *literally witnessing God*.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And it would move them so much that they would start chanting the name of God in Arabic, which is Allah. So it was like: "Allah, Allah, Allah!" And over time that became "Ole, ole, ole!"

CH: Mmhm.

CV: So that's how we have that phrase today. And what I realized from learning that was that the concert experience is a very sacred and spiritual experience.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And it doesn't *require* one, a spiritual experience does not require one to be alone. Right? You can you can be alone and have a spiritual experience. You can be with the collective and have a spiritual experience, which is like, you know church or traditional houses of worship, what they're trying to facilitate. And so for me, if I if I were to sort of like see things from your perspective and I'm guessing so, please correct me if I'm wrong,...

CH: (chuckles lightly)

CV: ...but there's something very sacred about like the individual, right?

CH: Mmhm.

CV: There's something very sacred and dignified and spiritual about the individual. But what I am suggesting to you is that that sacredness doesn't diminish among the collective or with the collective. Um, and in fact, I think this was something that that was the both the both the individual and the collective and the spiritualness of both experiences in the human condition was something I think that like was very much expressed during the Civil Rights Movement...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...with a lot of like the freedom songs that were sung and a lot of the different tactics tactics that were taken with regard to the sit-ins and stuff like that. I think that what was cool about the Civil Rights Movement was like King and all his various colleagues what they did was they gave expression to the dignity of the human being in both, in the sense that of the human being as the individual, but also in a sense of the human being being connected to his or her fellow man.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: And I and I--it may be worth thinking about that dynamic when you think about your experience and in a concert and how at the beauty of how you are you are alone with your fellow man experiencing this amazing,

incredible phenomenon in the in the concert hall, which I think is both sacred and spiritual and sometimes secular, which is the paradox.

CH: All good points. You asked whether I'm a spiritual person...

CV: Yeah.

CH: ...and that made me think of another area in which I kind of have the same quirk of personality, I'll put it.

CV: Okay.

CH: which is I meditate...

CV: Okay.

CH: ...I do mindfulness meditation. And I've been to several retreats.

CV: Cool.

CH: And *invariably* talk about how much better it is, how much more powerful it is to meditate in groups than alone.

CV: Okay.

CH: I've never understood it though.

CV: Oh, you've never had that experience.

CH: Never had the experience of my my meditation in a group being on average more powerful, more meaningful than meditation alone. For me it's just the same.

CV: Okay.

CH: But most people seem to agree with them. And so...

CV: Yeah, that's interesting.

CH: ...at minimum, it seems like I have a coherent personality...

CV: It's yeah.

CH: ...across the board.

CV: Yeah. (chuckles) Well at least it's equal because you said for the concerts like personal the personal experience is just better than the collective experience.

CH: Mmhm. Well, that's not quite what I meant.

CV: Oh, okay.

CH: I think um, they're about the same. Actually with a concert, it's probably a little better because it's live...

CV: Okay. (chuckling)

CH: ...and energetic.

CV: Sure.

CH: ...but it's not necessarily the other people there...

CV: Okay.

CH: ...that like make it better.

CV: Interesting.

CH: In any event,...

CV: (chuckling) It's crazy because I don't really meditate. Like for me music is my meditation.

CH: Hmm.

CV: I've tried. I've done meditation here and there but I never, I never like became so passionate about it. But for me like music and dance are my my practices and meditation.

CH: What kind of dance do you do?

CV: I don't know how you would describe it, but I guess--so Afrobeats is like my favorite type of music to dance to.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: I get, I feel like really connected to the continent of Africa when I dance to Afrobeats like on a visceral level. Like I've had people come up to me and tell me that they thought I was from Africa when they've seen me dance to Afrobeats. So I don't know how you would describe it, but it's it's it's dance that's very much in sync with that genre of music.

CH: Mmhm. Okay. Now this is my *actual* last question.

CV: Okay. (chuckles)

CH: Do you agree with me that Chance the Rapper's music has declined?

CV: Yes.

CH: Why, do you think it has?

CV: Hmmmm. Good question. I don't know what he's doing. Like he went from this very interesting...uh mixture of pop, rap, and spirit, and gospel...

CH: Mmhm.

CV: ...to like, I don't know. What is he doing? Trap music? I don't know. I don't know. It sounds. I just don't recognize anything unique in what he's producing now as opposed to his *first* pieces of work.

CH: Mmhm.

CV: It sounds like noise.

CH: Right.

CV: What do you think?

CH: I don't know. I'm trying to figure it out.

CV: (chuckles) Yeah.

CH: One of my friends said he's quote "hit chasing,"...

Cv: Oh that's...

CH: ...which is which is--every song he's trying to get every song to be a hit.

CV: Okay.

CH: Yeah. Or has too many hands in the pot, too many producers on each track...

CV: Ooohhh.

CH: ...each each song with it's like like putting sugar and a lot of sugar and a lot of salt in the same thing because you think it's going to taste good.

CV: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

CH: Actually you need to take away most of...

CV: Right.

CH: ...that and go back to simplicity and...

CV: Right.

CH: ...not trying so hard.

CV: Interesting.

CH: Alternative theory is that ever since he had a baby, something has changed about him...

CV: (chuckles) Really?

CH: ...as a person.

CV: Really?

CH: I don't know.

CV: I don't think that's it. I don't think that's it 'cause like when he produced that song "May I have this Dance" with ah Francis and the Lights, which was you know for him, I I think a love letter to his daughter, I think...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...that was that was like quintessentially Chance the Rapper...

CH: Mm.

CV: ...that was like powerful Chance the Rapper. And Chance the Rapper in his prime. But um, I don't know. Have you seen Rhythm and Flow? The show on Netflix?

CH: No, I still haven't. I've heard it's good.

CV: (in hushed whisper-like voice) SOOO good.

CH: Yeah.

CV: So I don't know where he's going as an artist, but as a *judge*, um it's one of the best shows on Netflix. So be sure to check it out and maybe that'll inspire him to make better music. I don't know. (laughs heartily)

CH: (chuckles) Okay. Can you tell people where to find you before we wrap up?

CV: Yes. I am on Twitter primarily. It's "cvaldary." V-A-L-D-A-R-Y is how you spell my last name. And also follow Theory of Enchantment. Also, check out The Theory of Enchantment podcast on iTunes and other platforms available. You can check out my music on SoundCloud under the moniker--Beats, Beats by Paradox. And I hope to be producing more music soon. I've been, I hit a lull with work and stuff, but I hope to be producing more of that. So feel free to reach out or for conversation or chitchat if people want to.

CH: Awesome. Thank you Chloe.

CV: Thank you.