

1 **Interview of Dr. Michele Berger, Associate Professor in the**
2 **Department of Women's and Gender Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill**
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5 Tiffany Pennamon: Hello, my name is Tiffany Pennamon. It is January 31, and we're here at
6 the Zora Festival in Eatonville, Florida, and I'm with Dr. Michele Berg...

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8 Michele Berger: Berger.
9

10 Tiffany Pennamon: [0:11] Berger. And, uh, I would like to get started, so just tell me a little bit
11 about yourself and what got you interested in Afrofuturism?
12

13 Michele Berger: So I am a scholar of Women's and Gender Studies and have been writing
14 creative work for a long time, um, probably 25 years, more than that, but
15 really, in terms of getting sort of published and being better known for my
16 creative work has come in the last 10 years. And I have a funny
17 relationship to Afrofuturism, um, because when I was writing or starting to
18 write in the 90s, there was – I knew Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, but
19 I really thought – and, and I'm 51, so I really thought that, at that time, I
20 was one of the only black people who wrote science fiction or was
21 interested in it. And when I would go to science fiction conventions, there
22 really weren't a lot of people who looked like me.
23

24 And it was Nisi Shawl, who's a really wonderful writer, well-known writer,
25 she happened to be, um, uh, working at this used book store. I was a
26 graduate student at University of Michigan, this is in Ann Arbor, and she
27 was like the other person of color I met, and we would talk about things
28 that later got defined as Afrofuturist. I tend to describe my work as, um,
29 extraordinary things that happen to ordinary people.
30

31 Tiffany Pennamon: [1:37] Nice. And so, in your own terms, um, how would you define
32 Afrofuturism itself, um, and then how can we apply it to the [whiter 1:45]
33 world?
34

35 Michele Berger: So, to me, Afrofuturism is a type of aesthetic, and it questions the way in
36 which canons have been created that depict African-descended people. So
37 that – so mine, mine is really broad, um, and I think people focus a lot on
38 the futuristic part as in projecting, um, what are the narratives that are
39 gonna sustain black people and people of color in the future, but I think it's
40 also important to recognize that Afrofuturism is also about rethinking the
41 past, right, and providing different kinds of narratives, um, questioning the
42 tropes that we have used. And, and I – you know, that's in, um, arts,
43 politics, literature, visual design, fashion design. I primarily know more
44 about, you know, speculative fiction, um, so that's kind of where my
45 interest has been, but I feel like people are using it – to answer the second
46 part of your question, people are using it to really think about what are the
47 structures that we have that take away life, right, and that really harm

1 particularly people of color and particularly people of African descent and
2 what are new ways looking at both creating new forms but also looking at
3 what, um, certain authors have written to help us think more imaginatively.
4 And so that...
5
6 Tiffany Pennamon: And so they're – yeah.
7
8 Michele Berger: And also, I mean, some of that now is also being reflected in, in our
9 movies, of course, and to some degree TV but really, in many ways, it
10 started with music and literature and even politics. And now it is, in some
11 ways, much more mainstream.
12
13 Tiffany Pennamon: And so going back to what you said about, um, sometimes people think of
14 it mostly as that future side, but rethinking the past it reminds me of
15 Kindred with Octavia Butler.
16
17 Michele Berger: Absolutely.
18
19 Tiffany Pennamon: [3:43] And so how would you say that, um, just black woman writers have
20 really informed your own writing in terms of this genre and Afrofuturism?
21
22 Michele Berger: Yeah, I mean, it – I – so personally, I feel like I'm very much indebted to,
23 um, the work of black women writers, 20th-century black women writers
24 generally, so people like Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Pearl Cleage, um,
25 a number of people in the, who were writing, 80s and 90s. Now, in a more
26 contemporary moment, I do a lot of work in – I'm sort of – I've come out
27 recently as a horror writer and writer of sort of "dark fiction" and so, um, I
28 love the work that's being done by people like Eden Royce, um, Nicole
29 Kurtz, um, formerly Nicole Kurtz, she's now Nicole Smith, Linda Addison.
30
31 I think that, um, really thinking about how women of color are reshaping
32 what is horrific and moving away from this idea of, um, you know, creepy
33 bad things, let's just say, like what, you know, what many of us grew up
34 with in the 80s and 90s of Stephen King, who's a wonderful writer, but
35 looking at the ways in which, um, harassment, uh, sexuality, you know,
36 legacies of slavery, the politics of beauty are, um, have impacted our lives
37 and are horrific and grotesque and, and worth reconsidering and thinking
38 about.
39
40 So the collection that came out a couple years ago, Sycorax's Daughters,
41 um, which is a collection of prose and poetry prim-, primarily by, um,
42 black women and they basically take on the horror field and, um, the work
43 in there is really thinking about also how black female bodies have been
44 depicted and labeled in certain kinds of ways and, and taking that on, so I
45 find that, you know, really interesting as well as, you know, more on the,
46 on the sort of science fiction end but just in terms of, of horror has been

1 really powerful. And I'll, I'll just say one more thing as someone who – so
2 I was kinda raised, um, in 70s and 80s and watch a lot of horror media, um,
3 but then more recently went back and kind of reread the classics and
4 reading other new work and, you know, when I read a lot of majority
5 writers, there's no space for us. It – we're not, I should say, we're often not
6 – I won't say exclusive but we're not often fleshed out as characters in
7 horror.

8
9 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.

10
11 Michele Berger: Um, as women of color characters and we're just, we're just not there. Um,
12 or if we're there, we're either the, you know, the magical negro, the, the
13 conjure woman, you know, those kinds of things, right? And so just
14 understanding that, particularly in this space around, um, horror and dark
15 fiction, there's some new, exciting work out there by women of color that
16 you're just not, you're not gonna find in other places.

17
18 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm. And me and Kim were having that conversation recently, um, just
19 about the lack of institutional space for black women in horror, [7:02] and
20 so how do you engage in these conversations with your own students, um
21 like are they doing any interesting work that you're helping them with as
22 well?

23
24 Michele Berger: So it's, it's so funny because my PhD's in Political Science and, and I do
25 interdisciplinary work and I'm, I'm in a Women's and Gender Studies
26 department, and it's taken me a long while to figure out, um, how to, uh,
27 have a more integrated approach. So my work is on racial and gender
28 health disparities, which are – can be horrific when we think about
29 systematic inequalities of women of color, um, but until recently, I haven't
30 really found ways to, um, bring some of that other work as a creative
31 writer, as a creative person.

32
33 One of the ways it's happened is I teach a Women and Creativity course,
34 upper division course, and in that, we look at the ways in which, um,
35 women as a sort of in the, in the past two centuries have been excluded,
36 have pushed against ideas of what is, you know, creative and artistic, but I,
37 um, often teach, um, uh, *Mind of My Mind* by Octavia Butler, and that's,
38 that's actually one that – I mean, now it's kind of back in popularity but it's
39 in – if people have read Octavia Butler, and some of my students have, they
40 are not as familiar with that. And it's just such a interesting novel in so
41 many ways and so they really love it. So that's one of their entryways.
42 And I also teach, um, so if I have an opportunity also teach some short
43 fiction by, um, uh, it's kinda feminist back to the fiction writer.

44
45 So that's one way but then the other way is not so much in the horror end
46 but, um, I just threw a big campus-wide initiative – I cotaught a class about

1 the environment and intersectionality but we use it through a sci-fi lens.
2 And I happened to teach with a African-American female professor in
3 German Studies, German and Slavic Studies and an African-American
4 woman, professor, who was in, um, public health. And we, the three of us
5 cotaught this class, which was – and I think about it, for first-year students
6 coming in, all three professors are black women and we're all talking about
7 – and we each had sort of our specialties but we, we tried to use how
8 science fiction represented the environment and what does it tell us about
9 vulnerability, so we looked at like *Beast of the Southern Wild* and a range
10 of texts.

11
12 And, uh, we got into an Afrofuturist perspective even though we weren't
13 specifically talking as much about horror, so I feel like the future is kind of
14 bright for trying to, you know, find ways to, um, use the lens of
15 Afrofuturism to talk about disparities or to introduce kind of, um, important
16 concepts to students. And, and also, students are coming with a much
17 wider, you know, visual and reading landscape than they did even five, ten
18 years ago.

19
20 Tiffany Pennamon: [9:59] Mm-hm. And so – and then when you're thinking about people and
21 writers like Zora Neale Hurston...

22
23 Michele Berger: Oh, my goodness.

24
25 Tiffany Pennamon: ...how do you make those connections between her legacy...

26
27 Michele Berger: Oh, my goodness.

28
29 Tiffany Pennamon: ...and the work that you're doing?

30
31 Michele Berger: Oh, my goodness.

32
33 Tiffany Pennamon: [laughter]

34
35 Michele Berger: Um, yeah. It's such an honor to, to be here at this festival. I, um, there's,
36 there's so many things going through my mind. Um, to, to some degree, I
37 think it is the next reclaiming of her work, right, because Alice Walker, um,
38 wrote in the – her volume, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* really
39 reintroduced Zora Neale Hurston to, um, both the emerging kind of
40 feminist literary studies as well as to a larger public. But I think now,
41 people are recognizing Zora Neale's, um, genius, right, and envisioning – to
42 one, to not be afraid of the past and to kinda probe deeply into some, um,
43 tropes and ideas about wider African-American culture. And I think we're
44 now ready – 'cause people have, you know, when, when Zora was writing,
45 people were very, um, othering of her work and ashamed of her work and,
46 um, and I think, you know, now, so many writers see her, her creativity and

1 her genius as part of what this kind of next wave of thinking about both our
2 survival but also kind of, of our roots.
3
4 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
5
6 Michele Berger: And so it's, um, to me, it's, it's, like I said, it's sort of the second imagining,
7 reimagining of her work.
8
9 Tiffany Pennamon: And then earlier today, you mentioned that your [novella 11:36], Reenu-
10 You...
11
12 Michele Berger: Mm-hm.
13
14 Tiffany Pennamon: ...is about black women saving the world.
15
16 Michele Berger: [laughter]
17
18 Tiffany Pennamon: [11:42] Could you speak a little bit about that?
19
20 Michele Berger: [laughter] Well, so yeah. Um, it's set in the 1990s and basically, it is – the
21 tagline is what if a trip to the salon could kill you? And it imagines, um, a
22 natural hair care product called Reenu-You, um, that potentially has a
23 virus. And so initially, black women, Latino women, who are using it, um,
24 get sick. And doctors sort of dismiss it as a skin rash. And so you follow
25 two, um, protagonists who try to find out what's happening, and, and so it's
26 got a little bit of the conspiracy theory, it's got a little bit of, you know, this
27 is obviously written before the widespread use of cell phones, so that idea
28 of rumors that circulate.
29
30 And – but I wanted to get at the politics of beauty. Not, not so much in
31 saying any one hairstyle or one way of being is wrong, but to make us think
32 about what are the push-pull factors that, um, you know, create the context
33 for certain kinds of, um, arranging our hair. And – but it is, is actually
34 based on a, a true incident in that in the 90s, there was a product called Rio,
35 and it was billed as a natural hair care tonic or something, um, out of
36 Brazil. And I played with that idea and in real life, within two or three
37 years on the market, it – there was a class-action lawsuit bought – brought
38 by women of color because their scalps were burning. There was actually
39 almo-, no natural products in it. It had higher, um, percentages of lye and
40 other products, but it was billed under this kind of natural health.
41
42 And so I sort of took that idea and wanted to play with all of those pieces
43 and, um, also set the, the tone of the, the novella as that it's, it's really about
44 collective female friendship that's going to help the women figure out
45 what's going on. And so often in, um, so often in a lot of, I think,
46 mainstream sci-fi speculative fiction, particularly film and TV, if you have

1 a woman – it's like, it's basically a cast of guys and then there's one woman.
2 And that – and I l-, for example, I love Wonder Woman, right? And
3 Wonder Woman was a fantastic [film on so many levels 14:04] but I'm like
4 it's basically, you know, we kinda, she gets excised from her community
5 and then, you know, she's with these guys. And then it also happens
6 around sort of race and ethnicity, right? So there would be like one person
7 of color in this other ensemble, and I just wanted to kinda play with that
8 ensemble idea and, so – for so many black women and women of color, we
9 have been each other's peer networks and we've been the witnesses and the
10 guides and the support. And so I wanted to explore that through female
11 friendship and also, you know, to some degree, counter the narrative that
12 black women are competitive and jeal-, I mean, if you look at the reality
13 TV show landscape, right?
14

15 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.

16
17 Michele Berger: You just see, um, so many, so many ways in which black women seem to
18 be antagonistic and opposed to each other, so I wanted to play with, with
19 those – some of those things.
20

21 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-kay. And that really speaks to you, just like the – that element of black
22 women writers, um, in terms of how they brought each other's work to
23 prominence in terms of that public discourse, um, like Toni Morrison as
24 editor, bringing all of her friends like revolutionize, um, like really
25 memorializing their work too.
26

27 Michele Berger: Absolutely. I mean, absolutely. And I, you know, as you're, as you're, um,
28 talking through these questions, I mean, I really have to sort of locate
29 myself in that I was, I was that person in, in undergrad in the late 80s, and
30 it was, it was, it felt revolutionary to read Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.
31 I mean, they were just starting to come into the, the canon in terms of what
32 was acceptable, and, and also it was often, you know, 'cause I had primarily
33 white, female professors who were teaching that work, and I was so
34 grateful even though I see different things than they might see in the work,
35 it was so grateful to have that, that context. And then, you know, of course,
36 you go back and you read Gwendolyn Brooks and you read so many people
37 before them, but to have that kind of [inaudible 16:01] like Toni Cade
38 Bambara and, you know, many, many people who are not as – I think
39 there's been a resurgence, but they're not as well read as they once were.
40

41 Tiffany Pennamon: Right.

42
43 Michele Berger: And I think we, we also have to kind of give our due to the people who
44 have come before us, which is kinda like Zora Neale Hurston, right?
45

1 Tiffany Pennamon: [16:20] Yes. And so, just in your own community in North Carolina, you're
2 at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, what work are you doing
3 in the community as well in terms of connecting people with Afrofuturism
4 and speculative fiction...or black speculative fiction?
5

6 Michele Berger: Yeah, that's a great question. Uh, so...we're, um, very privileged to have
7 Toshi Reagon who is an artist-in-residence and she, a couple of years ago,
8 adapted Parable of the Sower as an opera, um, or as a, as an opera and kind
9 of a musical production, and one of the things that – so I, I wasn't – I mean,
10 I, I wasn't directly involved in the production, but in supporting the effort –
11 so Toshi was very, um, strategic in that she wanted the, the, um,
12 performance was happening on campus but prior to that, she wanted to do a
13 series of talks and, and events in the community, around the community.
14 And she also wanted to upend this idea of, you know, who the Parable of
15 the Sower was for. And that took – she really pushed back on, um, some
16 ideas that the university had of like a kind of formal event.
17

18 So, so as part of that effort, um, I organized just a conversation about
19 Parable of the Sower with my colleague at the time, Lilly Nguyen, who is
20 Vietnamese American and we, we did, um, we held a space at a local, um,
21 books-, bookstore and kinda did a community read and, and I – we talked a
22 lot about some of the mother-daughter themes in Parable of the Sower and
23 some other, other ways that we wanted people to read the book, ideally,
24 before they saw the performance but also other ways we wanted to kinda
25 highlight Butler's work, and so that was really, um, it was really a gift to be
26 with my colleague, um, and see the work through her eyes and also – so
27 this is like, I think, what, 2017? So we're all still – we're still trying to
28 process what the Trump legacy, presidency was going to mean, the kind of
29 turmoil that was happening in our community, so it was a powerful time to
30 talk about Parable of the Sower.
31

32 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm. And that – it reminds me of, um, just like the element of when
33 you said rethinking the past with Afrofuturism, [18:40] also like what does
34 our past now look like in the future, so like at our current moment, and so
35 how do you see Afrofuturistic writers right now really shaping our future?
36

37 Michele Berger: Mm. I, I think one of the...and I, you know, I, I could be wrong about this
38 but one of the things that, um, I, I think [buoys 19:02] people when they
39 come to cotemporary Afrofuturist work is that there's a thread of resilience
40 and optimism. And, um, and I think we need that, you know, I think it's
41 very, you know, making critiques is, is a very direct thing right there,
42 especially because there are so many things that seem to be, um, in crisis or
43 being challenged but, um, what will sustain people really is doing the work
44 of thinking about how do we make strong connections and build
45 community and even if that community, um, looks slightly different than it
46 does now, and I – so I think that's, that's where, to me, where the readers

1 are, um, really resonating with our work, right? Um, and particularly I
2 would say on the – 'cause horror, by its nature, tends to have a, a, a much
3 more, um, I don't wanna say just sort of darker but the sense of it's cathartic
4 in a different way than I think what, what kinda traditional science fiction
5 does, which is to kinda move us way, way ahead into the future.
6
7 Um, so I, I think some of the writers that are, that are doing that work are –
8 leave those kernels of kind of optimism, right? And so – but we also – we
9 don't know. I mean, it's not, it's not clear...for the, for our human
10 community where we will be in 20 years, right? Um, we are at such a –
11 I've been trying to read a little bit more what people are calling cli-sci-fi,
12 climate science fiction, um, even though people have been writing that for
13 a long time and, you know, we have to ask ourselves pretty deep questions
14 about ourselves as, as a species, right? And so I think, um, for Afrofuturist
15 folks to try to do that but also, you know, lay some optimistic seeds in there
16 is really important.
17
18 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm. And especially, um, around the climate change topic. I know,
19 just for Zora Neale, her science fiction, just like her capturing of like the
20 environmental symbolism, um...
21
22 Michele Berger: Mm.
23
24 Tiffany Pennamon: ...her local Everglades and Eatonville...
25
26 Michele Berger: Yes.
27
28 Tiffany Pennamon: ...community, um, as we see at the festival now, just like that preservation.
29
30 Michele Berger: Yes.
31
32 Tiffany Pennamon: Um, I made a comment that in *Their Eyes are Watching God* how she
33 documented the actual 1928, Lake Okeechobee, Category 5 hurricane.
34
35 Michele Berger: Oh, right.
36
37 Tiffany Pennamon: And so it's like even that was like prophetic of our current times where like
38 hurricanes are growing in frequency and strength, um, like they're
39 devastating Caribbean communities, [21:45] and so like what does that
40 mean in terms of preserving culture and language and the peoples'
41 traditions?
42
43 Michele Berger: Yeah, and it's s-, so, so powerful because I had forgotten that there was that
44 piece in her work for sure. Um, well, and, and also what, what does it
45 mean – I think – so what does it mean to be in an environment? What does
46 that look like? Um, in the class that I talked about earlier, trying to get –

1 some students got it that because of historic inequalities, some of the
2 people most affected by climate change are going to be women, globally,
3 people of color, um, you know, um, poorer communities, all of that. But
4 then trying – for the students who didn't get that, trying to get them to
5 understand that, um, community may have to be refigured in some new
6 ways, right, institutions may need to be configured in new ways was, was
7 also a, a challenge.

8
9 Politics need to maybe be reconfigured in some new ways. Um, yeah, and
10 I don't know as much, uh, about the group in Durham that has been doing,
11 uh, emergent strategies. I think they're based in Durham and I should know
12 more about them, but that's another community that has sort of taken up
13 Octavia Butler's work and, and also, Toshi Reagon's lo-, so she did the
14 Parable of the Sower but she's an artist-in-residence for several more years
15 and wants to really say, um, have conversations and practices that say, okay
16 – I think the way she frames it is, "Okay, if things broke down right now,
17 what resources do you have inside of yourself..." just like, um, Lauren from
18 Parable of the Sower, "...and what resource do you have in your community
19 that you would draw on?" So trying to really get people to think about that,
20 I think, is her next project.

21
22 Tiffany Pennamon: Okay.

23
24 Michele Berger: Which is pretty exciting.

25
26 Tiffany Pennamon: And then I saw that one of your books is Transforming Scholarship: Why
27 Women's and Gender Studies Students Are Changing Themselves and the
28 World, [23:49] and so how do you see you and your students and your
29 colleagues really playing their role in helping society figure out like what's
30 gonna happen when climate change like affects how we survive and coexist
31 together, um, how gender constructs are refigured and oppressive things,
32 hopefully, eliminated?

33
34 Michele Berger: Mm-hm. Oh, my goodness, that's a great question. So, so that book was
35 trying to push back on that liberal arts, that skepticism about the liberal
36 arts, like what can you do with this degree?

37
38 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.

39
40 Michele Berger: So our – through empirical work, so we did a big, global survey and then
41 we did some interviews and we saw these patterns that most Women's and
42 Gender Studies students begin, um, broadly define kind of, different levels
43 of activism as students and sort of civic engagement. And then, you know,
44 'cause we, we talk to people five and ten years out, we see how those
45 legacies continue, right? And so some of it is using their critical skills to,
46 um, rethink the workplace, let's just say, or to advocate for gender equality,

1 racial equality in the work place but, but it's also like building better
2 community, so we are actually able to document that.

3
4 Um, and I think what's been interesting – so now, we're in the process – my
5 collaborator and I, are in the process of writing a third edition and in this
6 one, we're trying to front-load, um, so many students who, um, have gone
7 on or are interested in the environment and cl-, and climate change, so
8 we're documenting the rise of – for example, um, female, uh, small, local
9 farmers, organic farmers, um, we're trying to document, um, women, in
10 particular but not exclusively, going into the – challenging the ag industry
11 but also going into biofuels. So, um, we were trying to document all the
12 ways in which people are using their degrees in unexpected way and, and
13 often finding – like for example, um, the biofuels industry and it might
14 reflect a kind of we might say progressive idea about resources but the
15 actual day-to-day experiences are highly gendered, and so we have a
16 student, a former graduate, writing about, about that. Like what does it
17 mean to use – when people assume, you know, you can't use heavy
18 machinery or you can't do this or, or just assume certain ideas about
19 particularly what bodies can do certain things.

20
21 So, um, so I think in that regard, that's what we, we get feedback all the
22 time that, um, that sometimes liberal arts students get sort of pushed into
23 certain kinds of jobs or in the nonprofit area, which there's nothing wrong
24 with that but to see any job as a job, one, that you can bring a gendered,
25 um, analysis to and a, and a, and a, you know, I always no job is a feminist
26 job but you can make, you know, um, feminist thinking a part of any job,
27 um, but also, the, the sense of how students are – graduates are really
28 pushing down boundaries of like nonprofit versus corporate versus business
29 versus other kinds of – versus entrepreneurship that the landscape is much
30 wider – much more widely open.

31
32 Tiffany Pennamon: [27:11] Mm-kay. And then are you interviewing these students and that's
33 how you're collecting your data, so the qualitative aspect?

34
35 Michele Berger: So yeah, so we did, so we – the survey has about, um, about 900 students...

36
37 Tiffany Pennamon: Okay.

38
39 Michele Berger: ...graduates in the survey from, um, over 10 years out and then we did
40 some, um, interviewing from that. And then we have these kind of, um,
41 highlights of career trajectories throughout the book.

42
43 Tiffany Pennamon: Okay.

44

1 Michele Berger: So yeah. So that's a – we're not doing another reboot. If after the third
2 edition, then we might do a complete reboot, we would do the survey
3 differently and...
4

5 Tiffany Pennamon: Okay.
6

7 Michele Berger: Yeah.
8

9 Tiffany Pennamon: So that reminds me of Zora Neale Hurton's, um, like the qualitative aspect
10 of her anthropological work and so, um, I've also been having some
11 conversations just on the value of different methods so...
12

13 Michele Berger: Absolutely.
14

15 Tiffany Pennamon: ...like how qualitative sometimes is kind of dismissed as not valid because
16 it's not like data like statistics [28:05] and so how do you see that in
17 connection to Hurston's work in terms of producing, um, a better or more
18 comprehensive picture of how you can engage in academic work, um,
19 community work, and activism?
20

21 Michele Berger: Yeah, so...these debates get, uh, hardened and solidified depending on
22 where you are, right?
23

24 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
25

26 Michele Berger: So in political science, just the name alone suggests that there's one
27 legitimate way to do certain kinds of work. And so most of my career, I've
28 sort of pushed back on those notions, um, and what I, what I sug-, train
29 graduate students, um, in and, and undergraduates, you want a broad,
30 [methodological 28:46] toolkit.
31

32 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.
33

34 Michele Berger: Um, sometimes the story you wanna tell, like if you go to the state
35 legislature and you want to, um, make a case for rapidly moving on, um,
36 DNA rape kits, right? Well, you might need to make an argument that
37 involves, you know, kind of a quantitative argument. However, to study
38 systematic, um, systematic, historical, complex forms of oppression, um,
39 depending on the question you're asking, qualitative methods can be highly
40 suited to giving a much more, you know, richly nuanced, richly textured,
41 um, broad picture of what, what people – to me, it's like what the lived
42 experience is, right?
43

44 So we get from quantitative data, we can tell, um, really important things,
45 um, so the, the book that I'm – the academic book I'm working on is how
46 African-American mothers and, and their teenage daughters talk to each

1 other. And, um, and that wants to intervene in the conversation about
2 racial and gender health disparities, right? 'Cause we have all these really
3 scary facts and figures, um, about obesity, about diabetes, but until you
4 understand, how do, at least in the group that I'm looking at, um, how do
5 African-American mothers navigate the healthcare system, which you can't
6 necessarily get at just through statistics or quantitative work alone. You
7 don't really have a sense of what doctors are saying to them, what they
8 think about what their doctors are saying to them, um, how they then talk to
9 their daughters about what doctors are saying to them or how they think
10 about their own health so, um, it's really important to have, um, to me, a
11 really broad and rich set of [methodological 30:45] tools. And Zora Neale
12 Hurston was so wise and smart in, um, learning ethnographic mes-,
13 methods and, and then employing them to make visible hidden
14 communities.

15
16 Tiffany Pennamon: Mm-hm.

17
18 Michele Berger: Or marginalized communities.

19
20 Tiffany Pennamon: Yes. And we see that just with the preservation and the [inaudible 31:03] of
21 her historic Eatonville, [31:05] and so what does a festival like the Zora
22 festival really do in terms of furthering her legacy, um, furthering her
23 connection to Afrofuturism, especially with the theme of this year's
24 conference?

25
26 Michele Berger: Well, this is a spectacular moment, um, for the organizing committee, right,
27 because, um, so for example, myself, I would've loved to come to the Zora
28 Neale Hurston Festival. I knew about it years go and just could not get
29 here. Um, the fact that now Afrofuturism, because of its visibility in the, in
30 the wider culture, that's gonna draw people in. And then, if – even if
31 people don't know anything about Zora Neale Hurston, that allows for the
32 next, uh, kind of a layering of her work. That just wouldn't be possible,
33 right? I mean, I, I can't, I can't think of any other theme that – particularly
34 for, you know, African-American folks and even the broader community
35 that it so, so speaks to the moment that we're in, um, so I, I just, I think that
36 having this longstanding commitment to Afrofuturism is just going to bring
37 in, um, also more creatives or people who iden-, who identify as creatives
38 bring in, um, more, you know, young people, um, who really kinda see
39 themselves as wanting to do big things, right, and if we can remind people
40 of how big Zora Neale Hurston's legacy really is and couple that with
41 Afrofuturism, I just – I think that it, it really is a, a right moment for many,
42 many communities to get engaged.

43
44 Tiffany Pennamon: Yes. And since we are running a little bit close to your reading time, uh,
45 my last question, um, [32:49] what will you be talking about today later in
46 your reading and what do you think that, um, future generations of black

1 thinkers can really learn from, um, contemporary Afrofuturists and Zora
2 Neale Hurston herself?
3
4 Michele Berger: Mm-hm. So I'm on a panel, in just a few minutes, about what is
5 Afrofuturism, and I would like the panelists to drill down a little bit more
6 about how they came to that – their own understanding of it, how it's
7 maybe being used in a marketing sense that may or may not serve more
8 liberatory purposes. And then I'm on a panel on, um, women in
9 Afrofuturism and I'm gonna be talking about some of the things that we
10 shared here about what kinds of, um, narratives it helps us to see that aren't
11 reflected in the, in more speculative fiction. Um, and, and then the last part
12 of your question was about the kinda connection to Zora Neale Hurston?
13
14 Tiffany Pennamon: Yes. [33:48] So what do you think black thinkers or future generations of
15 black thinkers can really learn from her?
16
17 Michele Berger: Oh, my goodness. Two – a couple of t-, a couple of things. So she has a
18 very famous quote that s-, that says, um, "Research is formalized curiosity,
19 and you have to go poking and prodding," and I think that's really
20 important that to, um, not be dull and, and by dull, I mean not be
21 anesthetized by culture, right, because Zora Neale Hurston was always
22 curious about everything and everyone around her, um, and that's how you
23 come out with new ideas, um, and her persistence, you know. I think as a
24 creative person, um, she models for us, you know, she had patrons, she
25 worked with literary giants in her era, she found ways to support herself,
26 you know, way before like we think about like indie writers and [self-
27 poetry 34:43]. She was doing all of that. Um, and she fought for her right
28 to be at the table, um, and I, and I think that's, that's a really important thing
29 for us as well to, to recognize we deserve to be at the table, we have really
30 important ideas, and to be persistent in our creative work and to, to push
31 back on status quo thinking. [laughter]
32
33 Tiffany Pennamon: Thank you so much for speaking with me Dr. Berger.
34
35 Michele Berger: Thank you so much for this interview.
36
37 Tiffany Pennamon: [laughter] All right.
38
39
40 /tl
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