

**Interview of Dr. Reynaldo Anderson,
Associate Professor of Communication at Harris-Stowe State University**

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5Tiffany Pennamon: So my name is Tiffany Pennamon. I'm a graduate student at the
6 University of Florida and I'm here with Dr. Reynaldo Anderson. It's
7 January 30th and we're here at the Zora Academic Festival in Orlando,
8 Florida. [0:12] So first, could you introduce yourself, um, just give a little
9 background about who you are and why are you here today?
10
11Reynaldo Anderson: [tsk] Uh, good afternoon. My name is Dr. Reynaldo Anderson. I am a pr-,
12 Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Harris-Stowe State
13 University in St. Louis and I'm the Executive Director of the Black
14 Speculative Arts Movement. [tsk] And I'm here at the Zora Conference
15 today, uh, to talk about Afrofuturism and the rise of the black speculative
16 tradition.
17
18Tiffany Pennamon: [0:42] And so can you, um, tell me a little bit about how you came into
19 your work in Afrofuturism and first, how would you define that term?
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21Reynaldo Anderson: First, I just define it as a systematic body of black speculative thought
22 that's been around since the middle of the 19th century with key figures
23 like Martin Delany [tsk] or in the esoteric tradition, Paschal Beverly
24 Randolph and others who were doing this kind of work before even the
25 Civil War. [tsk] And then, it's mutated somewhat over time. Uh, uh, I
26 would say, uh, in the 20th century, key figures as I mentioned, uh, at my
27 lecture earlier today is Zora Neale Hurston in terms of the esoteric occult
28 aspect of, of black futurity or Sun Ra with the way he blends in the
29 esoteric ideas with music and technology. And then, in the 90s with the
30 advent of cyber theory and Web 1.0. And now, we are currently in the
31 second wave of Afrofuturism or Afrofuturism 2.0 because of the
32 emergence of social media platforms and, and the accelerating pace of
33 technological change and then other things that go along with it, such as
34 climate change. And it's now maturing as a philosophy of history [tsk],
35 uh, and, and approaches things like metaphysics, aesthetics, um,
36 theoretical and applied sciences, social sciences and proma-,
37 programmatic. And that is – those are all characteristics of the second
38 wave of Afrofuturism that's been going on for well over several years
39 now.
40
41Tiffany Pennamon: Okay. [2:14] And so when you were conceptualizing your work, um, how
42 did you make those distinctions between like that first wave of
43 Afrofuturism and then the second, the 2.0 and then where do you kinda
44 see...
45
46Reynaldo Anderson: Well...
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1Tiffany Pennamon: ...Afrofuturism going?
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3Reynaldo Anderson: ...I, I look at it in terms of technology and paradigms. I guess the Kuhnian
4take on paradigms, what constitutes a paradigm.
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6Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
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8Reynaldo Anderson: And the Web 1.0 phase of Afrofuturism where you had your online
9listservs, web pages, excuse me, and, and chat rooms. That was
10fundamentally different, excuse me, in terms of before the ever-,
11emergence of social media with Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and these
12other platforms that allowed masses of people to network even more
13effectively around ideas, exchange files and so forth. That was a new
14paradigm that came in, so that's a new technological paradigm; therefore,
15I kinda deduced that that's gonna change how Afrofuturism is thought
16about and practiced also. And so I came up with the term Afrofuturism 2.0
17durin' a discussion with Alondra Nelson at the Alien Bodies conference at
18Emory in, uh, 2013.
19

20Tiffany Pennamon: Okay. [3:31] And then from your perspective, um, what does Afrofuturism
21offer our society at this moment?
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23Reynaldo Anderson: Well, um, hm. [tsk] Depends on what you want to do in terms of offering
24the society. I guess, uh, for black people, it, what it is, it's, um, [tsk] a way
25of thinking about and talking about our future, uh, uh, other than being
26limited talking about Democratic Party politics, the Obamas or...
27

28Tiffany Pennamon: Yeah.
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30Reynaldo Anderson: ...other certain type of issues. Uh, if you, eh, uh, when you begin to have
31your own philosophy of history that critiques the, uh, past, present and
32future, uh, which is, uh, uh, where you're engaging in a form of
33community self-critique but also a certain type of critique on the society,
34that's going to ruffle the feathers of some people and the status quo in
35terms of how you think about it. When you think about it, uh, and then
36when you add science fiction tropes to it where if I'm an African
37American but I think of myself as similar to an alien abduction experience.
38And as I alluded to, uh, [tsk] in my, uh, presentation earlier, the idea of
39black bodies being subject to experimentations for medical advancements
40without anesthesia [inaudible 4:51] but the black body being used for the
41advancement and progress for all without compensation. Uh, thinking
42about that, so you got those overlapping tropes of science fiction, real
43history, trauma, reparations, politics and that's, uh, that's the framework
44that Afrofuturism allows you to work with in terms of l-, just, just a
45snippet of what you can do, uh, within that framework.
46

1Tiffany Pennamon: Okay. [5:19] And, and all of those critiques and those explorations of
2 these kind of hard topics to really talk about publicly, um, where do you
3 see, um, someone in Afrofuturism really trying to get maybe people that
4 might not know about it to really see these connections as well?
5

6Reynaldo Anderson: [tsk] Uh, well, the popular culture former was the movie Black Panther to
7 a certain extent, where you see parts of the movie where he deals with
8 ancestral worship, then you see the parts of the movie of advanced
9 technology. You see also in terms of a, a certain type of black politics, um,
10 uh, at the present, a certain type of, um, of, uh, social structure, uh, uh, a
11 certain type of a hierarchy present in the movie. So there in the movie you
12 have social studies, science, a certain type of gender politics, a certain type
13 of, uh, attitude toward science, uh, and wealth and heritage and
14 metaphysics that are all present in the movie. And it's kind of a, it's kind
15 of a mashable kind of project where you can kinda see these different,
16 from different, uh, cultures around Africa and the diaspora that come
17 together in a mashable project that, uh, Marvel, um, gets behind and then
18 mainstream studios. And I think even they didn't think it would, it
19 probably even surprised them the effect that it had in terms of how people
20 gravitated toward it.
21

22Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm. And one of my favorite parts about your lecture earlier this
23 morning was how you talked about Afrofuturism doesn't necessarily mean
24 it has to be black science fiction.
25

26Reynaldo Anderson: Yeah.
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28Tiffany Pennamon: [tsk] [6:58] And so when we think about Zora Neale Hurston and that
29 literary aspect, um, how can we make these connections in how we
30 analyze literature and public writing today?
31

32Reynaldo Anderson: Well, think about it like another book. Uh, that to me would come under,
33 uh, that's why I use the word black speculative thought. Science fiction
34 narrows what's you're supposed to talk about where black speculative
35 thought expands what you can talk about. Like I'd say John Williams'
36 book *The Man Who Cried I Am* or the movie and the book, the, *The Spook*
37 *Who Sat By The Door* are speculative projects, you know, the idea of this
38 person who joins the CIA or something like that in a way to overthrow the
39 U.S. government. And there are other kinda gems out there like Afro-6,
40 which was a underground literary hit for the Black Power movement back
41 in the late 60s. These are speculative projects but the thing is, the entire
42 Black Freedom Project was speculative. Before it happened, you had to
43 imagine it first and then we began putting those things in place to make it
44 happen. But people like Martin Delany, we had to imagine and speculate
45 about our freedom first before they became concrete vehicles. So yeah, the
46 black speculative, uh, thing, uh, a lot of what we've done starts out as an

1 idea in our imagination and it goes back to that old-fashioned thing, free
2 your mind and the rest will follow. [tsk] And so it gives us those kinda
3 spaces to really think about alternatives to the present, [tsk] uh, that people
4 can work on.

5
6 Um, and then and there are parallels in other experiences. Um, before
7 people designed rocket ships, they existed in novels in terms of people
8 wanting to get in rocket ships, fly to the moon with the work of H. G.
9 Wells and whatever. And I'm sure a whole generation of scientists
10 probably look at H. G. Wells' thing and then they created the science to
11 make it happen. And so that's why a person were to use the black
12 speculative tradition and say it's beyond just science fiction, [inaudible
13 8:48] we're also dealin with real science also, if that's the part you want to
14 focus on. And so like the work of the digital scientist, uh, Nettrice Gaskins
15 is the one that comes to mind.

16
17Tiffany Pennamon: Okay. [8:59] And then what connections do you see specifically between
18 Zora Neale Hurston and her ability to, to imagine an Afrofuturism in our
19 present and our past and our future?

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21Reynaldo Anderson: [tsk] Well, what Zora Neale Hurston did, she drew upon the past. That,
22 that was a transitional moment that Zora Neale Hurston was, um, writing
23 in. Uh, if I want to talk about it say for economics, that's the era of
24 monopoly capitalism that she's writing in after post WWI, when the world
25 economic system is changing from what it had known with industrialized
26 capitalism of the 19th century. [tsk] And so a host of other things, you got
27 the League of Nations that is, uh, uh, is formed after WWI because, you
28 know, of course, tens of millions of people are being killed, the Spanish
29 Flu. And so she's writing, uh, to, uh, she's taking this regional black
30 cultural, [tsk] uh, vernacular behavior and tradition and tries to
31 universalize it into a type of a cosmic consciousness but grounded in black
32 culture. In terms of going – so she's going from the particular to the
33 universal grounded in black culture in terms of how to think about the
34 future and how to historicize our past. And this, in terms of using these
35 past artifacts as an anthropologist studying our culture and then kind of
36 having it overlap with these esoteric traditions to project into the future,
37 kind of psychohistorically, uh, out of this past related to trauma, this is
38 where the way forward for us as a people. Uh, and, and then, um, [tsk]
39 and, and out of that tradition, uh, you do get a people, you do get people
40 like Sun Ra that do that.

41
42 And so that's why that I mentioned the elements of contemporary
43 Afrofuturism, the esoteric being part of it, [tsk] squarely, uh, where Zora
44 Neale Hurston's tradition in relation to Afrofuturism is.

1Tiffany Pennamon: And then in your presentation you mentioned that Zora and some of her
2 other Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, um, they were part of in a cult
3 almost.
4

5Reynaldo Anderson: Well, uh...

6
7Tiffany Pennamon: [Inaudible 11:09].
8

9Reynaldo Anderson: ...they were. Uh, there was a book Jon Woodson wrote called *Orangean*
10 *Modernism* and the other one *To Make, To Make a Nation*. And Jon
11 Woodson talks about how, uh, um, people like Melvin Tolson, whose
12 character people became familiar with in the movie *The Great Debaters*.
13 Uh, he wrote a book called *Harlem Gallery*, which is an e-, epic poem
14 which has a lot of traces of alchemy in that poem. And then you have, uh,
15 people like George Schuyler in terms of the work he produces using satire
16 with *Black No More* and *Black Empire* that are a part of this impulse, uh,
17 borrowing from this esoteric tradition and as well as Zora Neale Hurston.
18 And these traditions came from, um, these, uh, uh, where they take the
19 black experience and look at it through the context of what people like
20 Gurdjieff or, or Orage were talking about and Ouspensky. Because this
21 was a great time of where you had these cross-fertilizations of culture,
22 what they called during the jazz age up in New York at that time. And, of
23 course, Gurdjieff and a lot of his followers were in Paris. So you had this
24 Paris to New York kinda dialogue going on in the world. And this is at the
25 same time you got, so you got the Harlem Renaissance, you got the
26 [Inaudible 12:19] later, a generation [inaudible 12:22] Negritude and some
27 of these other things. So you have this transnational dialogue in terms of
28 ideas going on at that time that the Harlem Renaissance is influenced by.
29

30 And I, and as I also mentioned, globally at that time or at least in the west,
31 there's a major occult movement going on. You got it going on in
32 Germany and Britain and, of course, in North America, uh, also and so the
33 Harlem Renaissance. So what is, what the Harlem Renaissance and what I
34 believe Woodson and, and now more recent scholarship is bringing up that
35 the occult and the esoteric has also been a feature of modernity in terms of
36 how people negotiated modernity or maybe represent a certain disillusion
37 with modernity. Like, if we're modern and represent ideas of the
38 enlightenment, how come we just had a war where 40 million people just
39 butchered themselves and used poison gas and all these other things?
40

41Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
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43Reynaldo Anderson: You know, 'cause with the modern, uh, modernity and then the
44 enlightenment supposedly say because [inaudible 13:14] we are rational
45 people we wouldn't do something like that but, of course, we did. And
46 then, they did it again a generation later with WWII with the camps and

1 the ovens and all that kinda stuff. So they were trying to go for what they
2 called a different way through trying to get to a point of cosmic
3 consciousness using culture as a vehicle to get there.
4

5Tiffany Pennamon: And then you, um, kind of outlined kind of like a right and left wing of
6 esoteric tradition.
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8Reynaldo Anderson: Yeah. You got the right-wing esoteric tradition, which an example might
9 be the Nazis because they were in a cult. They had features of the occult.
10 And then, there's the left-wing aspect [of it too 13:48] where you have
11 these utopian left-wing projects also. Sometimes they're engaged around
12 socialism and some other, uh, aspects of it. So you do have the – and you
13 see those features in other, um, [tsk] recent, uh, theoretical formulations
14 around acceleration. Um, but yes, you have those left wing and right wing
15 tendencies of the esoteric tradition.
16

17Tiffany Pennamon: [14:09] And so what do you say to people that say that at least
18 Afrofuturism is too utopian or it's too idealistic?
19

20Reynaldo Anderson: Uh, well, those people have probably never tried anything, uh, when they
21 say it's uto-, uto-, too utopian. [tsk] Uh, how many times artists and
22 people chase perfection, you know, uh, sometimes just it's n-, it's not so
23 much about the final project but it's the, the journey trying to get there that
24 you wanted some things in pursuit of what you think it will be sometimes.
25 So, um, so yeah, I would – that's an abstract argument that people got to
26 work out in the abstract but I've never seen people trying not to plant the
27 perfect field, put together the perfect piece of art, stay in the studio to
28 create the perfect album or book on hours like that, you know. And you're
29 never going to be satisfied, of course, but sometimes people come close to
30 those moments of that they can ca-, capture that they think are moments of
31 those type of perfections. So, um, that's generally, uh, um, how I think
32 about people 'cause it's easy. I, I look at, uh, the right wing aspect of it,
33 that's the lazy way to go. That's where you're just giving in to base
34 passions and, and anger and hatred and some of the other issues out there
35 that doesn't really require that much discipline, so, you know.
36

37Tiffany Pennamon: And I think that's where Zora, like, really does a great service in teaching
38 us even today that even if you don't necessarily agree with someone or
39 you don't necessarily understand someone, you can take the effort to, like,
40 really engage with different cultures...
41

42Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.
43

44Tiffany Pennamon: ...across different ideas.
45

46Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.

1
2Tiffany Pennamon: I know even personally I didn't know that she was as contributive as she
3 was.
4

5Reynaldo Anderson: Oh. Well, the thing about it, if you really care about culture, culture is
6 always conservative, about tradition and so forth. Um, [tsk] however, uh,
7 we h-, here I would say we don't need to look through ourselves through
8 the lenses of others because most black people I know are culturally
9 conservative in terms of how we think about family, love and relationships
10 and whatever. And it's different from other cultures because here we had
11 to fight even to have our marriages recognized or whatever in the eyes of
12 the law. Um, uh, black or Africans here were enslaved longer than we've
13 been free. [tsk] And so, uh, so yeah, we are still in the process of
14 becoming and so and it's in our, uh, panache of the anthem we sing from
15 James Weldon Johnson, "Lest We Forget." So there's that kind of looking
16 back kinda thing of lessons from the past or what, uh, the African term
17 Sankofa to still, you know, how do you bring forward the best of the
18 traditions of the past and then remake the other ones that are no longer
19 necessary. And so, uh, so yeah, tradition matters. Uh, yes.
20

21Tiffany Pennamon: [17:20] And so what are some of those lessons that you've really looked
22 back on, reflected on and brought forth?
23

24Reynaldo Anderson: [tsk] Well, the thi-, the thing when I shared the story of, uh, uh, when I've
25 been to Africa, when you go to [inaudible 17:33] and you realize that, oh,
26 they had to be strong just to make it to the coast to the castle. And then, be
27 in this place for a couple of months suffering and then survive the passage,
28 all this. We are the descendants of the survivors of the people who
29 survived getting to the coast, surviving the castle [inaudible 17:50], so we
30 come from a very, [tsk] uh, strong set of people that, uh, survived that
31 experience and still be in their right mind and with their dignity intact.
32 And so [tsk] that is why it is our historical experience. We underwrite
33 what would later become capitalism in terms of how we were used to
34 jumpstart capitalism in what is kinda descriptively called the west where
35 modern capitalist is, is, uh, uh, being tr-, bought and sold and trafficked,
36 uh, in terms of the capitalistic accumulation that creates the, the modern
37 world capitalist system. So there's always that irony there in terms of how,
38 uh, it, it has broader implications for theory and critique and politics, um,
39 of, uh, of the modern era when it's looked at that way. And when Toni
40 Morrison talks about the African slave being the first mo-, the enslaved
41 African being the first modern person, [tsk] uh, of the modern era and has
42 all those kinda implications that, uh, Toni Morrison was talking about
43 when she makes that statement.
44

45Tiffany Pennamon: [19:05] And so do you think that, um, the way that we view Afrofuturism
46 now, especially like with those issues of imperialism, um...

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2Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.
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4Tiffany Pennamon: ...climate change, how can people that are practicing this work and also
5 academics, how can they disseminate their work, um, their practices and
6 kind of [tsk] scale it?
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8Reynaldo Anderson: Well, what we've done, uh, when we started the Black Speculative Arts
9 Movement, we started out in the community because, uh, we wri-, we
10 enjoy the community spaces better than the academy. 'Cause the academy
11 tends to be too stifling and [inaudible 19:39] we found a lot of our people
12 would rather come to a local community space then come on up on a
13 campus because they don't feel that they're accepted on a campus. And in
14 a community space a lotta times [tsk] it's not your academic rank that
15 holds sway, it's how much you know. So a person could be in there and
16 know more about the topic than a PhD about what's going on. And then,
17 the – uh, and it forces the, the academician or the scholar if they want to
18 apply it at the classroom to actually engage what's going on in the
19 community that their – how does their knowledge and what they're
20 thinking about this topic, uh, what does it mean for this local situation. As
21 I mentioned earlier when we did this, uh, we had our, um, [tsk] conference
22 in South Africa and a young, uh, black woman, Naledi Chirwa, who is a
23 lea-, leader, 20-something-year-old leader and she talked about our
24 Afrofuturism deals with the politics of the stomach. So there they have to
25 think about how does this idea, uh, feed us, you know. Uh, 'cause a lot of
26 times we're thinking of different things over here.
27
28 That's why, uh, as I, one, I commented before, Afrofuturism, how it's
29 theorized and practiced depends on whatever the local population has to
30 deal with, you know. So, um, yeah, so it'll, it'll mutate and it's flexible
31 enough to adapt across, uh, the diaspora to, uh, meet the needs of whatever
32 it is at the moment. So, um, [inaudible 21:06] for instance, if you're
33 dealin' with Caribbean futurity, they got to think 100 years from now is
34 my island gonna be under water, where do my grandchildren migrate to,
35 [tsk] you know. I'm thinking about my descendants who are not born yet
36 [tsk] and, uh, that might be their own politics in relation to climate change.
37 Like, you know, if we stay here, we drown, so are we going to build a
38 underwater city...
39
40Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
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42Reynaldo Anderson: ...or a floating city like *Waterworld*, you know.
43
44Tiffany Pennamon: [21:36] And so do you think from where we are right now and to where
45 our imagination takes us, um, how, what urgency do you see in terms of,
46 like, meeting these goals to...?

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2Reynaldo Anderson: Right now, the urgency is not there, I think. Uh, but like I said, a lot of
3 times your artists and thinkers will put the ideas or it hasn't connected to
4 the policy people yet 'cause the policy people are generally revolving
5 around election to election. [tsk] However, as these ideas become much
6 more and more popular, uh, I, I generally try to focus, I always tell people
7 I generally focus on people under the age of 30 'cause they tend to be
8 more open to experimenting with new ideas. I tell people my age, they're
9 just thinking about their divorce, their, their car note or their house note, or
10 trying to make it another 10 years to retirement. [laughter] So [tsk] they're
11 not gonna have a whole lot of energy invested in the future. And, and you
12 know, people know they have nothin' to lose, I mean, 'cause they, uh,
13 believe they came up with some type of report recently that the net worth
14 of black people in this country will be 0 in the year 2050, so you have
15 nothing to lose but try it. I mean, [tsk] they've already said if you keep
16 doin' what we're doing right now, we already know how much we'll be
17 worth in 2050. We already know what the climate, with climate change or
18 whatever. So [tsk] I believe it was Einstein said that keep, uh, [inaudible
19 22:52] if you want to identify an insane person, they're people that keep
20 doin' the same thing over and over again. So the sane thing is to do
21 something different.
22
23Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm. Yeah. That's really interesting you say that because, um, right
24 now, I'm 25, so whenever I try to talk with my friends, um, I'll say, like,
25 sometimes a crazy idea like let's cancel student loans for everyone.
26
27Reynaldo Anderson: Yeah.
28
29Tiffany Pennamon: Like, I was saying that, like, three or four years ago and then, like, to see,
30 like, politicians like Bernie Sanders...
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32Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.
33
34Tiffany Pennamon: ...and Elizabeth Warren saying, like, we're gonna take out, like, on
35 Bernie's side, like, all student debt and then Elizabeth Warren up to, like,
36 \$50,000.
37
38Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.
39
40Tiffany Pennamon: Then it's, like, okay, now it's in the public, like, discourse, so...
41
42Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.
43
44Tiffany Pennamon: ...imagine, like, what can be next for, like, my kids.
45
46Reynaldo Anderson: Well, five years ago, the reparations wasn't in the public discourse.

1
2Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
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4Reynaldo Anderson: And so, uh, that was like [inaudible 23:39] radical but now you [have to
5ask 23:40] candidates. I'm, I'm thinking okay, dual citizenship not
6[inaudible 23:44] I'm romantic about Africa, maybe I don't trust people of
7European descent in this country not to become fascist or I want a way to
8leave if I have to leave.
9
10Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
11
12Reynaldo Anderson: I mean, um, and that's not me sayin' bad things about people, just sayin'
13I'm hedging my bets against, you know, I don't know what's gonna be in
14the future of the country. Because if they want the country to be a certain
15way, white people are gonna have to get their act together, you know, if
16they really want. There's either gonna be some buy-in or there's not. Now
17statistically they're sayin' we're becoming more segregated. So to me, it's
18not logical to talk about everyone's holdin' hands when the numbers and
19the data tell me that we are not becoming more unified, we're actually
20becoming more segregated. Therefore, based upon the data, the intelligent
21thing is to do A, B, C and D in response to that rather than, [tsk] uh, take a
22reactionary thing of being a victim later. Just do some proactive steps in
23response to what the information says.
24
25Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
26
27Reynaldo Anderson: You know. Um, [tsk] and that's what I don't see enough of now, people
28actually talking about the politics based upon what the data says. They're
29talking about it more about the, uh, the I wish paradigm rather than what
30is, you know.
31
32Tiffany Pennamon: The reality.
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34Reynaldo Anderson: The reality.
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36Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm. And you mentioned in your lecture earlier today as well that if
37only just 1 million African Americans went back or had dual citizenship...
38
39Reynaldo Anderson: [tsk] Oh yeah.
40
41Tiffany Pennamon: ...[inaudible 25:08].
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43Reynaldo Anderson: That a country like Ghana or South Africa would be a superpower within a
44decade.
45
46Tiffany Pennamon: [25:14] And so do you see that?

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2Reynaldo Anderson: Well, I'll tell you what, that trend where a million people from the
3 diaspora went back last year, they really underreported and talked about
4 that. They focus more – that's what I'm sayin'. They selectively focus on
5 – when I saw a commentator who said, ooh, the biggest cultural event that
6 happened last year was the R. Kelly thing. I'm like, no it wasn't. You had
7 a million people, 1 million go back to one little c-, a country in West
8 Africa. That meant they saved money, planned the trip and flew over and
9 made the trip. That impact there, that's, you're talking billions upon
10 billions upon billions of dollars [tsk] that impacted. Now, they want to
11 keep the project goin' and it's impacting the politics of West Africa
12 [inaudible 25:57]. I think some of the other African countries saw the, the
13 resources and how that impacted Ghana's infrastructure and now they're,
14 like, oh, we better look at this.
15
16Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
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18Reynaldo Anderson: So that's going to have, have a ripple effect far beyond whatever R. Kelly
19 has got going, so – in terms of our, our destiny in relation to this country.
20
21Tiffany Pennamon: Okay.
22
23Reynaldo Anderson: And then that's where the Sankofa and Afrofuturists [inaudible 26:21]. In
24 our history, we can remember when there was no United States of
25 America. And therefore, as an Afrofuturist, I have to think about, well,
26 after the United States of America is no more, where will we be if we can
27 remember when there was none. Therefore, I can say, okay, maybe we'll
28 be here after there is one no more. So that means Afrofuturism [inaudible
29 26:45] questions things like, uh, a, uh, an uncritical patriotism or those
30 kind of things, which makes some people nervous, you know.
31
32Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
33
34Reynaldo Anderson: So...
35
36Tiffany Pennamon: And it would, like, I never thought about that too, so what happens after
37 the United States. [27:02] So what do you think is the role of an
38 Afrofuturist writer or someone from that black speculative tradition?
39
40Reynaldo Anderson: Oh, it just, uh, think about what does a, what does a – where, where are
41 black people after the United States is no more. And we know in social
42 sciences, everything has a beginning and an end. Every empire that ever
43 existed is no more. Countries that used to exist are no more. So what is the
44 law of inclusion? What is the beginning and what is the end? Is it a civil
45 war? Does the country break up? Or, [tsk] uh, right now, uh, they use I
46 guess in this kind of postcapitalist moment, they kinda use the black body

1 and face as a way to symbolize, uh, a certain aspect about America since
2 they want to put a black face on everything from, I don't know, certain
3 types of awards. I guess artists would call it a pas-, a pastiche, uh, kind of
4 uh, uh, a coating of, uh, this, uh, blackness as a marketing brand for the
5 United States to [inaudible 28:11] indicate, hey, we're not what we used to
6 be. [tsk] And – but when you interrogate and look at these things beneath
7 the surface, [tsk] inequality is bigger than it's been in generations. Um,
8 [tsk] of course, people caught up in the surveillance system of the
9 [inaudible 28:32], uh, or some people say we're going to a surveillance
10 capitalism thing. So, uh, yeah, they – those discussions are put aside
11 because we have the, um, the puppet show via media to persuade us that,
12 um, everything is okay.

13

14Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.

15

16Reynaldo Anderson: It's not okay [tsk] when you pull the scab or pull the, uh, Band-Aid off of
17 it. It's festering. And so I would say Afrofuturists, they're, they're to look
18 beneath the surface or peel off the scab [tsk] to, uh, then, uh, that's why in
19 a way Afrofuturists are almost kinda in a way like [inaudible 29:12], you
20 know. They go back and look at the dead [inaudible 29:16] history and
21 then try to forecast into the future sometimes. And that's the way you
22 could say, you know, that would be like a Afrofuturist as, as a [inaudible
23 29:24] and then you just give the [inaudible 29:27] modern technology to
24 project his – to, uh, be an oracle into the future using, uh, contemporary
25 data and algorithms to forecast and things, you know. Um, you know, so
26 that's, uh, that's one way of [inaudible 29:45].

27

28Tiffany Pennamon: And in a way, it kind of seems that, um, just like this black speculative
29 tradition is very prophetic.

30

31Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.

32

33Tiffany Pennamon: And so like everything that has been conceptualized at that ideal level is
34 now almost like becoming a reality.

35

36Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.

37

38Tiffany Pennamon: [30:03] And so what ideas do you even have around like just that
39 prophetic element of...?

40

41Reynaldo Anderson: Well, uh, we're going to have to deal with, uh, human enhancement. [tsk]
42 If we know that college students already take Adderall as a performance
43 enhancement thing to compete in the classroom, I suppose the next level
44 of that might be some type of implant that allows a student with more
45 money to compete more effectively on standardized tests than the poor
46 student that can't afford the enhancement. So, you know, 'cause I know a

1 lot of college students now they take the Adderall, the stuff meant for
2 ADD, so they can study longer, compete harder; the same way athletes do,
3 they take kinda steroids or whatever. So in the near future, we're just
4 dealin' with different forms of enhancement. And I suppose the wealthier
5 you are, the better type of enhancements and stuff and products you can
6 afford. And since we already know it's in the culture where people
7 enhance their breasts, their noses, lips and so forth, uh, your enhancement,
8 eh, uh, what kind of enhancements you have are dependent on how good
9 your credit and money is.

10
11 [tsk] And I suspect in a couple generations, you'll have those who are
12 naturally born with no enhancements and those who are designer babies to
13 – who were – uh, it goes back to what I mentioned in there about Frank
14 Herbert in his book *Dune* talking about the Kwisatz Haderach, a
15 genetically ende-, engineered superhuman. [tsk] And I suppose they're
16 going to be genetically engineering these into the military also, so that ge-,
17 the transhumanist or gene-, or the hum-, the enhancement project is pretty
18 much well under way and as we'll see that over the next, uh, couple a
19 decades. Or maybe they're going to design people to withstand climate
20 change better than we can now. Say we're – usually we wither at 110 and
21 now maybe we're, we have to enhance people to survive up to 140, 140
22 degrees to deal with, um, some of these issues. It's going to probably
23 change fashion where we might look like people that are – that live in the
24 desert in the Middle East. That might be the fashion here in a few decades
25 as these kinda European suits and stuff we wear, uh, the heat and weather
26 and climate won't permit us to wear that. Or we wear some type of full-
27 length body suit, like the Fremen people of *Dune* and Mars that recycles
28 our body waste and water into water that we can sip on to survive in a
29 harsher climate as a decertification takes over parts of the globe. Uh, you
30 know, that's – so a lot of this stuff we're probably tracking these changes
31 over the next few decades how it impacts style, aesthetics, politics and, uh,
32 food consumption.

33
34Tiffany Pennamon: Okay. And I want to go back to something you said, um, just how it was a
35 conversation at Emory with your colleagues...

36
37Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.

38
39Tiffany Pennamon: ...um, about not liking that term post-blackness.

40
41Reynaldo Anderson: Oh, that was funny. [laughter] I said and Nettrice Gaskins got it on tape,
42 I'm talkin' to John, I said what is post-black? I said, I remember makin'
43 this statement, that sounds like two black men complaining about their
44 white girlfriends at a Starbucks in Harlem. And everyone started
45 chuckling about it, you know. So, so that's kinda where, you know, we
46 started making fun of the term. Back then, I was like [inaudible 33:20]

1 when, I asked I think when did we stop being black, you know. So, you
2 know, and I think that was all a part of the black, the part of the Obama
3 movement that people wanted the post-racial moments. You heard, we
4 heard the term post-black, post-racial, first black president. And, of
5 course, the Tea Party and all the right swept all of that away rather
6 convincingly and so now we go, we were kinda mocking that crowd that
7 was trying to advance that, um, that notion. Because as one speculative
8 writer would, uh, [tsk] uh, W. E. B. Du Bois writes rights in the book
9 *Darkwater* about the comet and so-, and the souls of white folk that, um,
10 for white, certain type of white people, the black people are like a fixed
11 star and when we move out of our assigned position, it shakes their world
12 up.

13
14 And it goes back to what Chris Rock said. Until Obama's election, uh, as
15 Chris Rock said, the poor, uh, a regular working white guy wouldn't want
16 to be me and I'm rich, because he can always in his mind say at least I
17 ain't a nigger. And so for a lotta white people, the Obama presidency,
18 whether you agree with his politics or not, made them reflect in their own
19 position. And, and it's been my experience, though, that, um, when I've
20 dealt with elite white people, they despise poor white people even more
21 than blacks because they're like you're black and you've made it. So they
22 look at poor whites as like what's wrong with you? This is a white country
23 and you can't make it? So they despise poor whites but they manipulate
24 them and there are certain political economic interests to keep, uh, blacks
25 and other, uh, groups contained from challenging their interest. And so it's
26 like poor whites participate in their own demise, uh, just to feel better
27 about themselves, you know. And that's somethin' that Lyndon B.
28 Johnson said that, uh, uh, uh, about poor white people in terms of why
29 people underst-, don't under-, know why poor whites get, uh, sh-, don't
30 make alliance or common cause with other poor people of color. [tsk] All
31 about the psychology and how their investment in whiteness, that they'd
32 rather be poor and white than have to accept leadership or work with
33 people who they feel superior to because they're white.

34
35 And so, uh, and that's kinda what you see in the Congress, uh, the low
36 level of intellectual debate, particularly when you hear some of the
37 Southern politicians talk, they, uh, very rudimentary in terms of, of, uh,
38 their pol-, their political, um, [tsk] uh, analysis. Uh, ve-, very regional,
39 they don't really have a national project. So it's goin' back to the
40 unfinished tendencies of the American Civil War, the first American Civil
41 War.

42
43Tiffany Pennamon: Okay.

44
45Reynaldo Anderson: And you can kinda see that reflected in the, the, uh, the U.S. government
46 [inaudible 36:07].

1
2Tiffany Pennamon: And you can also kind of see like in the way that the poor people's
3 campaign was very threatening as well.
4
5Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm. Of course.
6
7Tiffany Pennamon: [Inaudible 36:14], um, trying to revive that now too.
8
9Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm. [tsk]
10
11Tiffany Pennamon: [Inaudible 36:18] Harris-Stowe State University is an HBCU.
12
13Reynaldo Anderson: Yes.
14
15Tiffany Pennamon: [Inaudible 36:20] and so...
16
17Reynaldo Anderson: Uh...
18
19Tiffany Pennamon: ...what conversations are happening at HBCUs or at least at your
20 institution about Afrofuturism?
21
22Reynaldo Anderson: [tsk] I'll tell you what, the HBCUs, like I said about [inaudible 36:28],
23 someone does a study about this current movement, most of the important
24 key figures from the second wave of Afrofuturism are products of
25 HBCUs. Uh, myself and John Jennings, who graduated from Jackson
26 State, [tsk] uh, Ytasha Womack graduated from Clark, uh, [tsk], uh, Tim
27 Fielder is an alumni of Jackson State, [tsk] um, others come to mind, uh,
28 [tsk] uh, you know, they, uh, uh, uh, that are products of southern HBCUs.
29 And, [tsk] uh, as I talked to a friend of mine, um, Jackson State was kinda
30 like my first [inaudible 37:06]. I mean, that space was where you could
31 have a space where you imagine black people being in charge of
32 everything. And so when you can imagine them being in charge of a
33 modern university, it's not hard to make the leap to being in charge of a
34 city or a country. And so HBCUs are laboratories for the black speculative
35 imagination. Uh, at a very low level, you're seeing how people, even if we
36 don't have as much money, you're seeing us in charge of things. And so
37 that is – it becomes a space where you can imagine more beyond those
38 walls.
39
40 And it takes place in those critical years between 18 and 23 years old
41 where you see that. That's where you need to [inaudible 37:47], you, you
42 have your life going, your girls, your posse, your people in your wedding
43 and friendships that last over the course of a lifetime. Um, [tsk] and I can,
44 I guess I can see it. Like, I remember, like, my, uh, my daughter, I know
45 she just, uh, got accepted online for Alpha Kappa Alpha.
46

1Tiffany Pennamon: Ooh, congrats.
2
3Reynaldo Anderson: Yeah.
4
5Tiffany Pennamon: That's my [inaudible 38:06]. [laughter]
6
7Reynaldo Anderson: You know, [inaudible 38:08] Jackson State is where I met my wife. Uh,
8 she pledged, uh, AKA, a Gamma Rho chapter there. And I'm an Alpha
9 from a Delta Phi chapter there and my father pledged before me at Jackson
10 State, so she's third generation Jacksonian. And so, uh, the, the, the thing
11 was, the thing is the next logical step in what would happen if Spelman,
12 Morehouse, Jackson State, Grambling and Howard then form a network
13 that is connected by via blockchain technology and then do some other
14 things. You know, when you got 100 of'm using blockchain technology,
15 which cannot be hacked, to promote certain types of project, information,
16 knowledge sharing and file sharing, everything else, that almost would be
17 like an invisible country within a country to a certain extent. And so, uh,
18 again, that's where, uh, you know, um, uh, and, and the first Black
19 Speculative Arts Movement event took place at Harris-Stowe, an HBCU.
20
21Tiffany Pennamon: [39:10] Can you...
22
23Reynaldo Anderson: Yeah.
24
25Tiffany Pennamon: ...explain a little bit about that?
26
27Reynaldo Anderson: Well, after Unveiling Visions was over and ended in the, uh, was it
28 January of 2016? It started the fall of 2015. Then, we were in discussions
29 about, man, we had that collection of artists there after Unveiling Visions,
30 this needs to become a movement. [tsk] And I know, uh, John at the time
31 [tsk] was in a transitional moment or I know he had to, uh, I don't think,
32 no, John was not married yet but John was [inaudible 39:43] transitioning
33 between locales [inaudible 39:47]. We're both extremely busy and I think
34 we were, we, because we had gone through that process of through 2013
35 to 2016 of having these events, like the AstroBlackness event, the Planet
36 Deep South and so forth. And I said no, this needs to become a systematic,
37 ongoing kind of movement thing where we put three to five basic things in
38 place and we go from either black community spaces and/or university
39 spaces that bring us. And it started at Harris-Stowe, then the second one
40 we had, uh, was Toronto, Canada. [tsk] And we, so we go up there to
41 Toronto and hook up with the Afro-Caribbeans in Toronto and then later
42 Montreal and then Howard and then, um, and some other places. And so
43 we've just been planting seeds the last 36 months in different locales and
44 at the same time doing the movement and networking aspect, we've been
45 putting out a body of work at the same time.
46

1 So our theory and practice go together, you know, in terms of, uh, in terms
2 of defining the work in the terms that we're doing. And, um, so for us,
3 we've just said, uh, I mean it might sound a little bit egotistical but then
4 being an Alpha man, you shouldn't be surprised that we, we're gonna
5 create the new Harlem Renaissance and we got the talent to do it and
6 we're not going to ask permission about doing it. And so the rest I guess
7 somebody will write about it in a dissertation, you know. Uh, and it
8 doesn't seem to show any signs of slowing down or whatever but, uh,
9 yeah.

10

11Tiffany Pennamon: [41:19] So what future do you see, um, for Afrofuturism? [tsk] Um, what
12 – like, do you see a third iteration of it emerging?
13

14Reynaldo Anderson: [tsk] The third iteration, I remember I talked about it in this, uh, article
15 with Design Indaba talking about Afrofuturism 3.0. Now I think Nettrice
16 Gaskins has an articulation of it that deals with technology but I'm dealin'
17 with like paradigms and sociopolitical paradigms in relation to technology
18 and other things. And I would say the 3.0 wave would happen when
19 Africa gets involved in it the way that the diaspora did. And the reason I
20 made that argument was the idea of pan-Africanism really starts in the
21 African diaspora. But then in the middle of the last century, the Africans
22 take the leadership of the pan-African movement and it later becomes the
23 Organization of African States and now the African Union and as they've
24 incorporated recently the diaspora as the sixth zone of the union. So the
25 third wave iteration I would suspect that, you know, as Africans
26 incorporate this and say, say you have one of their IT schools or an
27 engineering school saying our philosophy for this year is Afrofuturism. An
28 entire engineering school in African countries and then we're going to use
29 this to apply it to making things and critical making and other things that
30 we're going to combine with science. That would be fascinating. I mean,
31 um, [tsk] that could happen.

32

33 Or, uh, maybe some other thing I'm not necessarily thinking about, maybe
34 along the lines of what Nettrice is talking about. But, you know, I think
35 the next level of Afrofuturism would be in the area of public policy. [tsk]
36 And, um, 'cause I think there are enough creative people out here doing
37 some things but now we have to think about what does that look like in
38 terms of policy.

39

40Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm. Okay. [43:21] And then just in your time here at the festival, um,
41 have you seen an engagement, um, that's kind of been enlightening in
42 terms of Afrofuturism's connection to Hurston's legacy?
43

44Reynaldo Anderson: Well, I think for some, a lot of people here is just a new discovery they
45 hadn't thought of her like that. But when you think about people that we
46 cite, talked about in sci-fi, for example, I mentioned, uh, Asimov, Isaac

1 Asimov with his foundation series being kind of a psychohistorian and
2 Frank Herbert with his Dune series being a preserved form of it. So this
3 idea of a psychohistory in terms of in real time [inaudible 43:55] around
4 technology and culture, she very much fits into that tradition of what we
5 think about futurity in terms of projecting someone else in futurity. And
6 she had her own unique way of doing it in terms of how she combined
7 social science with culture and [inaudible 44:12] and the esoteric to
8 forecast this thing. That was unique to her and, uh, and that I think others
9 when they go back and look at it, uh, either try to imitate it or, uh, uh, you
10 know, at best, you know, uh, but it'll take a little bit of work. And it was
11 similar to what kinda, uh, Sun Ra was talkin' about in, in a similar vein.
12 Um, so I think, uh, from what I've met here at the festival, you're pro-, uh,
13 everybody [inaudible 44:42] new questions that we're taking a second l-,
14 look at Hurston in relation to the esoteric tradition and then how it relates
15 to black futurity around the question of culture and social change.
16
17 Um, and then for others who are outside of the literary field, maybe
18 they're looking at maybe the digital humanities project or somethin' like
19 that...
20
21Tiffany Pennamon: Okay.
22
23Reynaldo Anderson: ...for this particular festival.
24
25Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm. And climate change just keeps coming back to me too, so...
26
27Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.
28
29Tiffany Pennamon: ...um, how we're engaging with those digital rhetorics, the literary, um,
30 just like technological everything as it relates to how we're going to save
31 our culture, save all of humanity...
32
33Reynaldo Anderson: Mm-hm.
34
35Tiffany Pennamon: ...for whatever is to come. [45:24] So how do you see Hurston, her
36 environmental [inaudible 45:26]?
37
38Reynaldo Anderson: Well, that's where the challenge comes in. 'Cause right now, the trend
39 lines are – is 'cause basically every group for themselves at this moment. She
40 would probably advocate, uh, working with other groups, even though
41 keepin' our self-respect. But the trend lines now, uh, based upon the data,
42 um, populism and nationalism is the driving force of world politics, um,
43 right now and it's going to be on that trend for the next couple decades.
44 So her work now might exist as a critique of that behavior but she would
45 not be totally opposed to a lot of the culture work going on [inaudible
46 46:03]. She might have a critique on what the political practices would be

1 but she would not be opposed in terms of the doing unique Africanist
2 cultural production, uh, things that, uh, that it produces. And I, I'm sure
3 she would probably, uh, argue that, uh, to do this and I've even told other
4 people that are interested in the topic that do the homework and do the
5 hard work, get into the knowledge. Don't, don't be cookie-cutter about,
6 [tsk] um, how you're approaching the work. I mean, you know, just you
7 got to be good, really good at history and other kind of – that's why I
8 [inaudible 46:44], I argue that it is a transdisciplinary process, you know.

9
10 And so, I mean, and so to me, to me bein' an Afrofuturist also means
11 you're gonna be a lifelong learner, you know, and, and be intellectually
12 curious. And, um, [tsk] so yeah, she, she, she would fit in what, uh, is
13 going on right now around this topic.

14
15Tiffany Pennamon: Okay. [47:08] And so what would you tell your students, um, and future
16 Afrofuturists, contemporary Afrofuturists, um, what can they learn from
17 Zora Neale Hurston and early generations of black thinkers?

18
19Reynaldo Anderson: Hm, [tsk] what can they learn from them? Uh, you can't sit around waiting
20 for somebody to save you. Uh, you're gonna have to do the work. And
21 your work, if you could stay at it consistently enough, you'll eventually
22 find out whoever your tribe is supposed to be. Uh, one of the things I, I, I
23 think one of my funnest moments, organized events, was having a woman
24 come up to us after the event who said thank you for helping me find my
25 tribe. And so, uh, yeah, you, you – so 'cause a lotta people do this work in
26 isolation. And because a lot of people are not familiar with what the term
27 is [thumping] and so it's hard to find collectives of people that are all
28 doin' the kind of work. 'Cause I don't – when we first started this, we had
29 to find each other online first but now the last three or four years, now
30 you're seeing more conferences now. So it's creating more networks and
31 communities of interest. And then, so I suppose the next thing after the
32 networks and community interest, then comes through how the young
33 people learning from the past, how do you [squeaking] institutionalize
34 your work. So you don't just put together somethin' that's great and then
35 10 years later nobody knows about the challenge that you would learn.

36
37 Your older generation did some great things but one of their shortcomings
38 was they did not institutionalize their ideas within departments and
39 institutions so it was ongoing after they were no longer here. The, the
40 institution-building part was missing and I think that seems to be one of
41 the things we're working on in [thumping] this generation is the
42 institution-building part of it.

43
44Tiffany Pennamon: Okay. That reminds me of like Walker bringing Hurston's legacy back
45 into...

46

1Reynaldo Anderson: Yeah. Searching for our mother's gardens. Like, you know, she had to go
2 back and find all these women that did these work and it had gone away
3 because nobody [thumping] had institutionalized their work.
4

5Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
6

7Reynaldo Anderson: Yeah.
8

9Tiffany Pennamon: Yes. And so I guess my last question, um, [49:18] what's next for you or,
10 um, like...?
11

12Reynaldo Anderson: [tsk] Well, uh, in the near future, I know we're doing an Afrofuturismo
13 project looking at the black Latin futurity experience. And I'm working
14 with, um, [tsk] the Live Ideas festival in New York while I'm curating a
15 project with the choreographer Bill T. Jones and, uh, the live, the, uh, live
16 arts, um, community there. The title of the program is called Altered
17 Worlds: Black Utopia in the Age of Acceleration. Uh, we have people like
18 Cornel West who's going to be t-, participating. Arts and artists and
19 thinkers from all over the country will be there in May. And prior to that
20 event, at the Gala as a part of the host committee, I'll be a part of a
21 committee giving Spike Lee, David Adjaye, the architect for the new, uh,
22 the African American Museum in D.C. and, um, the estate of the artist
23 Jean-Michel Basquiat, we're gonna be giving them like a p-, uh, a lifetime
24 achievement award. So that should be pretty fun. So that's all going on in
25 the near future. And I'm trying to put together my first solo authored book
26 where I'm taking all these ideas and stuff I've learned [inaudible 50:37]
27 over the last decade and put it into my own solo-authored volume here
28 over the next year or so. That's the short term.
29

30 And plus, uh, the arts, the, BSAM or the Black Speculative Art Movement
31 seems to be takin' on a life of its own now. People are finding us and as I
32 mentioned during my talk, they want us to come to Australia to do some
33 things over there and, uh, we're waitin' to see if we're going to do
34 something in Brazil this fall, so.
35

36Tiffany Pennamon: Nice. So thank you so much, Dr. Anderson, for speaking with me today
37 and I hope you enjoy the rest of the festival.
38

39Reynaldo Anderson: Okay. Thank you.
40

41Tiffany Pennamon: Thank you.
42

43Reynaldo Anderson: Okay.
44
45
46/mlc