

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E2): Honors Students Explore Afro/African Futurism at Library Literature Fair

[*Getting to the Point* theme fades in]

[00min 05sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

Welcome to *Getting to the Point*, I'm Tonia Magras, host of today's podcast. This semester, Professor Kisha Tracy's honors literature class focused on the sci-fi genre, Afro and African futurism, and Jujuism. We're going to get into the meaning of those terms in a bit, however, as part of this class, students participated in a literary fair titled "A Journey into What's Possible: An Exploration of Afro/African Futurism".

[*Getting to the Point* theme fades out]

[00min 34sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

This fair consisted of students making posters and presentations, identifying and analyzing the textual, historical, and cultural context of works of literature through literary analysis and critical evaluation of Afro/African Futurism. So what is Afro African Futurism? If you dig deeper into its meaning, you'll find many authors and experts have varying degrees of explanations. However, in Dr. Tracy's class, we came down to the idea of it being a combination of science fiction, history, and fantasy, which explores the African and African-American experience.

[01min 14sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

Today, I am thrilled to introduce the winner of the Judges Choice Award, Autumn Garceau, and winner of the Visitors Choice Award, Julia Arena, to discuss their literary projects, which were a part of this fair. And later will be joined by Lori Steckervetz, the outreach librarian for student success here at Fitchburg State University, who is also one of the judges in this year's literary fair.

But first, Autumn and Julia, welcome to *Getting to the Point* and congratulations again. Let's start with you, Autumn. You won the Judges Choice Award. First, tell us about your submission and how you prepared it.

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[01min 52sec]

Autumn Garceau:

So I look- the first thing we did in class was watch *Black Panther* and I really liked the movie. So I looked at that, and how they used African language, which is the language of Xhosa in the movie, it's what they consistently talk when they're there, and I just thought it was interesting to see how they brought that into the movie to make it more...not as much of like a Western outlook, more of like it's based in Africa. We have the African language just kind of keeping it all in like a fluid line.

Tonia Magras (host):

Now, are you like a sci-fi genre fan or was this kind of your first delve into it?

Autumn Garceau:

More so like my first delve into it. I kind of just started watching all the Marvel movies, but I really liked it.

[02min 39sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

So, when they called your name as the winner of the Judges Choice Award, what- what was going through your mind?

Autumn Garceau:

I was kind of shocked, honestly. I wasn't really expecting it walking around. There was definitely a lot of good projects, so it was a surprise.

Tonia Magras (host):

And Julia, you won the Visitors Choice Award and you had to present your project to all- there were like a bunch of Fitchburg High students walking around asking questions and, just full disclosure, I am also in Dr. Tracy's class and I had a presentation as well. So, talk about that experience.

[03min 17sec]

Julia Arena:

Yeah. So presenting to a live studio audience type-of-thing is a little daunting and, I'll be honest, I went into it absolutely winging it. So I came into this and, honestly, once I started doing the first presentation for the first group of people, I really got into it and I was like, "Oh yeah, this is why I was so interested in this topic".

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Tonia Magras (host):

And now same question to you, were you a sci-fi fan before this class?

Julia Arena:

Ohh, am I. Ohh, am I. I am such a nerd. So, I mean Autumn over here is talking about just getting into Marvel movies. I've been on this bandwagon for years now, so sci-fi is right up my alley and it's been really interesting to explore this new Afro/African futurist version of the genre, where I've been more into like the Marvel side of it, kind of...Black Panther was at first step into this realm.

[04min 04sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

Now, I want to bring in our Fitchburg State librarian and Lori Steckervetz, who was one of the judges of this year's award. And before we get into that part of it, you worked with Dr. Tracy in kind of helping to develop this fair, so talk a little bit about that.

Lori Steckervetz:

Sure, so Dr. Tracy actually emailed me and my colleague, Olivia Rossetti, one of our other librarians, with the thought of some sort of literature fair, or a mini literature fair, since it was, you know, focused on one class.

And we really loved this idea. We were interested in having a chance to bring student work back into the library. So we thought this would be a really great opportunity to both highlight the idea that we are a space that you can do events in, we could do exhibits in, and then also get to what I think is the heart of the matter and that's displaying student work.

We're really proud of the work that students do here on this campus, and I'd like to see more of it up, for people to be able to come and take a look at.

[05min 12sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

So as I mentioned, Lori, you were one of the judges of this competition, and I'm not going to be upset because you did not vote for mine, but you did help out with the other librarians that you mentioned in this competition.

But it was a pretty stiff competition, like, talk about some of the things that you were seeing with the presentations.

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Lori Steckervetz:

We were very impressed with the work. Dr. Tracy had kind of handed over the...judging process to us entirely, and judging was extremely difficult for a number of reasons: the high quality level of work, but also the very different approaches.

And it was really, really hard to judge. We each judged separately, didn't talk to each other about it. We put all of our scores into a rubric- or into a spreadsheet and then kind of looked at the averages and...it was tight. So it was really, really, really tight.

[06min 10sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

Now just reflect on the overall, because this was a lot of work!

I mean, I- you know, again, at full disclosure, I was also participating in this fair. It was a lot of work and to Lori's point, having to take this huge genre and then bring it down to one idea for this fair. Autumn talked a little bit about your process and how it is you were able to get down to your presentation on the languages used in Afrofuturism.

Autumn Garceau:

So after Dr. Tracy announced it in class, I think it was like the class after that or somewhere around there, I kind of ran by my ideas with her at the end of class and she had said it sounded good, just like, I need to figure out where I actually wanted to go with it. So I researched, I put stuff together on a piece of paper.

I found a template for the poster online and I kind of just threw everything in and got it like...in the sections that I wanted it to be in, but then I was like, "This is a lot of information", so I emailed my template to her and was like, "Does this- is like the format good? Is there too much words? Is stuff too big?"

And she pretty much was just like, there's only I think I had like a definition or something that I didn't really need. And she was like, "There's a couple of things you can change. Other than that, I think it looks great" and I kind of just went from there and then added a little bit of design to it.

[07min 40sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

And Julia, talk about your process.

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Julia Arena:

Yeah, so I struggled a lot in the beginning of this project, kind of trying to think of a topic. Again, it was a very broad, like concept- I wouldn't even call it a question that we were given. It was more like, do something that relates to this class and make it your own. And so, I was lucky enough to actually be able to build on a previous assignment that we had done, for what was our called September Monthly Focus.

I was given the topic of New Orleans and Haiti and that relationship, and so, I was able to build upon what I learned from that and apply one of the books that we read to it. Now, having, like, read that book, where that assignment was like- or we read the book, so I was able to kind of combine those two things and what I learned into this project and really build upon the research I had already done, which is great to kind of, you know, to recycle a little bit of it.

And yeah, and then I got creative with some formatting and Canva and I love that site so much, it is a saving grace for me.

[08min 44sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

And Lori, you know, one of the things walking in there that really touched me was being able to see all these presentations and really reflecting the...total African diaspora and seeing the images of- of African, African-Americans on these posters with the imagery around it. Was that also one of the reasons why the library and Dr. Tracy, you guys got together and thinking like, this is a great way to promote diversity as well?

Lori Steckervetz:

I think that's a really great point, to be honest with you, the initial ask from Dr. Tracy was really just focused on the idea of like, "Hey, I've been wanting to get student work back on display. I want to work with the library". This is a really great kind of opportunity for us to be able to highlight student work on a topic that I don't think has gotten a lot of- a lot of people on this campus in particular know about.

There hasn't been a class, as far as I know, taught on this literary genre before. And while it has been around, at least for a little while, I know *Parable of The Sower* is a pretty famous book.

Tonia Magras (host):

Octavia Butler.

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Lori Steckervetz:

Yes, *Of the Sudan*, I'm actually currently reading it right now. So, you know, I think that it made it definitely a really great for us kind of, you know, you're all guinea pigs for us and we thank you very much for playing along.

So it was really a opportune kind of coming together of things. It would have been great regardless of the topic, but that just definitely was icing on the cake for us.

[10min 25sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

As I mentioned in the introduction, we were introduced to the idea of Afro, Afrofuturism and Afro Jujuism. Starting with you, Julia, had you heard of this genre before and what really stood out for you as we were learning about this?

Julia Arena:

Yeah, so I had been somewhat familiar with the idea of Afrofuturism specifically, but hadn't really been exposed to these ideas of African Jujuism, African Futurism and the differences between them. And so it was really interesting to kind of take this very vague knowledge of the fact that *Black Panther* existed in this realm and really explore it in a new sense.

And being exposed to these- these new topics in these books, it's just...I mean, it's fascinating, it's culturally enlightening, and it's really special to be able to learn about these things in a class where I wasn't really expecting it.

[11min 16sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

Do you think about science fiction and the stuff that you're watching differently now that you study this genre?

Julia Arena:

Yeah, I would say I remember it was one time in class where we mentioned that we don't need comparisons necessarily where, some Afro African Futurism titles were be comparing to more more Americanized titles, like, you could say people would compare *Black Panther* to the Tony Stark of, you know, of Africa, and we don't need those comparisons. I think that's my biggest takeaway from this, is that, it's its own path.

It doesn't need to be, like, connected or associated with anything that we consider familiar.

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Tonia Magras (host):

And Autumn, you mentioned that you- well, we actually got the chance to watch *Black Panther* during the class, and no, we weren't just slacking off, it was actually part of our studying. But did you see it differently when you watched the *Black Panther* after we started being introduced to this genre?

Autumn Garceau:

Yeah, I- I hadn't seen Black Panther before we watched it, but I knew it was, like a Marvel movie, and it was associated with all the Marvel stuff. So I was like, I always just kind of picture it is like a marvel movie, nothing else really...combined with it. And then after watching it and talking about all the different genres and like, kind of breaking it down after we watched it, I definitely- I can definitely see it in that aspect and it's pretty interesting.

[12min 45sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

We also had to read several books in Dr. Tracy's class, *The Parable of the Sower*, which Lori mentioned, *Black God's Drums*, *Black Leopard Red Wolf*, and I think we're finishing now with *Akata Witch*. Autumn, what was your favorite and least favorite book and why?

Autumn Garceau:

I would probably- I feel like they were all like, in different ways, they were good, but I think my favorite one would either be *Akata Witch* or *Black Leopard Red Wolf*, even though it's a very hard storyline to follow. As much as I did like it, I would say my least favorite was probably *The Parable of the Sower*, just because I'm not as much of like a comic book style book reader. So it was just different for me and not my favorite.

[13min 33sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

That threw me off a little bit as well cause when I ordered the book initially at the beginning of the semester, I'm like, "Wait, I don't think I did the right thing". Same question, Julia, what was your favorite and least favorite book that we read in the class?

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Julia Arena:

Yeah, I'll save the best for last, but not to hate on *The Parable of the Sower*, but you're making me pick one and, I think maybe just because I have a little bit recency bias with all the rest of them, but honestly, I wouldn't say it's- it's bad by any means. It doesn't deserve the whole like "my least favorite" title.

But I think definitely just kind of like the dreary storyline got me down. If I had to compare it to the rest of the other books, I- as reflected in my project, *Black God's Drums* is definitely my favorite. I love the brevity of it as a novella and I just really appreciated how it blended lots of worldbuilding. The alt fiction, alt history, I mean, and...all of these fantastical, magical, elements of the deities. It- it got my little nerd heart a-beating.

[14min 40sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

I love that. I love that. Lori, are you planning on, or is the library, I should say, planning on doing a fair like this again next year? They're plans to kind of keep this as like an annual thing?

Lori Steckervetz:

I mean, I hope so. And I'm also hoping that it piques the interest of other faculty on campus. So I'm really hoping, you know, I think there is interest from from Dr. Tracy and there's certainly interest from us as like it would be great if this was an annual thing, you know, whether or not it's kept to one class or we expand it out to like a literature fair for a lot of, you know, other literature classes that are running at the same time, I have no idea. But we're very open to possibilities.

I think at the end of the day, we really see ourselves as being- wanting to be a place where students and faculty in the Fitchburg State community come into the library and see themselves reflected back in the space. So that's very, very important to me and the rest of the library staff.

[15min 41sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

So we are, I think we have one more class actually in Dr. Tracy's class. Julia, would you recommend this class to any of your peers?

Julia Arena:

Oh, absolutely. I think it's been such a- a great learning experience. And like I said, for a gen-ed, you know, sometimes you can go into those and say, okay, well, I'm going to sit here and I'm going to listen to a lecture, I'm going to read some books and "yada, yada, yada", but this has been a really great experience to see books that I've never read, books that I've never been exposed to, and kind of this topic that is genuinely piqued my interest and, I hope that this is a topic that explore- is explored in future honors lit classes, but also maybe a little twist on it, kind of explore an even more like new area.

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Tonia Magras (host):

Yeah, shout out to Dr. Tracy because she really did make it a lot of fun and we had some great discussions in class and- and all of that. Well, you, Autumn and Julia, you guys have bragging rights now, as the two winners of the literary fair and I want to just say congratulations again and thank you for being guests on the podcast. And also Lori Steckervetz, thank you for being here on behalf of the librarians.

[Getting to the Point theme fades in]

We are really happy that we were your first guinea pigs and we wish you the best success in future fairs and displays of students' work. I think it's very, very important.

[17min 12sec]

Tonia Magras (host):

Thank you all again for being guests today. We hope you continue to achieve academic excellence in your studies here at Fitchburg State University. And that's it for this edition of Getting to the Point. I'm Tonia Magras and thank you for tuning in.

[Getting to the Point theme continues]

Zoe Chrisostomides:

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[Getting to the Point theme fades out]

[17min 53sec]

[Perseverantia theme music fades in]

Kyle Mooney:

I'm Kyle Mooney. I'm an Associate Professor of Communications Media. And you're listening to Perseverantia, a Fitchburg State University Podcasts Network.

[Perseverantia theme music fades out]