

**Interview of Dr. Kinitra Brooks, associate professor
in English at Michigan State University**

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Holly Baker: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and how you came to your work in Afrofuturism?

Kinitra Brooks: Hm, okay. Uh, so I'm born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, so New Orleans is often seen and spoken about as The City of the Dead and a city that's very comfortable with, uh, the idea of death but also the idea of the transitions of death and that death is not an end. And it's always been, um, you know, I just became a horror fan, uh, very early on. It was very easy to do that in, in New Orleans but also, you know, I'm a second generation blerdy, so my dad was into comic books. My aunts, his sisters, got me into all the like cheesy horror movies from the 80s and these sorts of things and so it just snowballed from there, so anything like supernatural, anything just sort of like odd or weird tales, all those sorts of things. Like I was reading *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* when it was an actual book, before it was movie [laughter]. Um, so all those sorts of things have just always appealed to me and I just found a way to do it as part of my job.

Holly Baker: That's awesome. And y-, you being from New Orleans now definitely makes sense.

Kinitra Brooks: [laughter]

Holly Baker: [Inaudible 1:16]. [laughter] So, um, how do you define Afrofuturism?

Kinitra Brooks: Well, I look at it and a lot of people look at it in terms of the idea of [Sankofa 1:23]. Um, I – what I always push back against, because I think there are so many different elements of Afrofuturism, but I always push back against the idea that it's only about black people in the future. That what it really is is a theory of time. It's a theory of time that talks about the past, the present, and the future all existing together, time being circular. It's, um, a specific, um, view of time that works against the linearity of time that's so, um, that [inaudible 1:56] believes in.

And in that sort of conflation and view of time, there's also a political possibility. There is a cosmological possibility. There's philosophical possibility. There is religious and spiritual possibility because the idea of I refuse to even see the world as you see it is so like revolutionary to me, right? And I consider myself an Afrofuturist because even though I work in a lot of the spiritual practices of the past, um, for me, it's about what do we decide to take from the past, what do we recover from the past. Um, Reynaldo Anderson talks – also talks about Afrofuturism as a recovery project because so much was lost, then how do we get back and how do we interweave that, and what do

1 we decide to take forward, right? Some things need to be left in the past and
2 that's totally okay, but some things are quite valuable that we've lost. And if
3 we can recover them, then let's do so and let's bring it forward with us as we
4 move on.
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6Holly Baker: Well, that's great.
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8Kinitra Brooks: Yeah?
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10Holly Baker: That's a great way of [looking at it 3:03].
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12Kinitra Brooks: Ah, thank you.
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14Holly Baker: [3:05] Um, from your perspective, what does Afrofuturism offer society at this
15 moment, um, critique, liberation, opportunity?
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17Kinitra Brooks: I think all of them. Again, if we go back to the idea of I refuse to see the world
18 in your terms like I – not only do I not take your opinion or your thoughts of
19 me and who my people are and who we should be and all of these things into
20 my soul, I refuse to even speak the same language that you're speaking, right?
21 Um, we don't see the world in the same way. And that sort of idea and
22 especially like with what I'm working on and how people can have worlds
23 within worlds, right, and people can have conversations within conversations,
24 right, and so if you're able to read, um, what someone is wearing, if you're able
25 to read what someone is saying, right, if you know the clues and can connect
26 the language together, there's so much secret stuff going on, right?
27
28 And, you know, even just like my curiosity and, you know, liking to be in on
29 what's going on, I'm like, "I have to learn the rules so I can read what people
30 are secretly saying," so, um, I think there's a possibility for that. There's a
31 possibility for communication. There's also the possibility for liberation
32 because it's so open. And I think a lotta times, I think liberation is different
33 from freedom. Um, I think freedom – so much of it, um, depends on previous
34 [inaudible 4:41] and what you were before, right, you know, we were enslaved,
35 now we're free, right? But is that liberation, right? Liberation is opportunity,
36 possibility, imagination.
37
38 Like, you know, and I also think that's why it scares people so much because
39 we like being told what to do. It's very easy for us to follow the rules and
40 follow what's, what we should do or what's planned for us, and it's harder to
41 even begin to imagine what we can do, right, what we like to do. And that can
42 be intimidating, and I think that's why sometimes there's this, um, I don't
43 wanna say animosity but tension toward, toward it or, um, you know, is it even
44 possible? Can we even do that? Well, have you thought about it, right? But
45 the thinking about it leads to other thoughts and leads to greater understandings

1 and I think that it can be scary for people. I understand that, that fear, I just
2 don't agree with it.
3
4Holly Baker: [5:43] Um, okay, in your mind, what's the link between Zora Neale Hurston
5 and Afrofuturism?
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7Kinitra Brooks: [laughter] So for me, it makes perfect sense, particularly in terms of her
8 influence on what I do. Again, it's the idea of documenting the past of, you
9 know, her work is, you know, one of the recovery proj-, her recovery work at
10 that time teaches us how to go back and do recovery work but also, lays a
11 foundation for us to, you know, a nice little jumping pad for us to go further
12 into the past, um, for us to, um, value folklore, for us to value everyday folk,
13 for us to value, um, not just, you know, our degrees and specific forms of
14 learning but also everyone's contribution to, um, our project for liberation, you
15 know, and, you know, just the ease that she was able to talk with people. The
16 ability that she was able to just go around and slide into the crowd, you know,
17 and she was someone who was dramatic. She was someone who was extra,
18 she was so – but when she was working, when she was doing what she needed
19 to do to get, um, she was respectful, um, she was understanding, and she
20 played herself lesser because she knew that it wasn't about her...right?
21
22 I think even, um, when she talks about when she undergoes the initiation
23 process to, um, in Vodou, right, as she does these things, that takes a certain
24 sort of [humbleness 7:16] because, you know, if you're a PhD or even a grad
25 student or anything else, you're like, I am pretty smart. But you have to be in a
26 place where you don't know anything that's fully going on, you're going into
27 this room where, you know, you aren't told things, they just happen to you,
28 right? And so you have to be open and flexible but also humble enough that
29 the people you are with know what they're doing, um, that, you know, they
30 mean well by you but also, you're not gonna know everything, you know? And
31 I think sometimes, we hunger so much for knowledge in ways that that hunger
32 can supersede us really learning, us really beginning to take what's necessary
33 into, um, who we are into our essence, into our being. Does that make sense?
34
35Holly Baker: Oh yeah.
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37Kinitra Brooks: Okay, good. [laughter]
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39Holly Baker: [8:10] Um, how did you come across Zora Neale Hurston's work to begin
40 with? What was the first – do you remember, um...
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42Kinitra Brooks: Probably...
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44Holly Baker: ...[inaudible 8:14]?
45

1Kinitra Brooks: ...uh, yeah. It was *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Um, and I didn't get it at,
2 at first. I think, also, you kn-, I was in high school, right, and I think
3 sometimes books have to hit at a certain time, but when I really sort of fell in
4 love with it was, um, when we reread it, when I reread it and I was taught by
5 Trudier Harris who became my – eventually became my dissertation director,
6 and she was like, "Janie sucks." And I was like, "Wait, what?" I, I never heard
7 it, you know, because everyone was like, "Oh, it's amazing and Janie's so
8 beautiful and she's a rebel and all these things," and she was like, "Well, she's
9 disrespectful to her grandmother, who only wants to do right by her, she, um,
10 wants to, you know, she, uh, with her first husband, she leaves him, right, just
11 leaves the man when that would've been a really good possibility for her 'cause
12 he was dying soon." "Heck, she coulda killed him," that was my thing, I was
13 like, "She coulda killed'm," you know, and took the land, been a rich widow,
14 right, which she winds up being a rich widow anyway, right, just without like
15 getting beaten and tortured by Jody for years, right? [laughter] Um, you know,
16 it's like, you know, she wasn't a really nice person. And, and, and that's okay,
17 right? She can be an unlikable protagonist, but sometimes you have to have
18 those difficult conversations that, yeah, Janie's not really someone you would
19 wanna be friends with, you know? You gotta understand why she doesn't have
20 a lotta friends, you know?
21
22 Um, so just of a different, you know, that Hurston's work was used to teach me
23 a different approach to reading, uh, that you could have these complex
24 subjects, um, and black women as protagonists, but also the idea of, you know,
25 should you do what you're told but also the idea of romantic love and Janie's
26 wish for romantic love. But also, you know, romantic love is a luxury and
27 always has been. And it's a pretty, pretty contemporary idea. Marriage has a
28 purpose. [laughter] it's to get you in a better financial position as a woman as a
29 [fem 10:33] as within these things, right? So, you know, is it bucking the trend
30 or is it sort of a selfishness, is it, you know, that kinda complexity really, really
31 appealed from – to me. Yeah.
32
33Holly Baker: Nice. Yeah.
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35Kinitra Brooks: Yeah.
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37Holly Baker: All right.
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39Kinitra Brooks: Did that make sense?
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41Holly Baker: Oh, absolutely.
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43Kinitra Brooks: [laughter]
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45Holly Baker: Everything you're saying is making total sense to me.
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1Kinitra Brooks: I was like, man...
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3Holly Baker: Actually, you're...
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5Kinitra Brooks: ...I was like, "Janie kinda sucks."
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7Holly Baker: [laughter]
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9Kinitra Brooks: She does. And I always teach it that way, and I'm like, you know, there's this
10 tension with Janie and I open it by playing, um, Kerry W-, was it Kerry
11 Washington? What's Keri Hilson's "Pretty Girl Rock", right, 'cause I'm like
12 she's just a pretty girl, that's all she is. And she works, and she works her
13 beauty and she flips her hair and all these things but, you know, she's a little bit
14 of a mean girl too. Like, you know, she's, you know, she's not perfect and
15 that's okay. You don't have to like her, you just have to find her interesting and
16 complex, and I think that that opens up worlds of possibilities for people, right?
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18Holly Baker: [11:29] And that's, um, like you said, the nuances you wouldn't have caught at
19 a younger age [inaudible 11:32]?
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21Kinitra Brooks: No, not at all...
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23Holly Baker: Yeah.
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25Kinitra Brooks: ...right? Gosh, no. [laughter] Definitely not in high school. [laughter]
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27Holly Baker: Yeah, that's right. Um, so, uh, the next question I have for you is, uh [11:44],
28 do you think the Zora Neale Hurston Festival's engagement with Afrofuturism
29 continues Zora Neale Hurston's legacy?
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31Kinitra Brooks: Oh, definitely. Again, you know, the idea of Afrofuturism as a theory of time,
32 and I truly believe with what she was studying, with the initiation processes,
33 the processes that she underwent with her work in Conjure, with her travel and
34 her work in Jamaica and, um, Haiti, you know, she understands this. She
35 understands these alternate and – not alternate but these, you know, um, these
36 theories of time in ways that, you know, only now have a name of
37 Afrofuturism, right? You know, these are very old ideas. We've just put a new
38 term on them, you know? Everyone thinks they're special, everybody thinks
39 their doin' something new, you're not doing anything new. She was an
40 Afrofuturist before there was a name up for it, right? And so it's not really of,
41 you know, is Afrofuturism right for claiming, you know, Zora Neale Hurston,
42 it's we're behind the times, you know, we're catching up with her right, and,
43 you know, and rightfully so. And, you know, continuously recognizing her
44 genius and how ahead of the curve she was. So yeah, she was layin' the
45 groundwork for it before we even knew it was a thing.
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1Holly Baker: [13:00] What do you think, uh, contemporary Afrofuturists can learn from Zora
2 Neale Hurston and early generations of black thinkers?
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4Kinitra Brooks: I think we, we are learning. Again, um, you cannot move forward without
5 knowing the past but also, that there has to be – even with all the technological
6 prowess we have, we still have to do the rigor of knowing, um, the ways that
7 became before us, right? So my current project is Conjure Feminism and it's
8 about, you know, looking at Conjure and rootwork, um, the spiritual practice of
9 black southern and Caribbean women as an intellectual history.
10

11 I think a lot of times, what we're learning from the past is again, as I've spoken
12 before, they were doing all sorts of complex things that we didn't even have the
13 terminology for. It's just that not everyone had the access to it, right, and so for
14 this, so much of this project in the Conjure Feminism is about me looking at
15 who was considered a philosopher, why, and why were these women
16 overlooked as philosophers? You know, um, Lindsey Stewart out of the
17 University of Memphis, she sees Zora Neale Hurston as a philosopher, right?
18 She is, um, she's a, she's a professor of philosophy and she is looking at her
19 philosophical impact, right, and how does her work with ancestors, um, impact
20 philosophy? How does that spirit work impact philosophy?
21

22 And for me, um, my idea is, you know, how – what was the importance of
23 black women's gardens, their medicinal herbs, the midwives, the conjurer, all
24 of those things were mixed together, right? Um, and I think people see – well,
25 black women were in the black church and that's it. Yeah, they were, but they
26 were also doing dibbling and dabbling in other things too and dibbling,
27 dabbling at other things that we were not privy to. So now, it's about how do
28 you then tell these stories and these secrets of black women that we didn't
29 know about, right? Um, and also the question of sh-, should we know about
30 them and are there secrets that we shouldn't tell, right?
31

32 So for me, right now, it's just a knowledge project, like I just wanna know what
33 was going on and I think, you know, so much of it has started with me recog-,
34 now recognizing what my great grandmother, what my grandmother were
35 doing, right, and now I have the language, and I'm like, "Wait, hold on. How
36 did you know – wait," you know. And, um, like my family was one of the
37 founding families of our church, our very proper, Baptist, conservative,
38 Missionary Baptist church, and – but also, we were doing other things too,
39 right? And that complexity, I think, is often overlooked. I think, again, it's
40 often tamped down because, of course, these women want to be seen as, you
41 know, good, Christian, black women. Um, so again, in learning from the past,
42 we're learning to relearn the past. We're learning to ask different questions,
43 and we're also learning to, um, I think we're also learning what is our ethic of
44 the past, right? Um, you know, some things are secret for a reason. And so
45 then we have to have our own moral compass and our own ethical compass of

1 what to tell and what not to tell. And I think that, in itself, is a whole other
2 journey, right, even as we investigate, um, what our foremothers were doing.
3

4Holly Baker: [16:51] When you're, um, researching your foremothers, um, what sort of
5 primary sources are you coming across?
6

7Kinitra Brooks: It's really difficult. [laughter]
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9Holly Baker: That's what I thought.
10

11Kinitra Brooks: Because, um, I want – I'm trying to look at...what did their gardens look like,
12 right? So, you know, um, my first iteration of this topic was called *The*
13 *Conjure Woman's Garden*, right? So we know that they were conjure women,
14 we knew that they were doing midwifery, we look at the work of Sharla Fett,
15 S.M. Fett. We look at the work of, um, Katrina Hazzard-Donald, um, we know
16 that the women were doing these things, right? We know that there were
17 midwives who were healing but also the spirit work of the midwives and all of
18 those things, but then how are they all working together? How did they also
19 work in that sort of interstitial place where a lot of these women were leaders
20 of their churches, they were on the deaconess board, right? These aren't like
21 really, these aren't just like laywomen, these are women who are leaders of
22 their community, right?
23

24 So they, you know, these women that we would see, these older women that as
25 kids we would see, they were really complex and had all these things going on
26 that we didn't fully know, and so it just becomes – you have to look at family
27 stories, family histories. There are alternative like [throat clearing] sources,
28 right, you know, dreams, you know visions, right? Again, how you begin to
29 document these things because these are also spiritual practices. And these are
30 also ideas of what counts as a knowledge practice. What counts as citing a
31 source, right? So I'm always like, "Well, can I cite that my grandmother came
32 to me in a dream [laughter] and just basically told me this?" Right?
33

34Holly Baker: [laughter]
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36Kinitra Brooks: You know, um, and then I think that sort of changes things, right, because, you
37 know, you know, Zora Neale Hurston was totally like, "Yeah, so this was a
38 dream, this was a vision, this did this and what have you," and again, how does
39 that then figure into our work as academics as well? Um, because I think
40 sometimes with folklore, folks are able to say, "Well, that's folklore," or,
41 "That's spiritual practices," right? It's like, "No, I wanna cite this just as much
42 as I cite Kant," right? [laughter] I happen to think it's more valid than him,
43 right? [laughter] I believe it more [laughter] than his words, right?
44

45 So, um, then you start to push against the strictures of the academy, and I think
46 that's really exciting, right, um, but I also think that it's also a question of when

1 do you do this work, right? I'm able to do this work now, with tenure and these
2 sorts of things but also, I wrote about horror to get tenure, so I did – I didn't
3 really follow the rules [laughter]. And I also think like me not following the
4 rules in that way worked for me as well. It was, it was more difficult but it, it
5 really, it worked for me in the end.
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7Holly Baker: That's awesome.
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9Kinitra Brooks: Yeah.
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11Holly Baker: I like the, uh, innovative way you're looking at things.
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13Kinitra Brooks: Yeah.
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15Holly Baker: [Inaudible 19:57].
16
17Kinitra Brooks: You – I mean, you have to. Like, you know, you can't like [dial 20:01] folks
18 up or whatever but also, you're looking at what counts as knowledge, what
19 counts as valid parts of knowledge, and we're already dealing with, um,
20 people's, you know, black women who are dismissed as, you know, ignorant or
21 not knowing, right, or, as I talk about, are so known, kno-, you know, people
22 know them so well that they think that there's nothing new to find out about
23 them, right? Um, you know, so, yeah. I don't think people recognize the
24 secrets that black women keep and they're very, they're very complex, they're
25 very deep and, you know, it's, it's, really, really interesting.
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27Holly Baker: [20:41] You're speaking tonight at Seminole State College?
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29Kinitra Brooks: Yes.
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31Holly Baker: Um, and, uh, your, your, your topic is "Is This Lemonade Organic? Placing
32 Beyonce and Zora Neale Hurston's Legacy in Conjure Feminism."
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34Kinitra Brooks: Yes.
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36Holly Baker: [20:53] Um, could you tell me more about that?
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38Kinitra Brooks: Oh, okay. So, um, the things that I've been speaking about before as Conjure
39 Feminism as looking at black women's rootwork and spirit work and conjure
40 work as an intellectual history, right? How do we then move these women
41 into, um, ideas of being philosophers, ideas of creating worlds that are
42 complex, um, and that Zora – again, we're catching up with her. She already
43 knew this. She was already doing this work. She was clear and very, very
44 matter of fact of these are valid things to look at, it was just everyone else. She
45 was just ahead of her time in that way. [throat clearing]
46

1 So what I also want to do is, you know, I really think that *Lemonade* changed
2 the game in terms of what Beyonce and how Beyonce was taken seriously in
3 ways that she had not been before. Um, also, but also of how she had – now
4 had the power to be taken that seriously, right? I think a lotta times and, you
5 know, she was paying her dues, right? She, she had to, you know, earn her
6 way and earn her keep and get to a point where she could just drop something
7 like *Lemonade* and it'd be okay, right, and it'd be respected, um, as well as
8 those who paved the way for her. I think, uh, you know, um, we have to, you
9 know, give due to Janet Jackson, to Diana Ross, to Josephine Baker, those
10 women who were doing this work, um, and this entertainment work. Um, I
11 also think that she is able to – Beyonce is able to, whether it be her personally,
12 um, or her team, um, is able to do the research and do the work. They read
13 Zora, you know, they've incorporated this work. Um, it's very purposeful and
14 intentional what she is doing.

15
16 Um, in that conversation, I also want to say that a lotta folks say, "Well,
17 Beyonce's team did it," and all those things, um, but Beyonce hires her team.
18 And I think we have to start looking at, um, not just Beyonce but, you know,
19 black women who are doin' this work of executive producing, of being creative
20 directors, of, you know, knowing who to hire, when, and how, [laughter] is just
21 as valid as being the person of doing the work yourself, right? And when you
22 have all these moving parts, um, and that's a talent in itself, um, so of – again,
23 of, you know, shifting the conversation around, a lotta times, black women
24 who are artists but who are underestimated and misread, right? Um, and I
25 think that there is, uh, a similar vein in that of how these women are
26 underestimated because they're another pretty face, you know. You know,
27 Zorah had that dynamism, she was, you know, a, a personality and all those
28 things, and I think sometimes, people don't recognize the rigor of the academic
29 that she was as well, right, the rigor of the writer that she was. Um, and all of
30 those things have to be held in tension with each other. But again, this is
31 another urging for us to see black women as complex beings.

32
33 So I, I think it's all a part of that trajectory, all a part of that idea. Um, and
34 tonight, I'm gonna talk about how, you know, Zora laid the groundwork for this
35 understanding of the conjure woman and that Beyonce's picking some of that
36 up and moving that forward and embodying the conjure woman in parts of
37 *Lemonade*. And then I end by talking about how Beyonce is the one who gets
38 the most notoriety for it, but there are other women and artists who are doing
39 this work, so I talk a little bit about, um, Akua Naru, um, who is a hip-hop
40 artist. She was a Hutchins fellow with me, um, she was a Nasir Hip-hop fellow
41 at Harvard, um, the year I was there, and also Princess Nokia who is a [New
42 Yorkian 25:02], um, rapper who's talking about some of these same ideas but
43 they don't always have the shot – they're not Beyonce, right?

44
45 So I wanna make sure that we talk about the work that Beyonce's doing but
46 also that other folks are doing this work in really, really interesting ways. Um,

1 she, herself, she has a Ibeyi in her, um, in *Lemonade*, the group. Um, they're
2 twins, um, who sing in French, English, Spanish, and Yoruba, right? Um, their
3 father was one of the, um, members of the Buena Vista Social Club. And so,
4 um, that this is opening new ways and causing, I think, contemporary, young,
5 black women to ask questions that can be uncomfortable for some of people
6 but I that think are necessary questions and necessary interrogations to, um,
7 really start to find who they are and who they want to be and the possibilities to
8 do that liberation work of imagination. Yeah, yeah.
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10Holly Baker: That's awesome.
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12Kinitra Brooks: Yeah, thanks.
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14Holly Baker: [26:04] Is this your first Zora Festival?
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16Kinitra Brooks: This is my first Zora Festival. I thought I – I mean, I thought it was way too
17 cool for me [laughter] to come, and I was like, "Oh my God, only Zora Neale
18 Hurston scholars go there," and whatever and I'm like, "I'm looking at zombies,
19 so I'm like, you know, and they're like, uh, yeah, I really like, yeah, but I
20 wanna come down next year so I can really actually enjoy it. Like here I'm
21 like, "Ah, I gotta around and do like 50,000 things," but yeah, no, I'm gonna
22 come down, bring some grad students too, yeah.
23
24Holly Baker: That's awesome. Well, I was thinking, as you were talking, like you fit right
25 in. You're gonna fit right in.
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27Kinitra Brooks: [laughter] Really?
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29Holly Baker: Heck, yeah. Like all these dynamic conversations that are goin' on...
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31Kinitra Brooks: Awesome.
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33Holly Baker: ...like they're so thought provoking and it's like motivating and inspirational.
34
35Kinitra Brooks: Oh, good, good
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37Holly Baker: Yeah, no, no, no, you're fittin' right in.
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39Kinitra Brooks: Oh, good.
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41Holly Baker: So like I would say that...
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43Kinitra Brooks: I hope so.
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45Holly Baker: ...you're part of the Zora Festival Family now, so...
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1Kinitra Brooks: [laughter] I hope so.
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3Holly Baker: [laughter]
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5Kinitra Brooks: Thank you so much.
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7Holly Baker: Thank you. It's been so awesome talking to you.
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9Kinitra Brooks: Oh, thank you.
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11Holly Baker: Before we go, uh...
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13Kinitra Brooks: Of course.
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15Holly Baker: I wanna say, uh, thank you for your work, um...
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17Kinitra Brooks: Oh, thank you.
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19Holly Baker: ...and for inspiring women, and thank you so much...
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21Kinitra Brooks: Yeah.
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23Holly Baker: ...for your time.
24
25Kinitra Brooks: Thank you so much.
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27Holly Baker: Thank you. You're awesome.
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30/tl