

**Interview of author Phenderson Djèlí Clark at the  
Zora Neale Hurston Festival in Eatonville, Florida**

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5 Grace Chun: Hello. Uh.  
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7 Phenderson Clark: Hello.  
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9 Grace Chun: My name is Grace Chun and today is [clicking] January 31st, 2020, and  
10 we are here at the Zora Neale Hurston Festival in the Zora's Place House.  
11 Um. [0:13] Could you please introduce [clicking] yourself?  
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13 Phenderson Clark: [tsk] Hello. My name is Phenderson [G. 0:17] Clark. Uh, pardon me.  
14 Let's start that over again. [laughter] I'm using 2 names. That's when I  
15 was a [writer student 0:22]. I can just go again?  
16  
17 Grace Chun: Mm-hm.  
18  
19 Phenderson Clark: Okay. My name is Phenderson Djèlí Clark. Uh. I also write under the  
20 name P. Djèlí Clark. [clicking] [tsk] Uh. I'm a writer of speculative  
21 fiction.  
22  
23 Grace Chun: [0:33] Can you tell us a little bit more about growing up a little bit?  
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25 Phenderson Clark: Oh, yeah. Sure. So I was born in, uh, New York. Queens, New York, to  
26 be exact. Queens. Uh. But at a young age, my parents who were, uh,  
27 immigrants from the West Indies sent me back to live with my  
28 grandparents, uh, so I spent the first, uh, 7 or so years of my life, [tsk] uh,  
29 after – I think after the age of 1, I spent the next 7 years [tsk] in, uh, the  
30 West Indies on the island of Trinidad and Tobago in a place called  
31 Chaguanas, Trinidad, in fact, uh, where I spent my formative years. Um.  
32 [tsk] And, uh, after that, I moved back to the United States, uh, where I  
33 lived in New York City and, uh, stayed there for a short while and then we  
34 moved, uh, to Texas and [laughter] so I actually – uh, most a my life, uh,  
35 where I went to college, where I went to [tsk], uh, most a middle school  
36 and high school was in Texas. And I, uh, spent a lotta time in Houston,  
37 Texas, so I've got a, you know, bit of a range. I'm now located in New  
38 England but, you know, I've lived a few places, yeah.  
39  
40 Grace Chun: [1:48] Uh, and can you tell me how you started your work in  
41 Afrofuturism?  
42  
43 Phenderson Clark: Well, [tsk] when I started, I didn't know what Afrofuturism [laughter]  
44 was. Uh. I think I've always had an interest in [clicking] various forms a  
45 speculative fiction. [tsk] Even growing up in, uh, Trinidad when I was  
46 smaller, uh, I had folk tales from my grandmother, I had folk takes from  
47 the community. [tsk] I grew up in a community that was, uh, [thumping]

1 that was a mix of, uh, persons of African descent, [clicking] uh, Afro-  
2 Creolized people, um, Afro-Trinidadians that is, as well as, uh, people  
3 from the Indian subcontinent, um, [tsk] who also were a large bulk of the  
4 population. And so [tsk] I grew up with a mix of Afro-Creole-type  
5 folktales, um, of, uh, of, of Hindu stories and images and television shows.  
6 And so, um, if you, you take a mix of this as well as, um, Muslim  
7 festivals, so all this was just part of my young upbringing. I think, from  
8 [tsk] that very early age, uh, I h-, I knew I had this strong interest in the  
9 fantastic, right. Before it's even called futurism, I had this strong interest  
10 in things that were fantastic and otherworldly. Uh. When I came to the  
11 United States, this was just nurtured more, uh, by, uh, an onslaught of  
12 media from television to, uh, movies to books. Uh. Both my parents, my  
13 mother was a, uh, a big *Twilight Zone* fan. [laughter] Uh. She also liked  
14 the original *Star Trek*. Um. She took my sister and I to the libraries where  
15 we would spend hours just devouring books and so all of that really  
16 helped.

17  
18 On my father's side, um, he, he grew up on a lot of older movies with  
19 people like Peter Cushing and these kind of older horror movies. He, he  
20 was a big fan of Godzilla [laughter] movies. He loved *Star Wars*. He  
21 would take us to see that kind of thing. And so, uh, you know, as well as  
22 it being part of the larger culture, uh, part of my family upbringing, and I  
23 come to the United States and just bein' exposed to it in, in various ways  
24 even as kids with other, with other kids. I grew up in [tsk], you know,  
25 mostly, uh, Black neighborhoods that were a mix of Black and Brown  
26 neighborhoods that are a mix of people from various parts [inaudible  
27 4:10]. All of us as kids, we, we loved various things whether it was *Star*  
28 *Wars* or, you know, uh, some television show or it was comic books. This  
29 was just what we were talking about in-between all the other things kids  
30 talk about, so it was just always there. Yeah.

31  
32 Grace Chun: [4:28] So how would you define Afrofuturism?

33  
34 Phenderson Clark: Hm. That's interesting because [tsk] there's a way that Afrofuturism [is  
35 now 4:36] often seen as this umbrella term for various aspects of Black  
36 spacula-, speculative fiction and I don't know that I agree. Like I, I've  
37 written stories before that I understand how people interpret them as  
38 Afrofuturism but I've also had people ask me like well, that story you  
39 wrote was Afrofuturism. I'm like well, that was a complete fantasy story  
40 that's set in a preindustrial [laughter] world. There's, there's absolutely  
41 nothing futuristic about it. It, it's more so a form of speculative fiction  
42 and fantasy that has, uh, Black characters and African antecedents. And  
43 so [tsk] to me, Afrofuturism, I, I've always look at as, for one, having  
44 something to do with some form of the future, right? Imagining  
45 possibilities of how Black people will exist, uh, in the future or can exist  
46 in the future or even futurist ideas, uh, within our present state and

1 imagining what those would be like whether it is utopian, dystopian, or  
2 something in-between. Now, I think where my writing – some a my  
3 writing fits in [clicking] is that, uh, I think there's a term that I really like  
4 using called, uh, retro. Uh, a, a ref-, retrofuturism or retro Afrofuturism.  
5 And I thought I had coined that term but I did not. It turned out that, uh,  
6 perhaps like minds think alike and the person who I realize in writings  
7 who was using that term is, um, I'm sorry. I'm blanking on her name at  
8 the moment. Nisi Shawl. The great Nisi Shawl, uh, writer of *Everfair*,  
9 um, uses this term of a retro Afrofuturism.

10  
11 In this case, I think this is again where my work fits in often is, uh, [tsk]  
12 persons who look to the past but imbue the past and imbue people of  
13 African descent, Black people in the past, with futuristic elements. And so  
14 we're thinking for instance of including Black people in things like  
15 steampunk because steampunk, of course, though it's the past, it's a past  
16 that never was. And often the technologies that exist in that past, while  
17 they are past, they also are much more futuristic than we have, right? You  
18 can have sentient machines in, in steampunk and different things that – for  
19 forms of, um, of human cybernetics that we don't have or a-, air ships that  
20 function in ways that, that our world, [laughter] they haven't figured out  
21 yet even though it's this, it's this, uh, it's this retro, uh, type of technology.  
22 And so a good word for that is – that I've seen used [in 7:02] Nisi Shawl is  
23 retrofuturistic. In a sense, I think some of my works and her works deal  
24 with this retro Afrofuturism. So it's a more complex look at fut-,  
25 Afrofuturism but it shows me how the genre can have, uh, different  
26 avenues and different ways to be thought of. Yeah. [clicking]

27  
28 Grace Chun: [7:17] Can you share a little bit about how you started writing?

29  
30 Phenderson Clark: Hm. So I think, um – I, I, I mean, I was always – I guess because one  
31 thing that happened is because I was – I said my, my mom who would  
32 take us to the [laughter] libraries and we would just sit and devour things.  
33 It's that I think, uh, after you read a whole lot, I don't know if this  
34 [inaudible 7:37] for everybody but for me, I, I read so much, I was like I  
35 wanna take my hand at that. And so I think from the time I was a kid, I  
36 would just write stories or I'd make up my little comic books. And mostly  
37 they were for me, they were for my sister. We would share these things.  
38 And then I think by middle and high school, it was for friends. But I, I  
39 admittedly did not think about writing seriously. I didn't think about  
40 writing seriously even as I was going through college, right? [tsk] I was  
41 not a writing major. I did not take creative writing classes. And I think  
42 part of that has to do with, uh, the time I was growing up. Did not have  
43 social media and those things and I just honestly did not see Black writers.  
44 Right? I did n-, at least, pardon me, I did not see Black writers of  
45 speculative fiction. And so it wasn't that I, it wasn't that I then assumed  
46 oh, Black people can't write that. It was just that it was not even a part of

1 my mind, say, that, uh, oh, I could grow up and be a writer of speculative  
2 fiction. It just wasn't there.  
3  
4 I don't think it was really until my later years of college that I started  
5 thinking like about maybe I could write speculative fiction. Maybe that's  
6 something I can do. And still it was just something I might do for myself  
7 or on the side. And I think, uh, sometime then, like literally in my very  
8 late collegiate years, I started taking [my hand of 8:51] thinking how to  
9 write seriously about speculative fiction. And it took many years before I  
10 actually entered the market or [laughter] those kinds of things. So it, it – I  
11 mean, when I look back now on when I would write, I would say it started  
12 at a early age but when I would write seriously? Uh, that came much later  
13 in life. Yeah.  
14  
15 Grace Chun: Hm. [9:09] What were your like biggest, I guess, influences?  
16  
17 Phenderson Clark: Hm. So growing up, again, because unfortunately the greats like Octavia  
18 Butler and others, you know, uh, Delany and others, were not even put in  
19 front of me. [clicking] I didn't know they existed. I did not know those  
20 writers [laughter] existed well until I was almost finishing college and  
21 [inaudible 9:31]. So thankful now for social media. People can learn  
22 more about these Black writers. But at the time, I mean, the internet, I  
23 think I was finishing college and it was, you know, becoming big. And so  
24 that's how I heard about them, actually interacting with people in early  
25 forms of internet social media on, on things called listservs, which  
26 [inaudible 9:47] think exist anymore. Um. [tsk] But when I was growing  
27 up, it was – I mean, my influences were often things I was watching, the  
28 more popular, uh, forms a speculative fiction, um, and the things I was  
29 reading. People like, um, Madeleine L'Engle's, uh, works. Um. Um. I  
30 can't think of her...  
31  
32 Grace Chun: *Wrinkle in Time*.  
33  
34 Phenderson Clark: *Wrinkle in Time*. Thank [laughter] you. Yes, of course. *A Wrinkle in*  
35 *Time*. I think it was like this profound influence. I was blown away by  
36 those books and I read them at a young age. I mean, you know, I'd read  
37 other writers. I read Tolkien. I think I was probably really influenced by  
38 Tolkien. For good or bad, I was influenced by Tolkien. I, I was a big  
39 fantasy person, so I read all these. People [inaudible 10:27] these  
40 Forgotten Realms books that were based on D&D. And, you know, I read  
41 like the Margaret Weis books of Dragonlance and so I, I was really big  
42 into fantasy, so I read those. I read Frank Herbert's *Dune*. And so [tsk]  
43 there were all these influences and what's interesting is none a those  
44 things sparked me to write. Right? I, I think that when I first started  
45 writing, uh, interestingly enough, like I said, it was later in collegiate years  
46 and it was actually like a mix of politics and, uh, trying to mix politics

1 with speculative fiction. So my early speculative fiction always has to do  
2 with something – it was a little didactic [laughter] and it always had to do  
3 with something social. And I think the influence on that was probably  
4 somebody like Ray Bradbury...

5

6 Grace Chun: Hm.

7

8 Phenderson Clark: ...you know, who I grew up, uh, on books like *The Illustrated Man*, for  
9 instance, and *The Martian Chronicles* and, um, you know, and then my  
10 mother's love for *Twilight Zone*. And I was like how do I translate that to  
11 talk about the Black experience? And little did I know even when I started  
12 that, I was like oh, I'm, I'm doing this and who's done this before?  
13 [Inaudible 11:24] Black writers who've been doing that for a very long  
14 time, right? And so it was a way that I was following that tradition  
15 without even knowing the tradition was there. [clicking] But when I did  
16 learn that tradition was there, then I devoured that stuff, you know, I went  
17 back and I read everything from Du Bois who is writing things o-, onward,  
18 right, and to, uh, see how various, uh, people of African descent, Black  
19 people, have, have looked at this, so yeah.

20

21 Grace Chun: [11:49] Do you feel like there's a sense of community within this genre?

22

23 Phenderson Clark: You know, I do. [clicking] And i-, and it's really interesting you say that  
24 within Afrofuturism or even larger within the Black speculative world.  
25 [tsk] There's a way that it kind of exists [laughter] on its – it kind of exists  
26 in its own space even with the advent of social media. Um. W-, when I,  
27 when I – I, I had left writing for a while, speculative fiction writing. I  
28 came back to it but when I came back to it, it was within these online  
29 Black spaces, right? It was full of Black creative – these, uh, Black and  
30 men and women who were, you know, uh, thinking and creating and  
31 sharing and had ideas. And a lot of'm were [inaudible 12:26] self-  
32 published and, you know, they were just, they were just all there. Some  
33 of'm [inaudible 12:30] to do movies, uh, some of'm were doing  
34 screenplays or they wanted to put on different performances. And it was  
35 just this huge community there and it was really interesting. By the time I  
36 even learned about the larger market, like the other speculative fiction  
37 community that we think of when we think of awards like Nebulas and,  
38 you know, th-, that was like another world. The Black space was its own  
39 contained world, so there was a sense a community. But that sense a  
40 community almost didn't – i-, it didn't even interact, bridge, or overlap  
41 [laughter] with the larger speculative world, which is still a problem,  
42 right? Uh. [Inaudible 13:03] speculative world, uh, seems at times  
43 completely apart from, uh, the Black speculative world.

44

45 And so I definitely think there – yeah, there's been a sense of community  
46 in that sense because for one, if you're in the larger speculative world,

1 well, there's, there's still not a lot [laughter] of Black – there's, there's not  
2 so many Black speculative fict-, fiction writers in the larger world that we  
3 can hold a conference, right, that wouldn't be like a room or two. And so,  
4 yeah, there's a sense that, you know, when you meet, you – I would go  
5 and look for – in the major magazines, I would very, you know, non-  
6 politically correctly, uh, look up people's names, say I think that name  
7 might be Black. Let me see if I can find this person. I'd spend long times  
8 hunting who they were to figure out if that story sounded like it came from  
9 a Black person, it addressed something. And so, you know, i-, in the  
10 sense, there's a community 'cause you're always looking for someone  
11 [inaudible 13:53] so, yeah, I'd say there's a sense a community, yeah.  
12

13 Grace Chun: Um. [13:57] So from your perspective, what does Afrofuturism offer  
14 society in this moment?  
15

16 Phenderson Clark: [tsk] Oh. In this moment. [laughter] Where do we live in a moment? I,  
17 you know, I think some people have pointed out that – especially people  
18 like Butler, um, who warned of – I guess used dystopia to [warn futures  
19 14:16] that – people have pointed out that she was like – she was warning  
20 of this moment, right? She predicted some of the things that we're facing  
21 now in many ways. Uh. And I, I think that's probably indicative of a lot  
22 of the Black experience like being the canary in the coal mine. [tsk] Uh,  
23 seeing the various things whether it's, uh, whether it's, uh, [inaudible  
24 14:38] thinking of environmental racism or, uh, looking at, um, i-,  
25 inequality within justice systems or looking at, um, the, uh, looking at the  
26 lack of democracy in politics. You can say that, uh, people of Black  
27 descent – people of African descent [laughter], uh, lived these experiences  
28 and warned and warned and warned and it's often not until it explodes and  
29 people are now threatened with the idea of, uh, auth-, auth-, um, you  
30 know, an autocratic-type government or they're seeing, uh, a further  
31 erosion of the environment and things that people pay attention to. And I  
32 think that a lot of early Afrofuturistic writers, you know, did this. They  
33 kind of warned of these possibilities or they talked about the issues of race  
34 and diversity and, uh, and, and various other social issues that needed to  
35 be addressed. And I think there's a way Afrofuturism offers that.  
36

37 But I think Afrofuturism also at the same time offers us the possibility to  
38 think about how to resist that kind of, uh, future, um, how to form  
39 resistance, uh, while you're living that type of experience and as well, how  
40 to imagine a future where that's not the case. How to imagine utopian  
41 future, right? Or if not fully utopian, at least a future where, uh, those who  
42 resist win and those other forces are not triumphant. And I think, uh,  
43 people who might despair, uh, in this moment or what [laughter] have you,  
44 I think that Afrofuturism offers that possibility, right? Whether it's  
45 through, uh, music, writing, or what have you. I think of somebody like  
46 Janelle Monáe for instance who said look, the future is going to have [tsk]



1 problems. It will have robots and androids [laughter] who, uh, face  
2 discrimination but they also dance. [laughter] Right? They, they find  
3 different ways to create and what have you and, and live lives. And I  
4 think, uh, uh, y-, you think about people, you know, various – I'm thinkin'  
5 about musicians like George Clinton and others who some people say  
6 have aspects a Afrofuturism. They say hey, look, in the future, uh, Black  
7 people will be there. However that future is going to be, they'll be there  
8 and they'll be creating and doing all these other things as well, so I think  
9 that's also something it has to offer, yeah.

10  
11 Grace Chun: [16:43] Can you share a little bit about the – some of your published  
12 work?

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14 Phenderson Clark: [tsk] Uh, sure. Um. [tsk] So let's see. Uh. Oh, I guess I'll talk about the  
15 one that won awards. [laughter] Uh. One of them is called, um – [tsk] so  
16 I, I wrote a, a novella. It's called *The Black God's Drums*. And it is what  
17 I would consider that retro Afrofuturism, right? It imagines, uh, this, uh,  
18 late 19th century New Orleans where, uh, the civil war, uh, never ended.  
19 There's simply an armistice and so New Orleans is a free city. All the rest  
20 of the United States remains divided. Uh. Slavery still exist in the  
21 confederacy, uh, though it's been transferred from plantation fields to now  
22 factory. And it brings in some of those dystopian elements, the  
23 steampunk, and bring in such as the use of chemicals and what have you,  
24 uh, to control populations. And at the same time, it also has this notion of,  
25 uh, Black triumphalism, uh, because the story, um, rewrites, uh, parts of  
26 the Haitian revolution. In this, uh, retelling, uh, the revolution is still  
27 successful but it's, it's more successful beyond anyone's imagining, right?  
28 Haiti is a full empire, they have freed various other, um, [tsk] enslaved  
29 people and, uh, thanks to them, there are things like airships and all of  
30 these things, uh, and, and various different inventions in the world. And  
31 so, you know, that work tries to, tries to give that bridge of the, uh, of, of  
32 both the dystopian aspect of futurism, this retrofuturism, but also  
33 something utopian and, and triumphant and the two are often, uh, I should  
34 say, in conflict within the [work 18:28].

35  
36 And it stars a – th-, the heroine of the, of the story is a young protagonist  
37 by the name of, uh, Jacquelin who goes by the nickname Creeper. Uh.  
38 She lives in New Orleans and, uh, she finds out th-, the confederates are  
39 trying to use a secret weapon or at least obtain a secret weapon called the  
40 Black God's drums, uh, and she has to go meet a, an airship captain from  
41 the West Indies, uh, an-, an-, a Black woman who's an airship captain, and  
42 she's trying to find the information to, to her and – uh, get this information  
43 to her and the 2 of them will then have to, uh, set about an adventure to  
44 perhaps save the city from – New Orleans from destruction. Oh, and also  
45 the protagonist has an African goddess who lives in her head because why  
46 not? So that's, that's one of them, yeah.

1  
2 Grace Chun: [19:17] And I think you've also wr-, written short stories?  
3  
4 Phenderson Clark: [clicking] Yes. Mm-hm. So [tsk] [inaudible 19:23] I'm tryin' to think of  
5 like any a my short stories a [laughter] Afrofuturism. I do have one, uh,  
6 that I, I would consider really an Afrofuturistic story. Um. It was written  
7 a long time ago and it is called *Wings for Icarus* and it's actually about a  
8 young [clicking] boy who is trying to redeem his father's memory. His  
9 father was an advent-, a-, an inventor who is named after Elijah McCoy,  
10 an actual [laughter] Black inventor. And I based it on – the story came  
11 because my father, uh, who is a welder but also has his own inventing  
12 mind, uh, just a natural inventing mind, was, uh, trimming a, a palm tree in  
13 one of our – at our house and he fell off – out of it and broke his arm.  
14 He's fine. Uh. He's fine. He's, he's fine now. His arm is better. But I  
15 came up with this story where things did not turn out as well [laughter] for  
16 this Black inventor who tries to fly like Icarus with his wings made of a, a,  
17 a modern type of, uh, metal [tsk] and polymer and it does not work. And  
18 the story's basically about this, uh, young boy who's trying to redeem his  
19 father's memory 'cause people think he was crazy. He jumped off a cliff,  
20 uh, trying to fly and he's going to [clicking] – he basically repairs the  
21 broken wings that his father had made and he tries to fly as well, so it's,  
22 it's, it's a bit about memory, it's about mobility, and it has that element of  
23 futurism [tsk], uh, and the, the Black inventor in it as well, yeah.  
24  
25 Grace Chun: Mm-hm. [20:50] How do you decide, um – 'cause – so you've written  
26 novellas and...  
27  
28 Phenderson Clark: Mm-hm.  
29  
30 Grace Chun: ...short stories. Is that typically the form that you like to go for or...?  
31  
32 Phenderson Clark: Well, [laughter] a-, actually, um, I started off as a, as a fantasy novel  
33 writer. Anybody knows anything about fantasy novel writers, I mean,  
34 they're huge, huge, gigantic tomes and, uh, I, when I first started writing,  
35 it was to write these I would call them short stories but they were really  
36 novellas. [laughter] And then my other thing was really to write huge  
37 novels. Uh. I had to actually go back and train myself how to write actual  
38 short stories. [tsk] And, uh, some a my novellas end up, uh, like *The Black*  
39 *God's Drums*, started off as a short story and it blossomed into a novella  
40 and so, you know, it's really funny. In the past few years, that's where a  
41 lotta my success has been, in publishing short stories [tsk] and novellas  
42 but I'm really a novel writer at heart. And so, um, I'm finding myself  
43 returning, uh, back to that long form, uh, again, so we'll see what happens.  
44 [laughter]  
45  
46 Grace Chun: [21:51] Is there anything you're currently working on?



1  
2 Phenderson Clark: Yeah, so I have, uh, 2 things. I have, um, [tsk] a novella called *Ring*  
3 *Shout*, which is – the best way to think of it is an – it's set in, uh, 1922  
4 [tsk], uh, Georgia. Actually, it's set mostly in not Athens, Georgia, but,  
5 um, [tsk] Macon, Georgia. And the – I don't wanna give the full premise  
6 of the story but it, it has to do with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Birth*  
7 *of a Nation* and such things, and the best way to describe it is a type of s-,  
8 Black southern gothic, uh, horror story but also fantasy, right? Th-,  
9 there's sword fighting [laughter] in it but there're also monsters. Uh. And  
10 so that is a novella that's going to be out in November [tsk], uh, from Tor.  
11 Um. And I am also working on a full-length novel. Well, it's actually  
12 done. It's just going through editing. Uh. Set in the world of another  
13 novella I've written called, um, th-, um, *A Dead Djinn in Cairo*. And it's  
14 also – this is also a retrofuturistic, uh, uh, imagining, uh, *A Dead Djinn in*  
15 *Cairo*. I also wrote a second, a second novella. A short story first called  
16 *A Dead Djinn in Cairo*, then a novella called *The Haunting of Tram Car*  
17 *015*, or tram car 15, how people, however people wanna say it. And both  
18 of those are set in a, an alternate, uh, world, an alternate Cairo, Egypt, um,  
19 that is not colonized and where a Sudanese inventor [tsk] has, uh, created  
20 these various, um, machines that have brought djinn back into the world.  
21 Right? And so [laughter]...  
22  
23 Grace Chun: Mm-hm.  
24  
25 Phenderson Clark: ...i-, it, it has a bit of – it has airships and it has technology, steampunk  
26 and dieselpunk technology. But it also has magical creatures and magic  
27 and sorcery [tsk] that's also a part of it in this enchanted, uh, but also  
28 somewhat futuristic, uh, 1912 Cairo. And so, uh, I'm writing the first  
29 novel in that world. Uh. I can't give the title away yet but it is coming  
30 starring, uh, its main character, an agent by the name of Fatma. Yeah.  
31  
32 Grace Chun: Thank you for sharing.  
33  
34 Phenderson Clark: Yeah.  
35  
36 Grace Chun: Uh. I guess switching over, um, to discussion about, um, Zora Neale  
37 Hurston.  
38  
39 Phenderson Clark: Mm-hm.  
40  
41 Grace Chun: [24:18] In your mind, what is the link between Zora Neale Hurston and  
42 Afrofuturism?  
43  
44 Phenderson Clark: Hm. That's a good one. Um. It's funny. I was, I was introduced to Zora  
45 Neale Hurston in college, um, from my, uh, from, uh, my – Dr. [Holt  
46 24:35] at, uh, at my, uh, [laughter] at my university introduced me to

1 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and I was introduced to the works of Zora  
2 Neale Hurston. I guess it was a way – it’s interesting ‘cause *Ring Shout* in  
3 some ways, the story I was just saying, was influenced by someone like  
4 Zora Neale Hurston [tsk] because, um, the idea actually came from r-,  
5 from, uh, me reading parts of the WPA narratives, uh, the Works Progress  
6 Association narratives, uh, these narratives of former – of ex-slaves and  
7 it’s Zora Neale Hurston who was instrumental in beginning that by  
8 interviewing, uh, ex-slaves, uh, here in Florida, right? And so I know she  
9 influences [laughter] me definitively that way. Um. But, you know, I, I  
10 think there’s a way that, uh, that, that her influence is there because I think  
11 of her in the 1920s and I think of, uh, her starting – you know, having the,  
12 the Black literati, uh, that she – group that she forms with others like  
13 Langston Hughes and others, um, and I think of, you know, them putting  
14 out their magazine, uh, *Fire!!*. Th-, there’s a way where that magazine in  
15 itself was trying to imagine a new type of Black. [Inaudible 25:42] trying  
16 to think of Black people as modern people, right? It was really this focus  
17 on modernity and to imagine how Black people exist in this, in these  
18 modern spaces, particularly with the time and h-, we would come to call  
19 Harlem Renaissance.

20  
21 And so I, I think that she’s definitively instructive there, right? And so I  
22 think there’s a way in which she – e-, even in her anthropol-, a-, a-,  
23 anthropology work and looking at, uh, at Black culture and Black cultures  
24 of the past. There’s always this way in which even though she was talking  
25 about the past, she brought that past into the present, right? And I think  
26 there’s a way that Afrofuturism, as much as it looks forward, it also  
27 doesn’t ignore that past. It’s very Sankofa in some ways. And I think, I  
28 think, uh, Zora Neale Hurston sits at that crossroads. Yeah.

29  
30 Grace Chun: [26:31] Do you think the festival’s engagement with Afrofuturism  
31 continues her legacy?

32  
33 Phenderson Clark: Certainly. I think if the, I think if the festival [inaudible 26:40] [laughter]  
34 Afrofuturism, yeah. I think that – uh, yeah. [You always 26:43] wonder  
35 like what would a writer, uh, think who, uh, you know, is gone now?  
36 What would they make of Afrofuturism, you know? And I, I think it’s, I  
37 think Afrofuturism’s, uh, embrace of so many possibilities and so many  
38 different avenues and daring at times to simply just be outside the box  
39 would be something that I would – I could see somebody like Zora Neale  
40 Hurston embracing, definitely, yeah.

41  
42 Grace Chun: [27:08] And what can contemporary Afrofuturists learn from Zora Neale  
43 Hurston and early generations of Black thinkers?

44  
45 Phenderson Clark: [clicking] Um. You know, I think about people like Zora Neale Hurston.  
46 I think about people like Pauline Hopkins who even earlier in 1903 is

1 writing these – writing books about finding lost futuristic, uh – lost ancient  
2 but futuristic, like retrofuturist, uh, cities in Ethiopia and all this. And I  
3 think that, um, there's a way in w-, th-, there's a way that, uh, as, as  
4 writers of, of s-, Black speculative fiction, it's kinda like like I said when I  
5 grew up, I didn't know, uh, them existed and now's there access to them  
6 in ways that didn't exist when I was younger. And I would say really  
7 knowing, uh, what they were doing because y-, uh, y-, you'll be surprised  
8 how much what they were talking about informs the now and informs the  
9 future. And you could look at them as almost predictive, right? But also  
10 dealing with the issues of their time. And I think understanding, for  
11 instance, how many of those writers [tsk], you know, if you were someone  
12 like Pauline Hopkins in early 1900s, you're writing against the basic racial  
13 terror of the nadir that's going on and how, uh, they would use r-, writing,  
14 this, this writing as this almost type of weapon, right, to fight back against  
15 these things.

16  
17 And I think there's a, there's a great deal to learn there, uh, if you're a  
18 speculative fiction writer in this age trying to find your place and  
19 understand where you as a writer fit in especially if you want to say  
20 something profound where, w-, where you fit in. And I think, uh, looking  
21 back at what they were doing and putting in the context of the times they  
22 were doing it in, uh, I think that's, that can be really instructive.

23  
24 Grace Chun: [tsk] [28:44] So for someone who is new to Afrofuturism, what would you  
25 recommend [inaudible 28:50] [laughter] start?

26  
27 Phenderson Clark: Oh, where would they start? I, I would say go listen to some Janelle  
28 Monáe. [laughter] [Inaudible 28:55] like people sometimes don't. They  
29 think of it as just literary but I would say like listen to Janelle Monáe,  
30 especially her first album and, and [inaudible 29:03] listen to it, like look  
31 at the art she creates for it. Look at the videos that she creates, right?  
32 And, and think of it almost as a story. Um. Go back and listen to some  
33 hip hop, especially early hip hop. Go back and listen to like, you know,  
34 "Planet Rock" and things like that and see how they were imagining how  
35 hip hop, just by the use of its – of the instruments it was using, right, in  
36 creating things like, you know, the various mixers and these things they're  
37 creating and creating turntablism. Think about how they were trying to  
38 utilize these things, uh, these sounds of the instruments of the future and  
39 putting them into their music and how that in its own way was futurism.  
40 So there is this way that Afrofuturism already exist in the things that are  
41 around us and we're not thinking about it because sometimes we're just  
42 thinking about it in the literary fashion. But it already exist in all of these  
43 cultural dynamics that, uh, that we need to pay attention to. Like think of,  
44 think of, uh, think of George Clinton, [tsk] you know, somebody like  
45 [Inaudible 30:01]. Think of these kind of musicians. Think of them in an  
46 Afrofuturistic context.

1  
2 Think about George Clinton's mother ship and who he's saying is going to  
3 be in space, right? The pimps [laughter] are going to be in space. Think  
4 of it in, in that, in that wild, uh, way that he's, he's talking about it where  
5 he's usin' the profane to talk about the future, which most people had seen  
6 as this clean slate in a sense and, you know, it's going to be sterile and  
7 pure. And he's like no, it's going to be funky as he puts it [laughter] and  
8 this is what the future is going to be. Um. And then, you know, literary-  
9 wise, uh, I suppose – [tsk] I mean, like I said, many of those older writers I  
10 would say to look at. Um. But also, I think people have put out some, uh  
11 – I, I think there are great new writers. I don't know why I'm blanking at  
12 the moment. But somebody like, uh, Cadwell Turnbull's recent work,  
13 whose – I'm sorry, I can't – sorry, Cadwell, I can't think of your – think of  
14 the name [laughter] of your book right now but it's a great book. It's, it's  
15 set with the idea of – like we always think of alien invasions, right? And  
16 we're thinking of alien invasions landing in, uh, [tsk] we're thinking of  
17 alien invasions landing in n-, where do they always land? They always  
18 land in New York or land in L.A. Right? [Inaudible 31:10] else in the  
19 world. And he has them land, uh, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, right? This  
20 is where they land. And the things – I mean, th-, that's, that's, that's  
21 fascinating, right?  
22

23 So think about works like that. Again, for some reason, I'm blanking on  
24 the name 'cause I'm doing this interview but Cadwell Turnbull. Maybe  
25 somebody'll [echo in 31:27], mix it in what the name of the book is. Uh.  
26 And, um, um, of course, I would say if – I guess if you're really wantin' to  
27 start, um, Sheree Renée Thomas was an editor [tsk] of a book called *Dark*  
28 *Matter* and it's an anthology. And I believe *Dark Matter* came out, I  
29 wanna say, either in the late '90s or the early 2000s. And what's great  
30 about *Dark Matter* is that it includes many writers like people you would  
31 think of as when we think of Afrofuturism, it includes essays on writers.  
32 You know, people like Octavia Butler who were these, you know,  
33 foundational books in Afrofuturism. People like, um, [tsk] like, like  
34 Samuel Delany, right, who are also these other figures. Th-, and they have  
35 essays by them or stories written on them but as well includes older stories  
36 from W.E.B. Du Bois talking about, you know, comets wiping out  
37 humanity in the early 1900s to most modern stories by various, uh, Black  
38 writers. And so it, it pretty much runs the gamut when it comes to ideas of  
39 Afrofuturism. It's just a good primer just to give you an idea of, uh, where  
40 some of these stories come from. People like George Schuyler and what  
41 have you, these older writers. Uh. Essays on the entire idea of  
42 Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction as well as stories by more  
43 modern writers. Modern for the time anyway. It's, it's a good starting  
44 point.  
45

46 Grace Chun: [32:53] Do you feel like the audience for Afrofuturism is growing?

1  
2Phenderson Clark: Yeah, and, you know, I think it was always there. [laughter] Like I said, I,  
3 I don't, I don't – it's, it's like – and we would say it's growing. I think it  
4 was just always there. I think it was – I think it's just oh, here it is now,  
5 right? And it's getting more publicity now, right? But I, I don't think  
6 there was ever a time when there wasn't an audience for it, especially if  
7 you're talkin' about a Black audience. Like I said, I always use hip hop as  
8 a perfect example. Hip hop's been doing Afrofuturism from the jump.  
9 Anybody raised on hip hop is probably already [laughter] ready to, uh, g-,  
10 engage in Afrofuturism and they likely already have, right? And so yeah,  
11 definitely. I-, it, I mean, if it's already there, then yes, it can only be  
12 growing.  
13  
14Grace Chun: Um. [33:37] Do you have any final thoughts [inaudible 33:39] you wanna  
15 say about Afrofuturism or...?  
16  
17Phenderson Clark: Uh. For anybody out there who's interested in it and who's interested in  
18 creating it, um, go for it. I, I, I don't know that it has any one definition. I  
19 don't know if it has any one medium. And so there're many different  
20 ways you can express it, uh, many different ways you can define it. And  
21 so, uh, please, uh, get your creative self out there and, you know, let your  
22 flag fly. That's it.  
23  
24Grace Chun: Thank you.  
25  
26Phenderson Clark: No problem.  
27  
28  
29/ad