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Dr. Christopher Bell

Director of Graduate Studies and
Associate Professor of Media Studies at CU Colorado Springs

Hosted by:

Ken McConnellogue

CU Vice President of University Communications

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- Ken: Today we're talking with Dr. Christopher Bell, director of graduate studies, associate professor of media studies at CU Colorado Springs, and a big fan of Marvel superheroes. Dr. Bell researches the way race, class and gender intersect in different forms of children's media. He's also a TED speaker, a diversity and inclusion consultant for Pixar Animation Studios, 2017 David Letterman award winning media scholar, and a 2017 Denver Comic Con Popular Culture Educator of the Year. Boy, that's a mouthful of things you got going there. Welcome.
- Christopher: I do a thing or two.
- Ken: You research gender and ethnic equity, is this a relatively new field of study?
- Christopher: People have been doing identity studies since the 1970s really. But in terms of taking that into the realm of popular culture studies, it's relatively new. We really started getting the first big identity and popular culture studies through the 1980s, and so that's really where my particular corner of the media studies world gets its start.
- Ken: This has got to be a relatively new phenomenon in media studies.
- Christopher: Well, it is and it's not. We've been interested in how different groups of people are portrayed in the media that we consume for decades. Again, sort of starting in the late 70s, early 80s, really taking a look at what does it mean to be a black person in media?

What does it mean to be a woman in media? What does it mean to be a white person in media? And so on. And so that particular vein of study has really been around for quite some time. The ways in which I do it, really focusing in on children's media in specific, that's relatively new.

Ken: As we mentioned, you work with Pixar as a diversity inclusive consultant. And you told us before we started taping that you're going to be going out there in the spring, what does that entail?

Christopher: So, I do a couple of things for Pixar. It really started in 2015, I was invited to give this TED Talk about my research. And I gave a talk about how I, as a father of a daughter who is also a big science fiction fan, superhero fan, a Star Wars fan, I found it problematic that whenever I would see my kid playing, she was always dressing up as boys. She was dressing up as Obi-Wan Kenobi or as Darth Maul or ... She loved The Incredible Hulk. And all these characters that she really loved were all boys.

And I began to realize that the problem was, while there were lots of female superheroes, there wasn't really a whole lot of female superhero stuff. The same kinds of toys you would find for boys and costumes and all that paraphernalia didn't really exist for female superheroes. And so she was sort of forced into this space where she had to play as a boy. And so I did this TED Talk about how I thought that was a problem, and it got picked up by TED, and it became a global feature and it sort of went viral for a couple of weeks. And in that couple of weeks, I got a phone call from a woman who said, "Hi, I'm the head of education at Pixar Animation Studios." And I kind of did one of those, "Well, no you're not." And, "Who are you really? And what's the deal?" And then-

Ken: What are you trying to sell me?

Christopher: ... What are you trying to sell me? And she did the thing that you only see in movies which was, she was like, "Hang up and call this number." So, I hung up and I called the number back, and it was Pixar Animation Studios. So, I talked to her and she said, "We'd like to invite you out to come and talk to some of our animators about the work that you do." Pixar has this education series, they bring in different people from different areas to talk to their studio.

And so I went in and I talked to roughly 50-ish members of their animation house, and sort of did an extended seminar about representation in media, how different groups of people get portrayed and what effect that has on the ways that we make meaning as a culture. And at the end of that, I said thank you, they gave me two giant swag bags full of cool stuff, which was great, that I brought home to my daughter. And I sort of thought that was the end of it. And then about a month later, at the end of December she called me back and she said, "We just took a poll in the studio of everyone's favorite education seminar from the year and yours was the overwhelming favorite." And I was like, "Well, I just came there a month ago and I was the favorite of the year. That's pretty cool." And she said, "We'd like to have you come back out in the spring and talk to a different group of people." And I said, "Okay."

And as I was talking to her, I realized that second group of people was much higher up on the totem pole so to speak. So, I went back out and I talked to them, and I found out it was really a group of producers, production assistants, some department heads, like

the head of consumer products was there, and the head of their story boarding department. And then I went back again, and that room was full of people with names you know. That was Pete Docter, who wrote Inside Out and directed Toy Story. And Brad Bird, and all these people whose names are names I grew up with and names we've all seen in the movies.

And all of a sudden, I was asked to comment on things as I was brought in, and I got attached to a couple of film projects, a couple of specific film projects where now, in the consulting work that I'm doing, they send me character sketches of films that aren't going to come out for four or five years from now. They'll send me character sketches and ask me what do I think of these, and I say, "Well, does it matter if this character's a boy? What happens if you change this character to a girl, or if you give this character brown skin? Does that change the story at all?" Or, "Who are you thinking of casting for this?" And, "Maybe you should think in this direction."

And so now, I really am sort of in a position where I am able at some low level to gently move the tide, so to speak, of how Pixar is making movies, of who they are putting in their movies and of whose voices are being heard, and of the representation that we see on the screen, which was my goal in the first place. So, in a roundabout way, I finally got there.

Ken: So Pixar's obviously taken this increasingly seriously.

Christopher: They certainly are listening to me in ways that I didn't ever expect. I mean, when the director and producer of Coco went on stage at the Oscar's to accept the Academy Award for Best Animated Picture for Coco, they literally word for word quoted me.

Audio clip from Academy Awards *"With Coco we tried to take a step forward toward a world where all children can grow up seeing characters in movies that look and talk and live like they do. Marginalized people deserve to feel like they belong. Representation matters.*

My phone blew up. We were all watching the television, and my phone just started ringing off the hook, and it was all these people who were like, "I've heard you say those words before. I've sat in classes with you and heard you say those things." And so, it's resonating at some of the highest levels in Pixar right now, which to me is everything I wanted to do with my research, so.

Ken: Do you feel a sudden weight of responsibility?

Christopher: Kind of. It's been weighing on my mind quite a bit in my recent consultation work with them because I have this sort of dual responsibility. I have this responsibility to Pixar to help them make better pictures and to help them make the things I'm trying to help them do more palatable to a studio that is not trained in diversity and inclusiveness stuff on a daily basis. I mean, they're just artists who make movies. And so, how do we make it so that they can understand the reasons why we're asking them to do what we're doing? I have that responsibility.

But on the other hand, I have this responsibility to humanity that I want to change, fundamentally change the way we think about representation and the way we think

about who is seen, who gets stories told about them, who gets to tell stories, and so on. And so I have to sort of delicately balance between not hurting the feelings of artists who can be sensitive, and artists are often times sort of thin-skinned, and so I have to balance that with the responsibility of, there's some stuff you need to hear and I'm not going to not tell you 'cause I don't want to hurt your feelings. And so that's a delicate line.

Ken: And you touched on your TED Talk, which got more than a million views...

Audio clip: 2015 TEDxColoradoSprings: Bring on the female superheros: *"But we live in a 100-percent media-saturated society. What that means is that every single aspect of your human existence outside of your basic bodily functions is in some way touched by media. From the car that you drive to the food that you eat to the clothes that you wear to the way you construct your relationships to the very language you use to formulate thought -- all of that is in some way mediated. So the answer in our society to how do we learn what we know about other people and about the world is largely through media."*

Ken: The people at high levels of Pixar taking you seriously, how does all this feel to you?

Christopher:

Pixar's a multibillion dollar corporation and your kids grew up on that. Someone ought to be advising them, and I'm happy that that gets to be me. The work that we do around identity, around representation, around the way that people use media to make meaning, to make sense of the world, to make sense of their lives, that work matters.

Ken: And a big catalyst for a lot of this, you touched on in your TED Talk and you touched on earlier, is your daughter.

Christopher: Yeah. Who is my very favorite human being who has lived in the history of the world.

Ken: You don't tell your wife that.

Christopher: I tell her that often, she already knows. We done good with the kid that we have, for sure.

Ken: Are things changing significantly? Is it a slow roll? How do you see things from where they've been when you first started looking at this to where we are now?

Christopher: In some ways it's a very rapid escalation, and in some ways it's the slowest roll that there possibly can be. We are seeing an exponential burst of energy around, particularly around gender narratives, especially in science fiction and in superhero stories and the kinds of work that I deal with, in children's media in general. Now, I would sort of be naïve to say, "And that's because everyone recognizes the pro-social corporate responsibly aspect of making good stories for girls." No, they've realized selling stuff to girls, particularly to brown girls in this culture, makes a lot of money.

There's a reason why the Disney Channel has completely shifted in the last 10 years from all shows featuring nothing but upper middle class white kids to literally every

show on their network right now featuring some brown girl at the center of that narrative. That's not necessarily just because they want to be inclusive or want to portray diversity within their shows, there's money to be made there, and I get it. So, in that respect, there's been this exponential boost because they've identified that market.

In other ways, it's a really slow process because while we do see that in certain pockets, Lucasfilm for example, the last three Star Wars movies have had women at the center of those stories. In a way, that had never happened before in the Star Wars universe. While that's true, we're not seeing that behind the camera, we're not seeing that in terms of who gets to tell stories, we're not seeing that in terms of directors or producers, or cinematographers. There was still shock that a female cinematographer was nominated for an Oscar two years ago, and she was the only one that had ever been nominated.

That's a problem. So, if I can say, "You're the first woman to ever do blank," and it's 2018, we have a problem. In some ways, yes, it is rapid growth. And in some ways, people who have power want to hang onto power and it doesn't matter what area we're talking about. White men have had lots of power in the culture creation industry in this country pretty much since its inception. And they're not really that eager to turn the reins over to women or brown people and that's the truth.

Ken: It seems shocking almost that these big media companies have taken so long to get around to this. And as you say, it's about a money certainly, but that would seem to drive them there more quickly, but it has taken a while.

Christopher: Yeah. I mean, one of the things I always tell my students is, "If you are not paying for it, you are not the customer. You are the product." So, for example, network television. You don't pay for network television. It comes into your house for free. Guess what? You're not the customer. The advertisers who pay for the programming are the customer and you're the product. They don't create television to give you good entertainment, they create entertainment you won't turn off to deliver your eyeballs to advertisers. And so because that is our structure for media production in this culture, I'm really not that surprised that it has taken this long because it's not like someone is saying, "Oh, we need to make the best, whatever it is, that we can." They're making things you won't turn away from and that's different.

If you really want to know where the good stuff is, you got to pay for it. Why is Game of Thrones a better television show? Because you paid HBO subscription. If I'm paying my \$7 a month or whatever, I want dragons and I want White Walkers and stuff. Why does Netflix get Stranger Things and not network television? 'Cause I paid my Netflix subscription and they can afford Winona Ryder and they go get her, and now she's in the television show that I'm watching. And so it's that model that has really pushed in some interesting directions, I think.

Ken: And your TED Talk concerned like an exclusion of female heroes and marketing merchandise. How does the merchandise of favorite characters, or how can it impact a child's self-identity?

Christopher: It's the number one thing that affects a child's identity. Think about it. Children, by and large, spend the vast majority of their time, particularly at their youngest stages, engaged in focused play. It looks random to the adult. It looks like a kid's just messing

around. It looks like a kid's just hanging out with their toys. They are not. Focused play is how children make sense of the world. It's how children process. It's how they process through trauma, it's how they process through things they don't understand, it's how they process through their emotions. All of that comes out in their play. When given things to play with, children will make up their own stuff.

So, you give a kid some toy trucks and a couple of blocks or whatever, they'll build a city. They'll drive the cars around. They'll make up their own thing. But focused play, independent focused play is not how American culture works because of profit motive. So, what we get in America instead of focused independent play is focused directed play. That is all of the toys have ancillary television shows and commercials on the television, and the marketing material in the packaging, and whatever. And all of those things are designed to tell the child how to play with the toys.

And so, if we're not paying attention to what's in the television shows, when we go to buy the toys thinking the kid will just make up their own games to play with these toys, they don't. What they do is replicate the storylines that they've seen on television. They replicate the interactions between characters that they've seen on television. They may add their own twist to it, but they're being told how to play with the stuff. So, if all of those characters are boys, for example, and my kid wants to play superheroes, what she's explicitly being told is, "Superheroes are boys and they are not girls." So, if you want to play in super heroic play, there's no entry point for you to insert yourself into that narrative. You are being told by all the media surrounding those toys that you don't belong.

So, when there are female characters within those universes, I was always the one to rush out and buy those toys because I want my daughter to know that within her imaginative play, she has a place. And it's exponentially compounded because my daughter also has brown skin. And so if you want to be a brown girl and a superhero up until 2015, you were kind of screwed because there weren't brown girl superheroes. There just weren't. There wasn't anything available.

And then we get Gamora, which is great, but Gamora's green. She's played by a black woman, but she's not black in the actual show, in the film. And so, it's layers on top of layers on top of layers. And you go to the store, and you're like, "Well, I'm just going to buy some toys and I know my kid likes this series, so I'll just grab two things off the shelf," not understanding there are intense connections between the material culture we give to our children to interact with, and the way they begin to see themselves within that narrative.

Ken: It sounds like things are getting better, but it also sounds like there's still a ways to go.

Christopher: Things are getting better, but there's still a ways to go. There are lots and lots of good things out there, especially right now at this historical moment for girls and even for girls of color. DC superhero girls for example, DC teamed up with Mattel, who makes Barbie, and they put out this line of superhero girl dolls. So, it's Wonder Woman and Batgirl and Bumblebee and Supergirl, and all these female superheroes, and they're all in high school. And they did a really smart thing with those. They made them in the standard nine inch size, which is the size that most superhero action figures come in. They come in a nine inch size. But they also made them in the 12 and a half inch size, which is the same size as Barbie.

So, no matter which universe your daughter wants to play in, if she wants to play with other superhero toys, there are DC superhero girls at that size. And if she wants to play with Barbie, there's also superhero girls who can now play with Barbie. And so, that's the kind of way that we think about gender differently that supports whatever kind of girl wants to enter into this universe. It's not, you play with Barbies, so superheroes aren't for you anymore, because now Wonder Woman comes in a Barbie. But it's also not, you want to play with these boys toys, so there's no more girls available to you. Now, there are lots of girl superheroes available to you to play in that universe too. And that's fantastic for children. It really is.

Ken: You've written a couple of children's books, *Do Not Open the Door!* and *Do Not Look Under the Rug!* I assume you're working on the sequels, *Do Not Look Under the Bed*, *Do Not Look in the Closet*.

Christopher: Right.

Ken: How do those fit in with your research and your work?

Christopher: They tangentially fit in with my research, but really what it was, was when my daughter was four and five years old and just learning how to read, I found it really difficult to find any children's books featuring children of color, particularly girls of color, that weren't a quote unquote special story about race. And I didn't want to read my kid a special story about race. I wanted to read my kid a funny story where kids just get to be kids, and they just happen to be brown. And because I couldn't find any, I wrote my own.

And so, I worked with an illustrator, and we got the first two volumes published. And they're really fun, and it's a brother and two sisters, and the girls are older. The boy's actually the biggest, but he's also the youngest, which we've talked about why he still sort of follows around his sisters even though he's the biggest and the strongest because they're older than him. So, it's girls getting to be in charge of things. It's brown people getting to be at the center of story, and nobody talks about the fact that they're brown. And that's the kind of story I wanted my daughter to be able to read. And so, she learned how to read reading my books that I wrote for her.

Ken: That's pretty cool.

Christopher: And happened to share with everybody else, so.

Ken: That's, I'm sure, a special father daughter connection.

Christopher: Yeah. I said earlier, my kid is my favorite human being in the history of the world. She's a pretty special kid. She's a tough kid. She's wicked smart. Both her parents are doctors. So, I feel bad for her teachers, especially 'cause one of her parent has their PhD in education, and one of her parents has their PhD in rhetoric. So, good luck out there to all of the middle school teachers that now have my kid in the sixth grade.

Ken: You've also featured Harry Potter books in your academic writing. What can we learn from those?

Christopher:

So, Harry Potter's my major research artifact. I started my career really writing about Harry Potter, the Harry Potter universe, and I've released now five books about Harry Potter. I have another one coming out later this year. And essentially, what I think is, every generation of people has what we call a cultural touchstone. A thing that sort of defines their generation. For my generation, that was Star Wars. Star Wars was our cultural text. It was the thing. If I was 15 years, 10 years younger than me, it would be Lord of the Rings. That would be the defining text for my generation. For the generation before me, it was probably Star Trek. There's this one text that sort of unifies that culture.

For what we loosely call Millennials, although I hate that word because it encompasses way more people than it actually should, it is Harry Potter. Harry Potter is their text. Harry Potter has been translated into more languages than any book in the history of mankind except the Bible. It is the bestselling work of fiction of all time. Every one of the Harry Potter series has sold more than every other children's book ever written. It is an enormous text. An enormous text. And embedded within it are all these narratives about identity, about race, and about gender, and about social class and socioeconomics and society. And we can use those books to talk about things that are happening in the real world.

So, when we talk about things like institutionalized racism. When we talk about people who are good, people who don't recognize they're racist, we can look at Ron Weasley and the way that he talks about house-elves. House-elves are slaves in the Harry Potter universe. They are enslaved. And because they are enslaved, Hermione Granger wants to free them. It's part of the narrative. In the fourth book, she creates this organization of trying to free them. And Ron is the one who says, "They like working and they don't want to be freed." And he is the nice guy we know who says, "The slaves are fine. They actually like being slaves."

That's a problematic narrative, and that's something we can deal with when we talk about how people who don't see themselves as racist can be racist. And we don't have to talk about your neighbor. We can talk about Ron Weasley, he doesn't exist. It's not your dad on the line here, it's this fictional character. And you can use that as a bridge to figure out strategies in your own life. When we talk about Lord Voldemort, and how does Tom Riddle, who was an abused child, he's orphaned, he's neglected, he probably has a condition called reactive attachment disorder, which I've written about extensively in the past, and nobody cares about him. And then we wonder why he grows up and when he's a teenager, he becomes a school shooter. He becomes a murderer. He kills someone inside of Hogwarts.

Why does he do that? There are reasons. It's called social disengagement. And we can watch him go through this process of socially and morally disengaging from society over the course of his life, and ending up as a murderer. And if we can recognize those signs in Tom Riddle, we can recognize those signs in the kid that lives down the street from you. And so there are lots of ways we can use this fictional text, this rich fictional text to talk about the problems we actually have in society.

Ken:

How do your students here at UCCS respond to all this?

Christopher:

Depends on who you ask. Most of my students really consider me a ruiner, that's what I do. I ruin things. They bring their favorite things to me and they say, "Well, what about

this?" And then I ruin them for them. The students who've had me the longest, my four year seniors that I get as baby freshmen and then come up through the media studies pop culture program, by the time they're seniors, they can't turn it off.

'Cause once you start seeing the things, it's hard to not see them anymore. Once you start recognizing how media representation works, it's not a thing you can turn off. So, by the time they're seniors, they come to me and they're, "We can't enjoy anything." You can't go to the movies anymore. You can't watch TV anymore, you can't do nothing because everything just jumps right out at you all the time. You see the inequities all the time once you know where to look for them.

Ken: And you're back there saying success.

Christopher: Every time someone says, "Well, now I can't watch these Disney movies anymore." And I say, "Good." So, yeah. It's not like I'm broken up, that I'm ruining things for people.

Ken: Who's your favorite superhero?

Christopher: Oh, wow. Who's my favorite superhero? Well, that's a-

Ken: Which one do you relate to the most?

Christopher: ... That's a tough question for someone who does the kind of work that I do. But if I had to pinpoint my very favorite superhero, I would probably say Daredevil. Daredevil's a really interesting text. Daredevil's a superhero who is blind and because he is blind, part of his superpower is all of his other senses are heightened. His alter ego is a lawyer. He's also Catholic, and there's a lot of Catholic subtext to his storyline. And he is not a happy Catholic, he is a penitent Catholic. He's a flagellant Catholic really.

He feels very bad about the violence that he has to inflict on other people as a superhero, which then makes his regular life very hard to deal with because he's so guilty all the time that he's a lawyer, and tries to solve his problems through the law. But then there are problems he has to solve through violence and it becomes a struggle for him inside. It's just a very rich, rich text, which I really enjoy.

Ken: Who would be your least favorite superhero?

Christopher: Superman.

Ken: Yeah?

Christopher: Superman's the most boring boring that ever boring-ed. He's really kind of the worst. Superman is an interesting text because it is so intensely patriotic in a way that I find problematic. Superman is not just this Kal'El of Krypton. Superman is America, but he's the America as American's like to think about America. He's the biggest and the strongest. He's the first guy in and the last guy out. He's the great defender of truth and justice. His powers literally come from the universe. His powers come from the sun. He is powerful because he is powerful. Almost nothing on earth can kill him. And that feels very America as we like to think about America.

The problem with that is it's not in any way self-reflective. The only thing that keeps Superman from doing whatever he wants whenever he wants to do it is he's a nice guy. If Superman one day decides he doesn't feel like being nice, there's literally nothing in the universe that can stop him and we never explore that part of the narrative, which is also an American narrative. It's an American narrative that we don't like to talk about at parties. So, Superman is a really problematic character, and most definitely my least favorite superhero narrative.

Ken: Who would be your favorite supervillain?

Christopher: Oh, my favorite supervillain. The best supervillain is Magneto by far. Magneto is the supervillain of the X-Men. He's actually the first villain of the X-Men. Magneto has a really interesting backstory. He's a German Jew and he is in a concentration camp in World War II. And his mother and father both die in the concentration camp, and him and his sister try to break out. And on his way out, they kill his sister, and he gets his powers at that very moment and he realizes he has power.

He only has one superpower, but it's a pretty good one. He has control over the magnetic core of the earth, and that gives him control over two really important things, magnetism and gravity. And all of a sudden, he's able to destroy the concentration camp and he frees all the Jews, and he basically says, "No one will ever oppress me again." And then he comes to the United States, to this country where in the superhero universe, mutants, people who have superheroes, are persecuted because think about it. If we're sitting here, we're all sitting here and we're having a conversation, and I suddenly burst into flames, you would freak out. You would be terrified. Now, what if my power wasn't bursting into flames? What if it was walking through walls? Then I could walk into the bank and take all the money. I can come into your house. What if it was turning invisible? You'd be terrified of me as a person. And so in this universe, everyone is terrified of them.

And so, Magneto comes and says, "Look, I'm not going to wait for you to recognize my rights. I'm going to take my rights, 'cause they're mine. They're not yours to give me. They're mine and I don't care that you don't like that I have power." Magneto's an important supervillain who becomes a superhero. But he's an important supervillain because he represents one of two characters in that narrative. There have been over 300 X-Men characters since the beginning of X-Men. It's really only about two people. One is Magneto, Erik Lehnsherr, and one is a guy named Charles Xavier, Professor X. Xavier runs a school, he brings kids to his school and teaches them to use their powers for good. He's the leader of the X-Men.

Well, he is literally the Martin Luther King archetype. And Magneto is literally the Malcolm X archetype. And it's the person is going to work within the system and not going to hurt anybody and use your powers for good, so you don't scare anybody, versus the person who says, "By any means necessary, I will have my rights." And that narrative is so fascinating to me and makes Magneto such an important supervillain. The best supervillians, the best villains in any narrative really, have to believe with all their heart and soul that they are the hero of the story. It's what makes them so good at being the villain. A villain who's just evil, twirling the mustache because he's evil is boring. A villain who is doing what he thinks is the right thing to do, that's a much more interesting person.

Ken: Before we started, you told us you're teaching more than a full load of class because you're on sabbatical next semester, and part of that's going to be at Pixar, and part of it's working with wrestlers.

Christopher: Yeah. One of my side passions is professional wrestling. I was a longtime fan growing up as a kid. And I've done a lot of research on professional wrestling. I teach a class about professional wrestling and its history. And I'm getting to merge these two things together, the development of superhero characters and professional wrestling. Professional wrestling is not a sporting event. It is live action theater.

Ken: Wait, what?

Christopher: It's not a sporting event. People always are like, "Well, wrestling's fake." And I say, "No it's not. It's only fake if you think it's a sporting event, and that's stupid 'cause it's explicitly not a sporting event." It is theater. It's ballet where people punch each other. It's no more fake than Hamilton. And so, you have to go into it understanding what you're seeing. And when you look at it in that respect, with these amazing performers, these amazing athletes who do incredible feats with their body. It's a superhero show.

And so what I'm doing is, I'm going to Florida to study at the Performance Center which is where they train new professional wrestlers. It's at Full Sail University, and I'm going to be spending some time down there going to matches, talking to fans, hopefully talking to the wrestlers themselves, and really doing some work on, here at the embryonic stage of a wrestler's career, how do we teach them how to embody this superhero archetype?

Ken: Well, as if you don't have enough going on, you're also a ukulele player. How'd that come?

Christopher: I am. So, when you do the kind of work that I do, you need a way to detach. It is very difficult in some respects to be a person like me. In the Avengers, in this war movie, they bring Bruce Banner in. And Bruce Banner has learned to control being the Hulk, and then they need him to be the Hulk, and he's ready to be the Hulk right at a moment's notice, and everyone's like, "Well, how did you learn to control your anger?" And he says, "The secret is, I'm always angry."

And that's me. That's me just in my daily life. I'm mad about culture all the time because there's so much terrible in our popular culture. And so when you walk around like that, if I didn't have a way to release and get away from it, I would have ulcers. And so the way that I do that is through music. I've always been involved in music in some respect my whole life. And I picked up the ukulele about three years ago, and found it was my spirit instrument. I didn't know how much I needed to play the ukulele until I started playing it. And now it occupies a lot of my free time. It's a way to just be, to just be in the universe without having to think about all this stuff, which I sort of desperately needed.

Ken: Well, Dr. Christopher Bell, we really appreciate you joining us today. Fascinating work you're doing, very interesting, and covering a lot of the waterfront. So, keep up the good work.

Christopher: Well, thank you. Thank you so much. And if your listener, are interested in more work in this area or more of the kind of work that I do, I actually host my own podcast, which is called The Deconstruction Workers. You can find this at thedeconstructionworkers.com. And it's me and other popular culture scholars from around the country who sit around every two weeks and do this. Do this exact thing where we take a piece of popular culture and sort of break it down, and see what the moving parts are, so.

Ken: And here I thought you were a natural, it turns out you're a practiced professional.

Christopher: I'm a secret pro.