Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. On this podcast, we bring scholars and novelists together to talk about how novels work, how they're written, read, studied, and remembered. I'm Sarah Wasserman, one of the hosts at Novel Dialogue.

Today, I have the honor of welcoming Hugo Award winner and New York Times bestselling author, John Jennings, along with professor, editor, and translator, JC Cloutier. This is an especially exciting episode because it's the podcast's first ever conversation about graphic novels. It's also exciting because today, the day that we're recording this, is February 1st, 2023, and so it's the day that the world gets to meet a brand-new Marvel superhero. Silver Surfer: Ghost Light #1, by John Jennings and Valentine De Landro hits stores today.

So, in addition to, you know, creating new Marvel superheroes, John Jennings is Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California at Riverside. He is co-editor of the Eisner Award-winning collection, The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of the Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art. His other projects include the horror anthology Box of Bones, the coffee table book Black Comix Returns, and the New York Times bestselling graphic novel adaptations of Octavia Butler's novels Kindred and Parable of the Sower. John is the director of Abrams comic arts imprint Megascope, which publishes graphic novels focused on the experiences of people of color. He is also the co-founder and organizer of the Schomburg Center's Black comic book festival in Harlem.

In conversation today with John is JC Cloutier, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. JC is the author of the award-winning Shadow Archives: The Life Cycles of African American Literature. He edited La vie est d'hommage, a comprehensive volume of Jack Kerouac's original French writings, and he has translated into English Kerouac's two French novellas. J.C. is also co-editor of a scholarly edition of Claude McKay's Amiable with Big Teeth. His work has been featured in many scholarly journals and exhibition catalogs. At Penn, he regularly teaches comic studies, including a creative writing seminar with cartoonist Rob Berry on making comics, which is a class I'd very much like to enroll in myself. So welcome both of you to the show. Thanks for joining us.

Jean-Christophe Cloutier

Thanks. Happy to be here.

John Jennings

Thank you for having me. Thank you. I'm excited.
And I have the delightful role here of playing third wheel. So I'll just turn things over to you, JC and pop back in now and again with a question or two.

JCC

Okay, great. Thanks, Sarah.

John! So good to see you again, my friend. So, you and I first met, what, like five, six years ago at the Hutchins Center at Harvard when we were first, we were both fellows together at the same time. This is pre your mega fame, I think, just about the moment when Kindred was about to drop and be unleashed upon the world. And, you know, our conversations were really inspirational to me. And I also was able to just walk upstairs and go see you do some comics up there in your office on the computer, which was amazing to see unveiled before my eyes. And so, I'm really excited today to be able to kind of talk with you about your process and kind of dive into that today on all sorts of the angles.

You're kind of a Renaissance man, I feel, you know, that your repertoire is so amazing. You have so many different roles. And since this is a novel podcast, I thought we could think about that term graphic novelist versus comic, comics being the term that I think you and I would use most often, but graphic novel as a kind of, you know, term that's been more popularized.

JJ

Comics to me are primarily a medium. It's a format change. It's like any other mediation of the story, you know. I would say that the graphic novel is just a format, you know, graphic novel is a format. So, in my head, anything over say, like 48 pages or 64 pages, thereof becomes, starts to become more a graphic novel, you know, and I think some of it's based off of the idea of like the mainstream comics, the space where you have, I don't know, a 20, 22 page comic or so. But, you know, I just got a copy of Shubeik Lubeik, you know, which is 500 pages. So that's definitely a graphic novel, right? Yeah, so I think that's a format change. I think in some ways, like people have popularized the idea of the graphic novel because you have erudite scholars and folk who don't want to be seen reading comics, that kind of thing. But you are reading just a big, long comic book, sorry. There's nothing you can do about it. There's nothing different between, you know, it's still, I mean, the graphic novel is still using the medium of comics to tell the story.

Now, as far as like where I see myself in the lineage, man, that's a tough one because over the last, I guess, maybe 15 years or so, as you said, I've done a lot of, worn a lot of hats. And one of my main things that I've been trying to do is level the playing field as far as like, whose voices get seen, you know? I don't mind, I love the medium and I love the classic comics. I'm a huge fan of Will Eisner and Frank Miller and, you know, all the people that make, that make comics. So as far as like my, you know, how I fit into the lineage of comics, a lot of it, a lot of my work has been about going back and archiving, you know, creators of color, that's something I've been really into right now, that's what I call sequential Sankofa, which I'll go back and look and see if I could find, in particular like Black artists who may have been erased or their work is in the public domain, refurbishing it and representing it, you know, and kind of archiving it. So like, it's almost like a critical archiving project, that's something I've been doing, that's kind of a hobby. But for the most part, I've been trying to level the playing field, as far as like BIPOC creators. And again, I'm a huge fan of traditional comics by, you know, predominantly white creators, like Frank Miller is one of my influences, you know, Bill Sienkiewicz, Howard Chaykin, the list goes on and on. I love the medium.

But I also love the fact that there's these characters of color and creators of color that we haven't seen that, and also independent comics too. So I've been trying to figure out like, archiving, researching,
theorizing, but then also create venues where these people can come together, empower each other both like spiritually, culturally, and financially. So that's why I started doing like the comic-cons, the ethnocentric comic-cons. I just actually co-founded another one in Los Angeles called CAAMCon, you know. And yeah, it was really cool.

And, so the other thing is archiving. So me and my friend Damian Duffy, you know, once we realized that there was such a bustling independent Black comics movement, we just wanted to try to figure out how to archive it and represent it so people could understand that, you know. *Black Comix and Black Comix Returns* were doing that. So yeah, and then, you know, trying to work in the mainstream as much as possible and think about how those characters are affecting people. Right, at the end of the day, like representation is extremely important.

**JCC**

Yeah, that's great. I mean, there's so many things you mentioned here that are going to the directions I wanted to address with you today. So let's talk about archiving, that you just mentioned lots. So, you also have been involved with a lot of curation of exhibitions. And I noticed that, you know, that's one of the words that, one of the labels that is used in to describe your role in Megascope, is curator, right? And to me, that's very tied to comics-making itself, even at the level of the page. So there's kind of both the meta-textual aspect of curating and literal archives, but also curation of the page itself and panels within that. Hillary Chute talks about, you know, panels, comic book panels being windows through which events are seen. Then you've got others like Roger Sabin, who talks about boxes of time, you know, Scott McCloud boxes of time, temporal mapping. And there's a French scholar that, I'm blanking on his name and I apologize, but the word he used that really kind of blew my mind was *vitrine*, which is like display windows, like panels as *vitrines* rather than just a window itself. But actually, because when we think of a display window like Macy's or something, it's a very curated space, right? It's such a controlled space. And curators exert control on space in a way, right? And I feel like whether it's the space of an exhibition, of an archive, right, that's for exerting that kind of control, but also it really works at the level of the panel itself.

So do you see this relationship in your work, that you have to be both kind of the meta-textual curator of this exhibition, like in *Unveiling Visions* at the Schomburg, and at the same time, the one who needs to sit down at the nitty gritty and control the representation of that space? Is it like a host-symbiote relation or is it a kind of a different valence for you?

**JJ**

You know, that's a great question. And I love that idea of controlling the space, because I often, I actually just wrote an intro to a series of middle grade comics that I'm co-editing for Marvel right now. And I used that term, so that idea of the world outside your window, which is something that Marvel really likes to think about. And I was like, well, you know, the page is a window. So I kind of use the same type of metaphor, like you're actually, they're viewfinders, you know, and you're seeing things through different spaces.

And I often have said that the white cube, the gallery space is like a page, you know. So when we first, when we actually, when Damian and I put together *Out of Sequence*, which was my first major show, at University of Illinois, it really was trying to put it together like a comic, like each panel was, each work was like a remix of a different type of comic. We wanted you to walk into the space and feel like you're in a comic book, that kind of thing. So yeah, I think I've always thought about the page that way.
The other thing too, is like, and I love the idea of the display window, but I also think of the panel as like a stage, you know, because so much about comics that are performative too, you know, from like, you're saying the sound effects, you know. One of my favorite things when I was working on this *Ghost Light* project is like, the editor would say, we need a sound effect here. So, I was like, “scra-kow,” like, “scra-ah,” you know, what is that, that kind of thing, right? So it's like this performative aspect. And so when you're like looking at a panel, you're really like kind of looking at it like a theater stage, that kind of thing too. I love that idea of performativity and like curation. But yes, I think they're highly, highly connected.

And I think that if you're adept enough to kind of work on both sides of it, you figure out where you need to go, because of the collaborative aspect of comics too, you know, because, you have a curator, but you also have a team of people that are helping you install the show and you have people doing lighting and so it's, it's really a team effort. And that's one of the things I like about comics too is like, they're so collaborative, you know.

I think what me and Stacey Robinson have actually done now is that we've actually figured out a way to integrate the storytelling, the metatextual aspects directly into the curatorial work, too. We created this, this form called the *Illabus*, the illustrated syllabus, the illustrated syllabus, yeah. So when you go to see like a show that Black Kirby has done, which is a design fiction piece, essentially, you're walking into like a class itself. So, you know, all the text is there as far as the illustrations. We have discussion prompts that are installed in the space, and also a bibliography. So if you're a teacher and you go into one of our shows, you can leave with a class.

**SW**

Can I jump in with a real quick question about collaboration?

**JJ**

Sure.

**SW**

So I'm thinking of Octavia Butler as one of your collaborators, you know, and that's really interesting. I think a lot of our listeners will know that our last season was all about translation. And I think about adaptation as a kind of translation practice, and a collaboration. But I'm just really interested in how you, I mean, really, the flat-footed version is how do you do an adaptation, but how you developed your craft of adaptation, especially with condensation, excerpting, pacing, you know, how do you get there? How do you do that work of adapting something like *Kindred*, or *A Parable of the Sower*?

**JJ**

You know, I think it's with anything with comics is you start small. Damian and I, but first of all, you find someone that you can work with and understand and love the work as much as you do, you know. But Damian and I did some translation stuff early on, like smaller pieces, right? And so you have to figure it out, because it is like a different modality, and you have to realize that different mediums have different affordances, and that's the first thing. As soon as you start adapting something, it's going to change, you know, whether it's good or bad, what does the medium do for the story? You know, that's the first thing. You have to understand both mediums to a certain degree too, or different media that you're working with, and what can work and what can't work. You don't want to, you don't want to have Ang Lee's *Hulk* happen, right? You know what I'm saying? Like, no, that's not a good translation on that.
So, yeah, you start small. Everybody wants to go in and they want to write like *Lord of the Rings*. I say, no, no, no, let's write, let's start with, you know, a smaller snippet of an adventure with a hobbit. Let's start there first and then work up and understand, you know, how you're working with someone. But you're right, and the other thing is to respect the voice of the original creator of the work, because yes, Octavia Butler is definitely a collaborator with us. And so you have to like get out of the way of your own ego and look at like: okay, what's the best thing for this particular story in this particular format? And that's the first thing. And respect each other's decision-making process.

Yeah, and I think that's where the craft is like, really just paying attention to the story and trying to figure out like what's the best way to get it across. Like for instance, you know, in *Kindred*, Dana, the main character was jumping through time, right? And comics are really great at doing cutaways. And in the middle of a comic book, you can actually totally have a schematic, and it totally won't take you out of the story because comics speak in symbols, right? And if you understand that, you know that you can actually do like someone walking through a house, or you can see the contents of her bag that she had when she time travels, you can see like a map of something, you know, that kind of thing. And it doesn't really take you out.

Now imagine doing that in like, you can describe it in a prose novel, but you do that in like a movie, it's like, what, what are we doing? It becomes real strange. It totally takes you out of the immersion of a film, you know. Comics are really great at illustrating things in a sequence and that, and you have to understand those affordances, I think. Yeah. But yeah, I think that's the way I look at it.

**JCC**

Yeah, just pushing on that, because that was one of the things I wanted to talk about as well is the term, one of the terms I've seen you use a lot for adaptation is translation. And I do think that it's like a better mind-frame for understanding what process takes place with what we often call adaptation; that it's an actual translation. I would say too that there's a branch of translation studies that, doesn't talk about translations as a kind of derivative secondary work, but as not another kind of iteration of something, but rather its own kind of new creation. It's another form of an original in that way, right? A different kind of understanding.

But at the same time, every translation is also an interpretation. And we often hear that. And it's, there's these kinds of choices that you have to make where the interpretation becomes fact or something on the page, right? So one of the earliest conversations I had with Rob Berry, who I co-teach with, was he's adapting James Joyce's *Ulysses* in comics, has been doing so for years, right? Yeah, I know. And one of the first conversations we had was, okay, so Cyclops chapter, the Cyclops chapter is this kind of chaos of cacophony, a polyphony of voices—like, what are you going to do? Are you going to have a speech bubble like to that guy and, you know, and then that means you've interpreted that that line in the novel is being said by that guy in that pub at that moment, right? Right? Or are you going to do a kind of, what are you going to do? Well, visually a kind of cloud, okay, like words hovering above the page? What's the solution that will take you away from that interpretation becoming fact?

So I'd love to hear if you could talk about one of those decisions that you had to make, collaboratively or on your own, when you knew that your interpretation was going to have to become fact on the page. And how you work through it. And what made you materialize it in that way?

**JJ**

Alright, I have a couple from, because I also was fortunate to adapt “On the Road,” which is a Nnedi Okorafor short story--
Yes, After the Rain.

--to After the Rain. And, you know, Nnedi and I are really good friends. And she was very involved with the adaptation, but also very hands off, because we only had a couple of things we wanted to change, but we did have to change things to, to fit into this, this other medium. So a couple things that really were awesome that we were able to do: there's this line in the original story, where she's talking about Chioma, who is the main character. And she said that she smelled something that smelled like life and death simultaneously. And I was like, how do you draw that?

Yeah, exactly.

How do you, what does that look like? You know what I'm saying? But what we did is like, okay, we had to speak in symbols. So first of all, comics seem to have this kind of inherent surreal quality to them too. The other thing is that everything on the comics page has the ability to tell a story, from the type of colors you use. In fact, color is like a soundtrack to comics to me. You know, I love colors. The type of line work that you use for the panels: is the image like crosshatched or is it not, you know, the simplicity of it? You know, everything has a, has an inherent like a particular value when it comes to like getting across the story. That's so exciting. It's also really daunting too, right?

So, we thought, okay, life, okay, let's look at a flower meaning life, right? And let's put in a skull meaning death. And so what we did is we came with this design, me and David Brame, the artist who worked on this, I did the colors and the adaptation. So we had this skull flower, right? Which is really cool. And so when you see her holding her nose and she's smelling the death and life at the same time, you would see the symbol of a death-flower everywhere. So even when she wasn't reacting to it, we could actually use it as a signifier that that smell is there. Like once you realize that that's what the question is, I mean, what the story is needing, we didn't need her to react to it anymore, then you would see it and say, oh, that's, that smell is there. So we were illustrating a smell, that was really cool and something that's really particular to comics.

The other thing is that, as you know, the gutter space is also a really great way to tell a story.

Right.

So the gutter is the space between the panels on a comics page, just for listeners who don't know that. Sorry. So one of the things about that story was Chioma was unexpectedly having tension between her American-ness and her Nigerian-ness. Right. She's having like a crisis of culture, so to speak. Like she's basically coming across ancestral spirits that she doesn't understand. So what we did is we actually made the panel, the panels were like the actual world, like our real world. And then behind the panel in the gutters, you could see all this weirdness happening that she could actually have access to. But we could see her reacting to it, but it's creeping slowly into the panel. And so that was one of the most
exciting things. But once we, once I read the short story, I understood what was happening. I said, man, you could illustrate this tension by showing these two worlds colliding, like literally.

**JCC**

That's a short story. But of course, we talk about it as a graphic novel, you know, just another way in which when you turn something into comics, that term or the idea of novelization kind of, you know, changes.

**JJ**

Yes, yes, good point.

**JCC**

But one of the things here that really strikes me about comics, and I often try to talk about it with my students, is that with comics, you always have to be thinking about the materiality of its own presentation. So covers, dust jackets, end papers, chapter transitions, right? In a novel, that can be very bland in terms of design, right? I mean, you're trained as a designer. So, you know, you turn to page chapter four, it's just like a little four on the next page at the top, right? That's all you get. But in comics, and in your comics, like whether it's *Parable of the Sower*, when you change years, suddenly you give us this double page, bleed spread, right? Full bleed, you get a whole different sense of things, plants from an encyclopedia, you get a detailed map of California with a ring of coffee to give us that sense of: this is an artifact, this is like a lived artifact that's been handled by human hands, right? The blood, the end paper, the strokes of blood that bookend *Kindred*, like if you open these pages, you are entering into the bloody world. Those kinds of elements. The dust jacket that you can put on, remove, all those kinds of things.

So that materiality, like everything in the comic has to be thought about from front cover to end. And so maybe talk about some of your favorite moves or some of your gestures that you've, the decisions you've made in terms of design to augment, enhance the process of translation of an original work or even your own work. How are you going to use all the secret resources of comics in that way towards that kind of overall effect?

**JJ**

Yeah, no, that's a great question. You know, so something like *Kindred*, for instance, right? I mean, man, we thought so much about color for that book. Because a lot of times when you think about time travel, right? I mean, if you're in the current day, a lot of times that is the brightest color, like it's in color and it's modern, right? That kind of thing, right? And then when you time travel back into time and it's kind of gray or it's got like an overcast or it looks vintage, that kind of thing. Classic example is something like *Pleasantville*, right? And it's literally black and white to color in the film.

So, but here's the thing, though. So for us, you know, 1976 is the past, right? And if you listen, if you read Octavia Butler's original novel, she says that first of all, you have to think like she and Kevin, her husband, have just moved into the into the house, you know, if you know the story and sees they're still unpacking. The first trip back to Maryland, 1800s in Maryland happens while they're literally unpacking books and stuff, right? So they haven't had a chance to even like live in that house. The house is still just a box, right? There's no memories that they've made there. It's not a home for them yet. And so what starts to happen is when she travels back to slavery time, she starts to feel more at home there because there's people that care about her. There's people she's literally related to, you know, people that actually they need her in some ways too, and it's an unsettling comfort. And that's actually what
makes *Kindred* so horrific, how easy it is for you to settle into slavery and be content. That's really, really powerful.

So, what we decided to do, because Octavia Butler said they were so vibrant and so real that we decided that the past full color, right? And then we decided to design the 1976 with this kind of like as you stated, like it was literally based off of like wounds. So, when I when I chose the color palette, I actually looked at a lot of like scab, I did image searches for the coloration of say like scabbed over wounds. And so that's why like that bloody color is literally like the brick red or like maroon color. That's the lead color. You know, and actually, even with the, even with the past, you know, I would, I would use that kind of bruised color as like the lead color palette. And it leads you throughout the entire book because it's about blood relations, right? But also, the trauma of slavery and that kind of thing. So that was that was a definite decision there.

The other thing I loved about the color palettes in particular were like, the lighting that, for instance, like when you're in the past at night, you don't have electricity. You're using lanterns and candles and stuff. So Damian told me about this film called *Barry Lyndon* by—

**JCC**

**JJ**

Kubrick. Kubrick. And he actually made cameras because that's what he would do. He made cameras to shoot in low light like that. And so if you look at if you look at *Barry Lyndon*, the cast of it is very yellow, it's like this yellowish ochre kind of color. So I literally would use, I used images of *Barry Lyndon* to kind of sample what my color palette would be for the inside. And then of course, if you look at the color wheel, design-wise, the opposite of that gold color is a purple. So when if you go in the past and you look at like those color pages of Dana running through the night, you know, I use a lot of like dark blues and purples and stuff like that to get, to get across what the opposite of that color is. I love doing that kind of stuff. It was just, it's one of my favorite things about the color.

And another thing design-wise is that Dana's shirt is a kind of a teal color. So if you do some research around the southern Gullah people, you know, from the Channel Islands, that color is called haint blue. And it's supposed to represent a spirit, it's supposed to ward off evil spirits, stuff like that. So we like the idea of her like haunting her own past, because they looked at her as a spirit. They're like, how are you popping in and out, you haven't aged a bit like you're not human, that kind of thing, right? So these are some of the decisions that we were making, as far as like, deep research around color and looks of the page design and stuff like that.

**JCC**

That's amazing. Yeah. Yeah, so many choices were right on there. I mean, also, you know, one of the things I think Butler was wanting to come across with the novel was to make the past living, a living past real, right? And so by making it the more vivid, the more kind of colorful, to kind of flip that relation, as you said, right between the traditions or the clichés of showing the past and the future. You're kind of forcing people to think, oh, well, this is what it would actually be like.

So, some of these elements remind me of kind of another aspect here, which is all the research that you've had to do, all the solutions that you've had to come up with really comes with the process. It comes with— before you actually sat down to do it all that wrestling with God, you know, that has to happen right, before midnight. And so in a way, comics kind of dramatize that solution on the page. I
feel that that's really tied to kind of visuality and the politics of representation and how in comics, if you're going to represent race, if race is a construct, if you're going to make a skin tone and phenotype, you can't escape that, it's right there on the page. So, you know, Dana, you don't know she's Black from the first line, when you read the prose novel. It comes later, but in the graphic novel, you open the page, prologue, I lost my arm, there she is, she's a Black woman. You know that. So you have to have your solution beforehand.

JJ

It's a really interesting conundrum, right, because comics also, they can traffic in visual shorthand, right, like stereotypes and things of that nature to which they are literally like infusing from different social or cultural norms, as far as like how we see each other. I mean, you could easily make extremely, you know, racist, reprehensible images, or extremely very sexist or classist images or ageist images, because that's the nature of the form, right, you can actually dramatize or make hyperbolic images. I feel like if you understand what you're doing, you can actually pull back and make some really, really interesting conversations about all those different things.

And I started thinking about race itself as this type of technology or deliverable in a certain way, right, and that, you know, a lot of times, comics and other types of visual media have actually helped to propagate that deliverable, if you're thinking it about as a designed object. So fairly recently, I've been thinking about this notion of what I call critical race design studies, thinking about race as a design object and how it shapes is shaped by society and it shifts according to what people need from it, that kind of thing. But you definitely have to like sell it as a product, you know, so you have these propagated signs and caricatures and things of that nature, right.

And so knowing all of that, I try to figure out how to unpack that as suddenly as possible when I'm making images, but I do blatantly make Black skin and Black noses and the phenotype is right there. Like you said, it's evident, it's just matter of fact, and by doing so, I think it kind of is a form of resistance to that, the race.

JCC

You know, comics won't let you forget the body. Like, you can't forget the body in comics ever. I think you can forget it when you read a prose novel, but not a comic. And I feel that you've kind of used that, I guess for purposes of social justice, but also not just that, but for storytelling, right, for making the story happen.

JJ

Yeah, you know, it goes back to the idea of like, which window we're looking through, right, and I grew up lower working class, you know, in the country. I grew up in Mississippi in a post-civil rights era. And I was transported through these comics, especially like, the stuff I was reading. I felt like I could see these buildings and, you know, I wanted to go to Queens and meet Peter Parker, that kind of thing. You know, so they were doing a great job of representing that particular perspective, but in the story that we've created, the, the touchstone person is very similar to what Claremont did with Kitty Pryde, where we, our introduction to a new aspect of the story is through a teenage girl who happens to be African American and named after Toni Morrison, right. So that's your vehicle in which you see this.

And so, you know, one of the things, like you said, I wanted to do with cartooning and this particular thinking about the story is to normalize the mundane aspects of life, of just being Black in America, the mundane nature of that.
JCC

One more thing to go just back to the archive and something that you said about kind of being human and kind of carrying that flame. One thing that I found super brilliant and inspiring is one of the ways in which you've spelled the word archive is A-R-K-I-V-E, like “ark” “ive,” which of course brings up the notion of Noah, right, and his whole business of like, and so that seems such a powerful image. And I'm, the idea of an archive, not just as a destination, but rather as a vehicle or kind of prosthetic that its purpose is to actually preserve a diversity of life, right. I mean, if you break it down to the, the bottom of what the Noah's Ark is, is to kind of preserve a diversity of wildlife as much as possible. And it's interesting, we often think of Noah as kind of like a solo dude, but he has a family too, it's speaking back to collaborations, like all that work that goes into building the Ark and, and all of that has got to be put in there. And it's both, that's something I feel when I read your work is there's a plundering of an archive, but it's not as a kind of, as a destination, as I guess scholars rather think of an archive, this is a place where you go and it's this, this kind of this end in itself in a way. But it's really a means to something else or maybe a prosthetic or a vehicle, a spaceship, like for you, I totally see that it would be a Noah Ark spaceship, not, not a water vessel, right?

And yeah, I'm wondering if part of your outlook on things or how you work on this is to, for your works to become this kind of arkive that propels us toward this diversity of life, towards a new destination among the stars. We maybe we don't know where we're going yet, but we're going among the stars.

JJ

Mhm, mhm. No, yeah, it's funny that you mentioned that because yes, I love play on, I love like, you know, playing on words. It's something that me and Stacey Robinson do a lot with Black Kirby. But also, you know, it's, I look at it as an Afrofuturist process too, because I'm influenced by the idea of creating like new words, like, you know, I love, what's his name? It's Istvan Csicsery-Rony's book on science fiction, where he talks about the idea of like, new neologisms being created for like new technology. So I like the fact that you use the word prosthetic too, an idea like the prosthetic impulse of thinking about like, this is the extension of ourselves, you know, I think—

JCC

Put that on your Illabus!

JJ

Yes. Yeah, it's going to, no, it's already there. It's already there.

No, but see that idea of, you know, this being an extension of ourselves is so great to me. And yes, definitely thinking about like travel, you know, that's a really big aspect of like Afrofuturism: the vessel, so we're putting like these pieces of information in a vessel, a time capsule and sending them into the future.

JCC

What are some, are there some future dream adaptations that you hope to work on, will work on, already working on, or what's the next, what's the next thing for, for the curator, John Jennings?

JJ

Yeah. Oh, that's a great question, because there's so many things. So, you know what actually, as far as the curator, I mean, so one of the next adaptations that we're getting ready to drop is called The Last
**Count of Monte Cristo.** Afrofuturist, solar punk, futuristic version of *The Count of Monte Cristo* based off the coast of Africa, 180 years after the polar ice caps melt. So it's actually still, so it's still a pirate story, but we're using like solar power, wind power.

**JCC**

Amazing. So it's playing off of Dumas’ own racial heritage.

**JJ**

That’s correct. And also the fact that it's based off of one of the, maybe the only novel that he wrote by himself, because a lot of people realize that Dumas actually had a collaborator, you know, a ghost, a kind of ghost collaborator, I forgot his name right now. But there’s this novel called Georges that he wrote that was directly related to like, I think a slaver boat. And it’s one of the only stories that he wrote that actually relates to race. So that actually was an inspiration for *The Count of Monte Cristo*, you know. And it's just so much, so much culture that I was like, this is so great.

**JCC**

Wow.

**JJ**

So yeah, so that's, that's been adapted by Ayize Jama-Everett, who’s my co-creator of *Box of Bones*, and, right. And also Tristan Roach, who is from Barbados, he’s a Barbadian artist, from a space that could be definitely affected by climate change. You know, so it's kind of a cli-fi story. It's beautifully done. I mean, it's a beautiful book, I think. I don't know if we have the lettered version of it yet, but it's, I think it's going to be lovely.

Another adaptation we’re working on right now, I got Kinitra Brooks, you know, to adapt *Red Dirt Witch* by N.K. Jemisin into a graphic novel, and the great Ashley Amanda Woods, is our artist on it, and it's beautiful. I think it's going to be, it's a great adaptation. Like, she'd never done one before, you couldn't tell. It was really well done.

**JCC**

Wow. Is this for Megascope?

**JJ**

My dream adaptation—So, all this is Megascope, yeah.

So, one of the things that I'm really excited about is I want to, we have a pitch in from Jabari Asim and myself and David Brame to do some adaptation of Henry Dumas's work, because I'm also a huge fan of Henry Dumas.

**JCC**

Right, well *Box of Bones, Ark of Bones*, yeah.

**JJ**

Yeah, yeah, it's very much influenced by, that's exactly what the title comes from.
Yeah, and so what I've been doing too is not only being interested in those types of adaptations, but also adapting and fusing together to, it's almost like an Afrocentric, mythopoetic, you know, of like a connected universe of all these different characters. Like, for instance, the Megascope to me is almost as significant as the time machine. To me, like, that changes Du Bois into like, to our H.G. Wells, you know, that kind of thing, right? So, what happens if the Megascope is given enough power to become the portal, right?

So, actually, what I've been doing is actually utilizing these diegetic prototypes in different stories on purpose to kind of perpetuate those ideas. So, for instance, me and Nalo Hopkinson and the great Steve Bissette, who co-created John Constantine, we're working on a book together called *Night Comes Walking*, this is for Megascope as well, where it posits Zora Neale Hurston as a paranormal investigator.

**JCC**

Nice.

**JJ**

And she uses a Megascope in the story, that kind of stuff. Yeah, so it's like, you know, just trying to tie all these things together.

**SW**

Well, this is so inspiring. I feel John, like, your ark is very full and we're all very lucky, because every day sure is a flood.

But as we sail to the end of the episode, I'm going to ask you our signature question that we're asking all our guests this season, and I'm actually really excited to hear your answer, because it's clear you are always creating and co-creating. So, it makes the answer to this question maybe more difficult. And the question is: other than your actual writing supplies and devices, what do you need to sit down and write or draw?

**JJ**

You know what? A shower, you know, a shower, yeah, and well, then coffee. So a shower is not to me, it's not just waking me up or actually just cleaning my body, but I find that being near water or being in a shower actually like stimulates, I do a lot of writing, you know, and if you're, in the shower, so if you ever like, John's in the shower, you can know I'm in there because I'm talking to myself. I'm actually writing dialogue. You know, and it's funny because like my friend Nnedi's like that too, so much so that she keeps like a waterproof like pad or something near the shower so she can write because you get ideas or something like this with the water running over you, and you can see and hear a lot better or clearer, it's weird, you know. So I tend to take these really long showers and, you know, I'm writing in here.

So it starts there and then what happens is when I, you know, I feel refreshed and stuff, I can sit down and I can actually go about my creation or whatever, and it's actually pretty much for mostly creative work, but also like if I'm doing something non-fiction, I can think of the theories and maybe make the, the locks and tumblers click a little better, you know, yeah. But that and coffee.

**SW**

Well, this is like the world's most productive shower that I've heard of. I feel very humbled and very shamed, but also it's really all about the ark, we're bringing it, bringing it full circle here.
Thank you so much to, to both of you for this really exhilarating conversation. I just want to remind our listeners that you can buy both of our guests’ books, including the brand-new Silver Surfer: Ghost Light in many bookstores and online, and we'll put some links on the episode's webpage so they're easy to find.

And as always, we're grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to Public Books for its partnership, and we acknowledge the support of Duke University. Hannah Jorgensen is our website manager and transcript editor, Rebecca Otto is our social media manager, and Connor Hibbert is our sound engineer.

Novelists from past seasons include Chang-Rae Lee, Teju Cole, Ruth Ozeki, Jennifer Egan, and George Saunders. But tune in next time for an episode featuring the novelist Erika Wurth. So from all of us at Novel Dialogue, thanks so much for tuning in. Keep listening and keep reading.