

**Interview of Dr. Walter Greason, Associate Professor and Chair of the  
Department of Educational Counseling and Leadership at Monmouth University**

5 Julian Chambliss: Right. So, uh, my name's Julian Chambliss. It's June 20...

7 Walter Greason: Third.

9 Julian Chambliss: ...third. [laughter] I'm speaking with Dr. Walter Greason of Monmouth University, uh, as part of Voices of the Black Imaginary Afrofuturist Oral History Archive. [00:26] Uh, Walter, can you say your name and your title and, um, tell us, you know, like a short, a little short bio?

14 Walter Greason: Wow. Okay. [laughter] Let's see. Uh, Walter David Greason. I am the Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Educational Counseling and Leadership. I am also a Dean Emeritus of the Honors School at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey. Uh, biographically, I was born and raised in New Jersey. Um, did my education undergraduate at Villanova, my Ph.D. at Temple. I published or written or edited six books and contributed to two more having to do with the Black Speculative Arts movement and broader issues of architecture and urban planning.

24 Julian Chambliss: Okay, um, and the reason I'm talking to you for, uh, this sort of oral history is to talk a little bit about your recent exhibition, uh, this last year at Monmouth University. It's worth noting for the listener that one of the books that you coedited was Cities Imagined, I coedited with you.

29 Walter Greason: Yes, sir.

31 Julian Chambliss: This sort of looked at African-American, uh, media and culture throughout time and history. Is it fair? I sort of went in in that sort of Afrofuturist Black Speculative Imagination. Uh, it's in there that I think we sort of, uh, talked a lot about this idea of the Tuskegee Universe, which is a concept that, um, I think at one point I was like, 'we should call the Washingtonian Universe' or something like that...

38 Walter Greason: [laughter]

40 Julian Chambliss: ...and then it's like, no, can't do that that will make people think we are talking George Washington.

43 Walter Greason: [laughter]

45 Julian Chambliss: So we just called it Tuskegee Universe and that was really a way to sort of think about, um, Black, Black intellectual activity in a post-reconstruction era. Uh, I know that you, you thought and have written about urban

1 design, urban planning, uh, and for your exhibit, you were kinda situating  
2 on kinda introduction to African, Afrofuturism for your campus. [2:46] So  
3 can you tell us a little bit about the exhibit, how it came to be and what,  
4 what were some of the goals that you had for that exhibit as the curator?  
5

6Walter Greason:

7 Yes. Thank you. Um, no, that, it's one of the great things of my life that I  
8 enjoy and build this work together with you and with so many other  
9 partners. Now, it has really come center stage for, center stage for a  
10 number of reasons. Um, the Afrofuturist Design Exhibit was a direct  
11 outgrowth of the connection you made between myself and John Jennings.  
12 I want to say this was back in like 2014, 2015 after your work in, in  
13 Rollins College in Florida and there was an exhibit there on The Black  
14 Figure in the European Imaginary and those projects. Uh, John had me  
15 come out to Loyola Marymount to participate in an AstroBlackness  
16 conference in California and he and I just vibed about art and graphic  
17 design and the history of comics, you know Black figures. I think this was  
18 before his first Eisner win with, uh, and, and the way that his graphic  
19 novels have unfolded, even before Blacker the Ink came out with Frances  
20 Gateward. So that foundation introduced me to so many extraordinary  
21 people. Um, got to be a part of Ruha Benjamin's Ferguson is the Future  
22 event for Black speculative writers at Princeton along with Reynaldo  
23 Anderson and Alondra Nelson and just a spectacular array of Black  
24 writers and artists. All of that work fueled our conversations, my, my  
25 determination to get something like Cities Imagined done and so  
26 Afrofuturist Design was made bringing all of that back home.

27 Bringing that back to the library at my home institution, which is a place  
28 that had been really designed and kind of executed to carry out very  
29 traditional visions of the white American imaginary, so there are a lot of  
30 symbols and a lot of, uh, policies on campus that marginalize people of  
31 African descent and, and Indigenous people. And so, uh, Kurt Wagner is  
32 the librarian, university librarian and he and I had become very close  
33 during my time as Dean of the Honors School. And so in talking with him,  
34 I would see the exhibits that would come through about colonial life in  
35 New Jersey or about Bruce Springsteen and folk tradition. I was like,  
36 "Listen, when you get a minute, if there's a chance I can get into the  
37 calendar, I'd love to have an exhibit here in the library about African-  
38 Americans and their visions of the world both their past and their present  
39 and their future", and, um, that turned out it could fit right in after our trip  
40 to the, um, [anzosa 5:37] conference in, in, um, New Zealand. So through  
41 that summer and doing a lot of the, vigi-, uh, virtual work on preserving  
42 and exploring historic Black spaces, um, we got to pull together books out  
43 of the library, art from John Jennings, uh, [Michelle Mulapola 5:57], uh,  
44 Stanford Carpenter. Um, Toni Morrison had passed away that summer and  
45 so we wanted to feature a lot of her work in that tradition.  
46

1 It was just tremendous to have it all come together and, um, that first  
2 weekend you were our keynote speaker talking about the kinds of research  
3 and work we, we'd been doing. Afrofuturist Design also, of course, builds  
4 off of the, the ridiculous amount of work I've done around the Wakanda  
5 Syllabus that showed up in the Black Panther movie. So that whole  
6 moment really came back to West Long Branch in a way that now has  
7 really manifested, um, just last week in the renaming of the Woodrow  
8 Wilson main building as the Great Hall and that, that effort to take Black  
9 voices seriously and, and Black intelligence, Black intellect seriously. Um,  
10 it is just an unbelievable moment that all of these influences come together  
11 and started to really give us the chance to reimagine the world we occupy  
12 and what we can do next.

13  
14 Julian Chambliss: Okay, and you, you mentioned that a lot of work that – you, you worked  
15 on the Wakanda Syllabus. [7:14] Uh, can you talk a little bit more about,  
16 about that?

17  
18 Walter Greason: So that's [breath] it's so hard. These last several years have been just an  
19 absolute whirlwind but I think in my life it's, it's a top two or three to this  
20 point, moment in that in 2016 the, the Marvel Cinematic Universe had  
21 produced, um, Captain America: Winter Soldier. In that film, they  
22 introduced the Black Panther, um, to the world and, and brought this  
23 character out of the comic book pages and I had gone back to like '99,  
24 2000 talking with, uh, Christopher Priest and, uh, Reginald Hudlin  
25 sometimes on a daily basis, um, about things they were doing in the  
26 comics. In, um, 2003, I was teaching a Race and Media class at Drexel  
27 and, uh, reached out and let Marvel know about it. They published the  
28 letter that I wrote to them. They, uh, have continued to do this work. They  
29 have the joking term 'they make you an ambassador to Wakanda' and so  
30 it's this kinda nice, nice moment to say 'Yes, please'. You know, as you  
31 bring students and you bring other educators into the circle this is, this is  
32 helping us grow the influence. I think the turning point for me was like  
33 2006/2007 when on Hudlin's public forum, uh, there were a group of us, a  
34 lot of former milestone creators and editors, talking about if there was a  
35 Black Panther movie one day, um, how would we design it?

36  
37 How would we engage in this speculation about what it should be like and,  
38 um, there was a thread on their public forum called 'Culture of Wakanda'  
39 and I started it off just by spelling out what I knew. It was like the core of  
40 if you wrote a bible about the fictional Wakanda what would it be, what  
41 would it involve, and so it was little pieces from the official handbook of  
42 the Marvel Universe. It was innovative details that, uh, Priest and Hudlin  
43 had brought it since the late 90s and, and that thread really took off. Um, I  
44 think I looked at it a year or 2 ago, it had over 50,000 uses. There were all  
45 kinds of ways where people like Al Ewing were coming onboard and, and  
46 making reference to it and, and connecting it to the stories they were

1 writing for Marvel Comics and so the, the Culture of Wakanda thread was  
2 the initial seed of the Wakanda Syllabus and then in, um, after the 2016  
3 film was successful, I knew eventually there was going to be a Black  
4 Panther movie. So I spent six, eight months pulling together all of the  
5 resources from the AstroBlackness and from the Planet Deep South  
6 events, finding everybody I could that I, I knew had written something in  
7 Black Speculative Arts and putting them into different sections; into film  
8 or television or internet or, uh, novels or nonfiction.  
9  
10 I just made it a first stop for folks who wanted to understand the kind of  
11 lexicon that would eventually show up in the film and then with the  
12 excitement about the film at the end of 2017, uh, a lot of folks stopped in  
13 to it. It was published by the African-American Intellectual History  
14 Society under their, um, award-winning blog. They had won a major...  
15  
16 Julian Chambliss: Black Perspective?  
17  
18 Walter Greason: ...prize. Yes, Black Perspectives and, um, it led to a bunch of series that  
19 you and I worked on about race in comics that I think folks have to tap  
20 into to get a sense of how rich this terrain is. Um, there was a series on  
21 Luke Cage, series on Black Panther, general takes on the way African  
22 influences show up in comics. Um, just so much insightful work that came  
23 out of those series of essays and so, um, the film I think we were hopeful  
24 for it to do well. In January 2018, you and I were at the Schomburg for the  
25 preview screening. Um, I'm still envious that you got to hang out with  
26 some, uh, pretty amazing actors and actresses [laughter]...  
27  
28 Julian Chambliss: [laughter]  
29  
30 Walter Greason: ...in the course of that night. Um...  
31  
32 Julian Chambliss: Right, so the, the preview event at the Schomburg was part of Black  
33 Comics, Black Comics, uh, event at the Schomburg. They didn't, they  
34 didn't actually show the film but one of the Dora Milaje actresses was  
35 there. Um, Florence, uh...  
36  
37 Walter Greason: Uh, Kasumba  
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39 Julian Chambliss: Yes, uh, and Jonathan Gayles, who is a really, uh, pivotal figure 'cause of  
40 his documentary, White Scripts and Black Supermen, you know, and John  
41 Jennings, of course. They were some of the first people that set up  
42 Schomburg Black Comic event, uh, and, uh, I did get to, to go to the after-  
43 party, which was way more complicated than you would think getting to  
44 the after-party.  
45  
46 Walter Greason: [laughter]

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2 Julian Chambliss: It was New York City, so I guess I should be like ‘Well yes, that’s what  
3 happens’ [inaudible 12:12] New York and then like the cast of the Luke  
4 Cage, um, show, uh, showed up and, and we got to hang out. Uh...  
5  
6 Walter Greason: That photo with Simone Missick is, is pretty legendary man.  
7  
8 Julian Chambliss: [laughter]  
9  
10 Walter Greason: [laughter]  
11  
12 Julian Chambliss: Yes. That’s what happens when you, um, that’s what happens when you,  
13 you’re in the beating heart of media empire that is New York City.  
14  
15 Walter Greason: [laughter]  
16  
17 Julian Chambliss: Uh, she was very nice, actually. Like, uh, she was super nice and we were  
18 all like, ‘Wait, that’s Cockroach’.  
19  
20 Walter Greason: [laughter]  
21  
22 Julian Chambliss: [laughter] I’m like, ‘Hey, that, that, hey, wow, that’s the whole cast’.  
23 [laughter] [12:56] Who was married to Simone? Dwayne...  
24  
25 Walter Greason: Yes. Yes.  
26  
27 Julian Chambliss: ...married Simone, I’d like to point that out right away if, uh...  
28  
29 Walter Greason: [laughter]  
30  
31 Julian Chambliss: ...but...  
32  
33 Walter Greason: They are a beautiful couple.  
34  
35 Julian Chambliss: Yes, they’re a very, very nice couple. The, so, you know, so there’s a long  
36 line of work that you’re doing with [inaudible 13:16] and I think it’s  
37 worthwhile to, to understand that, uh, some of your work is sort of filtered  
38 around a place in a way that’s really meaningful. So, uh, you have a book,  
39 Suburban Erasure, that sort of deals with development or, or erasure in, in  
40 New Jersey and, and that sort of like sets up a kind of intellectual history  
41 that’s, that corresponds to a kind of actual urban development history  
42 that’s also a part of this Afrofuturist Design, right? This, this core stuff,  
43 intellectual recovery. [13:53] Can you talk a little bit about that art in the  
44 work and how, how it comes together with some of these speculative  
45 pieces that have interest to you?  
46

1Walter Greason:

2 Yes. So that, that's a really difficult point because so much of my  
3 foundation is in urban history. Um, when I came to do this project about  
4 New Jersey, it was out of a, you know, family emergency. I had to care for  
5 my parents and start to redesign what I – the trajectory of my dissertation.  
6 So instead of comparing racial violence in the U.S. and South Africa, um,  
7 to be around my family, I had to look at how the community around us  
8 had changed. So it was a small Black rural working-class village, unpaved  
9 roads, very little electricity, uh, frequently, my neighbors didn't have  
10 running water and when I came back to do the project, um, there was just  
11 massive, uh, suburbanization. Um, a new regional mall, uh, highway  
12 expansions; all the roads were paved, traffic lights were everywhere. Uh,  
13 population density had surged and so that's what was the provocation for  
14 Suburban Erasure. It was instead of looking at suburbs as destinations of  
15 white flight, it was saying where did the flight go to when it left the city  
16 and what happened to the Black people on the rural fringes as a result of  
17 this white, white in-migration? And so it flips the traditional standard of  
18 looking at migration into cities and then ethnic competition and then  
19 ultimately the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s and white  
20 flight out of places like Newark. It starts from the outside.

21 It starts from places like Asbury Park and Freehold and, uh, these smaller  
22 Black communities that did not have the same kind of historical textural  
23 record to draw on and so it, it took forever. It took nine years to pull  
24 together all the kinds of fragmentary resources to stitch together, stitch  
25 together an analysis but what I've run into among urban historians is a  
26 very kind of pervasive assumption is that 'oh, well it's very difficult, even  
27 with gentrification and displacement' nothing is ever really a race.  
28 Nothing is ever really lost and there's this just massive privilege embodied  
29 in that. Especially as I get into and I talk about these traditions out of  
30 social and cultural history that, you know, there are places that don't have  
31 written records. When you think about the history of Indigenous people,  
32 especially in the U.S., the ways that their stories are just literally wiped off  
33 the map and suppressed through the processes of settler colonialism  
34 they're very similar to the ways histories of slavery and segregation are  
35 also just wiped away and, and taken off of the landscape. So those are the  
36 tensions that then when I started to write the series of, uh, teaching  
37 resources with, with various co-editors, you most prominently. That was  
38 the – me pointing towards how to do the reclamation and find new  
39 resources and bring new students into these stories, um, so that we get a  
40 more complete picture, so that we hear from more women and more  
41 Indigenous people, more people of African descent.

42  
43 Not just in the United States or in the U.K. or Canada but really around the  
44 world. So, um, that, that takes me to the most recent stuff that comes out  
45 of Afrofuturist Design is this idea of the Black Rainbow on, on the coast  
46 of New Jersey. Places like, uh, Red Bank, Asbury Park and Long Branch

1 where a group of Black technicians and engineers, um, coming out of  
2 segregated institutions in the 30s and 40s took over jobs, um, filing patents  
3 and creating radio, television, telecommunications technology at Fort  
4 Monmouth in Eatontown, New Jersey. It was thousands of families all tied  
5 into very technical skills that essentially built the infrastructure for things  
6 like this that we're talking on, on a call and recording information and,  
7 and I guess most notably I think of, you know, folks who worked on, uh,  
8 voice recognition software. This was all pioneered by African-American  
9 scientists and technicians and so these folks were my mentors when I was  
10 a very small child. They're the ones who brought me for the first time onto  
11 Monmouth University's campus to learn computer science, to learn  
12 advanced mathematics before I had even entered junior high school. So  
13 it's very real to me the way we imagine what Wakanda was, an advanced  
14 Black society inventing cutting-edge technologies that like no one had  
15 ever seen before.

16  
17 Like the people teaching me were those people and so as I started to really  
18 uncover what was being erased and it is this Black rainbow of Black  
19 professionals, Black middle-class families that did not conform to the  
20 stereotypes or, or even the historical record of what we saw in a Brooklyn  
21 or a Harlem or south side of Chicago, in, uh, Watts or Compton outside of  
22 Los Angeles. So, um, that made me then do more work with you in  
23 particular around, uh, the Zora Neale Hurston Festival in Eatonville and  
24 these Black independent communities that formed throughout the south  
25 after the abolition of slavery. How do we reclaim those stories and how do  
26 we recognize the kind of genius that Nora Neale Hurston highlighted for  
27 us but how did this also exist throughout the Gulf Coast and throughout  
28 the kind of rural "South"? A place like Birmingham as an urban center  
29 needs much more study. I'm really pleased that we just see this new book  
30 on Hattiesburg, Mississippi, that, um, [Stuckey 19:40] put together. That  
31 Black community history starts to show us a history of excellence and, and  
32 struggle that gets ignored and, and needs, needs further explanation and  
33 now we're doing even more across the Plains and across the Great Lakes  
34 region. To see that the impact of globalization and de-industrialization has  
35 been this massive threat to what made, uh, Black innovation, Black  
36 technical engagement and, and stable lifestyle through the middle of the  
37 20<sup>th</sup> century really fall apart.

38  
39 So, um, that's what I'm trying to do in the years ahead is to take the model  
40 and then further document the success of the Black Rainbow, um, up  
41 through the early 1980s but then more, more globally come up with  
42 visualizations and info-, infographics, economic analyses of the success of  
43 Black regional communities. Um, I, I look at a book on, uh, tria-, on the  
44 Triangle Research Center in North Carolina that, um, Alex Cummings has  
45 put together and, and her work is just so good to help us understand  
46 institutional investment and its impact but this applies to Black

1 communities too. So there are these technical centers like the Black  
2 [inaudible 21:02] that we need more people to come and study. We need  
3 people to engage with and so I'm, I'm hoping to kind of carry, you know,  
4 what, what I've done so far forward in those ways.  
5  
6 Juan Chambliss: Yes. I really, uh, appreciate you sort of laying that out because I, I do see  
7 that as, um, part of this little Black future industry, which is a kind of  
8 alternative way of thinking about a more traditional future history that we  
9 associate with speculative practice. Uh, you know, I, I, I think that there is  
10 a lot, um, to, to your, to your narrative here and I really appreciate you  
11 taking the time to sort of like frame things so clearly both in terms of the  
12 exhibit but also in terms of the broader thinking pathway sort of got you to  
13 that. Um, ...  
14  
15 Walter Greason: If I could interject just one real quick example. Because of the change of  
16 the Great Hall's name at Monmouth, one of the corollaries to that that  
17 doesn't get mentioned enough is that Julian Abele is one of the early  
18 prominent Black architects in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and he actually designed the  
19 interior of the building. It is like a metaphor that we intentionally took the  
20 name of a, a kind of divisive and segregationist president and someone  
21 committed to white supremacy and put his name on the building when he  
22 had virtually no connection to it when someone like Julian Abele, who  
23 literally built the space and made it something so gorgeous, a, a monument  
24 to what education can be, we've only started to kind of acknowledge the  
25 work that he did there. So that piece where we are seeing the discussion  
26 around what we name things and how we actually grapple with the subtle,  
27 subtleties of the history, the complexities of the history, you caught me at  
28 a really good time. I'm on fire about all that right this minute.  
29  
30 Juan Chambliss: Right and I – yes, I think that that's, that's a perfect, that's a perfect place  
31 to stop. I mean hopefully, we'll, we'll follow-up, um, with some more  
32 conversation about, uh, the further development of this [inaudible 23:07]  
33 Black Rainbow and sort of [inaudible 23:09] analysis around Black  
34 [inaudible 23:11] that you're doing but, uh, I thank you for talking to me  
35 and, um, I really appreciate you taking the time.  
36  
37 Walter Greason: You are my best colleague. You know this.  
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39  
40/axb