

## Transcript of Interview with Alex Smith by Kit Heintzman

**Interviewee:** Alex Smith

**Interviewer:** Kit Heintzman

**Date:** 03/14/2021

**Location (Interviewee):** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Location (Interviewer):**

**Transcribed By:** Angelica S Ramos

### **Some of the things we discussed included:**

Using art to project hope and remaining hopeful during the pandemic. Afrofuturism as a part of the fabric of activism, how it is imbedded in culture and impacts queer and POC culture. How Afrofuturism exceeds an “aesthetic revival” of representation of Black people in the future and the kind of work that needs to be done to ensure those futures. Deciding to cancel a show he was organizing in the early days of the pandemic to protect the presenters and audience members. The everydayness of people dying because they don’t have healthcare access or can’t afford medicine\* outside of the times of COVID-19; racism, sexism, and transphobia in the healthcare system. Corporate interests and their influence on policy. The unreasonable imperative that artists take the pandemic as an opportunity for productivity when many are out of work. It is hard to make art without fuel and without food. Witnesses barriers in the healthcare while caring for his partner after a stroke 5 years ago, the importance of medical bureaucratic literacy in a “Kafka-esque system”. Excitement about getting the vaccine. The pandemic in geopolitical context. Isolation in practice: Safety precautions and research prior to traveling for a funeral. Hope for “science married with activism”. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences need to be more visible, speak in lay person’s terms, do advocacy, and get in the streets. “Nothing is safe unless it empowers.”

**Kit Heintzman** 00:00

Hello.

**Alex Smith** 00:02

Hello

**Kit Heintzman** 00:03

Would you please start by telling me your name, the date, the time and your location?

**Alex Smith** 00:09

Yeah, my name is Alex Smith, aka Alexa Tarek. I'm coming from Philadelphia PA. I'm 45 years old, and it's March 14 2021 6:05pm.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:25

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under Creative Commons License attribution noncommercial sharealike?

**Alex Smith** 00:35

Yes, I do.

**Kit Heintzman** 00:37

Thank you. Would you please start by introducing yourself to anyone who might be listening to this? What might you want them to know about you and the position that you're coming from?

**Alex Smith** 00:48

Well, my name is Alex, Alex Smith. I'm an artist, writer, musician. And sort of like a often on again, activist, lecture workshop leader. Yeah, and I'm coming out of Philadelphia, my work basically revolves around concepts relating to Afrofuturism. For lack of a better term superheroes, and there's sort of like, a conceptual nature of superheroes in this sort of a sense that you know, the idea of the vigilante and the, and the hero, the people, champions are heroes or whatever, can be a walk among us. I'm in I use tropes from science fiction, cyberpunk, solar punk, bio punk. And like I said, Afrofuturism to empower people of color, queer people, and to project us into the future and our ideas and culture into the future as well. So I use different mediums to do that. My bands solarized, which is a sort of noisy punk rock band. My other band rainbow crimes, which is more along the lines of indie rock, but definitely a lot more, like crazier and noisier than the typical modern day excursions into that. Um, and I written a novel, short collection called artist, and I do collage work in, you know, soundscapes, like curate events, like laser life, which was a queer sci fi reading, that me and my friends in the collective that I'm in Metropolarity, we put that together, I started, you know, I met most of my collective members through that. Yeah, so that's, that's my, my practice right now is a little bit of everything. And, you know, I kind of view my, my work as if I'm creating for, like, 18, or 19, or 20 year old Alex, who probably needed some queer, black, sci fi, madman in his life. So I'm projecting myself, I'm projecting these aspects of myself back to the past, to not just nourish my own community, but to nourish myself as well. So yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 03:24

Thank you so much for that. I'd like to start by asking what the word pandemic means to you?

**Alex Smith** 03:31

Well, it's a right now, it's the first thing I think of about pandemic is the word frustration, frustrated. Just in general, like, first, the idea that like, as artists, we're supposed to just be able to start cranking out work because we don't have to go to our nine to fives. And, you know, there's no time barrier, and, you know, we don't have a bunch of social things that we're being called to, but for me, I might, it's actually frustrating, because I'm legitimately worried about the virus, I'm terrified of it. And I'm scared of people's reactions to it and their negligence and so there's that and then there's the idea that like, um, because of the pandemic, you know, I've been a little bit depressed and a little bit unsure of things. And, you know, it's really scary. Um, you know, as a sci fi writer, I sort of like dabble in possible futures and one in you know, I try to stay away from dystopia and apocalyptic stories, but that does creep into my writing and because I understand, like, how dystopian The current time is, and the pandemic is just adding on to that it's so I haven't really been able to crank out work and I don't expect other artists to be able to either even though we have all the time in the world, you know, I hope that people have been able to take this as not just moments where we can do our work, but also reflect and self care. And, like, you know, watch Sabrina the Teenage Witch and eat pizza too, you know, so, and also frustrated because of the government's response to it, like, flat out, like, they knew it was coming. They absolutely had no interest except corporate interests, as far as like, taking care of this disease and showing us the people like the sincerity of it, you know, we had our presidents and our senators all, you know, taking all the precautions, but like, you know, behind the scenes, but not telling us, you know, but but not leading by that example, and showing the example of yeah, this disease is real, yes, it's not a hoax. You know, I mean, those kinds of things. And like

these, this is, this is what the, the CDC is telling us to do. Like, they're all doing it, but they're sort of make masking these things in their own in the, in their own language, so that their constituents can, like remain under their heel, and it's really dangerous. Like, Trump got the vaccine, in private, knowing that his constituents would be like, Whoa, because half the people that voted for him don't even believe it exists. So I'm frustrated or government and frustrated at our, you know, at Johnny and Jane, who aren't masking and who are still going to restaurants and clubs and stuff, like all we like, as a sci fi writer, um, you know, and maybe it's maybe part of this is, is our media, our artistic media's fault as well. But when we see, um, contagions happen in the movies, like people dropping like flies or whatever, turning into zombies or whatever. So maybe, like, we, you know, we should take some responsibility and like, understand that, like, a pandemic doesn't have to look like instant death. You know, and I think we're sort of I think that's sort of like been a serious miscalculation on our part is because it hasn't been like a bola or any of the weirder, more sci fi looking contagions that that are fictionalized. So I'm just, you know, just understanding how scary all of this is. And the fact that no one is taking it seriously is really terrifying when all we had to do was wear a mask and distance. And we just, we couldn't bring it. We couldn't find it amongst ourselves to do that. So I've been frustrated, and kind of terrified. Sorry, it's a long winded answer. But that's how I feel.

**Kit Heintzman** 07:51

I'm here to learn from you. And anyone listening to this is here to learn from you. So long winded is not a not a problem. I'd like to invite you to the extent that you are comfortable to say something about your relationship to health and healthcare infrastructure, prior to COVID-19.

**Alex Smith** 08:13

Well, I have not had insurance for a long time, I just want a grant. And so I got I'm using some of that to get insurance on this is the first time I've been insured since I was in my mid 20s. Um, so I'm actually going to a legit, like non clinic doctor visit for the first time in like, 20 some years, so. And part of that has been because I'm taking care of my partner in a lot of ways who had a stroke about five years ago. And I've seen the medical industry firsthand. I was kind of, like, thrust into it. So going through the machinations of like, sign these 8 million forms, and, oh, you signed 8 million, but you needed to sign 8,000,001 Because that one is actually the form that you know, you need to do this thing. So, you know, and then dealing with bureaucracy of hospitals and care facilities. And, you know, it was an interesting Crash Course. So I feel like I have a lot of the tools to navigate a lot of that stuff, but knowing that I do, and that it's taken years to sort of understand it's like, scary knowing that there's people out there who have no idea it's absolutely terrifying. Um, and it doesn't have to be this way. Like over and like recently it's interesting because British TV have they've been watching the interviews with the with the with Oprah did with the royal family, and, but they're getting them to an American feed. So they're seeing all of our commercials that we have for like, like doctors and medicine stuff, and they're actually freaking out and shocked that we have commercials for medicine. So like, just the idea that the medical world is monetized to the point that it is. It's just, you know, Europe, and Canada probably doesn't know anything about that. But over here, it's something that we just have been born into, and we just take for granted. Or I guess, they take us for granted, and that we don't understand any other way. You know, and, I don't know, I just feel like the medical world right now is something that it's kind of like taxes and, and certain things like that. It's like something that needs to be maybe even taught in school, like how to navigate it or something, because it's very, it's very dangerously, gate camp. It's beyond it's sort of like world that is really strange and Kafka esque in its sort of machinations. Like I remember. So right after my partner was. He was so so basically throughout his entire, like, tenure poststroke he's was like, kicked out of places he was kicked out of ICU, he was kicked out of, like, the

secondary thing. I'm like, but he's not. He's not well, he's not well, like every step. I was saying he wasn't well, then he went to, he went to a kind of like, rehab care facility. And I was like, relieved. I was like, okay, he's got this rehab care, like thing, I take care of them. But then like, a week and a half later, they're like, well, he's got to go, like, What are you talking about? Like, he's making progress changes. So everything that was temporary, and like, everything was beholden to these, like, you know, insurance agencies or whatever. So. Yeah. And then, so when he went to, he had to go to assisted living, and it just became this whole mess. And so I've learned a lot through his experiences. Like, like I said, I, I've never had any serious health problems during the universe. But I definitely am really, I'm actually really excited to go to the doctor, I'm really excited about it. Because A, I want to get the COVID shot. And, you know, I think having a care doctor, like, could help facilitate that better. And, yeah, and, you know, I just want to make sure everything's cool, and good. You know, and just prepare for whatever, I'm getting older. So it's kind of like, you know, got to check in. But, yeah, pretty much all my experiences with the medical world has been through seeing other people go through it and taking care of them, and then just sort of like figuring it out. So I kind of have a sense of it. But it's definitely like, it's definitely like really frustrating, and it's not easy. So, yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 13:22

Would you share a little about what your day to day was? Like, again, still in the pre COVID world?

**Alex Smith** 13:28

Oh, yeah. Well, I started, um, I used to work in food. And then a couple years ago, I just, I just quit the industry. Like, it was like, I don't know, it was probably something dumb to like, I was basically working at a cafe. And it was, at the time, the cafe that I was working at, was probably the best place I've ever worked in, like my two and a half decades of working for the man or whatever. It was probably the best place I've ever worked. Like, they were openly queer friendly. They listen, they seemed we seem to be having discussions about race a lot there. And it was very open and they cared about me or whatever, like, kind of or something. I don't know, it was weird. And then all of a sudden, things started to get a little bit weird. And, you know, it's just, it was just a typical, like he said, she said stuff. And so I guess I was just kind of fed up with putting my energy towards that lifestyle, and I just quit the food industry and started to do freelance full time. I wasn't having any time to do my work. While my art I was turning down, like lecturer and gigs and like shows and I was like, Wait a minute. If I'm getting all these gigs and shows because you know, people want to hear what I have to say because I you know, the book that I wrote, or the bands that I've been in or the scenes I've helped whatever, um, then I shouldn't be doing that. So yeah, it's been a it's been interesting on basically working for myself and having to navigate that world too. But yeah, I was curating shows for the rotunda, which is a venue in Philadelphia, that is essentially owned by UPenn. But we're given a pretty wide range to be able to do account what we want. And so that was a really fun, and there was a lot of community events. So yeah, typically, my days would revolve around writing, curating, and organizing events and shows. I remember right, when the pandemic started to hit, I was doing a two day, sort of like, mini, not even a festival, but like a two day show that was to benefit lava space, which is this anarchist community center here. Who was going through some weird legal stuff. And I remember, like, not wanting to shake hands with anyone, and not but not really understanding why I didn't want to shake hands with him, because like, you know, you've heard rumors and stories, and this was like in February and stuff. And then, um, right, right before the payday was gonna hit in March. I had, there were like a bunch of events scheduled. And I was just like, we have to shut these down. Like, we can't do these. Because really, it really sucked, because they were like, community events. It was like people who are, some of the people were like, just putting on their first event, some of them had, like, rented, they were doing a play. So they rented furniture for the stage. And I was

like, Man, I really don't want to shut this down. But like, I feel like also kind of don't have a choice. And so it was weird. Being in the sort of, essentially the entertainment industry and like, trying to understand the whole thing, and being like, Okay. As someone who's in the entertainment industry, like, who is who sponsors the venue, like, it's my, I'm responsible for these people. So I felt like this huge weight and responsibility. So I really advocated really hard for the managers of the space to shut down even though we had all these shows book. And ultimately, they agreed, and obviously, it turned out to be the right thing to do. But it was really tough at the time. So yeah. So yeah, I guess pre COVID. I was mostly curating and writing. I'm trying to spend my days doing this.

**Kit Heintzman** 17:45

What are some of the things that you've been doing? And how have you been adapting post pandemic?

**Alex Smith** 17:52

I have not been adapting. This has been very difficult. Like I said, earlier, it's been, like, I've seen everything on Netflix and Hulu. Like, that's pretty much how it's been. I did win that grant from the Pew arts. So that's helped me a lot. But it's also challenged me because now I have so many things that are making art feel burdensome, in a way, like, the pandemic. Everyone thinks of it as, like I said earlier, everyone thinks of it as this, like, free space, like artists have this like sleep this like, time and, you know, but when you're worried about, like, where are you going to get food from? It's kind of hard to like, like, fuel your art, like, you know, and it's really, really difficult. And funds are drying up and like, you know, so it's in case there's only so many GoFundMe is, like you can feel comfortable doing when people are legitimately like, not getting medical care, not getting food, not getting housing, you know, so there's only so much you can do. So mostly, I've been kind of edging out. Like, but the weight of the grant and the weight of so called free time with the pandemic has sort of like, created this cycle of like, stagnates. So I'm trying to, like desperately trying to get out of it. I have a, an office now. And I bought some new equipment and some new art supplies. So hopefully, just being surrounded by this kind of like fresh atmosphere will help a lot. I've been really invigorated by the, the idea of the vaccine too, so that's been good. But mostly, it's just been kind of vegging out and playing with the cat and, you know, staying at home like I've been, I've literally been like nowhere have left West Philly like, three times. Maybe the whole time and Not counting like doctor's appointments for my partner. But um, I, you know, I went to North Carolina, where I'm from, because my mother passed away. And that's the only time I've that's one of the only times I've left West Philadelphia was to go be with my family during that time. So and it's, um, yeah. And I was terrified the whole time. I was really contemplating, should I even go? Mmm, someone assured me that, like the train system was pretty good at distancing. And it was it was very distance on the train. And they were super serious about the mask and there was sanitation wipes and stuff everywhere in you know, I didn't stay with my sister, I got a hotel, even those. So you know, that did little things to try to my best to keep everything on the level. But yeah, that's what I've been doing. It's kind of nothing, which is not exciting, I guess. But it's just been the reality. I guess I um, so the few things that I have done, I started a, I did a started a zine called fluff gang, which is about this group of gay bears is basically sort of like it's sort of like this fanfiction II thing that I started doing, it's gonna have various artists who are going to be interpreting scenes from their life or whatever. So basically, it's a data. It's an everyday life of this group of gay bear friends. And I started a company with my friend James Dylan back called Black vans, which also features a gay bear protagonist in a cyberpunk, Afro futurist city, where the character main character Bo is the sort of de facto leader of this group of hackers that aid and a bit superheroes. You know, they do like tracking and surveillance and Intel and stuff for superheroes. And it's about how this Elon Musk meets. Donald Trump meets Martin Shkreli needs everybody who's sucked ever type bad guy has sort of taken over future Philadelphia, and he's hatched a plot to get rid of the superheroes. So now it's up to the hackers to actually

do the heroic work. Now that disappear hasn't been. So yeah, so we worked on that. And then artists got my self published. story collection actually got picked up by a publisher, rozario, so that might come out in sometime in 2021, as well, so things are looking up, but like, yeah, I spent the last year kind of venturing out so.

**Kit Heintzman** 22:49

Can I ask you to talk a little bit about how Afrofuturism has its importance changed? Pre and Post pandemic? If so, how, if not, why?

**Alex Smith** 23:05

I think it has been its presence has sort of like augmented the struggle that's been going on. People are so ever futurism is about. Obviously, it's projecting black people into the future, right? That's like the one the one sentence way to describe it. So because of the pandemic and also because of all of the upheaval that went on this past summer as well. You can even throw in like, like the stuff that Trump was doing and not doing because of all these things, colliding at the same time. I feel like ever feature isms become part of the fabric of the way people think about activism. There can be an entire, like essays, books, Tomes, films, protests, TV shows, live streams that have the sort of like general aesthetic knowledge, goals, tropes of Afro futurism. And you will never even hear the word Afrofuturism. Like, that's how embedded it is into the way black people and particularly queer black people are looking at activism now. So I think it's important is both understated and, like helping to augment what's happening in the world right now. Like, yeah, it's just, it's just like you. I mean, I can even I even see it on I follow fashion a lot. And I even see it on the runways like companies like a cold wall and like Gucci hired Virgil Abloh and he's been in the his last show was basically is basically an ever featured show. Like, I'm like, I'm watching like an afro futurist like film, like in this nine minute like lookbook video. So you know, like, there's every, like aspects of Afrofuturism has touched a lot of mostly career mostly POC culture. And I think it's, I think it's fantastic. There's still room for, you know, the science fiction aspects, there's still room for like, because eventually, I want to see science married with activism. I've been really into the idea of chaos, magic, and alchemy. And these sort of like made up things that are just like people trying to find an answer for something. And I love the fact that that can be applicable to a lot of like African sciences. I've been following a lot of African innovators, like people who use like milk jugs to, like, some dirt and some, you know, to create like hydroponic gardens and, like, there's a peep. There's people in Detroit who have started this whole thing where they're just like, creating internet towers, and they're going, I mean, it's just, there's so many practical applications for accurate futurism. And the sort of like, Afro funk or, or cyberpunk, cyberpunk, like reimaginings of not just like literature, and activism and art, but like real the real world. So I'm really interested in that. In fact, that reminds me of another project that I'm doing. It's called Future smoke. And it's a magazine that's coming out, I'm putting out four issues of this magazine called Future smoke as and each issues a different season. So season one is tech. So I'm in my ideas to interview people like Rashida Phillips from black quantum futurism, and people like that for with the idea of like how tech kid advance or can be used practically in the lives of black people, POC IQueryable. So and then, future seasons are eco bio, mind and war. So those, it's basically a after the revolution. You know, after we've done all the protesting, and then all the petitioning and done all the writing, and then all the upheaval that we can possibly do, what happens after the revolution? How do these concepts apply to the society that we actually want to build? So where we're at right now, with Afrofuturism, being like an intrinsic, seemingly intrinsic part of the struggle Afrofuturism, though, purports to tell us, like the possible futures, so we still have to keep thinking about advancement and new ideas, like if we, let's say we overthrow the government, okay? If we overthrow the government, and we've created in our own image, the actual image of human beings and the people and not like, Democrat, Republican, corporate, this and that, right? Like, if we actually if the

people actually run society, like, how are my how's my sister going to get her sickle cell meds? Right? How are people with high blood pressure? How are they going to get Metoprolol? You know, how are people going to get prep and other like, AIDS drugs? Like, how are we going to get our medicine? Like, How are his food going to be grown? Like, where's power going to come from? What's the highways gonna look like? So these are all questions that we need to start thinking about an understanding and like, everyone seems to like, you know, hate capitalism, but what we're going to replace it with, you know, so those are ideas that Afrofuturism is, is that's the next challenge for Afrofuturism is to like, go beyond the aesthetic revival of seeing black people in space into what will it look like once we get there? Yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 29:21

Some of this, you touched on on the last answer. So feel free to skip if you're, if you think you've covered it, but 2020 was a pretty big year, as 2021 continues to be and I'm wondering what some of the biggest issues have been on your mind over the last year and some change and how either how they intersect with a pandemic or how they just continue to matter.

**Alex Smith** 29:52

What other than one of mostly talks about I guess I could say, like, are black people going to be on bout to exist? Like can I can I leave my house without fear of like, death? reprimand, arrest? Suspicion, you know, I mean, like, like, are we going to be allowed to like function in society, the same way that white people look like, the same way that people who aren't black are allowed to function in society? That's, that's been something that I've been thinking about a lot. Like, for instance, like, so there's scales of this, right? And it's kind of like, on one scale, on one, on one hand, there's like, okay, let's talk about the medical industry, so that there's a fear from black people of going to the doctor, right? Um, you could say, and where does this fear come from? It comes from the fact that we are not considered human beings in a lot of different ways, like, and we're considered like, to have a high pain tolerance. Our ideas, and our thoughts about our own bodies aren't taken seriously, especially women, you know, especially trans people. And it's, like, really crushing to like, be like, if I get sick, I might go to this place and die, because they don't like, understand me as a human being right. And then, so it's also kind of like, yeah, there's just so many like, levels to this, that, it's going to take this huge paradigm shift, for us to like, be seen as a human being. And so that's been something that I've been really, really thinking about a lot lately, like. Another example is like in Hollywood, and these are just the high minded example. This is not even the everyday example. Like, if I'm running for a bus, and like, the bus driver sees me and he drives off, but if I was a white girl, he'd stop, right, like, just little things like that, then compounds and compounds and compounds and to create this sort of, like, wave, you know? And, you know, when our children go missing, is it going to make the news? And, like, are they gonna do documentaries, and films about our missing kids like, things like that, or like, stuff that we, as a society, like, don't even think, you know, we just accepted, like, five year old black girl gets handcuffed and arrested, you know, in school, and it's like, we just accept that, like, what the hell like, it's just, it's wild stuff. And, um, so, yeah, that's, that's been, like the main thing that I've been thinking about a lot lately. And so one of the things that makes me that fuels this curiosity is, and, you know, I'm in media, and I'm an Artistic Media. So I'm always thinking about, like, perception, and representation. And the whole, this whole notion that Hollywood doesn't think that, you know, black stories will sell unless they're, like, pain porn or something. And I, that's really strange and odd to me, because, you know, as a gatekeeper as a producers, they're allowing racism to, you know, color to paint, like, what they decided to release, what they decided to fund and what and, you know, um, yeah, so I'm thinking about that, I'm thinking about that a lot. I'm thinking about the fact that we're not allowed to fail. And we're not allowed to, we're definitely not allowed to fail up. And it's just this idea that, like, we can't make a shitty

movie, or we can't make a shitty album, we can't make the art. We can't make a shitty book. Because if we do, they're not going to like, see, you know, we're not allowed to, like, do anything that's, that's considered transgressive or, like, a failure. And so just that critique of being consistently trying to be 10 times better. And in order to prove our humanity is something that really has been, like weighing on me a lot, you know, and I think it's come from a lot of just interactions with a lot of different things. But yeah, that's that's, that's something that I think is missing from a lot of the the social justice narrative is that like, yes, we can fight for our rights, but we're still not even viewed as human and that's where it all starts. So you That's what I've been.

**Kit Heintzman** 35:01

Thinking. I'm curious, what does health mean to you?

**Alex Smith** 35:11

I think, to me, it means being able to advocate for your well being, and to help others appreciate that advocacy to, to have people in authority expect you to want the best for yourself and for your community, and not to be opposed to the idea that you actually want to live harmoniously, right? Like, for instance, like, if they're coming into a neighborhood, it's like, oh, we're gonna switch this changes turn this neighborhood around, and like, they just want to come in and like, you know, slap some artisanal, whatever chain on top of something. But, like, why not approach that community with that community's interest? And be like, There's already people here, like, what can we do for you, like, so that's health to me being able to, like, exist in, in a, in the society, within a society in the way that you want to exist? Like, you know, if we want to, like, ride our bikes, or play gin bays in the park, or have a barbecue or whatever, like, this is part of our culture and like, you're coming here, like, an understanding that create harmony with us don't like just bring your weird, isolationists Nordic bullshit into our realm, like, understand, like, what, what, you know, what we're already doing here. Um, so health to me is harmony, like, within and without, like, you can't, you have to have both, like, can't diet your way to health, you can't, like, you can do all the exercising and the jumping jacks and have a regular checkup every, like two days. But if like outside forces are absolutely opposed to your Harmony, then you don't have health. So that's what that's what it is to be like harmony, balance, and community.

**Kit Heintzman** 37:32

What are some of the ways that you think we might be able to get there towards harmony, balance community and a concept of health?

**Alex Smith** 37:44

Well, like I said, approaching each community that we encounter, through the lens of that community as best we can, sharing is better than like, terraforming, you know, like, like, how long are we going to have to, like, go through colonial like, you know, this colonial way of approaching another culture, you know, like, we've been doing it for 1000s of years now, and it hasn't paid off, like nothing's really paid off, except for, like, this small percentage of people, right. So it's not working, it's not sustainable. So for me, it's about how you approach the community that you're trying to communicate with. Yeah, don't call the cops stop calling the cops on black people. And like, you know, advocate, you know, advocacy is very important. You see, some say something, but like, you know, that kind of stuff, like, it's very important to be conscientious. And to be able to, like, understand that, like, even if you don't see color, or if you don't care if someone's gay, or whatever, then like, that's like neutrality. We need advocacy. We don't need, we don't need neutrality, we need advocacy, we need understanding empathy. And the closer we get to, that those states of being the better, it might be difficult. Like, for a lot of for

instance, I'm, I'm in writing. So a lot of people often are like, well, it doesn't make sense if this, like it would, wouldn't be natural for this character to be black, or if this character was queer, but like, it's also not not natural. Like it's like, it's, we need people who are willing to take that step to take those advocacy routes to take a chance and to like, make things difficult for themselves. Like, okay, you might not know how to write a black gay character, but like if you have this huge forum, um, and your whole cast on the show is white or whatever like, really is something that you should really be thinking we should really be thinking about, you know. And so in order to, like, get to this level of harmony, we're going to have to make tough choices, we're gonna have to, like, be vulnerable, and we're gonna have to like, especially like, sis, white people are going to have to, like, really start asking some difficult questions amongst themselves. And, yeah, it's gonna be, it's gonna be tough, because it means giving things up. It means giving up resources, it means giving up privilege, it means giving your body and your mind to this sort of like, culture of advocacy. And it means doing it all the time, it doesn't mean just doing it during on Juneteenth, or during it, doing it doing, um, national, with black women's trends Women's Day, or whatever the specific days that they keep creating, it doesn't mean just sharing an article about the first black woman to do XYZ it means like, it means What are you doing, to ensure that we have a multitude of these first a multitude of these things continuously happening, and that people are advocating for the communities that they, you know, claim to be so inspired by, you know, like, at this point, people who are like, paying lip service to diversity and advocacy and things like that are just kind of like, racist, those racist rednecks that listen to a masterpiece, or whatever. Like, they might listen to rap, but like, they're still like, fucked up in the head. So, like, the liberal version of that is someone who would, you know, listen to Kanye West, or Kendrick Lamar or something, but still won't approach their life, you know, with advocacy in mind, you know, and it's because it's difficult, like, it's easier to be blissful, or whatever, like, but it's, but I find out when you do approach things, by trying to like, understand the sort of like, depth of marginalization that marginalized people go through, then your whole world opens up to like, this whole new thing, like, I kind of liken it to when I became vegetarian, like, I never even heard of couscous, you know, like, a whole new palette of food opened up to me because I decided not to kill animals anymore. Like a whole, whole new foods, entirely new cultures, like I've never had Indian food before. Um, so just like, once you start empathizing more, the world opens up to you, it may seem hard and difficult and shameful. I think most people just ashamed. You know, it may seem shameful. But like, once you get past that, and you realize, okay, shame is my, what been what brought me here, but there's actual work that I need to do. And once you start working, you realize, man, I really got to open my entire worldview, you know, it's kind of again, like, I stopped eating meat, because I didn't want to kill animals. But then I realized, all these industries are taking away from the Earth. And because animal rights advocacy is, so it's such a depth to it. And you know, and I was open, my eyes were opened to the health benefits of it. So then that level, so it's the same, like if you decide that you're going to like, be an advocate for marginalized people, that like, you start to understand their culture, you start to understand their story and their struggle and their day to day life of dealing with consistent racism. throughout their day, from the moment they wake up, and turn on the news to the moment they get home. Like there's constantly bombardment, you'll never be able to feel that but you can at least empathize with it and start to like, break those things down within your own community within yourself within the larger world. So that so yeah, using your own empathy, to open yourself up to things is like, super, super important. And don't be afraid to fail. You know, like, I've had people so a lot of times I help people when they're writing. You know, because they see me online and they're like, oh, Alex is a is an interesting person. And he's, you know, his voice is good. So and they'll show me their writing and it'll be like, you know, they will think that they've created this really diverse, like universe or something, right? And I'll look at it and I'll be like, well, these this is all messed up. Like you're doing all these like things because You know, you're having your your black carriers do this and say that your core character say this and say that, but you're not really like, pulling from your own friends, you're not like,

really trying to like, understand and like, like, empathize with your characters, you're basically just pulling tropes from things you've seen on television. And so it's hard. So they get frustrated, and they're like, Well, I just won't do it. So it's but it's, you can't just take your ball and go home, you have to like, take your lumps. Listen to the harshest critics understand what they're trying to say. And in work, so yeah, it's a lot of work. But when you consider the fact that marginalize people are doing this work every second, you know, our lives. And you only need to take a few minutes to correct this one thing. It's kind of a no brainer. So Oh, that was a little tangential, but sorry, about

**Kit Heintzman** 45:55

No apologies necessary. Would you tell me a bit about what safety means to?

**Alex Smith** 46:05

Safety? I think that's a little bit more nebulous. I think. I don't have someone someone else was talking about this to me the other day, I was like, saying there's a difference between, for instance, of saying there's difference between I posted something like there's a difference between something that's like gay friendly, and something that's a safe space for queer people. I think there's, um, and they challenged the idea of the safe space. And I was like, Man, that's kind of right, you know, there really aren't any safe spaces, technically. So I guess I'm moral on the, on the side of like, what's empowering now, I think that's what comes after safe space for me, or just safety in general. Nothing is safe, unless it empowers. So like. It's either, like, we might, like, feel safe, in like, I might feel safe in my apartment, or whatever, right. But I don't feel empowered here. Like, this is the apartment that we took, because it was the only ADA thing and like, you know what I mean? Like, I don't feel safe here, I feel I feel like so certain, like aspects of that can have the illusion of safety. But if something is not empowering you then it's not really a safe choice. Because you don't feel like you're creating the narrative, you're a part of a community. Just because it's got the illusion of safety. It doesn't mean that it's like I said, it doesn't mean that it's advocating for you, it doesn't mean that it's like, really there to see you survive and thrive, because then you have to go on to the next day, that could be putting you in danger. So for me, safety is empowerment. And that's pretty much it. There's no There's no other. There's no other way for something to be safe, whether it's a show or a product. If it's not empowering you, then it's not safe.

**Kit Heintzman** 48:23

Within that framework, how are you thinking about? How do I want to work this? The standard narrative of safety precautions that sort of dominant dominated our current moment.

**Alex Smith** 48:42

Oh, right. Well, again, like none of it feels empowering. It feels like we're just kind of being put out there. Like, it feels like it feels like they're just, Oh, man. Let me find my tinfoil hat real fast. But it feels like we're just being played like we're pawns. They're, like pushing to see how far they can take certain things. And I guess they've been doing that for a while and it's been heightened under Trump. And even some during Obama's period, it's just been like, pushing the limits of like, what they can get away with, right? Um, and the pandemic has been like, freakin ground zero for this kind of like limit testing. It's just, it's wild. It's really wild. Like there's no clear plan, right? There's no, there's no clarity. There's no like, no one's seeing and it's all under this illusion of like, trying to like be like, Oh, we're democracy. So you have a choice. But we don't really have a choice because we're still beholden to corporations. You know? So they Corporation's mandate that we have to open XYZ facilities or whatever, then like, yeah, it's, that's, that's what is governing our governance of this pandemic, that's what's

infringing upon our current safety right now, when, you know, it's really, it's really kind of messed up. We don't feel empowered, we don't feel safe, we don't feel like the system that we've entrusted in since we were born, that we have sort of like, voted into place isn't taking care of us. So, again, is not empowering. So it's not safe. And yeah, I think the vaccine has been the most interesting aspect of this. Out, I'm curious to see what lessons medicine and science can take from how quickly they got this vaccine out. And I hope that people are starting to realize that man, they honestly they could have, they could have been cured some of this stuff. If they just weren't so governed by the idea that like, people being sick means corporations make money. So yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 51:32

May I ask how you're feeling about the immediate future, immediate in however you see it?

**Alex Smith** 51:38

I'm generally an optimistic person. And I don't think that that's waned too much. I don't know if I've come across as a little Doom and gloomy in this interview, but I'm mostly optimistic. Like I said, like, this past year has been very interesting in the fact that like, a lot of people have started to it sucks that it takes like half a million people to die. And in order for people to like, wake up to a sort of, like, new paradigm, but um, we're not going to have much choice. And so that might sound like a little bit cynical, but I think because of this immediacy, we're gonna have to, we're gonna have to just like shift everything. So, you know, I'm pretty confident that that shift will come, whether we go kicking and screaming, or someone is just like, okay, look, here's some ideas, and then people start to like, really, you know, go for it. Um, yeah, every, I don't know, like, yeah, like, Elon Musk is trying to get to Mars. But there's like, a million things that he could do in Texas, you know, Texas is just lost power and people died. And like, no, no, and he's trying to get to Mars. So, you know, that stuff makes me feel a little bit cynical. But I still have some hope. And I'm going to, like, try to project this idea of hope, through my art, and through my music and my writing. So, yeah.

**Kit Heintzman** 53:22

Would you say a little bit more about your hopes for a long term future after this?

**Alex Smith** 53:33

Long term, I'm just I don't know if I can say, you know, I'm, like I said, I sense a paradigm shift. I'm, like, we live in a society where, like, Black Panther can be the number one grossing film ever. Right? But, like, we voted for Trump, so like, you voted for Boris Johnson, and you know, like, so we have, we're at this point, this weird point where it's like, everyone wants to see, like, this explosion. This, you TOPIK explosion, but were afraid of like letting go of the strands of the safety of having, like, a fascist, you know, in office telling us what to do. So telling us who to hate and things like that. So we're trying to we're figuring that out. I think we're figuring out all of this stuff. So I'm not really sure what the far future holds. I think I'm hopeful for the paradigm shift in the near future. But after that, it's going to be like man, it's gonna be like, you know, I'm not. So I don't want to use terms like who wins and things like that, but It's gonna be about like, what ideas take hold in, like this sort of like, earthen firmament, you know, like what ideas become palpable when ideas become part of the atmosphere. And so I'm hoping that like, those ideas that we've that I've mostly been talking about the empowerment, the empowering ideas, make it to the surface. I'm hopeful that it that it can happen. But again, it's going to take a lot of examining of what happens in the near future. To figure out what happens in the far future. Sorry, that didn't quite answer it. But like, it's really hard when you're a queer person of color, like trying to live day by day, but I'm also a futurist. So I'm also kind of like thinking, a few steps ahead. But like, it's really hard to think like, in these extremes.

**Kit Heintzman** 56:01

Would you be willing to share some of the ways that you've been taking care of yourself throughout the last year.

**Alex Smith** 56:11

I have not been taking care of myself, I've just been eating pizza, and watching teenage Johnny Hunter on Netflix and stuff like that. So I haven't really been taking care of myself. I just started sort of trying to do a little bit more exercise. And I stopped eating sugar. I'm doing really good at not eating sugar actually. Um, and it's funny, because I wasn't feeling very good. And I realized it was because I was eating like sleeves of cookies, like I was, I mean, I'm, you know, I'm fighting different forms of depression, during this pandemic, which is just weird, you know, and so, trying to deal with all, you know, all the things, um, but then, one day, I just decided to, like, stop eating sugar. And it was the worst timed time to do that, because I had just ordered like, 12 boxes of Girl Scout cookies. So it's been like, really crazy. But um, yeah, not even sugar in trying to get back into exercising. Um, and just like, you know, hanging out with my partner and like watching interesting things on TV. But for the most part, I haven't really been taking care of myself. Like I said, I had my first doctor's appointment next week. So that's a good start. Though, I'm a bad example of how to take care of yourself during a pandemic. I mean, I'm doing all this stuff, I'm wearing my mask, I'm distancing, I'm not going anywhere. I'm, you know, tipping my Uber drivers, you know, I'm gonna stain, you know, I'm sanitizing. I'm doing all this stuff. But I'm not I'm just not doing other things that I should be staring at too many screens, but what I'm doing all the best.

**Kit Heintzman** 58:11

This is the penultimate question. So we know that we're in this moment of a lot of biomedical and scientific research happening that sort of circling around us. And I'm wondering what you think people in the humanities and social sciences could be doing right now to help us understand this moment?

**Alex Smith** 58:38

Yeah, more they need to be more visible, you know. Less insular. Less academic. More. Break Downey, like more, like, layman speak more in layman's terms. They need to be out there in the streets, like people protesting our ad be doing advocacy work, you know? I don't know. Like, I don't know why, like, there's a lot there are a lot of people who are doing a lot of cool things, but they, and they need to be given a forum like if they truly want to do this stuff. Then the gatekeepers need to like, like open the gates and let them let them speak. So but they need to be more on the frontlines of spreading their ideas and in ways that like, aren't alienating because, like, just keeping all of this knowledge esoteric and stuff. Like it's not it's doesn't it doesn't it's, it's antithetical to what, like they're trying to do, like, the stuff that they know, everyone should know. So yeah, transparency and, and speaking in layman's terms and being more vocal about things as much as possible. But then again, like I said, it's all about the media outlets giving them a forum as well, like. So.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:00:16

This is the last question. So this is an oral history interview. And I carry some assumptions. As a historian going into it. One of the assumptions I make is that a historian 100 years in the future, will struggle to contextualize how much is going on right now when they try and understand this moment. So I'd like to ask you to speak to that person and tell them a part of what they need to understand, to begin to make sense of this, if they want to understand the pandemic, what else do they need to know? And what kinds of questions do you want them to focus on?

**Alex Smith** 1:01:02

Well, they need to understand the sort of economic climate, particularly in the quote unquote, Western countries who seem to be handling the pandemic the worst, they need to understand how the sort of like false so called individuality of these countries, has created a dichotomy where people are not the average everyday person is not concerned with their neighbor, and keeping their neighbors safe. And they're more concerned about losing their quote unquote, rights to like, or whatever. And those rights, that they're concerned about losing, they're actually giving them up in a lot of other ways. Which is really, really kind of like sad, when you think about it, like they're willing to advocate for a government that oppresses people for being different for being clear, black, and brown. If it means that they don't have to wear a mask, to go to Walmart, based flat out, and this is the dichotomy that people in Europe and the United States have created. The more social minded and I say socialist, but social minded countries, like some in Asia, Africa, have had better success against the pandemic, because they had a had their community at heart when they were taking the precautions. Um, so this is what we're currently up against, for the most part, it's not the disease itself, which, thankfully, is not like, as dangerous as it could be like, it could be like some, it could be some next level shit. Like, we're thankful that it actually is not as dangerous as it is, even though millions have died from already. In so we're also at a point where our government is more concerned about you know, where, how they're going to make money, capital, and less concerned about the people that are going to be out there making this money for them. All of this is happening against the backdrop of severe racial injustice, increasing poverty, and growing sentiment against LGBT people, particularly trans people. And it's happening at a time where it may seem like on the surface, we've never been more open because like I said, Black Panther was top selling film just a couple of years ago, you know, there's more gay people on television now than there ever was. But you know, the trans murder rate is increasing every year, that kind of thing. So it's like, we're fighting against having diversity and visibility be an important thing. And then those who are who are clinging to this like archaic past Creating a huge walls resistance wars. So even though we have plenty of the resources and tools to combat this disease are the way our social constructs are, or not allowing us to do so as a community. And it's really dangerous. So that's what. So if anyone is reading this or listening to this 100 years from now, that's this is why because our society is not willing to advocate not willing to empower, not willing to embrace.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:05:42

Yeah. I want to thank you so much for everything that you shared today. And at this point, I just want to invite you, if there's anything that you want to say that my questions haven't given you the space to say, here is some space to do stuff.

**Alex Smith** 1:06:01

I think I've said everything, to be honest. I'm keep. I just wanted, I guess, to wrap it up. The future is now and yeah, the future is now and safety is empowerment. So if something that you're doing isn't creating space for you in the future, then don't do it. And don't do it to other people.

**Kit Heintzman** 1:06:38

Thank you so much.

**Alex Smith** 1:06:39

Thank you