

Thu 19 Nov
6.30-8.30pm

Michelle M. Wright

Live transcript

KEYWORDS

black, blackness, fact, linear, timeline, history, black women, Black Lives Matter, quantum physics, racism

SPEAKERS

Sofia Lemos, Michelle M. Wright

00:03

Sofia Lemos: Good evening, folks, my name is Sofia Lemos I'm the curator Public Programmes and Research in Nottingham Contemporary a contemporary art centre in the UK and is my pleasure welcoming you online for seasonal keynote with Professor Michelle M. Wright, especially once have granted us an insightful outlook on the pleasures and the urgencies of dialogue of criticality and the need for transnational solidarity. They have also afforded an outline for building a more equitable and desirable world untethered from the structures of racial capitalism. This reinvigorated moment of political energy shows us how interlocking systems of oppression, including police violence, the prison industrial complex and economic and environmental invulnerability invites more complex models for understanding subjectivity identity and community blackness remains undefined, and suffering under the weight of many definitions rights Michelle and right. According to our speaker this evening pursuing the question this question requires focusing on the when, and the where that blackness is being imagined the Find and performed for her blackness cannot be located on the body because the diversity of bodies that claim blackness is an identity in physics of blackness from 2015, with University of Minnesota press, Michelle tells us how tells us that our constructs of blackness are largely historical, and more specifically based on a notion of space time. The where and the when that is fitted to a linear progress narrative. In my own research, about of what I term, Sonic continuum. I look at how nonlinear and syncretic histories manifests our understanding of time,

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and by extension, our experience of the world as it is. Pardon, as it is constantly seized by the language that we use to describe it. In an effort to decentralize the year and denaturalize the historical construction of time as a category of modern Western knowledge making. We try to grapple with how time controls representation and what consequences. This might have for the field of visual cultures. Which brings us to our talk this evening. Sonic continuum attempts to propose aquatics for temple deprogramming, which is how I came to learn about Michelle's work in collaborating with artists, poets and academics, our research trend offers derived grammars that do not organize experience, according to linear narratives, but in the string to temporalities in multiple rhythms, which Michel complicates by asserting a multi dimensional interpolation of blackness in the here and now. Michelle draws from literature and lay readings of quantum physics, new findings that assert that just as, up and down, are is a different direction from left to right and forward backward other other completely new dimensions could exist in our Cosmos to borrow physicist Lisa Randall works in Physics of blackness Michel elaborates a critique of how we end up representing and researching the world what she calls the Middle Passage epistemology and its academic representations of blackness intertwine this evening with how civil revolutions calling for greater racial equality, such as Black Lives Matter expose the ways in which even minority collectives also value some lives of over others. Before I introduce our guests. I'd like to take this opportunity to show our gratitude to Michelle for her enthusiasm to travel from Atlanta to Nottingham back in June, and for sharing her wisdom with us online today. A word of thank you to the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University for generously and graciously supporting our events, as well as acknowledging my colleagues James Brower and Ryan Kearney, for taking it for their technical support this evening. I would also like to mention that we welcome your participation in the discussion, for which you can use the chat on the YouTube page to write your questions and comments, and that In addition, we've incorporated an AI system that generates live captions for tonight's event, a link to this option can be found in the YouTube chat box. So without further ado, Michelle and right is the Augustus Baldwin Long Street Professor of English at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where she teaches course courses on African American and African literature and thoughts

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with an emphasis on weirdness on class nation gender and sexuality. Professor writes first book becoming black, creating an identity in the African diaspora from 2004 with Duke University Press, establishes an intellectual genealogy of blackness from other to subject in West Africa. The Anglophone the Francophone Caribbean the United States and Western Europe across 18th 19th and 20th centuries. Her second book Physics of blackness beyond the Middle Passage epistemology, which I highly recommend. Use the theories of time from lay discourses in theoretical physics philosophy, history and literature to show us to show how theory positions of blackness become more accurate and inclusive. When we move from understanding blackness as a what, to a when an aware, and her current project, Feeling Europe: Black and African Diasporas in the Heart of Empire looks at how Space Place affect the stabilized yet expand notions of home and racial belonging. Michelle is also co editor with Tina Campt of Reading the black German Experience a special issue of Callaloo with Maria Fernandez and Faith Wilding of Domain Errors: A Cyber Feminist Handbook, and with Antje Schuhmann of blackness and sexualities finally Professor Wright also writes for public for public media with pieces published in Ebony Chicago Tribune the route and Los Angeles Review of Books among others. So from the total fangirl to our present and future friends in digital space. Please join me in welcoming the show with a warm reading behind our digital screens. Thank you.

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Michelle M. Wright: Oh, Sofia thank you so much for that introduction and I'd also like to, like, Ryan and James for setting up this impromptu studio and getting us all hooked up my connection hasn't been so great, so I apologize for any minor glitches that may happen during the course of my talk. If there were a title to my talk, I would call it black justice and physics of blackness and no surprise there is a lot to talk about in this moment here and now when it comes to black justice. I am talking to you from Atlanta, Georgia, on the eyes of the United States on Atlanta right now as Democrat and Republican operatives descend to follow the senate runoff that is going to be happening in January. In a nutshell, what is going on is Biden has won the presidency, don't tell Donald Trump because, of course, he is still from the belief that he has won. But the Senate races have not all been called yet. And we are having run offs in

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Georgia for two Senate races, if the democrats get those Senate races then that can make a big difference to the Biden presidency where he won't be stonewalled the way that Obama was with a Republican majority. And of course, issues of black justice are coming up because the places where the Trump administration has decided to attack the voting process are in major urban areas in the US with very large black populations that in fact carried the day for Biden and here I'm talking about Detroit. The Trump administration has just dropped their lawsuit against Wayne County where Detroit is located which is lovely, Philadelphia, of course, which was what really put Biden over the top. And here in Atlanta, we are finishing up the recount, and I think the results are going to be broadcast within the next minute within the next hour. I can't be sure, but what we have going on here of course is black voters that manage to get Biden across the line and into the presidency, and no surprise black voters now being attacked by a whole spate and team of lawyers, trying to argue that one simply cannot trust black people to vote. The whole issue of blackness and justice as you know, has a very long history going all the way back to Atlantic slavery and it has been deployed in amazing useful ways. The ability for black abolitionists to with allies bring an end to Atlantic slavery, the ability of black anti colonial activists to bring an end to colonization in Africa, the ability of black activists like Desmond Tutu to end apartheid and of course Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and of course the ability of black activists to end issues of Jim Crow here the ability of black activists to carry on the fight in Britain, where we had Stephen Lawrence's death, just what really seems like a few short years ago, being pushed by his mother as an important cause to fight for and to start paying attention to the racism that happens in Britain so blackness and justice have always been paired together in incredibly important ways but at the same time as somebody who studies blackness theorizes blackness. What I have been struck by is the very narrow definitions of blackness that we tend to take up from those moments. The most recent right now of course is the fact that the Black Lives Matter organization that has sprung up and is taking place protests are taking place now in Europe in the US, they are taking place in interesting places in Africa, even in places in South Asia, people who would not necessarily define themselves are black as black or taking up black lives matter it's also happening in South and Central America. This was an organization founded by three women of

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color Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, and yet the majority representations we have about black violence tend to focus on heterosexual black men. Now, I don't want to downplay this black men are being murdered with impunity, not just in the US, but in all sorts of places all across the world including for example Kenya and Nigeria, but of course black women are being killed, too. there was an enormous difference however in the gendering of the violence, black men are killed in public spaces in the street in front of others slowly choked to death. As if to say or simply to say the white patriarchy controls this nation and we can kill your black men in front of you and we don't have to face repercussion, it's a display of power. When black women are killed. It's like Breonna Taylor or Eleanor Bumpurs, where the police break into a home and kill them in private they shoot them up, they destroy the place, or like Sandra Bland who was found hanging in a jail cell and it was pronounced suicide, and in other words what happens is this gendering of violence means that within the public space, the black male body is front and center, but black women of course are also being slaughtered and pushed into the background because they tend to be killed in private ways. Another very common way in which black women are murdered, at least in the US, is that they are handcuffed taken into the back of a police car and then when the police car shows up the police station. Those women are dead, they've been shot through the head and the police officers claim after we handcuff them. They managed to grab my gun and shoot themselves in the head. In other words, suicide that is physically impossible. And even more importantly, it doesn't even get labeled as a murder, so there's no place for people to push for social justice, it gets quietly tucked away as a suicide, so it becomes even more difficult to protest those deaths. If we go all the way back to the era of Atlantic slavery. We see the same sort of thing. While we decry the enslavement of black women for the most part, when we talk about the evils of slavery, the focus is often on the loss of black masculinity the emasculation of the black male, which again is brought up with brought up with police violence today. In other words, racism, quite often ends up being reduced to black emasculation, and those black people who do not count as important to the topic of black masculinity, do not get to be included. And here I'm not only talking about black women but of course black trans people, and black queers who are being murdered in horrific rates at least here in the US, but quite often those deaths aren't counted

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either. And there's very little investigation. Instead we tend to summon all of our outrage for these more public murders that are happening and that we have this question therefore coming up as to why is it that black representation ends up being so narrow, given the universality of blackness, given its power and its complexity, what is happening here. What we do have happening is a sort of silence about these other killings, and we can extend that to the ways in which, for example in Kenya and Nigeria right now. Black police men are murdering poor black men and poor black women, again with impunity. In the United States black academics, we are largely silent about this because to be brutal about it, we become riled up when we see a white agitator at hand, a white malefactor, it is almost as if whiteness is what we are focused on when we decry that black death. If it is a black person killing another black person, suddenly that black life does not seem to matter as much, and again we have to get to that question of representation, why is it not just that black men are the focus, but then in certain circumstances if it is a black man killing another black man or a black woman killing a black man, a black female police officer for example, why are we not protesting this, so those who are protesting in places like when Bob Mombassa and Lagos are not heard by other black networks, again we managed to narrow this cause of blackness when what we can see from it is its ability to expand into encompass. I would argue that the marginalization of black women and queers isn't simply incidental or coincidental, at least in the US when it comes to discourses of black nationalism, the suggestion is often that black feminism and black queer rights are antithetical to the progress for freedom for the black collective as a whole. So we often end up silenced or if we speak up too much the suggestion is we are emasculating the black male, a strong black woman is a bad thing for a black man, apparently. And of course we also have the quiet murder of black women and queers in black majority nations as well which we also tend not to talk about when we broaden this out to a diasporic view. Those of you who are watching this from Europe, or elsewhere outside the US are more than familiar with the ways in which blackness nationally speaking tends to only get attached to the United States and Africa as if these are the only places where black people exist, so that when you have moments arising like Black Lives Matter erupting in places like London and Berlin, you have a lot of white Europeans shocked surprised they can't imagine this one.

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They have a hard time seeing that there are actually black citizens in those cities. As a side note, sometimes when I meet white German scholars I do like to teach them a bit when they ask me what my work is, and I will talk about the fact that I work on black Germans I work on a lot of different black collectives but that's when I will present, and their first reaction almost inevitably is there are no black Germans, that's the first thing that they say, and I respond saying well there are about 2 million black German people, and then their next response they don't miss a beat is well it's only 2 million Why do you need to focus on them. So we've gone from a blanket denial that black people exist in Germany to a sudden type of interesting justice math where it's decided that 2 million people being oppressed, just doesn't count. I don't know what the threshold is where suddenly injustice counts doesn't have to be 2 million in one black body and then suddenly they'll care or two and a half million I'm not sure how that works. but what happens there of course is the erasure of black people, and if so many of you I'm sure have encountered white Europeans quite often like to claim that racism only exists in the US, we don't have that problem here, or if there is a problem of course, it's the problem of people, quote unquote refusing to fit in. So blackness is not only in these representations of raising women or raising black queers. It also ends up raising the vast majority of the black diaspora. And as I work on issues of diaspora I was really sort of stunned by this because when I first got my PhD Paul Gilroy, who was a very famous black British theorist wrote a book called The black Atlantic in which he argued that you can understand black communities in the US the Anglophone Caribbean and Britain as all being united across cultural pathways discursive and political pathways of people united by a single goal so we can understand it as a nation of sorts. And I was so excited by this when reading the introduction because it's an absolutely brilliant idea. No surprise Paul Gilroy is an incredibly brilliant man, but when you read through the black Atlantic, the thing you notice is his focus tends to be on African American men. And once again, the rest of the Atlantic is sort of left out including black Britons in fact white Britons show up more often in his text than black British speakers. So that was one of the first moments in which I realized that sometimes in our attempt to represent all different kinds of blackness. We don't follow through one that if for some reason it's not happening, we end up, even in diasporic texts when we talk about the African diaspora. It's not uncommon to argue that the

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African diaspora to see it argued that the African diaspora begins with Atlantic slavery, and then suddenly you see what's going to happen, you're going to see West Africans only taken us slaves directly into the US, and all these other land masses are bypass, despite the fact, for example, that Brazil has over 100 million black Brazilians I'm probably gonna be about 200 million now since apparently you can get state funds for your election campaigns. If you claim to be indigenous or black so suddenly you have white Brazilian politicians, throwing up their hands and deciding they are part of the folk. But nonetheless, right now in counting 100 million black Brazilians, there are about 30 million African Americans so less than a third, and yet for some reason when we talk about blackness in the Americas, it is almost always African Americans, and as of course as you may also know you had slave ships stopping off in Europe they started in Europe, they go to Africa, they stopped off in Europe to refuel and quite often to sell some slaves. So you had some slaves of black Europeans who had slave descent, but of course we also know the African diaspora, did not begin with the Atlantic slave trade at our most conservative, we can say the Africa diaspora began with the empire of Carthage, an empire of such enormous and expansive trading routes that the Roman empire that was still just a tiny little thing at that moment realize that if they truly wanted to grow, they would have to defeat Carthage, so you had black Carthaginians throughout Europe and in many places in the subcontinent and South Asia as well trading. So we could say that, you know, the black diaspora starts before there's even a concept of blackness much less a concept of Europe, and yet for some reason we start much much later cutting out other key groups like black Liverpoolians or even simply cutting out the slave trade that went from East Africa into places like Turkey and into India, so of the slave narrative also gets lost and forgotten as we just make the straight line from West Africa to the United States and I remember puzzling over this for a very long time about why we have this lack of representation, why it is that all these people can be excluded in encyclopedias and documentaries, in theory books in lectures and presentations, without actually anyone explicitly saying, we're not going to talk about black women here, we're not going to talk about black queers here we're not going to talk about black Europeans, instead they just automatically seem to get left out. And I was really as a theorist trying to figure out how is it that this happens, especially since, even at the time that I had just

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gotten my PhD in the late 90s, you had all sorts of famous black women and queers producing amazing creative works, and theoretical works, exploring our presence exploring our existence, so it's not hard to incorporate us and yet somehow, even with these piles of books and now in 2020, the piles have grown even larger, we still not quite getting into the main narrative. In the US, in my lectures I often refer to this as the didja know, phenomenon. And what I mean is in high school textbooks sometimes also middle school or elementary school textbooks in the US. So for students from the ages of five to 18, you'll get your history and then you'll have these quite literally little colored boxes in the margin supplementing that history, and when I was growing up the title was Did you know or Did you know Did you know that Madam CJ Walker was the first black millionaire is, did you know that peanut butter was invented by George Washington Carver. In other words, the attempt to incorporate minority voices would be put quite literally in this little cage in the margins and the attempt to incorporate. If anything underscored the modularization one there they are literally in the margins talk about literal marginalization, but also I mean I love remembering these fun facts but when you memorize them as exceptions to the rule, that means you don't in fact integrate them, because your head is already reading them as strange little facts that are disconnected fun things to bring up at dinner, maybe, but not not serious history, not the things that you really have to memorize like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and so forth. So when I started to write my book physics of blackness. I came across this amazing article by a conservative black columnist named Deborah Dickerson, and the title of the article was colorblind I think it came out in 2008 and in it, she says, Barack Obama, ain't black and I was like well I have to read this I have to find out how Obama isn't black who knew. And what she goes on to argue is she says that blackness is only people who come from West Africa and were transported into the US and produced offspring that later became African Americans, and she has one line in what she says. A third generation Harlem might somebody from the New York neighborhood of Harlem, and a Nigerian cab driver driving through New York have very little in common, other than the fact that they will both experience racism. And one of the reasons she gives is that Nigerian cab driver came in voluntarily to the US, and that was really struck by those words because the first thing that hit me was the fact

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that she was describing this Harlemites as third generation now on one level I absolutely understand the idea of generations. In fact, it's something that minority groups quite often use to underscore our long lasting presence in a place we are not new arrivals we have been here for a while, but Dickerson was using it in a questionable way, she was saying that this third generation Harlan might possess this knowledge about blackness that this Nigerian cab driver could never possibly access, which of course is ridiculous. It really depends on who the third generation Harlow might is, What if this is a family that has mixed in with white families going along and this person isn't even aware that they are black. What if the Nigerian cab driver and I don't understand why they're called a Nigerian cab driver because they're in New York so somehow they're simultaneously driving in Nigeria and New York at the same time in other words he's trying to displace them take away the fact that they are literally, physically they're participating in us life and culture, and instead belong elsewhere. But what is the Nigerian cab driver is working with civil rights groups, um, you know, what if they have married into an African American family and of course for that matter when it comes to Barack Obama, what Deborah Dickerson did not know and arguing that Obama is not black because his ancestry is Kenyan is that Obama's white mother comes from a family, her name is Ann Dunham, that is descended from the black punches. In other words, a family named punch that had been held in slavery in Virginia and slowly. One part of that family line crossed the color line by marrying into whiteness so Obama actually does have, quote unquote, Middle Passage blackness Middle Passage of course referring to the Atlantic slave trade and Kenyan blackness. So if anything the attempt to try and boot somebody out due to their linear ancestry, is a mistake. I would add to that when we think about ancestry we often talk of course about the ancestral line, but if we want to be honest, we should really refer to it as like an ancestral bush. And what I mean by that is, we're talking about all sorts of tangled ways in which we relate and interrelate to one another, when we go back to our family trees. One thing you might notice is as those family branches spread out more and more blank spaces appear and more and more branches get cut off and other words, what we want to do is try to get around the fact that we are all ultimately related to one another. For example genealogists have a joke. They say that if you hire a genealogist to do your family tree and the genealogist comes back to you and says,

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one of your 32nd descendants was Genghis Khan, you shouldn't be surprised. In fact, with genealogist knowledge, it would actually be rarer and more interesting. If one of you were able to find a 32nd descendant, that wasn't Genghis Khan, because by the time you hit the 32nd descendants. We almost all are integrated with one another and produced into this, so this attempt to produce ancestral lines that prove one's authenticity are highly questionable and require a lot of pruning of that family tree. But what Dickerson gave me in that moment my eureka moment was. Ah, Yes, what we do when we talk about blackness is we are we are defining it historically, and we are defining it according to a historical construct that we've all been taught and we are all familiar with. To the degree that I would argue, most of the time we don't think about it. And what I mean by that is the history timeline, also known as the linear progress narrative, which is the way in which collectives tend to map and understand their histories, so you start off with a line, you have a little dot that's your origin point and then an arrow at the other end and then you take your collective and you trace it along the dot, all of you who have been in classrooms in a history classroom I'm sure are familiar with this, if a professor takes up their chalk, or their whiteboard marker and draws a line and starts marking off dates, places people, etc. You know exactly what's going on. And you know how to read it and that's the beautiful part of the linear progress narrative the idea of the timeline, but there were also moments where it doesn't fully work so what I want to argue and what I argue in physics of blackness is not that we should dispense with the linear timeline, I would argue we absolutely need it, but there are times when it doesn't work for us and in those moments we need to pause and find other methods of representation. Let me first take you through the different ways in which the linear timeline doesn't work. As you all know, all timelines need origins. The thing with origins however is that they carry a two fold problem. One origins are also endings they cut off whatever preceded it. So in other words, if you came to the US before the Atlantic slave trade started up, you are going to struggle to find yourself on an African American timeline which starts with the arrival of slaves. Back in the 17th century. The other thing with origins is that origin set the theme for your timeline. So, even though we talk about these timelines as progress narratives, you can never really progress further away from that origin. If the African American timeline starts with slavery. That means enslavement and

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oppression must always be our theme throughout. And as we all know all of us black communities all over the world, whether we start our timelines in oppression or not, we are much more than oppression, we are not simply the result of oppression. If we were we wouldn't have the brilliant philosophies, music, the ingenuity of the black experience there is a reason why the world is so caught up with blackness and why blackness makes so much money in this world from sports figures to Barack Obama to Black Lives Matter etc. And it's because we are more than simply the product of oppression, which is another problem with this timeline specifically a black timeline that begins with oppression means that you as a people begin as a reaction. It turns out that white people are actually the actors on your timeline if you begin with the big, the entrance of slaves into the US, and no surprise, a lot of times you'll see this in African American timelines where you have white enslavement. And then blacks pushing against that enslavement, and then whites and pro impose Jim Crow black people push against Jim Crow, and so forth and so on. In other words, all of our actions become simply reactions, not unlike the way what Dickerson said about that Nigerian cab driver coming voluntarily to the US, although I should note that we really should question that notion of voluntarily. If you are escaping political oppression, or if the ways in which Europe the World Bank and the United States have carved up parts of Africa and dominated economically, so you have to leave in order to feed your family and feed yourself. It's hard to say that that's voluntary. The other problem of course with this timeline is that you get just one to represent a people moving through that line, which means that when you hit something like the 15th amendment to the US Constitution, in which black men are granted the right to vote, you might have a pause as you're doing your timeline because only black men are granted the right to vote, not black women, of course not black children, so less than half of the majority of black people, and yet you would argue, of course it's important to put down the 15th amendment in this timeline, but in doing so whether you want to or not, you have basically suggested that that dot that's meant to represent the collective is primarily representing black men in that moment and the rest of us disappear timelines as two dimensional things are very forbidding things and what I mean by that is, you're only allowed to represent that collective through one in the same way that when you're representing the Diaspora through a timeline. You

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really can't do an accurate history, if you start adding to that timeline, all the different lines that went out in all sorts of different directions. Before Atlantic slavery during Atlantic slavery after Atlantic slavery timelines are neat and simple but as a result of course they neaten up and simplify our very existence. So you have this question then of, what do we do with this timeline and where did it come from, who do we blame. What do we try out into the streets. The reason my book is called physics of blackness is because our notion of linear time comes from philosophers, that were very taken with Sir Isaac Newton's notions of the laws of motion and gravity, which I'm sure you're all familiar with a body at rest stays at rest until it encounters a body in motion a body in motion will stay at that same velocity until it encounters a body of lesser or greater speed etc. Philosophers took this idea, and were just so stunned by it because on one face of it you could argue well that's not very impressive. I think that's something I figured out at the time of 3d that if I take this ball and throw it at my brother's head, it's going to calm him on the head and he will go over so in other words, look at me I'm a Newtonian genius I understand how this works. But of course Newton's genius, was not about throwing balls at vulnerable bratty three year olds. It was about being able to calculate everything in this universe so in other words Newton was showing us that if you have a rock at the bottom of the river, I can trace back where that rock came from and I can tell you where that rock is going to be in 100 years and 1000 years. In other words, it was understood as if he had unmasked and unmasked the clockworks of the universe, what we know now, of course, is that Newtonian physics doesn't always work in fact it tends to work in a vacuum. You can't have factors that were unanticipated suddenly coming in because that messes up the mechanism of determining what the past was and determining what the future was, if a Paki Derm suddenly shows up and kicks that rock. You don't have a Newtonian equation for the unanticipated package or him coming in and kicking the rock. So Newtonian physics only works when you can highly control the environment. So you can see how timelines also end up being so highly controlled. When we look at Western civilizational timelines, of course, they become equally ridiculous if not more so this argument that Western civilization begins with the ancient Greeks even though if you go back to Heraclitus you hear him you read him talking about Egyptian scholars astrologers mathematicians etc, where this knowledge came

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from. And in the same way when you think about the ridiculousness of when you go to the United States and go to a place like Washington DC, or to any state capitol like the one I'm in here in Atlanta, you'll see a lot of neoclassical architecture all the Doric ionic and Corinthian columns, and a lot of quotes from Seneca and Aristotle so we really get into ancient Greek and Roman history and you would have to ask quite logically, why is it that contemporary Americans are convinced that their roots are located in ancient Greece in Rome, they certainly are not accepted the degree that you know everybody's roots are located in ancient Greece in Rome before you go back out into the world again. And the reason of course is that linear progress narrative this idea of neatening and simplifying, so that one can produce the US as the very natural causal result of all the brilliance that happened in ancient Greece and Rome and then in the Renaissance and then voila, we have got 18th century United States suddenly becoming the beacon of democracy and taking up the mantle. From ancient Greece. But if you talk to, physicists, about time. And you may have to you know accost one in a dark alley because if you ask them nicely and politely, a lot of times they won't tell you about what they think time is. And the fact that they're not even sure if time exists, or if what we're calling time is actually a rather blousy broad category that encapsulates all sorts of things from, you know, alarm clocks to the growth of a plant to the atomic clock to the sifting Sands of Time to travel and distance. So you may have to get one in an alley Don't let them know that I told you to do this. And, um, you may have to get a bit rough with them and ask them if you had to pick a definition of time what would it be if you force them to pick a definition of time they'll say well if time is anything. Time is entropy, which means that time is the movement of molecules from a tightly bound order to a looser and quote unquote more chaotic order, time is ice melting. Time is a person growing over time is a tree growing in other words we move from that neatly bound order to where we as you know human beings begin to slough off skin the tree grows all the leaves die they filter onto the ground. And what was that tree of course starts to spread across. Possibly the earth. If not, let's be grandiose here the universe. So in other words, what we have here is the possibility that time doesn't move forward, rather that time moves outward. And one of the things I find so genius, about really successful aspects of black activism is that long before physicists understood that time and entropy may in fact be one

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of the same thing and that movement outward. They already understood that need not to think about going forward, but about going outward and by that I mean encapsulating and bringing in more people. The most recent example of course is Black Lives Matter and the fact that these three founders did not attempt to control the movement, much less define it they simply said, Black Lives Matter. And in that so many people have found resonance and membership so no surprise that in that capacious expansive definition. We now have Black Lives Matters protests bringing up, organizations springing up in the United States in Europe in the Middle East in South Asia and including Western East Africa, we have Black Lives Matter happening. And one way I also tend to think about time expanding and complicating is the way in which we experience time so I take this notion of entropy, and the possibility of time moving outward, and I combine it with the way in which we go through time. Now, as you know, we don't actually go through time in a linear way although I'm sure we're all familiar with a really oppressive sense when we think about our life as a linear progress narrative, where sometimes we we worry about like maybe I've peaked you know I'm supposed to be getting better and better and better as time goes on, and yet maybe I was at my most popular and smartest in high school, or I certainly have nervous college students coming to me where they did so well on the midterm but not so well on the exam following the midterm, because the anticipation and the assumption is that we all live like a linear progress narrative we become cumulatively smarter and more progressive and yet we know on a broad space that isn't true so it's odd that we expect that, you know, would you say that the Holocaust is an improvement on Atlantic slavery when we look at World History it's really hard to argue that we are progressive in that way, and yet at the same time we do tend to use that linear progress narrative, I'm prone to it. When I say things like can you believe that in 2020, a man like Donald Trump is president, as if in 2020 we're supposed to be smarter better faster than 1020 than the year 2018. In other words, it really has a grip on our notions of who we are and what we should be and where we come from. But when it comes to our experience of time, we don't have separate tenses of past, present, future. And what I mean by that is, the past is not behind us. The past is literally all around us, quite often and changed form. all the people that live before their clothing their documents the animals their food. It's all still here it's simply perhaps in

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the dirt or on earth in a museum, or perhaps you had it as part of your lunch today. In other words, we got there is entropy the fact that everything is still present with us. It's not located in some other space that we call the past in the same way that the present is not a middle space and time that we constantly occupy that can be frozen, because if I try to explain to you what the present moment is I'll tell you the present moment is this moment but not the moment when in which I first told you that was the present moment I mean this moment but not this moment that was sort of. In other words, because we are in constant motion, whether it's our hearts beating, or whether it's the earth spinning on its axis, we are constantly in motion which means there is no real present tense, in the same way that we are constantly making our future if we are constantly in motion, then that means we are creating as we go. The future is not something that lays out there waiting for us to enter it. The future is right here and right now, so my definition of what I call epiphenomenal time is simply the now. The now that encompasses everything, and that is always becoming infinitely more complex, and I argue that this is a good way to understand blackness. When we need to have a more accurate more capacious more inviting representation when we talk about issues of justice. For example right here right now talking about blackness to you we can play with the idea that we have my own blackness. I grew up. Interestingly enough, or boringly enough in Western Europe My father was an African American diplomat, so you have blackness coming from the US, in a very Imperial form because of course after World War Two. The US really rose as the dominant economic power in the world, which allowed with black Americans fighting for justice for places like the State Department to make an, an effort to hire more black diplomats, so here comes my dad moved to Europe to represent the United States, and here I am growing up in Europe, and as I'm growing up going to these private American schools so even though I come from a class of people that are descended from slaves. I'm going to a very expensive American schools at the cost of the United States which doesn't bat an eye at paying thousands of dollars to educate me and it's happening during the Nixon administration one of the most racist presidents we've had. And as I am at school, I'm encountering African American and black African students who are utterly apart from me. And what I mean by that is African American students that I encounter are the sons and daughters, always

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of military personnel who are waiting before they get moved to a military base I'm located in the city as part of diplomatic personnel, they're out there, because even though we come from the same rough background. They have ended up as working class, joining the armed services in order to make a better life for themselves, and they're going to go to Department of Defense schools which are not the best schools to be educated, while here I am very similar to them and yet enjoying this privileged education. The black African students are sons and daughters of diplomats and ambassadors, their sons and daughters of royalty they move to step apart from all of us we all sort of watched them in all. So in other words you have all these different blindnesses operating in that classroom, and yet they're distinguished by things like nationality, culture, and socio economic difference and those of course need to be brought out. As I stand here right now talking to you. You can think about of course blacks experiences in Europe and the different ways in which they operate the ways in which we have been inspired by the fights for Steven Lawrence's justice, the black BLM movements happening in London, and the pushback FYI Hirsch having a bestseller called *British* and what she talks about those issues of belonging and blackness and racism. We can also talk about black Germans who are an accent extensively complicated group who every generation have different heritage points, whether it's before world war one where they're mostly coming from East Africa or World War One, where they are the offspring of affairs between white German women and the DSi yell cynically color French colonial troops that were mostly from Senegal, but not completely to World War Two were the offspring of white German women and African American soldiers to the post war in which we're looking more at West African immigration and other words, you have this black collective that of necessity needs to understand itself in an expansive and capacious way, and perhaps it isn't coincidental that the major thought leaders of black German identity and activism in Germany are almost all women of color, and quite often queer women of color, whether it's Fatima El-Tayeb who is now a professor at Yale University, um, [inaudible]. And we shouldn't be surprised perhaps that these that these figures who occupy what could be understood as a sort of marginal blackness or an inauthentic blackness or not quite authentic blackness because it doesn't follow that Middle Passage linear progress narrative have broken out the

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issues and understandings and definition of blackness to kind of bring us all in. And of course we can tie that back to the Black Lives Matter movement founded by queer women of color who are bringing in all these people together and so suddenly in my discussion of blackness just right here right now in epiphenomenal time. I'm talking about blackness in Europe blackness in the UK black class differences, black immigration world wars, the list goes on practice in other words, intersects with everything. We are really one of the fundamental forces that shapes and defines this world. Now, I always enjoy giving talks and I always have a launching point I never quite sure where I will land, so I will wrap up here by simply saying that in moments where linear representations of blackness, do not work and cut people out. That is when we need to start, quite simply and quite complex with the right here, right now, of epiphenomenal blackness. Thank you.

47:06

Sofia Lemos: Thank you so much, Michelle. It's it's been a wonderful journey. So as you know we're working on listening to sound to the poetics of time. And so I'd like to open with a question relating to the nouns so the now time of the presentation. So there's a feeling, there's a certain anarchist quality to tempt to a temporality that embraces simultaneity overlapping timeframes cleaving or the possibility for two things to be one itself and its opposite. And so I wonder how this reconciling time in space allows us to think differently about contemporary entity, about the here now.

47:52

Michelle M. Wright: Um, it's a great question and I think, and I think the sonic feature quite, quite nicely into that, I think, including myself human beings were often prone to switching out representation for reality, I won't get into a definition of what I think reality is that's a dark hole that is very difficult to get out of, but of the ways in which we can be taught about blackness or gender in the past. And even though we are present and listening to it. We don't notice that we have been cut out of that story. So I think one way in which it's an archaic is that it epiphenomenal time really pushes against a vertical hierarchical notion of knowledge, and this isn't new I mean we could as an American, I could trace it to say the GI Bill after World War Two, where you had black and white, Asian,

indigenous servicemen. Now, having the money to go to college, and as they're being taught these history courses because perhaps possibly their men. Very few service women use the GI Bill. They don't see themselves in the history books and they don't hear themselves in the lectures, and they're thinking, I just helped win the most consequential Battle of our time and my people don't matter what it is your, what is it you're trying to tell me. So in that you have that kind of controlled anarchy in that moment, because you have men of color and white men not seeing themselves and demanding that that space change immediately so contemporaneity to me intersects quite nicely with something we are quite often taught not to think of in the classroom, which is physicality our corporal reality, the fact that we are there, and we have the right to ask and to demand. What about me, and even ask, why are you teaching me this, like what is the goal because right now all I see is the erasure of myself. And the same thing could be applied to the sonic in that moment, because you can think about the silence that attends the lecture and thinking about it also of course as a silencing. Now that doesn't mean I'm advocating that everyone should all talk at once, etc. But it means that when we have epistemologies narratives of knowledge delivered to us as monologues as simply linear, no surprise that we're being cut out of it. And that's enabled by the sonic that's enabled by the silence of course we can also think about the way silence can push against it if the professor asked if there are any questions and then the crickets that you hear as we say in the US, in other words you hear you have nothing going on that silence can be a form of resistance. And I'll stop there but just sort of simply say yes I do see the anarchic potential in there and Isn't it sad that the anarchic potential is simply saying I exist. I am here. How do I connect to what you're trying to tell me to do or think or believe.

50:58

Sofia Lemos: Thanks Michelle so I'll ask a few a couple more questions in preparation for everyone to sort of gather their thoughts gather their opinions, please do feel free to write your questions and thoughts on the chat so. Admittedly, I work here at Nottingham contemporary with Public Programmes and Research is largely inspired by Sylvia Wynter by the nice height of the silver, and, and specifically we're I think we're looking at something that the Silva calls the analytics of raciality so this

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means the apparatus of knowledge manufactured by the sciences of men, and society. And so we try to look at different violences that are enacted upon the Black subject subject but not only through philosophy history. So one of the things that we're sort of really interested in and I think runs across the thread of the, of our events, is how European philosophies of time, place black and indigenous persons and a subject, outside of history. Right. So one example of this or let's say a global example of this would be coming from Elizabeth Povinelli who says that, or who points at the question of how settler colonial states, deny First Nations sovereignty, in order to establish themselves as the starting point of their political narrative. So she calls this form of government. government mentality, the governance of the prior. So, I wonder, you know, in reading your work. I wonder how quantum physics became a generic field for tackling philosophies of history and their attendant systems of knowledge.

52:59

Michelle M. Wright: Oh yeah, it's a great question and you, you certainly can't go wrong using the Silver's work, I would want to trouble that that's tends to be my first reaction. If I get a whiff of any sort of binary is going on and by that I mean, a binary line that takes the sciences as all white and inherently oppressive and, and it's being used to oppress black bodies, it's not to deny that that isn't going on but I also want to complicate that, and I want to complicate it by arguing that even when the sciences like to imagine themselves as all white they are not all white, and you have had of course black African scientists, long before the ancient Greeks started up, who informed the ancient Greeks so their ideas are operating within there and of course, as I argue at the end of my book and when it comes to linear time. If we who knows what the actual origin is I'll stay free of origins, but the earliest we can trace ideas of linear time is to anti Trinitarianism, which was a Catholic doctrine, developed by Arius who was a third century black African Christian theologian of course as you know, back in the third century, an enormous amount of important theologians were black Africans because of course you had the Eastern Roman Empire opening up all these different places like Tripoli for black, black theorists and black Christians, people like of course San Agustin as well. And so it was areas, who has the earliest instantiation of the idea of linear time

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anti Trinitarianism Of course it's simply arguing that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost did not appear contemporaneously instead, one has to come out of the other and of course that's where we get that idea of succession. And interestingly enough Sir Isaac Newton was not a follower of our use, but he was a follower of Sonsini or scientists who was a Christian theologian who basically took up anti trinitarianism again so in other words we get it. We Newton's oppressive theories actually come from black African so part of what I always want to bring up is you can actually find blackness intersecting with all these things. When it comes to issues say of like settler colonialism. We are also guilty of that in African American studies because we talk about how we were promised 40 acres and a mule by the US government upon emancipation from slavery, but nary Do we ever mentioned ordinaries there are mentioned from us, who's, whose 40 acres are we talking about quite often African American History begins with the idea that the US is simply made up of black and white people. And we are raised the indigenous presence. Now that's not to say we should all hang our heads in shame and just shut up and never talk again, it's simply to say plus plus we need to add more to these discussions. I'm not interested in stopping discussions, I want to bring more things in and show all the different ways blackness intersects. In addition to the fact that you've probably heard of the Buffalo Soldiers famous song from Bob Marley, the Buffalo Soldiers were soldiers who worked with William Custer and helping to move indigenous people off the land and slaughter those who resisted and black soldiers were part of that too. So we were part of the settler colonialism, then that's not to say therefore were to blame for everything, etc. Again, but to simply sort of try to shatter those binaries especially with notions of oppressive knowledge because, again, if we play with the right here right now I want to say that as a black academic, who is very well paid, it doesn't mean that I don't have to deal with racism misogyny homophobia. At my majority white University, but I would argue, there is a problem if I try to speak for black people that I don't allow it to speak for themselves. And what I mean by that is black folks that live maybe 10 miles from me and are working poor, I really push against arguing that I am oppressed in the same ways that they are I think as black academics, it's incumbent on us to talk more about socio economic difference rather than argue that it doesn't exist I know, Isabel Wilkerson for example, brilliant beautiful writer has just come up with

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a book arguing that in the US races caste, and I take exception to that because I, again, I think that's too linear that's a radical simplification. And as I'm as black academics who are privileged I often argue that the essence of privilege is not knowing you have it in other words you just feel free to hear I am talking to you in the middle of the day, because I can because I don't have to work in a factory, because I don't have to go out looking for work. I have that freedom to get on zoom and talk to you for a couple hours, no problem. So I think people should think about that right here right now and ask, Well, how is it that you can do this, What are your levels of oppression and where are you located. So that's where I really want to play with notions of oppressive knowledge and if anything. It might also give us hope because I think if we push too far with these binaries black folks coming up can really believe that black people have never achieved anything that they are of no import whatsoever I sometimes I'll have students writing essays saying since the dawn of time, black people have been enslaved to whiteness, and I you know I have to kind of tell them, not really since the dawn of time in the grand space of history it's a very small space in the right here right now it matters quite a bit, but in the right here right now on talking to you and correcting your essay. I can also point to the fact that blackness is is much bigger than any binary could hope to encompass.

58:36

Sofia Lemos: So on this note, I have a little bit of a complicated question the long one. So, thank you for for for amusing me there's already some questions coming in from from our audience so after this we'll, we'll jump into that. So Michelle, your work builds on a broad array of views and positionality. And let's say as we connect on November 19 2020. The US has passed a quarter million deaths related to COVID-19, today's headlines show us that the top EU negotiator for the Brexit talks is has tested positive so the talks are interrupted, and that Boris Johnson is also self isolating so the prime minister of the UK. I'm speaking to you as a Sis, white Southern European woman living between central and northern Europe. Speaking from Berlin, which, as you pointed out has its own complicated histories of blackness. My own biography is also crossed by colonial history so my my great grandmother and my grandmother were black women who married why Portuguese men in Angola. So early 20th century Angola so my father was born there

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then a Portuguese colony and fun facts. We all went back. As you know, Portugal had a five 500 years of colonial history, one of the long lasting longest lasting Empire colonial empires, if we ignore the sort of current activities of the British Overseas Territories, let's maybe not question too much, but also of course that colonial history could not have existed if it weren't for the Islamic occupation of the Iberian Peninsula for, you know, between the eighth and the 11th century, at least for Portugal, Spain was a little bit longer. So Portugal emerges here as a sort of one of the first nation modern nation state in Europe effectively and sort of longest lasting in its colonial exploitation. So anyway, so my father was born there he immigrated to Portugal in the 1960s. He was socialized in Portugal as a working classical colonial subject. Hi that you're watching, by the way. And he has, you know, one of the many lives at the intersection of what Hazel Carby calls Imperial intimacy, right. So, I think I would like to start this question one by thanking you for sharing how mainstream, and academic representations of blackness might welcome black British, African American, African diasporic queer feminist Anglophone Caribbean lusophone a span of four Francophone European African and Asian perspectives, but also that also in conflict encompass not only the Atlantic but also the Indian and Pacific slave routes routes that we often tend to ignore as well as older forms of enslavement. So with this long lead 2040 long question. I'd like to break it down into parts. So the first part is what challenges, does your proposal pose for forms of identity based forms of identity based politics. How might collectives apply resistance in agency in these treacherous moments of anti anti black anti indigenous anti ecological violence. And then secondly what forms of togetherness and political allegiance, does your proposal redraft.

1:02:26

Michelle M. Wright: Yes, it's a, it's a fantastically long question, and, You know what, I'll actually do is I'll first start by realizing I was looking at my notes I didn't answer the tail end of your question last time. So give a brief answer to that and then move into this one, and you would ask you know what role does quantum physics play in in this in this work. And I briefly put I, as I was writing this I was, I started writing because it's a blackness because I had this eureka moment with the Deborah Dickerson article realizing time and space and how we arrange it are

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very important. And at the time, without any clear goal I just been reading what I wanted to read because I didn't know what I wanted to do for my next book so I was reading black histories of World War Two. And there is a time, and I actually found the realizations of time coming out of physics, much more interesting than what I was reading in philosophy where I found most figures of time were simply variations on linear time it was either linear or circular spiral. And, and the way they were concentrating this in physics really grabbed my attention but I had to start to ask myself I was as I was writing this. Oh, to what degree, am I saying hey black people we should pay attention to white physicists because they have the answer for us. And that wasn't my intention and I hope I make it clear in my book I don't think everybody agrees. I'm putting them into conversation and I was very aware of the fact that when it comes to stereotyping blackness. People tend to think of physics as almost the opposite you know physics is white and male and rational and blackness is irrational and creative etc. But instead what I tried to show and argue is that blackness is simply an exceptionally complicated identity and if we go back to black discourses, a couple hundred years ago, you know, long before quantum physics was, you know, a glint in the eye of. I'm forgetting all the different physicists names right now because Einstein was not really a big proponent of quantum physics or just like Max Planck people like that black people were already thinking these complicated arenas but I found that engaging with physics allowed me to make it clear where what was going on. And also because we tend to be such a science based society. I wanted to make clear these notions of time that blackness is coming out of through epiphenomenal time are not fanciful. They're not whimsical, they're actually now taken up by science as ways to produce, you know, cell phones and and laptop computers and global positioning units, etc. So in other words we shouldn't simply dismiss it as Oh that's a nice idea but it doesn't work it's like no this is actually seems to be, how we're making our world work right now so now I can put that to the side and talk about this idea of the challenge of identity based positionality is collective resistance and agency. Um, yeah I think this is one of the reasons why some folks do not like what I am saying about blackness because I refuse to allow blackness to be grouped into one fixed collective, and my primary reason for that is just theoretically it's untenable all the lies we have to start telling about blackness if we want

it to simply stay here and not move. You know when I teach classes on African American literature I will ask my undergraduate students sometimes my graduate students. So what makes this literature black, and, you know, it's just silence nobody's going to venture. Nobody's going to venture an answer, because I think they all know what the answer may be but it feels so wrong to say it which is black literature is literature written by black people so then you ask. Okay, so what are black people, and you get into okay black people are people descended from black Africans or black Africans and it's like, well, according to anthropology especially paleoanthropology we're all descended from African so that would make us all black. So then we have to move into phenotype you know and what the black body looks like. And of course what I'm simply trying to do is show that there is no one thing that links all black people except the one thing that links all of humanity and of course a lot of people don't like hearing that. And part of me can understand that because of the fear of the way in which the right wing will glom on to this, which they have done for ages right this argument that is especially popular in Europe which is you know race doesn't matter so you guys need to stop talking about the fact that, you know, black bodies are being battered and exploited and murdered etc etc You just need to get over that and they want to glom on to and say yes see race is a construct we don't need to deal with it. But when that happens, we simply have to push back and argue against it as opposed to staying silent about truths that are liberating and empowering for black people who are quite often not allowed to identify as black or are not seen as less black a sort of striking black feminist, a black person who looks typically white, etc etc queer black person, of course there are the arguments that you know queerness is a white thing, it didn't come from black people, it's something we learned from white people, all that kind of thing. And so what happens is under, under what seems to be a very empowering guys, let's all unite and identify as black and move forward as one becomes debilitating because when you have all these different types of black people mobilized for action. Understandably, they all have different goals and ideas and things that they want to do and what inevitably happens is only one tiny group actually gets their goals presented and push forward and this is what happened during abolition, and this is what happened at least in the US, this is what happened during the Civil Rights Movement, and this is what happened during

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black nationalism it simply became, we need to fight for the empowerment of black masculinity so we need to get behind black men and we need to not talk about gender oppression, we need to push away people who are queer or if you're queer Be quiet about it. So in other words we start to tear we don't move forward as one, we move forward as this, you know oppressive hierarchy in which certain people are being told quite perversely that in the fight for justice, you don't matter, or you're less important, which is a terrible message to impart to anyone. So when it comes to collective action, my responses, one has to understand that as an individual, we are made up of all sorts of different collectives, which we form and deploy in different ways, all the time so sometimes I'm a black feminist, sometimes I am a hater of American western movies. Sometimes I am, um, you know, I'm not a vegan but what am I'm a lactose intolerant, non gluten eating lesbian so you know it depends on the context it depends on what I'm thinking. And so our identities are all really polymorphous which, to me means, what you do is you join those organizations whose goal in that moment you identify with and you feel you are represented and I would push against joining organizations that refuse to recognize you because in that moment I would argue, they're not pushing for justice they're not pushing for equality, they're pushing to get themselves in the door and then they're going to slam it shut and we've seen how that plays out because we have a blackboard huazi that is exceptionally wealthy somewhat powerful, but they're not really doing very much to help black working poor communities the social economic divide has really separated them out. So you join those organizations whose goals you identify with in the moment. And then after you have fought that fight, you shouldn't feel like you have to be bonded to them for the rest of your life. And it's simply an argument that you know guide free speech that put out a lot of people put out called elective affinities so collective action should always be made up of individuals who are all represented within that collective and not hierarchize. And when it comes to action. I argue it's important to be specific, rather than say yes I'm for justice because all of us are for justice in some form but you know Donald Trump is for justice but his notion of justice we know is an injustice to everyone except for him. So if that means that collective action should really be grounded in the individual, you find other individuals who are like minded you agree on the specific goal, the specificity of what you're going after the change

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what you want to do what you want to protest the law you want to change the people you want counted and you agree to disagree. In other words, when the goal is, when the goal is accomplished or there's no more that you can see going over you disperse and you go join other elective affinities, I tend not to go for strategic essentialism except in moments of extreme, extreme trauma something like Atlantic slavery or apartheid, where you know the fact that you really don't have much time or freedom to decide at all beans. We have to fight for it as a collective, but otherwise I definitely push elective affinities, and when it comes to collective resistance I think it can be anything, you know, it just, it depends on the context sometimes silence and inaction, is the most resounding thing you can do other times it's speaking up. Other times it's being part of the institution to fight from within, although we also have to acknowledge if we are in an institution that means, sometimes we're part of the problem sometimes we're not sometimes hopefully we're part of the solution. And the third part of that is to recognize that as human beings we are all flawed we are not pure so when it comes to fighting against something. It also makes sense to try and understand why these people are doing what they are doing and why they're arguing rather than demonize them mad, rather than tend to render them other that's something that's really going on very heavily in the us right now. We demonize all republicans we demonize all trumpers. And I just don't see how that is going to get us to any space that is worthwhile occupying, so long as we're still playing this game of heroes and monsters.

1:12:31

Sofia Lemos: Thank you so much, Michelle so I'll jump to a question from our audience. A question that comes from one of my favorite artists Luke Willis Thompson and he says there's a poetic refrain I hear in your lecture with the works of Maori and Pacific feminist thinkers such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and diversity Why does indigenous discourse influence your thinking of time, and if so, or not. Where does indigeneity matter with regards to blackness. Um,

1:12:04

Michelle M. Wright: I love hearing that I also have to admit that no I am broadly ignorant of most indigenous discourses I know very little about

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them. My partner is Australian so I do some work on black Aboriginal culture I read only and listen only I don't write because there is just so much I cannot know and I even think that to a certain degree my own positionality being born in one country, and moving to others. I'm escaped some traditional definitions of indigeneity but I also have some arguments and and thoughts about it. And I'll also sort of do a brief plug here, because I I do a book series through Northwestern University Press called critical insurgencies with a co editor Jodi Byrd, who is an indigenous activist, and so I've also been kind of learning from her about the ways in which we need to rethink space and time. The ways I really kind of come to it and the only responses I have are the tendency to read indigeneity incompletely which is to think of it as static and to think of it as pure and to think of it as non dynamic. So in other words, when we talk about indigenous nations in the US, quite often people talk as if I'm well the Mohawk we're always, we're always in this space and the Chickasaw were always here and they never moved it never change. And they never mixed with other people. When in fact, the history of indigenous peoples is similar to the history of peoples all over the world No surprise there were conquerors, there were settlements there were overthrows there were hierarchies. And if anything I think my only pushes we have to understand indigeneity as dynamic rather than some sort of static primordial to which people have to, you know, return to, which isn't to say that we don't have epistemologies there that we really need to take in and think about and work with because if you think about how these indigenous communities, managed to thrive and grow and diversify before the arrival of the West. Clearly it means that their own conceptions of politics and governance and identities are something that that work in many cases, and what we have really does not work so I think my only call would be for us to take on more this dialogue because it did Janae. These are very much our future I think especially as we are looking at you know this world burning up and you know we protest a little bit but most of us aren't doing much of anything about it. Um. The only other thing I will add to that is in the United States. Black descent and indigeneity is a very interesting question because if you have different relationships between indigenous nations, and the black slaves that came over in some cases, fugitive slaves ran to and were adopted by indigenous nations who helped them escape and other cases indigenous nations wanted nothing to do with them,

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and they worked with white settlers sometimes and in other cases, they purchased black slaves and traded in black slaves, which I think simply shows the diversity of indigeneity, and we're actually having some interesting lawsuits happening in the US where for example, the Seminole tribe in the northeast that a part of part of New York State mixed very heavily with escaped slaves and black freedmen to the point where their phenotypes read for most people as black and in the result of which has been that for many indigenous peoples and for the US government the seminars don't count as authentic indigenous peoples because they look black and blackness is black and so of course cannot be read as indigenous. I'll leave it there because I was about to go off on a on a smaller history but yes I'll stop there.

1:16:56

Sofia Lemos: We still have time, the smaller history's always important welcome.

1:17:01

Michelle M. Wright: Okay, so, I will bring in another history. Your fault for encouragement. Um, when I go back to Australia, there is a really interesting aspect to indigeneity, where some of the people that came off the convict ships were black they were black Caribbean black British and African American, and a lot of that was the result of the American Revolutionary War so again you see how blackness is very much a dynamic shaping force when it comes to historical moments, African Americans who had fled with the British because they'd been promised their freedom and jobs they were given freedom they weren't given jobs. So like a lot of white working class Brits and Irish, who had been dispossessed of their lands and their property. They stole to survive and as a result were put on these convict ships, it was, it was such a problem in Britain, of course, it never occurred to them that maybe we need to provide them with the land that we stole from them or some means of support instead it was like let's put them all on ships, and then it was like let's put take those ships to Australia because we can't take them to the US anymore because the US, of course, used to be a place also for British convicts. So they landed and there is a historian Cassandra Pybus a white Australian historian who wrote this book called Black founders that is all about these early black figures, but it's interesting

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because at the end at the beginning of the book she puts down this question of, I don't know what to do with this book because it's, it's kind of a bunch of fun facts you know it's a marginal history, and of course with epiphenomenal time it's like, it's not a marginal history because it intersects with everything you can tell the story of African American black Caribbean and black British convicts that mixed with black Aboriginal groups. So you have blackness intersecting with indigeneity in Australia, you have an intersecting with indigeneity in the US, those who escaped and sometimes some folks were with indigenous nations some black folks escaped with the British because they didn't see a future for themselves. So in other words, we can see this kind of gorgeous weaving. And it also of course underscores the, the dynamism of indigeneity.

1:19:09

Sofia Lemos: So, taking cue from the title of your next book, and I think around some of the questions that were circulating or some of the state the sort of points of anchoring anchoring points that were circulating in physics of blackness you problematize the question of return. And you also talk about double consciousness in an analysis of wb Dubois. So, Africa, you were talking about blackness as a dynamic shaping force and obviously Africa, the African continent is also a dynamic context with several with its own political movements with its own political expressions. And as we see in texts such as Saidyia Hartman's lose your mother return and life with the intersection between two cultures, often can contribute to sentiments of belonging of displacement of destroying meant. So do you want to tell us how you're thinking about the question of belonging. For this next book project.

1:20:15

Michelle M. Wright: Um, I don't know if I can because I keep changing my mind on what this project is going to look like I've already retitled it I've decided to call it Afro your opolis, and I want to look at. Still want to focus on black travel narratives written by black folks from across the diaspora, and look at how they're constructing the space of Europe because the well. This connects actually your, your pretty genius it does connect quite nicely to belong I just had to do the mental steps. First of all sort of start by stating that yes Africa is such an important

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space to talk about when it comes to the African diaspora because for a lot of black thinkers in the West and I would say again, especially in the US, we tend to put Africa in what got Molly woodshed a professor at at University of Pennsylvania has called romantic arrest, and this is another problem with our timeline is that if we start a timeline with Africa. Whenever you do a timeline you have places on it, those places become temporalities. So Africa at the beginning becomes fixed in the past, and you have the situation of African Americans going over, going back to Africa, and then being surprised at how they don't fit in it's like well, your ancestors were forced to leave, 18th century Africa and you're coming back to 21st century Africa. So you, if anything, you shouldn't be surprised you should be kind of relieved that is not the same, you know, contrary to what all the races have claimed, starting with Hegel that as Africa is now so it has always been so it always shall be no Africa is a very dynamic continent made up of many different people. And I actually do a reading in physics of blackness of lose your mother by city of Hartmann and which I argue that in those moments where she's thinking in a linear way of trying to reconnect to an ancestry, that it has. She's been torn from she feels at a loss she feels ignorant she feels disempowered. But when she simply places herself in the here and now and owns who she is and her own identity, it doesn't worry about who's got the longer pedigree of whoever she's talking to. That's not only when she, I wouldn't say sort of fits right in, but that's when she can understand her space engage with it, read it and be productive in it rather than attempting to own something. When it comes to this project Afro your propolis. What I'm interested in is the fact that when it comes to writing on Europe, and blackness African Americans tend to dominate that discourse as well. And they have a very rosy view of Europe and what I mean by that is starting in the 19th century where you had some black slaves actually making it to France and Britain. They would write about like William Wallace brown they would write about their time there and marvel at the fact that they're treated equally. Even after emancipation in the early 20th century people like Mary church terell talking about how there's a trope that actually developed with these writers where they talk about how they go to museums and restaurants and hotels and everybody accepts them just for who they are and clearly that is a sign of a civilized culture, and then everything gets ruined. When a white Southern Gentleman shows up and has a conniption and

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seeing this black person being treated equally. So what they're doing there of course is trying to show that hey white, white Americans, you think that what Europeans are the apex of civilized behavior well guess what part of that behavior is anti racism is not reading me as an inferior being and you In fact, you know joke's on you You are the ones who are crude and uncivilized and disgusting and horrific. But of course what happens with that is the erasure of Europe, and its colonial history, not to mention the fact that, um, you know the earliest civilizations about black inferiority come from Europeans it didn't come from Americans it came before there was such a thing as the United States of America. So, um, you have black travelers from Africa you have black Europeans writing about Europe in a very, very different way. And so it's sort of different sets of belonging. And that's what I want to explore because you, I can be a bit of a slow thinker sometimes what kind of hit me was, you know, so often, obviously, when we think about our racial identity we tie it to place. So then we get into this question of, like, well, what am I, when I'm in another place that doesn't know how to define me Who am I, what am I, and that can mean that one's racial identity can get some could say destabilize some could say becomes more capacious expands, people like James Baldwin talked about it really bothered people to hear him say this, he said that, you know, from time to time when he was in France, he was, he forgot that he was black. And I agree that is simply him saying he doesn't feel the weight of that history that he's carrying in the US. Other people I think read it as an erasure of blackness or removal of blackness but I simply argue it's a different black temporality that's happening there. So when it comes to belonging and place. I want to think more about what happens when we move from place to place, and what is the meaning of that belonging and how do we recalibrate it in order to constitute ourselves black Americans were prone to recalibrating it by reading themselves as civilized beings that were no different from white Europeans but of course it was at the cost of understanding and acknowledging white European complicity in what had created them as the descendants of black slaves and of course. I'll sort of finish up briefly by saying that, that also had an effect because, you know, as you know, Sofia and France quite often they love to pat themselves on the back for being so open and tolerant and we're so good with black people. And then of course they were so like thrown at the at the riots that were happening in son Danny and the other bone

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you're like, How can this be, you know, we're French. We don't have racism. And part of that was enabled not consciously inadvertently enabled by these black American praises of how amazing, white, white French civilization is, and actually now that I think about something on really quickly. Um, I don't know how true it is but there are, there is this anecdote about how during the Carter years in apartheid South Africa, the Carter administration made a point of sending African American diplomats to South Africa to sort of say, look, we've got our act together. Look at how progressive we are. We want you guys to have to deal with this black person and deal with the fact that they're not according to your theory inferior at all you have to deal with your own fallacies. That's not what happened for white Afrikaners the attitude was like, oh yeah sure your blacks, your blacks are fine they're civilized they're great you know our blacks are the problem. And it's the same thing in Europe it's the your blacks versus our blacks So in other words, belonging gets really twisted in terms of blackness as a possession, but also blackness and space in that history.

1:27:19

Sofia Lemos: So, it seems that were coming close to, to the end of our session. And I think I would like to end in that specific rapaciousness that you were that you were bringing on the you're sort of us on online, multidimensionality, which is a word that we didn't focus on so much but I think that encompasses a lot of of what was said here today. So, shall if it's okay with you, we'll, we'll, we'll end the evening here, it's been a really fantastic journey, and I'm looking forward to the next to the next book into travel through those through those narratives with you. Everyone who has been watching online I think I thank everyone for your presence for connecting with us today. We'll have the video archived on YouTube, very soon. And if there's any questions that you want to comment. There's always an opportunity for that on YouTube, we can always pass that onwards to Michelle so please do feel free to send your suggestions and thoughts and Michelle, thank you so much.

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Colophon

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