

Transcript

Earth A.D. In-Conversation Event

00:05

UMA: Okay. Hi, everyone. Welcome to our kind of panel event, which I didn't actually think of a snappy name for. But this is something I've been really looking forward to really excited about. This is a kind of supporting event to go with the exhibition Earth A.D., which is currently on at Wysing Arts Centre. And so I should kind of introduce the people I've got with you first of all. My name's Uma, and with me today I've got— Oh, I should do the housekeeping first. Sorry I'm doing these things back to front So first thing of all, as this event is being recorded. So it will be kind of archived after the fact. So if you want to revisit it, it will be on the Wysing Broadcasts website and it will be subtitled and there should be a link from the stream text that you can go to and and yeah, and it's being – yeah it's been archived. And so I'm going to introduce myself. First of all, I said my name's Uma Breakdown; I'm an artist and researcher based in the northeast of England. And I've just kind of well, it's been about a month now since Earth A.D opened at Wysing Arts Centre. It's a touring show Co-Commissioned Very Generously by Wysing Arts Centre and QUAD in Derby, and FACT in Liverpool. And with me today, I'm very happy to say I have my friends. Angela YT Chan. Angela YT Chan is an independent researcher, curator and artist specializing in climate change, her work explores power in relation to the inequity throughout the history of the climate crisis through self archiving, rethinking geographies and speculative fiction. Her recent research art commissions focus on water scarcity, conflict and everyday experiences through climate framings and communications. Since 2014,

Angela has produced curatorial projects and workshops as Worm Art Ecology collaborating with artists, activists and youth groups. She co-directs the London Science Fiction Research Community. Angela is also a research consultant, having worked in international climate and cultural policy and on climate and sustainable— sustainability projects for major cultural institutions. Also with me today is Dr Tom Dillon, who is a researcher whose work investigates the politics and aesthetics, of speculative fiction magazines. They recently finished a Ph.D thesis on the speculative fiction magazine *New Worlds* from the 1960s. Tom is a founding member member of Beyond Gender, a research collective that looks at the representation of gender in relation to race, sexuality and class in science fiction. He's a former director of the London Science Fiction Research Community and so these are I going to give you a quick outline of what we're going to do, say, I've got these wonderful people are each going to I think we start with Angela and then Tom. They're going to kind of give a kind of presentation on some of their current research and things that they're interested in. And then after that, we're going to maybe have another chat and then I'm going to open to some questions. So think about any questions and you can send them directly through the chat in twitch and they'll wind up through a convoluted maze. They'll wind up to me, my earpiece and I think that is everything. So, Angela, are you ready to present?

03:32

ANGELA: I am, firstly I will share my screen and let me know when you see it. Yes. All right. So I am Angela. Nice to meet everyone. And I'm so excited

and so happy to be in this space because Uma, we've been like e-friends for a few years, several years now.

03:53

UMA: Yeah. Quite a few.

03:53

ANGELA: And Tom, I have known of you from a distance for quite a while, and having this, like, LSFRC link is really special as well. So it's yeah, it's great to be in this space and I guess I can even illustrate this with my opening slide, which is a really amazing illustration that Uma produced that I bought maybe in the summer, and it sits on my desk at home. I'm not home at the moment, but yeah, it gives me encouragement, inspiration and a bit of cheekiness every day I am at that desk, so yeah, just to kind of let everyone know that these brilliant illustrations of the sale of Uma's Instagram page so for me what I prepared to share today is a little in response to some of the things that Uma and I have been chatting briefly about ahead of this session. And it's for me largely responding to the ways that we strategise on self archiving and what it really means in terms like for me what it brings together for the ways that we storytell the climate crisis. And I think that it might be helpful for me to kind of just highlight some of the key themes that I'll be going through in the next segment. So firstly, I feel that it's really important to be thinking about counter-narratives, which stand as resistances to the mainstream narrative. In this context, you know, that I work in, the mainstream stories that we're hearing and also kind of disseminating within our own spaces about climate change. But

what really matters is also kind of the counter-narratives that don't get resourced, they're actively erased. And what this has on the implication of the presents and the future is that we are kind of moving through in terms of the climate crisis is really important for us to think about also creatively as well. And then another kind of question I think about quite often is what constitutes climate data because in talk— talking about stories and like giving our perspectives, we're also feeding a lot of information into the ways that we're describing our experiences. And so to kind of maybe destabilise the power systems that really contribute or kind of steer the way that mainstream climate stories are being told that might not represent us, might not be representing marginalised communities. And to really kind of what I think of throughout my practice, whether it's like through research for curatorial projects or for more recently visual arts projects or, you know, researching with other artists on the frameworks for what is sustainability in the arts, in the art sector, which is also an industry for us to deconstruct the criteria for expertise. So really problematise, you know, what expertise could mean rather than to break it down from something that says, oh, climate science doesn't matter. Like that's not that's not what I mean. What I'm valuing alongside that is that, okay, we need to also recognise the power systems that have constructed the hierarchies which frame like what kind of sciences, traditional ecological knowledges or kind of like, you know, everyday experiences that we value or we don't value in conversations about climate change and so, I kind of come from when I work on my projects I think a lot about colonial histories and it's, you know, as the starting point also of the climate crisis as well. And specifically for me, I am very interested in the British Empire the way that it continues through to the contemporary as well, in the ways that we narrativise

climates and environmental issues. So I'm going to give you an example just briefly, because I think, you know, this is a project that I've done maybe a bit of a while ago. And so I'll move on to a more recent project later on. And I want to describe to you this research project that ended up to be a video piece that I did in 2021 as a way to kind of illustrate the ways that climate framings are really important to how we position ourselves and also kind of take on the mainstream narratives quite critically. So the Great British Rain Paradox is an actual report I mean, it sounds pretty sci fi. It's quite— the name is very eye catching and so it was published in 2020 by RB Finish, which is a dishwasher detergent company. And this report was supported by the UK Government's environmental agency and it warns about the UK's projected water scarcity crisis within the next 20 years. The report describes a paradox that while 77% of the British public respondents believes the UK is a wet and rainy country and assume there are adequate water reserves. In reality, our demand for water could soon outstrip supply. So for me as a researcher, I was quite critical about the way that this report goes, goes on to frame the water scarcity issues, specifically around the UK, without transparently telling the public about the decades of state deregulations, which means that water companies and sewage companies are not by law I guess I— they are not required by law to register when they have been polluting the water ecosystems. And so for this report it's framed as a water-saving strategy framework, and it's very kind of consumer-focused. It doesn't address us as citizens with rights to water. And what does this tell us for the future of the climate narrative? So this report saying, okay, in 2040, there's going to be issues and I'm already looking ahead. That's the government this is archives on the government's website that they the authorities could be saying in 20 years time, oh, look,

in 2020, we told you so. We warned you about these issues and we told you to save on water. And so throughout this project and also after it was exhibited, you know, there was a really great kind of like public momentum about water health in— across the UK. And so for me, thinking about, you know, the potentials for, you know, this, this narrative being twisted back on to citizens in the future is actually very real. And so for me as a researcher I thought okay, my methodology could be to speak to people who I know around the UK, are very involved in their own communities and you know, they might not be specialists in water nor climate issues, but they know the surroundings. And so from the Shetland Islands to Birmingham to, you know, London and Cardiff, people, largely racialised people, were talking to me about, you know, their experiences of water and water stories. And, you know, in this, like Fatima and Khadra was telling me about how, you know, there's something about how water that can cross borders and it finishes off. They say that, you know, but people can't. And so thinking also about water in terms of migration like these are all embedded in the ways that we see water not just as a utility commodity, but something that is really fundamental to why we're even here in the first place. And Laolu and Yasmin talk more about the way that it shaped water shaped Cardiff in terms of the cultural identity, the racial identity of the place. And so throughout this project, so I'm going to just list the names of people who are involved. Here we have Laolu Alatise and Yasmin Begum Previously in the previous slide was Kaajal Modi, and then also my mum and dad, Shamica Ruddock, Jennifer Edwards, Amahra Spence, and Fatima Tarkleman part of the video was also this animation piece of illustrations that took a very fluffy looking mosque down. Many different types of waterways. And it's a reminder for us to rehydrate And so, more recently

I've been thinking about, you know, how to how do we move away from, you know, producing stuff as artwork, you know, how do we move towards producing strategies, tools, ways of kind of, you know, breaking the notion of artists must create to exhibit, to create these climate stencils. I'm just going to kind of, describe what they were about. You can see on the left hand side that there's a kind of template and in the middle you have the instruction kind of leaflet as well, which was also translated into Italian on the right hand side. And I was doing these workshops in England, Wales and Italy and the climate stencils were workshops that use question prompts and conversations as well as drawings to design our own individual stencils where each symbol in these squares represent a range of our feelings and experiences related to climate change. So eventually, after these prompts and conversations, each participant would create their own unique stencil to nonverbally express climate issues day to day, week by week, depending on how they would like to use the stencils. So it's a bit of a joke on this kind of like section on YouTube where you have people who are very into like tracking and using their kind of like bullet journals to express their day to day experiences. And because like for me, if you were to ask me how I felt about climate issues this time last year, I might be referring to something that was big and well covered in the media rather than kind of go inward and think, Oh, what was I kind of feeling? So in this kind of like quick exercise workshop series it was just a way to open up some of the ways that we could be thinking about our own personal climate data as a, as a kind of tracking tool that that says, you know, again, like we have a lot of our lived experiences that are really valid and we bring quite a lot of perspectives already and that we don't need to be, you know, quote-unquote experts in order to even feel engaged in these conversations. I

guess working in this kind of overlap of arts and climate change for the past eight years, there's these very stark parallels that I see between, you know, who feel entitled and don't feel allowed to participate in these spaces, both the arts and the environmental climate movement. There are systemic barriers that exclude certain demographics of people from feeling like they can step into the space, let alone steer and shape what that space can look like for them. And so it's, you know, building these stencils were a fun activity and you can see some of the examples that came out as well, working with people in a range of disabilities and also ages and also languages as well. So be intrigued to see how some of people, if they were to start tracking things, how would that work? But there's no commitments for them to do so; it's on their own terms. And so I think I want to finish by, you know, anchoring a lot of these into why I'm so interested in thinking about information, narratives and data as well. I want to, you know, invite you to have a look at some of the real world databases that are telling stories of climate resistances and experiences that are not necessarily in the mainstream or in the British media mainstream as well. For quite a lot of last year, I was working in international climates and cultural policy, largely looking at how cultural sectors around the world are or are not using environmental policies. So kind of like how sustainable is the arts sector globally? and what are the intentions to kind of have this kind of cultural shift as well? And in part of my research, I came across Tatiana Pardo Ibarra, who is an investigative journalist specialising in climate change and was describing Tierra de Resistentes, an open database that documents violent attacks against environmental leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean between 2009 and 2020. And this is a really, you know, important database for people to recognise that also when we're visualizing

data, it can also be across languages that we understand, like the the stories behind them. And it's a great reminder also that when we're working on these projects creatively, that we also have to be accountable to people who are experiencing the violences and devastations day in, day out. For example, here, like where being an environmentalist is not a choice, it is not a curatorial kind of fun term it is not something that is short term either. And another database that I wanted to point towards is The Global South Climate Database And this is by CarbonBrief with Reuters Institutes, Oxford Climate Journalism Network. And so it says that it aims to ensure that journalists from all over the world can contact climate experts from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Pacific. And there's a climate journalist who I was in touch with recently who was my course mate, we studied geography together. Diego Arguedas Ortiz was telling me that, you know, this had just peaked at the thousand mark last week. It was published only a couple of weeks ago and he described that the goal of the project is to ensure that journalists from all over the world can contact scientists from the global south. So it's really, you know, destabilising who gets to have like this microphone that speaks for so much of the populations who are experiencing climate change already. So I'll leave it as that and look forward to our chat as well. Thanks.

21:28

UMA: Thank you so much, Angela. And there's just there's so much I'm from that in my head now that we're going to come and have a talk after Tom's presentation. So, Tom, if you're ready

21:41

TOM: I am ready, yes. Is my audio coming through?

21:44

UMA: Yes, beautifully.

21:46

TOM: Ok, great and yeah, thanks very much for inviting me Uma I'm very excited to be here and talking with everyone. And thanks Angela for your wonderful talk. There's— yeah, it feels very urgent what you're talking about and I hope what I am talking about links to in some way and I guess the way in which I think it probably link to it the most clearly is the idea of counter-narratives. And I hope that will come close as we go on to the talk. But thank you for sharing your research and for those very practical ways in which you're going about trying to bring about those counter-narratives. So I'm just gonna share my screen now. Okay. Has that come up then, can you see that? Okay. So yeah, I'm going to be talking today about the author, Michael Moorcock, and talking about some of the queer implications of his writing. And I hope to talk a bit about counter-narratives as well to link a bit to Angela's fantastic talk. So I'm going to be reading from a script, so I hope it won't be too stilted. [laughs] I'll try and break at different points to make it a bit more human rather than a robot talking. Okay, so Michael Moorcock is a science fiction and fantasy writer, still just about working today but his output has slowed greatly in recent times. He used to— he claimed to write novels in three days in the 1960s and he wrote hundreds of novels. I always find it interesting to know how people know

about Michael Moorcock it's different aspects, different ways in which people know him. He's most famous as a fantasy writer of sword and sorcery that's probably the way that people know him best. He's also well known within the science fiction academic community as an editor of *New Worlds* magazine. And it was very influential at the time in the 1960s, and I'll be speaking a bit about that. And lastly, I don't know if you can see it or whether the video is blocking it. A lot of people who were around in the 1960s and 70s know Michael Moorcock as a countercultural figure. He was a lyricist for the band Hawkwind, and that's a picture of him there on the screen playing a guitar. In this talk, I'm going to try and as far as possible merge these three aspects into one because they're all going on at the same time. And the aim is to explore the queer elements in his work. And I hope this will speak to Uma's work as well. I'm going to begin with an introduction to Moorcock's life and work before moving on to take a closer look at some of the writing that I believe contained an ambiguous queerness, and specifically the character of Jerry Cornelius, which I'll be speaking about. I'm going to end with an evaluation of the intent—Moorcock's intentions and the reader response to the Jerry Cornelius stories. Moorcock was born in Mitcham in South London in 1939, and he grew up in the kind of period of time in London during the Blitz and postwar austerity. He describes these times as an exciting time, strangely, and there's a sense in which he enjoyed playing amongst the ruins. He read widely from a young age. And his first true passion was Edgar Rice Burroughs. He— they're very easy to source these novels at the time. Edgar Rice Burroughs novels because they were freely available in bookshops and train stations. From the ages of 14 to 17 He edited his own zine about Burroughs called *Burroughsania*, and it's up there on the screen. One of

the first issues. On the strength of this, he, at the age of 17, became a professional editor of a magazine called Tarzan Adventures, which you can see on the right of the screen there, and which essentially repackaged American Tarzan comic strips for a UK audience at around about this time, he started trying to imitate heroic fantasy because he was very interested in heroic fantasy. So the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E Howard who wrote Conan the Barbarian. And he first of all, started writing these as pastiches. But then they later become— became critiques of the problematic imperialist and white supremacist overtones of these writers. But these stories he first started writing featured the ghoulish Eric and his vampiric phallic sword: Stormbringer And I've put some illustrations and book covers of this character. These stories were picked up by an editor called E.J. Connell and he edited a fantasy magazine called Science Fantasy. He also edited a magazine called New Worlds. And around this time, so around his late teens and early twenties, Michael Moorcock became involved in a number of different subcultures, including playing in bands, being part of anti-racist political campaigns and also being part of the science fiction fan community. So in 1964, when Moorcock was 2— think that's right, if my math is correct, he was offered the opportunity to edit New Worlds magazine, and he edited the magazine until 1970. And during his time at New World, he's widely viewed by academics and critics as ushering in a new movement in science fiction that's known as The Science Fiction New Wave The new wave was characterised by experimental literary techniques and the introduction of, well, the apparent introduction of more edgy content such as sex, drugs and madness. And during his time editing the magazine Moorcock published a number of well-known or soon-to-become well-known figures such as J.G. Ballard, Pamela

Assouline and Thomas Pynchon. And a lot of— a host of different writers and authors as well. You can see one of the covers has an M.C. Escher illustration on the front. That I've got up there on a slide Moorcock has described his motivation for shaking up science fiction as attempting to create what he called a popular avant garde, so trying to merge popular fiction with avant garde experimentation. And this idea was very much in the air in the 1960s. There were lots of people and groups trying to merge popular modes and experimental techniques but just off the top of my head, something like Pop Art is an example or Penguin paperbacks and the Beatles are examples of 1960s groups and products that are trying to mix popular and avant garde forms. Susan Sontag described this at the time as what she called 'The New Sensibility', and she saw it as creating one culture, which was a merging of popular and experimental avant garde forms, but also merging artistic and literary spheres as well. And Moorcock also described his work as part of this New Sensibility. So the content of New Worlds wasn't particularly gay or queer. And even when there were explicitly gay moments within the stories, it was often in an ironic or cynical way. However, what I want to suggest is that the destabilisation of these binaries between popular and avant garde forms had some queer implications which were exhibited most clearly in Moorcock's own work So he's going to talk now about more Cook's queer, queer ish writing. So, soon after taking over as editor of New Worlds in 1964 Moorcock invented the character of Jerry Cornelius. And I have the first illustration of him up here on the screen. He's a trendy young musician assassin, and he was first introduced by Michael Moorcock as a kind of model for other writers in how to produce writing that was both popular and avant garde at the same time. So the first story that he published in New Worlds magazine was a rewrite

of the Elric stories, and I showed you a few slides back, Elric but updated to the modern world. So Jerry Cornelius is in some ways an update of Elric and Moorcock introduced the story as an experiment, an example of the anarchic approach to storytelling, which he hoped that writers and readers would respond to. The first story was followed by two more, and these were later published as *The Final Program*. Moorcock then set about writing a sequel called *A Cure for Cancer*, which was published—was serialized in *New Worlds* in 1969 and then published in 1971. And then he also published two further Jerry Cornelius novels in the 1970s. In the late 1960s, other writers who were involved with *New Worlds* became interested in Jerry Cornelius and started writing their own stories that were published in *New Worlds* that featured the character, the character of Jerry Cornelius. And these included—sorry—James Sallis, Brian W. Aldiss and M. John Harrison. These writers expressed the view that they found the forms of the stories liberating a break from the constraints of either popular forms or experimental narratives. Though these stories written by other authors don't strictly follow a chronology, rather they exist as different versions of the same character or different universes. The developments of each story were weaved into the next one so that the authors were responding to each other's stories. Formally, the stories mixed the plots and imagery of popular fiction with modernist techniques. So images and plots taken from science fiction, fantasy, spy novels, pornography, among others, were expressed using the experimental techniques of surreal juxtaposition, typographical experiments, irony and collage. And this is an illustration that was published in *New Worlds* that's a collage of different texts and different drawings of Jerry Cornelius. The instability of the narrative was deliberately mirrored in the instability of the character. If the aim of the form was to

destabilise the division between experimental and popular writing, then the character followed suit undermining the divide between binary sex, gender and sexuality as well, as well as race and class. When I was writing my Ph.D., which I finished last year, I think, I drew some diagrams to help me work out exactly what was going on with this character. And this is one of them I put up on the screen here. But essentially, for me, what Moorcock was doing was trying to express an anti-imperialist politics with these kind of play of binaries. So the white, straight male of popular fiction that Moorcock had read as a child such as Tarzan and Conan the Barbarian, he was kind of playing around with that, trying to destabilise them. And I guess that links with this idea of counter-narratives, but also the kind of deconstruction of these narratives of I guess Western humanism of that dominant subject position of the white heterosexual male and Jerry Cornelius is this character. who kind of dissolves into different subject positions. Today, I'm going to be mainly talking about the ambiguities of sex, gender and sexuality, though it's important to remember that these binaries, the binaries of sex, gender and sexuality are intimately related to binaries of race and class. And so in Jerry Cornelius' first outing, the first story, he slept with a man in the first scene and he merges with his nemesis, Miss Brenner in the last scene to create a gender nonbinary messiah figure. In later stories, the instability of the character only increased sleeping with both men and women and generally blurring the edges of gender, his identity moving between man and woman, masculine and feminine, and his– bisexuality is at all times ambiguous, disallowing any possibility of stable sexuality and gender. I'm just going to show you an example now of the kind of– of this kind of instability. So this quotation comes from the third Jerry Cornelius novel: *The English Assassin*. And in

this particular vignette, which is— the narrative is made up of lots of short sections in this particular part of the narrative, Jerry Cornelius is in Guatemala with an associate called Colonel Pyat and they're trying to buy iron clads; it's a steampunk alternative reality the two of them are going back to— they finish their day of trying to buy iron clads, and Colonel Pyat invites Jerry Cornelius up to his rooms that he's staying in. I'll just read out a quotation. Let's get a bottle, each, shall we? I have a suite upstairs. And perhaps someone can find us a couple of girls? Or perhaps two girls will volunteer their services. Everyone is emancipated in Guatemala City. Fine. When they had risen, Pyat flung his arms around Jerry slender shoulders. Do you feel like a girl c— Colonel Cornelius? So on one level we have a quite straightforward narrative of white colonial, heterosexuality, Colonel Pyat's professed wish is to find two women to sleep with. And that would suggest that this final sentence. Do you feel like a girl Colonel Cornelius? is a question about whether Jerry Cornelius approves of his plan, i.e. would Jerry Cornelius like to sleep with a woman that evening There's another, more subversive interpretation, which I don't think is that subtle, that Jerry Cornelius might in fact feel like a woman and might wish to sleep with a man. Jerry Cornelius is never given the opportunity to reply, as the chapter ends with this question and we're left kind of ambiguously positioned. We're not sure exactly which of those two options is the correct one, these moments of ambiguity punctuate these Jerry Cornelius stories. The continual movement between binaries leads to a breakdown of the character into multiplicity. So a dissolution of this White Western subject male, straight, able bodied, White, did I say that already? into difference. So not only were the Jerry Cornelius stories a literary experiment challenging the hierarchies of fiction, but they were also a political

challenge to hierarchies of identity within the colonial and patriarchal order. I'm going to end quickly with thinking about how people received the stories at the time, so whether these stories were intentionally queer on Moorcock's part or whether it was something that was being read into. So fittingly, the queer intentionality is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, Moorcock had spoken of Jerry Cornelius as a satire of the counterculture, including the sexual revolution. And a couple of critics have also picked up on that. One critic has found that in one of Michael Moorcock's notebooks for a Jerry Cornelius novel, a note that appears to suggest that it's all a kind of satire on sexual experimentation in the 1960s. And apparently, Moorcock writes that the stories were a satire on the general kinkiness of present day thinking and imagery. And some of the narratives actually can come across as a little bit queerphobic as well. On the other hand, and in complete contradiction to the idea of Jerry Cornelius as a parody of the counterculture. Moorcock has suggested that the stories took for granted, as he did, bisexuality and if you like, homosexuality as perfectly ordinary expressions of human passion and love. He wrote that the first novel itself, *The Final Program*, was an attempt to argue for the blending of masculine and feminine traits as a kind of balancing to overcome the shortcomings of the 1960s. So you could see these stories as both a parody and an affirmation. So it could be a dystopia of 1960s London or a utopia celebrating freedom and possibility that comes out of the counterculture but what of the reaction to such ambiguous texts It appears that some did in fact see these stories as a satire on the counterculture. So one countercultural figure called Mick Farren did in fact complain about the Jerry Cornelius stories they— Some of the writers at *New Worlds* produced a comic for *International Times*, which is a countercultural magazine. And in

it they took the mickey out of the counterculture quite a lot and a lot of— Mick Farren was upset about it. But otherwise, it does seem that it went over people's heads mostly. Apparently The Final Program was rejected by a lot of publishers, not only with disgust and concern for Moorcock's state of mind, but also with anger and hatred. So it produced a really visceral reaction. And the science fiction anthologist and author Judith Merrill who was a big supporter of Moorcock, read the book and said it was evil and didn't want to have anything to do with it. Mick Jagger apparently turned down the role of Jerry Cornelius in the 1973 film of The Final Program, because he said the part was too freaky. In a more positive light, though a source of annoyance for Michael Moorcock. Many readers really liked Jerry Cornelius and they'd come to his house in Notting Hill dressed as the character. And Moorcock thought that this was essentially missing the point and that they didn't see the irony of the character. But I also think that there is a quite clear reading that suggests that there is a queerness there. And I think those authors, sorry authors, those readers were responding to that. I'm just going to end with an anecdote, because I don't have any firm data that suggests that people read it in a particular queer way. But the only time that I've seen Michael Moorcock in person was at a reading of his last novel when it was published in 2016, and in the questions afterwards, someone stuck up their hand and made a statement that was basically that they'd been really influenced by the Jerry Cornelius stories and specifically reading the first novel and seeing the character sleep with a man and merge with a woman. And they were expressing how this was incredibly revelatory for them and helped them explore their sexuality. Apart from that, I don't have any evidence of it except for me. I don't know if you noticed, I have the same kind of hair as Jerry Cornelius, so I kind of

cosplay as him all the time But I'll end there thanks very much for listening to me and I've really enjoyed speaking to you.

40:50

UMA: Thank you so much. Thank you so much, both of you. Oh, my gosh. It's like I've been trying to take notes and I'm kind of just getting completely lost there. These are— they're such, like, amazing presentations that you've done. So I really, really appreciate this. So as a kind of like overall kind of thing, the reason I was interested in talking to you both was between the two of you both this idea of like science fiction, but like the specificity of like systems and systems that are kind of maybe breaking down and unstable and the tendency towards entropy. And also this idea of kind of I can't think of a better word than appropriation. But it's not just appropriation. So things are like counter-narratives, reclaiming narratives, deciding who gets to talk, moving a framing from one level to another level. And so I had I have like a whole bunch of things that's been like a really hard thing to kind of work out where to start. But I wanted to ask, say something to you. So start with Angela. Okay. So, Angela, I've been like trawling through your back catalog of work I've been trawling through it and there's so much stuff that you produced that I'm really, really interested in. But there's one thing in particular that like really struck me and I know that you wrote these prompts for a research day at Is it Bio Art Birmingham? or is it Birmingham Bio Art? Remember that? It was only like a year ago

42:24

ANGELA: Called like BABLAB

42:25

UMA: BABLAB, right, yeah

42:27

ANGELA: It's such a catchy name, let's go with BABLAB

42:30

UMA: BABLAB So it's the thing about kind of introducing artists to using kind of bio art processes. It's something I'm really interested in. Like a big thing in the show Earth A.D. is the idea that like if a thing is going to have to be made in a material that may last forever, like if it's made of plastic, is it really worth making? Is it is it – is a thing worth– Is it good enough to be made if it's going to be around to the end of time and whether to make things which kind of rot and stuff like that is the kind of thing I was thinking about and I reading a thing and you wrote all these wonderful prompts. The people take apart the workshop and there's a thing that really struck me from the beginning, and you frame your prompts to the artists with this first thing, which is how does this living matter live by relating to its changing environment, by relating to us, and in turn, how do we relate to it? And this as like a way of thinking about stuff not as a fixed identity and not as like a general, how it identifies to everything else. But how does the thing work with something that's unstable? And this kind of actually clicked with a thing like a kind of like a horror story to me that's been in my head the whole time I was making the show, which is the kind of the story of the decline of the the saiga antelopes saiga antelopes started dropping in numbers like

hugely in the kind of 2010s like massive like 20,000 of the— of the antelopes because they die over the course of like a few months. And it turned out that it was just an increase— Well, likely is an increase in temperature and humidity. That meant that a fairly benign bacteria that a lot of them had in their beautiful huge noses got too prolific and just eradicated all of them. So this idea of like something unstable, completely collapsing something is something I was very interested in. So, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about this principle of like how a thing— how a thing can be understood through how it relates to an unstable environment and whether that has any other application at different scales or any of the other things that you're doing.

44:32

ANGELA: Yeah, I guess. Yeah. Thanks for that question because I guess it's always like checking the processes that we're using, whether it's— directly using materials or kind of by indirectly like moving through spaces that then shape the erosion, maybe of that space you know, whether it's natural, or whether it's a cultural space, like what are we doing that impacts it because we're constantly negotiating these difficult processes to ensure that we keep things in balance if they're imbalanced there's harm or there's potential for violence. And I think that when we're using materials as artists, for example, there should also be like a a long term understanding that that also has a life. Does it go into storage afterwards, like the way that you were describing the materials in your work decomposing and then also then being replaced, for example, like what does it mean to have like these substitutes as well? Where like it's it's these kind of like they're not quite clones, maybe? I'm interested in kind of like thinking like with you on that,

so like much of the replication of the past are you then creating? Is it an archive to its true like original or is it like a evolution of the original artwork? And I think like in response to the brief, I was given for Bio Arts Birmingham to really like introduce to people who might not have had exposure to living beings as part of artworks, whether it's microbial, such as yeast or plant form or, you know, other kind of like living beings was really interesting because for me, I don't— that's not an area of like, I guess like materials that I have experience working with so much and to see them as like evolving like neighbors. Then like became this kind of like thoughts that I could steer that brief or that kind of like, you know, collection of prompts to give those artists or to give those readers because it's then not seeing art as an object, but like within your ecosystem of like, yeah, like a neighborhood, you're creating these differently scaled architectures where various materials animate or inanimate, are then being— are then inhabiting. And there's a lot of power involved in that. And so it's good to reflect on what kinds of like powers we're like redistributing or holding on to. So yeah, I've answered that with more prompts.

47:50

UMA: Yes. I mean, I'm going to— I'm going to kind of bring a question in to Tom and I've got a kind of follow up that I want to ask a bit more about. But yeah. Tom, so a big thing that I'm really interested in with Michael Moorcock, is, I guess partly his politics, how he so to a degree not really in his own control like connected to the anarchist movement that like the symbol that him and Jim Cawthon made for Elric well not for Elric, but for I think it's actually for just chaos in general. They— the 8 pointed star gets kind of appropriated and moves on beyond what they're doing. But the idea

of like order and chaos is something I was really interested in. And that's why I was looking at the work and hearing your talk and going into the idea of the characters being kind of reused and shared and also going backwards and thinking about how Moorcock begins with like these like tight things of like pastiche and you know, what could be tighter than like writing Tarzan fanfic and stuff like that. Like, so what do you think is like, if any, is there any kind of like political at any scale or kind of resonance that that idea of like sharing characters between authors, of authors like not even having to complete a work with their own kind of character and then being no canonical story or sense of like stability.

49:20

TOM: Yes, it's fascinating. I think it does have a political valence. The idea of not having control over what you're producing and it's something that Michael Moorcock when he came up with the character of Jerry Cornelius, he said, "please use it, and do w— with it what you want" And initially the idea was that some people were supposed to take it as a model for this this new type of writing that was supposed to be experimental but also widely read. So a very 1960s ideas of kind of popular modernism but it's essentially what is now known as Open Source Characters. And I think within comic books— ("comic books" makes me sound like I'm 100 years old!) superheroes, for instance, there's also an open source movement to share characters and they're not to be trademarked. And that, you know, it's a —it's a massive resistance to the commercialization of fiction because shared characters don't happen very often outside of, say, a house character. So in the 19th century and 20th centuries, if there were characters that were shared around, for instance, the Beano is a good

example. These characters are trademarked by the magazine, and then the writers don't have really any control over it and what happens. They're just contracted to write it and their names aren't particularly important. But what Moorcock was trying to say is, "Please take this character. "It's yours as much as mine. "And do w– do with it what you want" And I think that is quite liberating in some ways. And it has the anarchist sense of democratising and pushing back against commercialisation of particular literary products. Anyone can use it. You can do with it what you like, but it also, in a narrative sense, opens up this idea of possibility because you're going from this very tightly controlled literary product. And I guess to link it with what Angela is talking about this idea of decomposition. You're taking something and you're letting it just dissolve and turn into other things. And that opens up a kind of what Michael Moorcock would call the multiverse of every single other possibility of a particular character or a particular narrative opening up. And I have connected this in my research with kind of anti– Michael Moorcock's anti-imperialist politics. So the sense of this White male straight character character of adventure fiction, but also that kind of universal, subject position of imperialism. And Michael Moorcock lets his– this character– Jerry Cornelius is that character, but he lets his character dissolve and decompose. And part of that is letting go of control, letting other authors read into it, but letting– letting other authors take over but letting readers read into it what they want. And I think that has been a source of annoyance for Moorcock, but I think it's also partially the point as well.

52:23

UMA: Right. Thank you. Yes. I mean, this– this actually comes back to

what I was going to ask you, Angela, a little bit. So I was thinking about your presenting the thing of— I'll get the name right again. So is it the great the Great British Rain Paradox? That's the original research thing that's done by Finish. So I guess the thing I was thinking about when you were presenting that and you're talking about how people have this idea of like this country is rainy therefore it's impossible for it to have a thing— to have a drought. And I guess part of that is the idea that we know that it's a rainy country. But I was thinking about how this aligns with other such surveys I've seen. So how I saw a survey recently about how average people in America, were interviewed about percentages of populations, so things like like the trans community in America. From the survey, the general people coming back were kind of saying that they thought the idea of like trans people in the population was somewhere like 20%. In reality, it's more like kind of 1% or something like that. And how like this is rather than a thing about like a kind of visibility of like rain, it's more about the kind of idea of media hours and media presentation and how much fear is stoked into a thing. And I kind of wondered how this idea of like these, like people coming up with their own narratives or even like just asking people to examine like their own kind of rain and water narratives. How is there a way that this can become something that that kind of counteracts that, the idea of like, at least diffusing the idea of there being one story or something else

53:57

ANGELA: Yeah, I guess with the Great British Rain Paradox They only surveyed 2000 people as their sample and it's unclear the socioeconomic background of these people. But the survey or the report itself is, you know, encouraging people to use dishwashers. You have households that have,

you know, certain appliances that others might not. And I think it's more about like the way that— let me kind of like word the sentence in my head I think it's funny because when I was speaking to, you know, my peers up and down the country, they were saying, “well, we know what water scarcity is like because we come from countries— “Our parents come from countries where water is scarce.” You know, there are these like, you know, lived knowledges that comes through when you just have day-to-day conversations that are really dependent on who you're asking. And I think that's— often it's it's quite targeted those questions, they're framed in a way that gets the answer that they want. And there's a difficulty because the narrative that the report was putting across was this kind of seeing is believing is why we're here now in this environmental and climate crisis that's water scarcity. And this is actually quite an ablest approach to be to be getting at for the authorities, because it's saying that, well, “we're kind of shifting the blame “of our kind of accountability to communicate.” And we're just going to say, “because you've taken on your own “kind of agency to read, like the window outside “as like the the facts of the climate's not changing” is something that is really dangerous. And so, yeah, it's, it's— that's something that I was really concerned about. In critiquing that report. Sorry, does that answer the question?

56:26

UMA: Yeah, I think so. I mean it wasn't much of a question more of like a, kind of like just a thing I was thinking about. I wanted to see like, I guess do you see like— do either of you see this idea of like, do you see any other ways that that kind of appropriation can be like a strategy through kind of science fiction to create these kind of counter-narratives and are there any

like, other examples or other things that you are interested in, I guess rela—
Angela I haven't heard any science fiction stuff from you, so I was like
really keen to find out what kind of thing you're into in as well.

57:04

ANGELA: Yeah, for me I really like I really believe that we can't speculate without having an understanding of how we got here in the first place. So in terms of kind of like dreaming up futures, like, to know and be accountable to the histories that have passed is really important. And for that project itself like the speculative fictions came through more in the illustrations and the kind of histories and presents were articulated in the— I guess the video living room conversations that we were calling them. And I think like in terms of like the speculative fiction aspects§ going a bit farther with these works like my practice is kind of evolving in this— kind of like quite fun space at the moment where I'm bringing in kind of like data engineering projects on like climate data with kind of— a kind of a faux historical archive like film narrative with also the kind of— the tropes of speculative fiction and fantasy that you see quite a lot in kind of nineties, Chinese like films. And I just— it's just kind of like instant drama of like, like kind of like movie effects that were used at that time that I'm kind of like really drawn to because it's so in-your-face but showing a lot of ripples. I was working with a group recently on kind of like Hong Kong diaspora kind of narratives up in Sheffield, and like this term called like [...] was described like that comes through in kind of like Chinese fantasy films where you kind of just like visualize the ripples of like these kind of energies that you're passing through to other people. So, you know, how do we kind of visualize influences in a way that is kind of creative and through visual media? I kind

of wanted to ask Tom a question like, what are kind of contemporary kind of uses of Moorcock's characters like have any kind of visual artists, for example, taken this on like beyond like literary like authors. Could you say a bit more about that?

59:34

TOM: So, I'm not actually that well versed on people who have contemporaneously used Jerry Cornelius as a character Michael Moorcock is still writing them every now and again. And I haven't read all of them. And they're often that kind of reading of the current particular political situation and then a kind of ironic comment on them here's an illustrator who died a few years ago last year called David Britten. who did some really amazing illustrations of Jerry Cornelius. He was a Manchester-based artist and Grant— Grant Morrison is that the name of a graphic novelist? Apparently, Michael Moorcock was very annoyed with him because he wrote a character who was very similar to Jerry Cornelius, but he wasn't named Jerry Cornelius. And that caused a big fracas in the graphic novel community. in the UK so Michel Moorcock tried to take the character back but in terms of this idea of trying to appropriate the imagery of, you know, queerly trying to appropriate imagery in the present moment, I think that the person who's doing that the best for me is Isabel Waidner who's a novelist. Who's written a couple of novels in the last couple of years that often take characters from popular fiction and, bring them into the narrative, and completely rework them into a different form. So in 'We Are Made of Diamond Stuff' Eleven from Stranger Things is a— is a major character. and in their most recent book, they use Bambi as a character as well. And so again, this kind of queer appropriation, but at the same time in language—

like experimental techniques but very readable. So I don't if that's a direct line from Michael Moorcock, I don't think it is to all I think it's more a direct line from the 1960s but there are certain people who are trying to do interesting things today. But yeah, there are bigger— those huge organizations that are trying to stop that kind of thing. So I don't know if you heard that Loki— So Disney have control of Marvel. And I think there are reports of them trying to stop people using the word Loki as a description of what they were doing. Maybe it was some kind of religious festival because they have a trademark on the word Loki. So I think there is quite a big problem at the moment of trying to appropriate things in a queer way. But having you know, people punching down. So I don't know what to say about that. [laughs] I think people should just do it anyway if they can.

1:02:29

UMA: It does seem really weird, like Jerry Cornelius is quite odd in that it's like a character made to be appropriated. And you think, like you said, there's not many characters that are created like that except for the house style things or for things like, like the nom de plume Like if you make a really bad film and you then credit it as Alan Smithy, so it's like a kind of shame— shame identity that you can take on if you want to disown something as a director and things like that. But I can't really think of many others that are created specifically to share. But then I guess the thing is, it's like you kind of bypassed that, which is what other people do. Like just steal a character rather than wait for one to be offered up as an open source thing Okay, I, I have loads of stuff and I'm going to have to just like email you outside of this because we need to wrap up. But thank you again. Thank you so much for— [laughs] Yes, thank you so much for this. I

have to plug the show once in this as well. The show is still on at Wysing Arts Centre It's not about either of these things. These are just things I was just like thinking about. And that's why I asked some experts in, but it's on until the 11th of December. And yes, please look up the work of Angela Chan and Tom Dillon. And thank you again for attending this thing and thank you for Wysing, for hosting us. And this will be archived for don't know how long, but for a bit. Thank you very much, folks, bye bye!

01:04:00

TOM: Thanks, Uma. Thanks, Angela.

01:04:02

ANGELA: Thank you both.

01:04:04

TOM: Thanks everyone for watching.