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Futurism after the Future

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SPEAKERS

Jayna Brown, Sofia Lemos, Melissa Blanco Borelli, Tavia Nyong'o

00:05

Sofia Lemos: Good evening, folks. My name is Sofia Lemos and the curator for Public Programmes and Research at Nottingham Contemporary and it is my pleasure to welcome you to this online contemporary conversation with Tavia Nyong'o, Jayna Brown and Melissa Blanco Borelli to explore black radical utopian practice, the performative dimensions of blackness and the politics of sound. So for those of you tuning in for the first time, Nottingham Contemporary is a contemporary art centre in the UK and we often invite academics with expertise in different subjects to collaborate with us on expanding our curatorial research and public programmes in the artistic sector propositions in our exhibitions. So this evening expands on Sonic Continuum our multi platform research programme that investigates practices of rulemaking through sound both as opposed to constitutes the world, but also as a medium for producing knowledge about it. So, we believe that the past few months have great granted us an insightful outlook on the pleasures that are just as a dialogue, of criticality of togetherness. And we feel that we couldn't be more proud to be gathering tonight speakers at a moment of reinvigorating political energy. Also, we're in a moment where the interlocking systems of oppression that include police violence that include the prison industrial complex, and forms of economic and environmental vulnerability, have made visible or require an invite more complex models to understanding subjectivity, identity and community. So taking cue from their proposals from the scholarship this evening, it looks at the role of speculation

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of fabulation in contemporary black artistic production, but also, it explores the intersections between sound dance gender dissidents and black environment to address social imaginaries that exceed conditions of traumatic loss of social death and our cultivation. So without further ado, I'd like to introduce Jayna Brown, who is a professor in the Graduate Programme and Media Studies Institute in New York. Jayna is the author of two books, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* from 2008 and *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* due for release in February 2021. Both out with Duke University Press as well as numerous articles and essays, Jane is editor of the journal *Social Texts* and co director of the Pratt Global Centre, Global South Centre and contributing journalist to mprs music programming. Thank you, Jayna, for joining us. And Tavia Nyong'o is a chair and Professor of theatre and performance studies at Yale University. He is the author of *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory*, from 2009 and *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* from 2018, which is out of New York University Press. He's also the author of numerous black and queer art, music, literature and performance reflections, and the longest serving member of the Social Effects Collective. He also co edited the sexual cultures book series from New York University Press. And finally, I couldn't think of anyone more thrilling and energetic to chair the ebbs and flows of this dialogue. So I'm pleased to introduce the wonderful Melissa Blanco Borelli, who is a dance performance studies scholar. She is a desk reader in depth theory and performance of Royal Holloway, University of London, as well as assistant professor in Dance Theatre performance at the University of Maryland. Her research interests include identity corporate reality, blackness and Latin American decolonial aesthetics, and thinking beyond the human mind. Lisa is the author of *She is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* from 2015. So without further ado, thanks so much for everyone for joining and tuning in today. Thank you to our speakers. Thank you to the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University for graciously supporting our events programme and also to my colleagues Ryan Kearney and James Brouwer, who are supporting us this evening. Thank you again, and I look forward to the Q&A.

04:40

Melissa Blanco Borelli: Thank you so much for inviting me to do this. I couldn't think of two better people to have a conversation with Tavia and Jayna we have we've actually known each other for quite a bit. I met Jayna when I was a graduate student at UC Riverside and she came and gave a talk on Babylon Girls. I think it was just about to come out or had just come out and we Actually bonded about Cuba on our trips to Cuba, and Tavia. I met again as a graduate student as part of Black Performance Theory Collective, which is a group of scholars that work black performance scholars that work on black performance theory started by Thomas F. DeFrantz, the wonderful Thomas F. DeFrantz over Duke University, and the three of us have been at several of the meetings. So we've always had at least every couple of years and opportunity to get together and talk about blackness performance and everything related to those wonderful capacious topics. So thank you so much again, Sofia for inviting me, and I'm just going to do a brief introduction to our conversation and then I'll hand it over to Jayna to begin. So this keynote moderated conversation considers the ways in which blackness animation geological devastation, black science fiction polytemporality, corporate reality and digital detritus coalesce in the works by three black artists we have chosen today. Wangechi Mutu, Nairobi/New York, Wura-Natasha Ogunji, Nigeria/Texas and Jacolby Satterwhite, New York City. In each of our respective provocations, we address what we find capacious, that is the ways in which these artists gesture towards how black world making is a project that must figure beyond our time space, and the logics of racial capital and social death. Black imagination as materialise through these cultural productions, opens crevices and considers the potential of destruction akin to the Yoruba Orishas. Oh yeah, its power over death and rebirth, to bring about an end and new beginnings. Given the theme of this event under the rubric of Sonic Continuum, we are asking you to think beyond your eyes to consider the ends of ocular centrism, where blackness equals death. Instead, let's think about what this end might feel like touch, like, sound like through the cacophony of black voices and bodies, walking, carrying, eating, jumping, dancing, or travelling between worlds of their own making over to you Jayna Brown.

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Jayna Brown: That was really beautiful, Melissa, thank you. Very, it was lovely. So I'm going to start today with some prepared remarks that spring out of my new book, Black Utopias. And my central argument in this book is that to answer ethically to this era of Apocalypse, that we're all in, we must let go of being human, that is everything that we think being human means. That is, that we are an exceptional species than the most evolved of all carbon based life forms. And as such, we have the right to dominate overall the planet, or in a paternalist model has the responsibility to husband it. I'm thinking of animal husbandry, there, the term animal husbandry. The domestication and breeding of animals is called that. But we have to also remember that the human is a category of exclusion. So for many apocalypse is a continuing condition. The world has been made dystopian, through slavery, colonialism and all their violent afterlives. So we need to imagine not only new genres of the human, which Sylvia Wynter, encourages us to think about. But new genres of existence, altered modes of being, which are actually already present in the practices and imaginings of those who have been excluded from the rights and privileges of the human. This can look like many things but ultimately, we remember that we are made of the same elements as the rest of the universe, and rejoin them. This is a form of dissolution, but also of becoming, in this sense, ends are not ends at all. apocalypse has the potential to open up a breach, to usher in new paradigms beyond what we can perceive from where we are. In my continuing work, I want to push beyond familiar onto epistemological frameworks, those that are designed in man's image and with his interests as their central organising principle. What are the possibilities if we estranged ourselves from ourselves, to imagine multi and trans species processes of desire and becoming? I've been inspired by the life forms Darwin put at the bottom of his list in terms of sentience and intelligence, which reproduce in wild and wonderful ways. So I joined there are several scholars now working on this very inspiring. So we're thinking of mollusks, snails, worms, bottom feeders of various kinds, that reproduce in different ways. They're not they're not hetero, reproduce, reproduce. There's also by those that do not fit into familiar taxonomies, such as coral reefs, which are both plant and animal spores and fungus, which are their own genus, neither plant nor animal. But I realised recently that in my dreams of a radical biology, I have been holding on to the idea of an organic system untouched by technological

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manipulation, or the toxins, poisons, waste and detritus produced through human dominance. Instead, I have to acknowledge that the organic has been irrevocably changed. And I realised this in a discussion that I was having at the University of Toronto. And it was a conference about biotech stuff, it was really interesting. And we were talking about artificial intelligences, and particularly, the figures, Sophia, an AI in human form. And one of the science tips was explaining to me what the skin was made of, and I don't know all the technical terms, but it was, as he described it biological matter that had been programmed. And this just completely threw me off. It disturbed me. Partly because I had of this I wanted to keep them discrete and have this magic biological world separate, but also because I think that the principles of dominance, mastery and manipulation, are still governing this bio technological application. The very fact that we need to make AI is in human form in the first place. So I asked what forms after the Apocalypse and the irreversible effects of our supposedly dominance? What lives in the oil spill? In the exhaust fumes? What does that life look like? And does it trouble the distinction actually between life and non life so today I'm looking at two pieces by Wangechi Mutu selections from two pieces by Wangechi Mutu whose work is full of wondrous interspatial beings, snakes fungus fish, birds dismembered and recombined. Her work has an organicism transmogrified by an ecologically destroyed environment. Mutu's artworks are dark, stripped of the hope for sustainability, environmental justice, for ecological preservation. That's a generalisation. She's a very prolific artist, but there's a strain in her work that I read like, resonates for me in this way. Mutu's work in collage, video, sculpture and installation centre on women's bodies, but not as metaphors for Mother Earth. Instead, women's bodies as fractured dislocated fantastical. Their dismembered reassembled forms evoke histories of colonial violence and violation. Her work slink bodies and commerce, showing this nexus as the basis for capitalist exploitation of beings and the planet. In her works, bodies are not recovered or restored but re enlivened. Sometimes on the other side of death, often violently affected bodies give birth to distinctively human forms. Her work refers to the technological wonders of the 21st century which are sourced and produced in the global south. Her landscapes are filled with the refuse the ship consumer capitalism produces her shapes evoke, for example, in *The End of Eating Everything*, which we're going

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to watch a piece from evokes the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which exists between California and Hawaii. This is the biggest of what they call islands, the biggest five islands of plastic amassing in the oceans. The last time I looked at was 1.6 kilometres 600,000 miles big and 100,000 tonnes of plastic. The terrain of her work gives a glistening oily surface and depth to the devastation of ecological world. So, first, we're going to look at the small, two minute segment from one of her videos. called The End of Carrying All. I believe we're going to see that now. Or Okay, well, let me say some things about it first, and then we can show it after. This piece, which we're watching the end of opens on a woman walking slowly, carrying a container on her head beating off what looks like locusts, with birds flying behind her. As the video progresses, her basket container fills with the stuff of modernization, building smokestacks cast off bicycle wheels. It opens actually with the woman carrying this container. And as it can progress as her basket fills in, with the stuff of modernization, building smokestacks cast off bicycle wheels, as we see. So as I read it, here, we have the results of human exploitation over the earth, pictured as the burden of black women, those who've been used in its production, development and continuation. She transmogrified into a slimy single celled organism, but one created out of the excretions of this world, the effluvium of its toxic waste mixed with biological medical care to make a new form alive, but energised by a disturbing phosphorescence and an oil slick sheen that glows in the dark. This is soon internalised under the skin of the earth moving and spreading and appending the soil with its glowing poison. So this video actually begins for those who haven't seen it I show the end with the head of the musician sent a gold heading this monstrous being and she is eating the birds she's munching down the birds so and the birds are swaying in the air and this kind of uneasy viscosity. In the body of this being arms are waiting like cilia or anemone tentacles in the ocean. We have tires and other refuse seen in processes of ingestion, decay and the composition. This voracious and bloated entities with toxic chemical waste seems able to digest everything expelling great plumes of gases, as Santigold or the figure play by Santigold. Choose the birds blood dilutes into the viscous sky, the entity undergoes a series of transformation and is subsumed by its own expulsions. Now we showed the ending which right it goes dark and then clears up into this beautiful blue sky with white fluffy clouds. And maybe we can talk about this I'm

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not quite sure what to do with the end. When as if caught in a time lips this year, suddenly, in a clear sky full of puffy white floats, I just said, emerging from these clouds are amoebic beings, perhaps a new species containing the chattering head of santigold. So I wonder, are we invited to disperse into as Frantz Fanon calls it the cosmic effluvia of the universe? Will we manifest as the same species or evolve into something new and unexpected? So the challenge one of the challenges one of the questions that I have coming out of this another question is, are we looking at the preservation? What is our ethic if we're not predicated on the model of responsibility, or the preservation or restoration of existing ecologies? So that's, that's the end of my remarks. I believe then we have any thoughts that you have?

19:16

Melissa Blanco Borelli: Just thinking about the end of The End of Eating Everything, right? Because I also write about it a little bit in an upcoming essay, but really short. I also I also Yeah, and I also find that ending hopeful actually don't find it is because the there's almost this a closing of the curtain of the event, but then you're left in the space of, Okay, so what happens with those peoples? What are they going to then coalesce and create something new, and she's eaten everything, but what if she gets hungry? And so I think that there's a continuum, right? I feel like time. Time is of no matter there anymore, because we've only been given the glimpse of it, but Yeah, so I don't know what you think, Tavia.

20:02

Tavia Nyong'o: But yeah, there's definitely seems to be something either cyclical or spiral about the logic of the film in the sense that because we're not given a direct because we're in the cosmic effluvia. We don't necessarily have a sense of scale, right? It does seem to be large, right? The, when the cameras pulled in, it seems really large, but then when it kind of pulls away, we're disorientated in relationship to, in relationship to size. And, and that's, to me conveys a kind of sense of the spiral. Right? You know, it's kind of going around, but it's also we're kind of zooming out or zooming back in, in a way that is, I think, interesting. There's of the, of the various organic metaphors that play in The End of Eating Everything. The one that I'm always kind of drawn to, in some

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ways, because of the title is the worm. And so I'm thinking about how the worm actually shits out. I'm probably simplifying this but like compost or, like the work that earthworms do do actually in detoxifying or and in producing new soil. Yeah. And that's also not necessarily, I think, Roman beyond optimism and pessimism as frameworks but thinking about what this sort of like composting, right or like mud sill mud, so sociales sociality does in, you know, throughout throughout, moved to his work, and indeed some of our more recent pieces where she is making these really interesting sculptures that appear to be made out of mud or soil, but also to me, very powerfully reflect the termite mounds created in the in the savanna in East Africa. So there's almost a sense in which I mean, they're kind of humanoid, right, but they're, but they're built out of out of this termite termite society. So that's interesting to me as well. There are some kind of interesting links to to, to Satterwhite when we get to the single celled organisms, but I'll wait until later.

22:41

Jayna Brown: I mean, I like that, just one thing I know, we have to move on. But that's, you know, I like that invocation of the worm. Because it gets us away from that idea that we're in this sort of like, Mother Earth cycle of rebirth. You know what I mean? Because I feel like that's, it's not right. It's too cliché. It's not what's going on. So the worm and the application lets us think about different forms of, of when things happen afterwards. What comes out afterwards, or, you know, simultaneously or whatever, but we can talk more about time, I'm sure.

23:22

Melissa Blanco Borelli: He's wondering, yes. I'm just wondering how if we can see our own videos, how we're going, well, we'll just continue. We'll figure it out. Okay, so here's my little provocation based on Wura-Natasha Ogunji's work on second. So when I came across Wura-Natasha Ogunji when I was living in Berlin on a research fellowship, and she had some installations. And then I started looking up her work. And I came across these short videos that she actually made, I guess, in the beginning of her artistic career. And thankfully, her website still up and the videos are still there. So a I've had a chance to look them and i and i want to study them more. So I'm grateful for this opportunity to think alongside Jayna and Tavia. So sometimes, thinking about the

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end of the world can be exciting. This is my segue from Jayna into mine. Besides offering someone's response to those of us who enjoy a little bit of gallows humour, it offers an opportunity to imagine and elsewhere, somewhere after the end, the idea of the end promises a totalizing moment, one that stubbornly stops and forbids the forcefulness of time to barrel on. It signals an end of time or within the neoliberal capitalist context. The lack of enough time for productivity, imagination, resource increasing or safeguarding, and even a questioning of our current political economic system that makes many of us long for its end. The possibility to imagine what happens After, if there even isn't after, after the end appears in different ways, in the context of the works that we're looking at these pieces in their capacious imagining of ends allow dance to become a prison for politics. As Mark Franco writes, politics are not located directly in dance, but in the way dance manages to occupy cultural space. Furthermore, dance is, quote, ideological and it carries inevitable political effects for this reason. Art theorist Natalie Loveless wonders when she asked how might we inhabit human non human never been human and more than human social webs differently at all scales of existence? If an end or the end is inevitable, what creative and imaginative modes can we enlist to turn these endings into something else? How do you continue to exist after an end? What world are worlds rise up that offer new ways of being? How does an end signal and an inevitable beginning continuation in the same way after an end is no longer viable? So how then to end Dewar? I consider the video work of Wura-Natasha Ogunji as a dance between worlds a dance about comings goings and stuttered endings and possible beginnings. She often turns to the glitch, the interruption and the breath as an aesthetic device to in my analysis don't doesn't considering the violence is of Eurocentric time, and how black world making continues. Despite she makes a break from it and startles it yet continues to exist within it. Black diasporic longings that leave imprints like the wake of the ship, exile and in permanence. Here I'm reminded also of vitamin D at those longings for Cuba, leaving her marks on soil on trees in rocks. This is what I think about when I watched this conjuring of a grungy Black Death haunts black bodies. What can her body do but mark the ground forcefully separating sediments with her makeshift shovel in order to assert presence? Can you please show belongings next in similar fashion to one glitchy move to the end of carrying all This video shows

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Wura-Natasha Ogunji's belaboured body dragging detritus in the form of empty plastic water bottles across the ground, her drag also, it might also resemble William Pope L's drags, right? Is the type of durational choreography that asks us to consider the labour of the black woman's body and what it carries with it. Is there a spike for her? Right? And what's interesting, I think, and this isn't in Wangechi Mutu is that the response is getting back into the earth. But here she disappears out of the frame. So is there a respite for her? Especially if we're thinking about violence of racialized capitalist time, and it's neverendingness. But let's consider this as a dance with the earth, the land territory, what might that partnership look like or engender? And even if these markings and these drugs are ephemeral, I'm drawn here to think about what Jayna you've written about the hypo and hyper plasticity of blackness, I think you say it's, there's a failure to change or mutate and the ability to mutate too much. So I'm drawn to those ideas in thinking through this work. But again, thinking through one gets you to work in general. Can we move to video three, please? My father and I dance in outer space, losing a parent signals and end of a world A world where one is tethered to it through a geological connection to another person to people who made a decision to bring you into their world, the world and help you see the world and perhaps make it better. Quote, I touched the ground. Why should I? He's no longer there. He's up here with me. Laughing crying, trying to keep up. Can you do this? Can I hug you? Can you do this? No. How about this? Yeah, that's it. Remember, don't touch the ground. Stay up, stay above. We were meant to fly. Slow down, slow down. Let me catch my breath. I didn't want to go just yet. I want to dance a little longer. We were meant to fly. In this imagined monologue between Ogunji and this spirit of her father, I consider the ways in which this exchange and dialogue might expand the time she can spend dancing with him. How great to be able to dance with our ancestors away from the literal weight of gravity and the material world of racialized capital. We might even become weightless since after all time in space. As Albert Einstein wrote our illusions of consciousness, albeit very real ones. Black performance is a capacious sight. It quote involves subjectivity occasioned by action born of breath as Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez write in Black Performance Theory is informed by black sensibilities, or stylized ways of being in relation to each other and our environments, where knowingly or unknowingly the sensibilities

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become sources of strength, resistance, or pleasure. Several times Ogungi makes the same journey. The rhythm of it is jarring, but eventually we expect the slowing down. What doesn't stop surprising, at least for me are the grunts and the breaths. Her body is jumping, working hard, and, and working hard to stay above ground, editing and technological plague, contributes to this choreographic trick that she's actually fighting against gravity. her knees come closer to her chest, she spreads her arms upwards outwards. Sometimes one is up always while the other is down. The repetition of the journey is always the same with the labouring breaths and grunts, the sound of wind and glitches the faded light Penumbra of day or night all contribute to an otherworldly space, where ancestors and futurity dance together. So those are the provocations I offer, as a segue also between Jayna's work and Tavia his work into black futurity. So I don't know if you guys have anything to comment upon that or given the slight delay, we can just continue. I don't know. It's up to you guys.

39:20

Tavia Nyong'o: We can have maybe a couple minutes back and forth. Jayna, you want to I think it would be good. Just I have some thoughts. Just

39:32

Jayna Brown: go ahead.

39:33

Tavia Nyong'o: Go ahead. Yeah, um, thank you, I think, Melissa that's, that's it's actually a great segue, you know, and, and work in its own right. I love this idea of dance as a prism for politics, or as a kind of a micro politics. I was thinking maybe because of the glitches that we were experiencing and maybe our audience was experiencing or not right, but about the interface, right. We can never really know No, I'm kind of who's seeing what in this digital environment, it really kind of drove home the circulation of black dance or blackness more broadly in either the GIF or the GIF, depending on how you pronounce it, right? You know, they're like those kind of small, animated, you say GIF. The, you know, those, those little bits of behaviour, right, which are often but not always funny, you know, but very often repet, but usually repetitive,

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and always kind of be speak that stylization and sort of sensibility of blackness, that you kind of ended your comment by calling our attention to is something that, you know, I think it's important. And, and then the other, you know, just because we're looking at dance through the screen or multiple screens, I always go back to this phrase that I'm just obsessed with from Fred Moten where he talks about the para ontological distinction between blackness and black people, right? I think which I kind of take to me in the ways in which blackness can kind of like circulate around para, you know, like the ontology of black lives, right, you know, and this has something to do with, like, the spirit and the breath. Right, but also with the commodity form, right. And technology, right. And this is, I think, you know, to draw back in Jayna, your interest in both technology and its detritus and the imminent or actual collapse of consumer society and some sort of some sort of futurity that that that comes in the wake in the wake of that in the wake of that collapse. I think these are all suggested, despite the very barren and spare backgrounds that are grungy chooses for I take it for most of the videos, or at least the videos that you show. Mm hmm.

42:14

Melissa Blanco Borelli: Yeah. And I like that connection between the barren space and the labour the physicality of her body, always kind of interrupting the bareness. And again, like it made me think back to one guy he moved to, and the woman walking with all that on her back. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

42:35

Tavia Nyong'o: There's a very early Mutu performance of Washing. I don't know if either of you have seen it where she is, I think it's actually herself in the video, just like sort of laboriously washing a floor. And it it, you know, it anyways, that just, you know, these shared concerns, I guess, both about women's labour, and about the kind of repetitive action and a certain tradition of,

43:02

Jayna Brown: and the durational durational Ardell. nature of this and, and then yeah, and

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Melissa Blanco Borelli: also like the ritualistic because there's something ritualistic about repetitive. Hmm, well, well, depends on Yeah, obviously, it depends on the type of labour but I think, yeah, there's a ritualistic hypnotic kind of quality of doing the same thing over and over then.

43:25

Jayna Brown: And the way it can influence the way it can shape the body, that kind of repetition, and maybe in some ways, Ogungi's body is being shaped by the digital, right. Yes. glitching. And being but yet resisting, I don't know quite what to do with labour in that because she's not labouring. She's jumping. She's free of labour some way. Hmm. Maybe just because she's not taking the ground.

44:00

Melissa Blanco Borelli: Right. She's recording us. Yeah, she's recording the moment of not of weightlessness, right? Yeah, weightlessness,

44:07

Jayna Brown: and not being connected not being attached to the earth.

44:11

Tavia Nyong'o: Mm hmm.

44:14

Jayna Brown: stop to think about his wonderful videos. Yeah,

44:18

Melissa Blanco Borelli: I wish he made more. I don't think she's focusing more on installation and performance within museum spaces. But let's turn it over to Tavia to bring us to

44:30

Tavia Nyong'o: performance in the same space.

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Jayna Brown: Museums bases. Yeah.

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Tavia Nyong'o: Although actually Jacoby Satterwhite also performs or in the past performed in public as well. So thank you, and I'll just jump into what I had to say. I'll speak before setting up the video. In my recent book, Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life, I developed the idea of Angular sociality to this A way of being a part in togetherness that is specific to the dynamics of black queer movement vocabularies. This idea is not original to me, but desorbed Neale Hurston, who declared in 1934 that quote, after adornment, the next most striking manifestation of the Negro is angularity, everything that he touches becomes Angular. In all African sculptures and doctrines of any sort, we find the same thing. Anyone watching you grow dancers will be struck by the same phenomenon. Every posture is another angle, unquote. Whatever the truth of this claim about black dance in general, it is certainly true of voguing. The black, brown, trans, queer, competitive dance, social social dance style that emerged in the house ball scene in New York City, in the 1980s. In Vogue, every posture is certainly another angle, angular sociality names, forms of appearance that are sharp, striking and fabulous as nightlife theorist Madison Moore would have it, modes of self fashioning that leave the stultifying world behind, as Jose Muñoz would urge us to Muñoz also directs us to a then and there that speaks to alchemise of melancholy and loss, which I want to get into, in framing Angular sociality against the backdrop of black senses of time and temporality. I suggest in Afro-Fabulations that we bring our dead into co presence with us in our live performances into the spaces between us and the spaces we move through environments filled with those we mourn, and yet still fight for. In its luxuriant exuberance such Angular sociality can sometimes be taken for brand adult consumerism. I would argue that it would be wrong. However, to conflate all commodity play and femme centric self fashioning, with an acquiescence to racial capitalism. While there is no guarantee that the characteristics of black expression equip us to refuse racial capitalism, there is on the other hand, little hope of refusing racial capitalism without taking these characteristics into account. person's emphasis on black mimicry, although itself a dated term can be helpful if it serves to remind us how performative angularity is always a repetition, but with a difference in the discussion of the artist and dancer Jacoby Satterwhite that follows I want to further develop this claim regarding the potential for dance black angularity, and digitally adorned play to make visible and

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therefore contestable, some of the psychic costs of capitalism on black subjects in the 21st century. Jacoby Satterwhite is a multimedia artist whose work often he often says multimedia artists diva whose work often features psychedelic CGI landscapes into which he inserts his own dancing playing body. He Vogues poses and shoots laser beams out of his hands like a video game character or a big screen superhero. Satellite also build sculptures and 3d printed objects and creates bodysuits sometimes with helmets and screens attached in which he can move through both art and public space. Well, Vogue is at the centre of his move movement vocabulary. His dancing is also freestyle and expressive. He is not replicating the exact technique of the competitive Vogue dancer neurosci dancing in a ballroom competition. Rather, he is most often dancing in the studio against the green screen, multiplying himself through CGI so he can be inserted into spaces of seemingly infinite play. As he describes it, folk is already a dance form that works with imaginary objects like makeup, compacts, mirrors, and cameras, meaning that the gestures are oriented around showing objects that don't exist. As video dances take up that technique as a cue to work with a cornucopia of strange and often quite sexy objects. The object world of his videos are not entirely random or unconscious, however, but derived from an archive of drawings that his mother created over a period of time when she was descending into mental illness. As Satterwhite describes it, these drawings were instigated by her avid watching of the home shopping network. I don't know if everyone has that that gift. This is something that's familiar to UK audiences but it's a cable television channel in the US devoted to usually quirky devices promoted by celebrities. So the home shopping network with its perpetual parade of novel consumer gadgets and, and reflect his mother's aspiration to develop an idea that would be equally marketable in the video. You'll see some of these In some of these designs and some of her descriptions of what the designs will, will do. As her illness progressed, her drawings became increasingly ornate and abstract. And that complexity might be attributable to the respite they afforded her from the worst of her symptoms. Satterwhite's videos take these drawings some annotated in his own mother's in his mother's own hand, as a basis for building his magical fantasy world of play and desire. His series Reifying Desire takes on the Marxist concept of reification, which literally means thing ification and mimics it's in a mimics in his creative

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process. While there is an established tradition, going back to Warhol, of artists embracing commercial culture as a means of upending aesthetic hierarchies, that doesn't seem to be Satterwhite's objective. Instead, he miniaturise this and multiplies and multiplies his dancing body, it can until it can serve as both sign and symptom of the effects commodity play has on the hyperstimulated subject. There is a tension between the severely analytical tidal Reifying Desire and the colourful, kinetic and kinky videos that accompany it. What is the desire being reified? Can desire be reified. For Marx reification occurred when a social process was mystified by capitalism, when I pick up an iPhone and my iPhone just chimed in to remind me that it exists and it's awaiting my suggestions, if not commands. When I pick up an iPhone at an apple store because I desire a new smart device to replace last year's model. I focus only on the price and any discounts. I see a relation between myself the phone and the Apple Store. But I do not see the supply chain of workers that mined the rare minerals that assemble all the parts that shipped and stocked the shrink wrapped and product, or even the workers who then have to dispose the outdated iPhone that I threw away in order to make space for the new one. I also probably ends up in that that garbage dump that Jayna Brown was talking about. I also tend not to see the labouring hours that I must work to pay for or pay off that price. Nor do I reckon with the aspect of labour I'm signing up for when I voluntarily link myself up to the latest round of 24 seven updated social media apps downloading at the latest Wi Fi network speeds. All these modes and relations of production are mystified by the pristine white box I walk home with. Even the cash register has been eliminated in the Apple Store less the process of reification be sullied by anything so crass. This is what Marx means by capitalist reification of the commodity. It disguises social relations as relations between objects. In this sense, perhaps a better name for what we see in Satterwhite's video is a de-reification of desire. Not that we can you know, unilaterally refuse capitalism, step outside of our fantasies or ignore our vulnerable, debilitated bodies. But Angular sociality forms a shady antagonism to an anti-black and anti-queer world and bringing them eternal relation front and centre and substituting consumer commodities with objects drawn from a Dreamspace that is within but not entirely of racial capitalism. Satterwhite's dance in the expanded field urges us to think the structure of the unconscious and the structure of racial capitalism together, and

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we'll watch about six minutes of Reifying Desire part five, it's a silent it's a silent video. The text you're seeing is some of the annotations from his mother's illustrations or commodity designs. You will also see a picture of his mother at some point kind of zoom around the background of this space and as well as their she disappeared for a second. You'll also see Picasso's What is it Les Demoiselles d'Avignon. One thing that the his images readily evoke are video game, space to video game play. And that is intentional. Satterwhite has talked about his own actually childhood battle with cancer, that meant that he spent a lot of time in bed playing Final Fantasy. And that that, that sense of being a you know, first person player within this hyperreal video game world is part of the aesthetic that he brings to brings to his animations, he does all these animations himself as well as appearing within them. As a sort of kind of continues in this world, that he's somehow literally animating right with his laser beams. And you see these sort of like, mannequin type figures, then to sort of life and there is this literally hyperplastic do use hyper plasticity that, that Jayna was calling attention to counter both the movement of these, these these figures, but then also, they're kind of transfiguration they become almost hermaphroditic at one point, and then one character one one out 111 of these. One of these figures then grows a large phallus out of which ejaculates like a stream of little Jacoby Satterwhites that are dancing. It's so just to kind of, you know, there's something clearly in the, in the, in some at least at least of the of the objects from his mother's archive that he has selected something a kind of an interest in, in the way or fascination way, a fascination with the promise of the consumer object to kind of like deodorise sanitise and sculpt the female body, right, you know, and so when it's called, like, for pussy power, use this object, and it will make you know, and, but, so, so, so reifying, those capitalists desires that are actually really misogynist, right, and just sort of hatred of the, the female body, and then and then kind of reimagining in this fabulated space, in which I'm, in fact, sexuality and response and and play is is sort of hermaphroditic and polymorphous. And the individual dancer is indefinitely, kind of extrapolated, or multiplied through digital, copy, paste. So that's sort of some of the things that you would see if, if we were able to watch this a couple more minutes of the video. And then the last thing I'll say is that sort of as his work has progressed, and you know, later, he kind of began this work when his mother was alive, she's since passed and some of his

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later work on dealing with that act of dealing with that loss and but I would argue that there is this kind of relation even between you know, a living, you know, person and what we you know, what we that they the gaps, and losses and communication, that debilitation illness distance, right, can create these are very much things that are on all of our minds right now and in a global pandemic, right on and they, I guess for me, they they add some layers of kind of an additional layer, I'll put it to two videos that seem initially kind of hyper saturated with colour, play sexuality, you know, fabulousity right but that are also about this kind of, but it also about about death and loss and a gender and kind of kind of dealing with with with people who are kind of missing from the picture. Right. And I think that is that is part of what's You know, that's that's another thing that I think connects connects this work to, to a grungy and and move to.

59:46

Jayna Brown: you know, what's, what strikes me, you know, watching these is how uncomfortable they may be, because it's so digital. There's like, you No, it's like airless, I feel suffocated with the airlessness of it. But at the same time, there's all this organic stuff happening, right? There's like jizz all over the place. And you know, and I'm not quite sure what to do with that juxtaposition. It's disorienting, because there's not a sort of a flat plane to work on all the time. You know, and what am I to do with his dancing in this? You know, body less plastic world, you know? So, like, I was saying before about my discomfort around mixing the biological, technological, you know, this really does that for me. Like, I don't feel comfortable watching this. So, I don't know, it's not a question. Just a comment, but maybe you could say something about that.

1:00:48

Tavia Nyong'o: Um, yeah, you know, I think that that is that. That dimension of discomfort for me is also, I wanted to make, I don't want to fall back on something as easy as a kind of generational difference, but, but I do think that a generation that is wholly immersed in video game play, arrives at these digital spaces in a different way than likely I do, right? In other words, that sense of being a projecting yourself into the digital environment, in I mean, I get this is all hypothetical,

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because like, I do not know how to play video games, right? Like, I don't play them. The last one I played was like, Miss Pac Man at an arcade. Right? So even that kind of, you know, I associate video game play very much in with like, meat space, like, kind of going to the arcade machine doesn't work, but a quarter end, right? It's quite different than this other. Whatever, we used to call it cyberspace, you know, in which, you know, which is, which is much, which I don't think is perceived as a threat, which I think is perceived in a different way now, then, you know, then it is, at least for me, you know, so that, um, but yeah, you know, I it's, it's, again, I'm thinking now, whether there are, you know, there are certainly as as satellites work as developed, I mean, one other thing to say is that very often these videos are shown in our spaces. That are actually, if anything, even more uncomfortable for me, because they're most of sociality are like overly stimulating. To me, like, I feel like I can't kind of like engage in what's happening with the work, right. So there's that. And then there's finally that he does actually, or he has in the past, like, perform, he has these kind of like bodysuits, which had like, video screens attached to them. And he's almost like Adrian Piper fashion, like, kind of taking those out into like Chinatown and other environments in New York City, and the sort of like dance and seeing how the public responds to this particular character that he is kind of embodying or performing in his videos. So as well as building sculptural environments that, you know, immersive environments for. For audiences like us back when we could have audiences, in immersive environments. It'll be a while since you know, it'll be a while before we do that again. But, but that was, I think one of the directions to work was going,

1:03:47

Jayna Brown: Yeah. Well, thinking of it in those different environments really helps me. You know, I could imagine him in Chinatown, then I can. And also in the sort of the sterile space, the white box of the museum, like I can imagine, feeling very differently about it than in my house with all my plans. You know, with my old self, you're not old.

1:04:13

Melissa Blanco Borelli: I'm just mindful of time. Should we open it up for questions? I think you've been provocative sufficiently, I think for some interesting questions to come. Okay, so this is a comment from

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that looks queer. The words we choose to create an interact with are increasingly moving into the digital space. It's natural that ways to mourn and to grieve should assume these forms. Here's a question from Marieles Wentworth Garcia, in dealing as a child with his own mortality. I wonder if the artist found rescue In the world of video games, it feels like an ability to exist outside of his own physicality. Okay. You're muted, Tavia.

1:05:11

Tavia Nyong'o: Yeah, sorry. So I think it was question to me. Yeah, so Exactly. That's exactly right. So part of what he says is that, um, you know, and he's a really interesting character, he's a really interesting artist on his own work, right? This is not always the case. But like, if you watch videos about, it's almost like, what do you have left to say? Because he's so articulate, you know, but he sort of talks about, you know, cancer being, you know, being a disease that supposed to kill you, right? So that, like, if you survive cancer, it's almost like you're, you're, you're, it's like life after death. Right? Like, like medical intervention in cancer resulted in like, a kind of, you know, and, and so, that, that that gives him you know, so he embraces that. That sense that the organic form is already his organic life is already intervened at this like cellular level in a way that is irretrievable irretrievably, like scientific and technological. Right. So that's part of it. Right? That's part of where the idea comes out. Right. But then part of it is also, you know, yeah, doing a hospital bed, like that bed, you see kind of floating around that, you know, first thing Oh, that's a child childhood bed, it was at the hospital bed, right? You know, the thing you can kind of do and, you know, extensively in recovery, right is in treatment, right? It's like is to kind of go to dive into these to dive into these gaming, gaming worlds, right. And so there's a kind of an analogue, I think, between the gaming world where he finds like a point of contact between the gaming world, his own gaming world, Final Fantasy and other games and his mother's video games, I didn't get a chance to show this but she also recorded, this is an extraordinary person, right? Like hundreds of hours of acapella songs that she wanted to record. And he has spent a couple years working with a with a producer and DJ to actually make and release some like an album of her of her music. So you know? Yeah, like, there are lots of ways in which you know, he's not the only artist for whom like

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this, like, you know, gasify father. relationship with another generation, particularly people who have been kind of shut out or excluded from, you know, from whatever actually from life often, you know, from full participation in life because of debilitation or racism, poverty, sexism, right. Hi, sorry.

1:08:07

Melissa Blanco Borelli: Let me record myself. Right. Hold on. I have a question for both of you. Because we were when we were talking and preparing we started talking about science fiction and our interest in science fiction. So maybe both of you might want to share what science even even though people may have already read your work, but it's always nice to hear from the scholar author. Yeah. Why is science fiction? An entry point to think through and about blackness and its futurity? Yeah. Particularly in your work or something that you've recently seen, or experienced in pop culture. I know you guys are cultural critics. If you might want to share something that helps you that you can be that you can be like, yes, that's exactly what I'm theorising. There it is, right. Yeah, I know that. In that way, maybe it'll generate more questions in our audience. But I don't know.

1:09:07

Jayna Brown: Yeah. Okay. I don't know the answer to your question. Exactly. But, you know, science fiction is the place, or at least particular authors can use this science fictional form to push and say how far outside of your conceptual framework can we go? Right. But it also brings to mind a book that Toby and I both have read and written about. by Samuel Delany called The Einstein Intersection, I find intersection. And in that there's sort of, we have very different reads and I probably don't have time to do that right now. But there's part of it is about the trying To fit into the human form this extraterrestrial, extra psychic entity trying to fit itself into the human form through use of biology, but also myth, right? Fabulation which Tavia talks about a great deal. I don't know. Maybe you want to say a few things are not talking?

1:10:20

Tavia Nyong'o: No, that's exactly right. I think that's, you know where I would that was going to go, we were out of my mouth, right, that

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we both have an interest in Samuel Delany's work in general. And in particular, we both have written actually in our new books, right, we have sections on The Einstein Intersection, which he originally wanted to call a fabulous formless darkness, which I think is an interesting, you know, alternative title. And, you know, you know, this I think, Jayna, your approach to it is very much in relationship to like the history of eugenics and right like thinking through some of those kind of consequences around that. I'm, what I'm where I'm, at the moment, I'm, and you're my students are watching for some reason, they get a free preview of where we're headed in class, but like next week, we're going to be reading Octavia Butler short story Bloodchild and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's reading of that, in which is a similar, well, not similar, it's a different story, but it's about human alien reproduction, right. And she sort of inviting us to sort of meditate in that story on the dilemma, this human colonist on an alien planet has as to whether to go along with a kind of agreed upon implantation of alien embryos, right, which is part of what allows this uneasy peace between these two species to kind of coexist, and it's like really kind of gory, you know, and involves, like, male pregnancy, right, you know, so really, up ends a lot of our assumptions about reproductive city and replication, right, that, I think is something that both but in different ways, both Butler and Delany as a science fiction authors are able to kind of grapple with, right. So you know, part of my argument connected Delany is that he's kind of grappling with like these ideas in the 1960s and 70s. That are now technologies that are now available to us today, enter endocrinological plastic surgery, right, but also, but also kind of like mythic in that kind of Roland Barthes sense of myth, right, like the kind of basically the discourses and symbolic systems that we live by right around which we organise categories like race and sexuality and gender.

1:13:04

Jayna Brown: And incidentally, both of us were taught parable of Octavia Butler's parable of the sower last week. We were both teaching it in the same weekend, we hadn't told each other, but it's a very timely book, for those of you who haven't read it. It's eerily prescient, of our kind of, of our apocalyptic days. Era. And so yeah, so if you feel like having your world reflected in the fiction that was written in the 1990s, which is actually about the results and consequences of neoliberalism, and,

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you know, hyper privatisation, hyper capitalism, climate and the effects on you know, the environment is climate crisis disease. Yeah, but the decimation of civil society? Yeah, a very good read. And also the establishment of what could happen after the apocalypse?

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Tavia Nyong'o: Yeah. I think that um, Oh, okay. Well, I'm just gonna I think maybe we were gonna go to Laura Solomon's question. Yeah. Okay. Because I think that

1:14:27

Melissa Blanco Borelli: there's, there might be one more in the chat in, and then that's, that's it.

1:14:32

Jayna Brown: But let me let me go grab it. But

1:14:34

Melissa Blanco Borelli: yes, so let me just read Laura's question. I wonder if any panellists would be interested in speaking more about neoliberalism. Jane, as you were just speaking, in relation to futurity? I'm thinking that they're used, that they're used at least to be a pretence of modernist theological progress. But now there's just acknowledgement of disposability of folks. So, neoliberalism, our favourite topic. the bane of our existence literally,

1:15:01

Tavia Nyong'o: I will say just at the risk of repeating what Jayna just said, right that I considered, I consider Octavia Butler to be one of our most precious theorists of near liberalism, right? Because it's like down to the nitty gritty, right. So she sort of, I mean, teaching a novel set in 2024, to the class of 2024 gives you chills, right, you know, like, right off the bat, right? So my students are like, highly attentive right to what this novel has to say about the world around them. And, you know, they're not even that, you know, it's not, I asked them, you know, do you think she was prescient? And they're like, Oh, my God, it's like, so obvious, right? But in another way, they're not living in the exact world that you predicted. Right? So it's not as if she's some kind of like soothsayer, you know, but

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like, rather than that you know, being thinking, from the point of view, the victims and the disposable bodies of new liberalism gives you a very different sense of what its future is than the official futures presented by neoliberal ideology. Right. And this is also something that I would mention the work of [inaudible], who talks extensively in her book about the contrast between capitalist speculation, right, the way in which neoliberalism seeks to harness the future through modes of through through speculative pricing and insurance and debt and credit. Right. And, and the kinds of futurity that are imagined in in black, brown, queer, indigenous feminist, science fiction's right, we just not to say that those are always utopian, Happy Places where we all live without outside capitalism, right, but that they're thinking through those capitalist dynamics, those neoliberal dynamics in ways that new liberalism is itself kind of blind to right that neoliberalism kind of depends upon total blindness, to what its its history, right. founded the dispossession and genocide, slavery, and but also, its its its present and its future. I don't know. That's, that's what I would say to that. To to that question. Jayna.

1:17:34

Melissa Blanco Borelli: do you want to add, or shall we move on to I believe, our last

1:17:38

Jayna Brown: question. I don't know that I have anything to add that Tavia you know, Tavia is eloquence, always, you know, gives me food for thought.

1:17:58

Melissa Blanco Borelli: Okay, so I'm gonna move on to it looks like our last question. Do you feel that technology will always have a symbiotic relationship with humanity? Or should we prepare ourselves for a point of separation and individual identity?

1:18:14

Jayna Brown: I don't know that I understand that individual, like, separation and individual identity. Because,

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1:18:24

Melissa Blanco Borelli: you know, the way I'm understanding I, well, technology, you know, technology requires human ingenuity. So I mean, then there's a science fiction films, right, where the technology takes over,

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Jayna Brown: like tournament

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Melissa Blanco Borelli: later. Yeah, so um,

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Tavia Nyong'o: yeah,

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Melissa Blanco Borelli: I don't know, that looks clear. Could you elaborate a little bit more on your question, if possible?

1:18:43

Tavia Nyong'o: It's almost like it's a question written from the future. When we passed the singularity. And technology, it's personified. Oh, so

1:18:58

Melissa Blanco Borelli: there's a question for me curious to hear about notion of enduring or ending, how to harness ancestry towards futurity? Thank you. That's a great question. And then I might even open it up to both of you or why not open up to you? Yeah, I think, um, I'm always interested in playing with this idea of to the logical Western time, right. Like it's, it's an invention, but we're in it and we're, you know, like, Albert Einstein says, it's, it's a real it's, it's a figment of our imagination, you know, it's a figment. But its effects are real in the way we understand the ways in which we understand consciousness, right through time and space. So the way I'm seeing the work of war Natasha Ogunji, and a little bit of Jacolby Satterwhite's work is that in order to imagine or imagine a future ready you need to bring in the present you have to consider the past in the present to then materialise a type of future And that way, the ancestors right or those in the past aren't haven't ended.

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It's a constant enduring. So that's how I was thinking about that. But thank you for that question because it helps me think further about what it is I'm trying to say with this play with enduring and ending. So I don't know if either Jayna or Tavia,

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Jayna Brown: I'd like to kind of always expand what we mean by the ancestors. Because there's a way it can be wedded to a very kind of conservative humanism,

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Melissa Blanco Borelli: and kinship a particular kind of biological kitchen,

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Jayna Brown: you know, biological kinship, heterosexual reproduction, correct, linear linear timelines, trying to recover a timeline that's irrevocably lost, anyway, but I'd love to think of it. I have a relative who speaks to spirits, or spoke to spirits, he's dead now. And one, he would talk to an ancestor, a former Indian, Native American Chief, but also to another being that they reside among us, but we can't perceive them named Golden Ray. So I'm wondering, like, how to use the best of that kind of idea of ancestry in terms of you know, but without sort of getting caught in that. That, that kind of more. Yeah, that other form that sort of humaneness in a bad way.

1:21:42

Melissa Blanco Borelli: Yeah, I completely agree with you. In fact, I'm a couple of weeks I'm teaching Elizabeth Povinelli's book Empire of Love. So, and we're asking exactly that type of question like, how can you think about love because outside of this, this concept of the heteronormative family, right? And what kinds of kinship models emerge, right, because she works with Australian Aboriginal queer communities in San Francisco, [inaudible] theorises this way of enduring literally because she's also interested in the concepts of endurance, and creating a community outside of again, the biological concepts of family. Okay.

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1:22:25

Melissa Blanco Borelli: Unless there's any further questions. I think maybe if you guys have any final thoughts or comments that you would like to share, or we just think one another, nice to see you. A nice way of socialising, like COVID. I mean, you guys would just train right away, but I can't do it right now.

1:22:44

Tavia Nyong'o: Absolutely.

1:22:45

Jayna Brown: It's just lovely. Yeah. It's just lovely to speak with you and to, to realise that there's such synergies in the ways that we're thinking even when we haven't even told each other what we're working on recently. It's just, it's amazing. And I I just really enjoy thinking with you. Oh,

1:23:06

Melissa Blanco Borelli: yes. Likewise. Pleasure.

1:23:08

Tavia Nyong'o: Yes. It's been great. I want to thank Sofia for making this providing this opportunity to us and doing all the, you know, visioning. I'm also, you know, Jim and Ryan, who've been behind the scenes, but I've been making everything work in ways that I'm always so impressed by. But, but Yeah, I know. And also, thank everyone who's been watching and asking questions and engaging. So this has been a pleasure.

Colophon

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