



**HANDEL WRIGHT GUIDES CCIE – AN INTERVIEW WITH CCIE DIRECTOR, PROFESSOR  
HANDEL WRIGHT**

*Published in Spring 2007 Edition of LINK*

In March 2007, Professor Handel Wright sat down with Carole Wallace to talk about his work at CCIE and the journey that led him to found CCIE and take up a Canadian Research Chair in Cultural Studies at UBC.

**CAROLE WALLACE: What brought you to the Faculty of Education at UBC?**

HANDEL WRIGHT: I came to UBC in the summer of 2005, attracted primarily by the offer of a Canada Research Chair position. The CRC position and the kind of support for one's research that comes with it, including the Faculty of Education's strong encouragement that I set up and direct a centre that could support my own work as well as that of colleagues doing similar work here at UBC and beyond proved quite attractive. It was particularly good that both the CRC position and the Centre focus were open and I could select appropriate themes and foci. What I decided on was a CRC focus on Comparative Cultural Studies. For the centre I decided on a Centre for Culture, Identity and Education. In addition to regular teaching and service work, I've taken on the additional role of the David Lam Chair of Multicultural Education and for the most part the three roles of CRC, Lam Chair and Director of CCIE overlap and work rather well together.

**CAROLE WALLACE: What can you tell our readers about your academic history and your activist interests?**

HANDEL WRIGHT: I'm originally from Sierra Leone and did my undergraduate studies there (a B.A Honours in English). I came to Canada for graduate studies, which I did at U of Windsor (MA in English), Queen's University (MEd) and OISE/University of Toronto (Ph.D Education). I went to the University of Tennessee after my Ph.D, attracted primarily by the fact that they were setting up a Cultural Studies Unit which utilized cultural studies as an interdisciplinary approach to both sociocultural foundations of sport and sociocultural foundations of education. It was quite exciting to be there and contribute to the establishment of this Unit (and to see other institutions such as Ohio State create similar units). However, the luster wore off when the College decided to return to traditional departments and both foundations of sport and education were pushed back to taking traditional approaches to their work, with the result that cultural studies was reduced to 3 holdout education faculty tucked away in a mish-mash department that included instructional technology, curriculum studies, educational foundations and health and safety. Given these developments, it was time to move on.

I'm pretty passionate about examining and addressing issues of social difference and social justice generally and the old idea of working for a just and equitable society. This overarching interest is what guides my research teaching and service work. It is the reason I am primarily interested in discourses such as cultural studies, anti-racism, critical multiculturalism, postcolonialism, critical theory and critical pedagogy as well as emerging discourses of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and diasporic studies and methodologies such as critical and institutional ethnography. While it is

increasingly difficult to do so, especially in terms of time commitment, I still keep my hand in with activist work outside the academy. My primary work in this regard is with the Highlander Research and Education Center in Newmarket, TN, where I serve on the working Board of Directors as a member of the Board's executive, chair of the personnel committee and member of the We Shall Overcome committee. Highlander has an amazing social justice organizing work history, from work with unions and poor whites in Appalachia to the registration of black voters and the civil rights movement and its current work is quite diverse, dealing with everything from migrant workers rights to queer youth organizing to anti-globalization education. It is not as well known in Canada, perhaps, but its credentials include the fact that both Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks learned much of their civil disobedience strategies there; the fact that Paulo Freire admired Highlander work, visited and co-wrote a book with Highlander founder, Myles Horton; and the fact that the Center was closed more than once for miscegenation (blacks and whites were actually dancing together in the 1950s!) and for being a suspected Communist organization.

**CAROLE WALLACE: Please describe the focus of the Centre for Culture, Identity and Education (CCIE) and its goals.**

HANDEL WRIGHT: The CCIE focuses on undertaking and sharing research aimed at understanding identity and sociocultural difference (interplay of race, gender, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, dis/ability) and the promotion of social justice in society as well as in and through education. It's larger task is to contribute to understanding how we interact across difference in community (be it the classroom, local ethnic enclave, the nation or globally). It draws on the discourses that facilitate these aims: cultural studies, critical pedagogy, feminism, postcolonialism, anti-racism, indigenous studies, critical multiculturalism, etc.. The CCIE primarily aims to produce and disseminate studies (theoretical, conceptual, empirical) but when possible to also undertake praxis work- theorizing and empirical studies that are linked with pedagogy, performance and activism. The approach is to bring together local figures (Faculty of Education, UBC graduate students and faculty) and outside figures (national, international) to generate and/or showcase our work. The work of the CCIE is currently primarily focused on facilitating the agenda of the three year period of the David Lam Chair, the broad topic of which is "Multiculturalism With(out) Guarantees," taken up in local and national terms this first year, in comparative Canada and US terms next academic year and internationally for the third year. I've had to hit the ground running and the organizing of events, undertaking of publications, hosting of visiting scholars and creation of links with other centres and programs is now ahead of other work such as the setup of the physical space of the centre and the establishment of the steering committee and advisory board.

**CAROLE WALLACE: Does CCIE have any exciting projects, events or visitors planned for the near future?**

HANDEL WRIGHT: Yes, I'm quite excited about the CCIE's next symposium and the next three scholars scheduled to visit the Centre. As part of the Faculty's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations, the CCIE (together with the UBC Office of the Associate Vice President, Equity and Drs. Leslie Roman and Hartej Gill, EDST) is organizing a free, full-day symposium on April 2<sup>nd</sup> on "Multiculturalism With(out) Guarantees: The Anti-Racism Alternative" which will involve an invited keynote speaker and panels on the following topics: the relationship between indigenous education and anti-racism education; UBC faculty and student anti-racism activism; the Faculty's Diversity Cohort and anti-racism approaches to teacher preparation and classroom pedagogy; and the work of several UBC administration branches on anti-racism and equity issues.

In terms of the visitors, the first up is Prof. George Dei, Head of the Department of Sociology of Education and Equity at University of Toronto and a leading theorist and public intellectuals in the field of Canadian Anti-racism. He will be here in early April and will give the keynote address at a CCIE symposium on "Multiculturalism With(out) Guarantees: The Anti-Racism Alternative." Prof. Jody Berland of York University is one of Canada's leading figures in the field of cultural studies and she will spend a substantial part of the fall as a visiting scholar at the CCIE. Finally, Prof. Ien Ang, Director of the Institute for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney and another leading cultural studies figure internationally, will visit and present at the CCIE in late October.

**CAROLE WALLACE: What is the support structure of the work of the CCIE?**

HANDEL WRIGHT: Caroline Rueckert works with the CCIE as a GRA and she has quickly proven invaluable. She is a doctoral student whose research interests are in a hybrid cultural studies, critical multiculturalism, postcolonialist, feminist approach to diversity and pedagogy and she is particularly interested in affect and issues of emotion in the pedagogical encounter. Her work with the Centre has included everything from design and organizing of the upcoming symposium to design to design and updating of the CCIE website, from research on recent developments in multiculturalism and multicultural education to contributions to the organization of the CCIE research space. The NCIE has also been invaluable as part of the support structure for the work of the CCIE. NCIE staff have worked with me on all details of the symposia I've organized and with my research work in general.

CAROLE WALLACE: **Would you also like to mention the courses you teach?**

HANDEL WRIGHT: I teach courses in cultural studies, multiculturalism, anti-racism and qualitative research. Courses I have taught thus far include Cultural Studies Praxis and Introduction to Qualitative Methods. I'm currently teaching a doctoral course on Cultural Studies and Comparative Multiculturalism/Anti-Racism. In the summer, I will be offering a graduate level version of that course. My programme area, SCPE, is now including cultural studies as part of our approach to our interdisciplinary coursework.

CAROLE WALLACE: **Would you like to mention your recent publications?**

HANDEL WRIGHT: My publications continue to be eclectic, both in terms of topics and forms of publication. I seem to have fallen into a specialization in (co)editing special issues of journals. I'm currently working simultaneously on my 12<sup>th</sup> (a special issue of Cultural Studies co-edited with Australian Meaghan Morris on the relationship between Transnationalism and Cultural Studies) and 13<sup>th</sup> (a special issue of the journal, *Diaspora, Indigenous and Minority Education* co-edited with Samson Nashon and David of CUST and based on the CCIE symposium we co-organized on African Knowledge). The 11<sup>th</sup> was a co-edited special issue of Cultural Studies with Keyan Tomaselli of KwaZulu Natal University in South Africa on the theme of African Cultural Studies (due out any minute) and the 10<sup>th</sup> was a special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* on paradigm proliferation in educational research, co-edited with Patti Lather. And I suppose there's my 2004 book, *A Prescience of African Cultural Studies: The Future of Literature in Africa is Not What it Was*.

CAROLE WALLACE: **Anything else you would like to add to give our readers some insight to CCIE?**

HANDEL WRIGHT: Yes, I'd like to encourage faculty and graduate students who are interested in cultural studies, multiculturalism and anti-racism, comparative education and issues of representation and social, global and environmental justice to become Associates of the CCIE. They can simply contact me with a brief bio and contact info (telephone number, e-mail, etc.) and I'll add them to the growing list of local, national and international CCIE associates. Benefits include collaborative research possibilities with other associates at UBC, nationally and internationally; listing of their profiles and research projects on CCIE website; invites to CCIE activities and use of Centre space and equipment depending on availability.

CAROLE WALLACE: **Thank you for your time, Handel.**

HANDEL WRIGHT: Oh you are welcome. I enjoyed chatting about the CCIE and it's work.