Physics of Blackness

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Introduction

Many Thousands Still Coming

Theorizing Blackness in the Postwar Moment

For a few centuries now, Blackness has been big business, attracting attention and reaping raw profit not only in the West but increasingly in the world at large. In one of its earliest and most famous manifestations, Blackness was sold as a balm to white self-regard and resulted in a fantastic boon in profits when African slaves were marketed as "Negroes"—a distinctly subhuman species who possess, Thomas Jefferson remarked, "that immovable veil of black,"[1] thus excusing from further consideration the accusations of inhuman practice lobbed by abolitionists. Today, the myriad ways in which Blackness is sold is dizzying: its social, cultural, and political currency helps sell jazz, pop, hip-hop, a variety of professional sports, Barack Obama, punitive criminal laws in "First World" Western nations, Bishop Tutu, "race" medicines, and degrees in African American, African Diaspora, and African studies—to mention some of the most obvious examples. Yet for all its successful (and less successful, forgotten) deployments, Blackness remains undefined and suffering under the weight of many definitions, not one of which covers every type of Blackness or coheres with all the other denotations and connotations. So what do we mean when we discuss "Black music" or "Black culture" or, for that matter, given the claims of geneticists, "Blackness" as a distinct genetic marking?

At first glance, it appears that it is the Black body that is denoted by Blackness: indeed, to hear some sportscasters and race geneticists express their assumptions, the Black body is often imagined and deployed as if it were a uniform "thing" that automatically grants its owner great athletic ability and rhythm. This mystique, which lifts the body up in the white imagination as an objet d'art, also denigrates it to the animal status of pure instinct. It seems every few years we are reminded of this with a sportscaster's politically incorrect comment or complaint about how Black athletes enjoy "natural" corporeal advantages over their differently raced competitors.

Contrary to the assertion that Blackness comprises a set of genetic qualities, decades of research have borne no fruit confirming this often-repeated claim. Indeed, the concept of Blackness as located in the body cannot be sustained by any serious further investigation because simple observation reveals a broad variety of Black bodies. Many of those bodies can "pass for white" or another ethnicity; many of those bodies do not identify as Black, although they "look" Black to us; and those bodies may in turn encounter other bodies—for example, African Americans touring their ancestral homeland in Ghana—and reject the notion that African Americans are Black, ironically based (at least partially) on perceived physical differences.

While we cannot dismiss social, political, and cultural discourses and practices that clearly link Black communities across the West to their African origins, locating Blackness as a determinable "thing," as a "what" or "who," gives us a conceptualization that exhibits the unnerving qualities of a mirage: from a distance, it appears clearly cogent, but up close, Blackness evanesces, revealing no one shared quality that justifies such frequent and assured use of this signifier.

For those of us who work in Black studies on identity, we are almost wearily familiar with this problem of trying to find a one-size-fits-all definition of Blackness. The absence of any sort of biological evidence that links all Black peoples together hardly surprises us (we are well aware that Blackness was not a scientific discovery but an economic and political argument first used to justify the Atlantic slave trade). Yet even knowing that there is no one gene, history, nationality, language, politics, society, culture, or any other factor that can serve as the basis for the identity category of Black, we nonetheless continue to deploy it as a category and are thus still bedeviled by the question of exactly what constitutes Blackness.

In his introduction to *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*, Robert Reid-Pharr asks us this very same question through Thomas Holt: "The problem becomes particularly difficult for those of us involved in the study of Black American history and culture because we risk either conceding to outmoded and regressive ways of thinking about human identity and diversity or devaluing as 'unreal' or 'immaterial' a history and culture that many of us take to be precious."[2] There is, of course, a political undercurrent to this dilemma: some scholars (such as Walter Benn Michaels) have seized on the argument that Blackness is socially constructed to then argue that it is unworthy of research.[3]

Some even argue that to identify Blackness as an identity is racist. For scholars like me, these arguments only exacerbate racist perceptions and behaviors, and we reject the illogic that the study of racism is intrinsically racist. Yet to understand Blackness as a construct without explaining what it is—only what it is not—generates old and new paradoxes in our arguments. The largest problem is that of unequal representation of Black collectives in discourses of Blackness generally: despite our best efforts, some groups enjoy being understood as Black, whereas others have to struggle and clamor for recognition. This "problem" is hardly limited to or most heavily burdensome to scholars who work in Black American history and culture—it is, I would argue, endemic to any and all discourses on Blackness that reject a biological origin for race and yet offer little else in its place.[4]

When we ask, "What is Blackness?" we already have a set of answers: it is a collective identity that intersects with many other collective identities that in turn intersect with one another, such as gender, sexuality, or socioeconomic class; spiritual and other performative subcultures, professions, trades, ethnicities, or religious denominations; lifestyles or dietary choices—the list is endless. What we really want when we seek to define Blackness is a common denominator that links the Black presence in all these categories. At the same time, Blackness is simply too many things to be anything but everything. One would be hard pressed to find some way in which Blackness did *not* intersect with all other collective identities (especially given the current understanding that all human life originated in the continent of Africa). While this conclusion is pleasingly inclusive (if annoyingly opaque in its simplicity), it does not answer why, if Blackness is and can be everything, it is so often set off as some "thing" that is distinct.

Pursuing this question requires focusing on the phenomenology of Blackness—that is, *when* and *where* it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal. Blackness cannot be located on the body because of the diversity of bodies that claim Blackness as an identity. Blackness, then, is largely a matter of perception or—as performance studies theorist E. Patrick Johnson observes—made up of moments of performance in which performers understand their bodies as Black. Furthermore, because it is not necessary for the audience to understand such performances as Black (except in the matter of ticket sales and perhaps favorable reviews), this further suggests that Blackness is in the mind of the performers.

Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology argues that Blackness operates as a construct (implicitly or explicitly defined as a shared set of physical and behavioral characteristics) and as phenomenological (imagined through individual perceptions in various ways depending on the context). As such, we can best locate and define Blackness across the African Diaspora by incorporating both of these aspects into our analyses within and without the academy.

Bringing together Blackness as constructed and Blackness as phenomenological is not as difficult as it might at first appear, because both modes comprise notions of space and time, or "spacetime." Our *constructs* of Blackness are largely historical and more specifically based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progress narrative, while our *phenomenological* manifestations of Blackness happen in what I term *Epiphenomenal time*, or the "now," through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted. I capitalize my use of the term from its formal philosophical definition, in which the epiphenomenal is not in itself causal but nonetheless correlates with causal phenomena. In *Physics of Blackness*, "Epiphenomenal" time denotes the current moment, a moment that is *not* directly borne out of another (i.e., causally created). As I show in chapter 3, however, Epiphenomenal time does not preclude any and all causality: only a *direct*, or *linear*, causality. In other words, the current moment, or "now," can certainly correlate with other moments, but one cannot argue that it is always already the effect of a specific, previous moment. Read together, they underscore the depth and breadth with which these notions of spacetime pervade Western expressions of collective identity, most especially Blackness. Even further, they underscore that while the linear progress narrative is an invaluable tool for locating Blackness, when used alone its very spatiotemporal properties preclude a wholly *inclusive* definition of Blackness, yielding one that is necessarily inaccurate. By contrast, Epiphenomenal time enables a wholly inclusive definition (appropriate to any moment at which one is defining Blackness).

The use of *physics* in this book's title reflects my use of lay discourses on spacetime in particle or quantum physics, which I bring into conversation with discourses on Blackness—scholarly, creative, and in some cases media based—to uncover how and why these distinct spacetimes operate and to trace their attendant effects on concepts of Black agency and the meaning of Blackness in our *contemporary* "postwar" moment.[5] Thus while this book grounds itself squarely in the humanities, it nonetheless

seeks to show how using space and time as analytical categories informs an interdisciplinary analysis that is at once broader and deeper than analyses grounded wholly in the conceptual resources of the humanities.

This introduction reflects the organization of the four chapters that follow: the first half of the book examines the dominant constructs of Blackness that use a linear progress narrative, and the second half focuses on the use of Epiphenomenal time—that is, how Blackness is read in our postwar moment. It is perhaps unavoidable that any analysis of Blackness and its role in the Diaspora will identify certain discourses—collections of linguistic and cognitive practices focused on core sets of concepts—as "dominant." A dominant discourse expresses the will of a center of political, social, or economic power within a given social structure, in effect constructing within that structure the identities of social classes based on presumed degrees of freedom to exercise agency. Thus under both of the central paradigms that organize the conceptual resources I bring to bear in this book—the Middle Passage epistemology and the postwar epistemology—there are dominant and subordinate discourses that shape the terms in which competing interests are debated and pursued.

The goal of this book is to provide a model for defining Blackness across the Diaspora that easily locates and corrects the common exclusions so often found in our everyday speech, scholarly canon, and public assumptions. The need for definitions of Blackness that do not exclude, isolate, or stigmatize is all the more pressing, I would argue, with the increasing proliferation of diverse Black communities of individuals whose histories and current status as "hyphenated" Black identities across the globe call for representation and inclusion. In this manner, *Physics of Blackness* specifically cautions against overreliance on the exclusive use of linear progress narratives to define Blackness and urges equal consideration of the moment of interpretation, or Epiphenomenal spacetime.

Importantly, even as incorporating a phenomenological definition of Blackness into our current understanding sheds light on issues of exclusion and lack of agency, it also raises troubling questions: most pressingly the conundrum of whether Blackness is ultimately in the eye of the beholder or of the performer. For those who seek to ignore or deny the material reality of oppressed Black peoples across the globe, myopically arguing that the *immateriality* of Blackness moots any and all questions about it is a strategic if entirely mendacious way to sanction anti-Black racist practices. Furthermore, this misuse is of deep concern to

scholars who see a similar threat in poststructuralist theories of Blackness that appear to detach it from its African origins (most "infamously" in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, still a "must-read" for all scholars of Black collective identity in the African Diaspora).

In their anthology *Race and the Foundations of Knowledge*, African Diaspora scholars Joseph Young and Jana Evans Braziel attempt to strike a balance between the outright rejection of Blackness as perception/performance and Blackness as a historically demonstrable fact. Explicitly rejecting what they define as "poststructuralist dismissals of race," they offer a counterdefinition:

> We do not define race, though we recognize that historically it has been defined in such ways, as any of the following: an ontological category, a biological or psychological essence, a fixed or unchanging category of uncomplicated belonging, a genetically determined classification with presumed intrinsic epistemological interpretations. Like the scholars who insist that race does not (or should not) exist (Anthony Kwame Appiah, Houston Baker Jr., Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Paul Gilroy, and others), we too recognize race as a historical category defined through biological reductivism, a political classification intended to define individuals through difference in oppressive ways, a social and cultural construct, a discursive formation. It is not, however, an "empty" category or a "free-floating signifier," as some would have it.[6]

By characterizing misrepresentations of Blackness as "empty" or "free floating," Young and Braziel reveal a central worry associated with the notion of Blackness that isn't "grounded," or given weight, specifically, through its "historical category." At the same time, by choosing to foreground race as a historical category, Young and Braziel almost dovetail with an article they cite just a page or so before—namely, Caribbean scholar and cultural studies founder Stuart Hall's famous essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in which he argues that there are two types of cultural identity for collectives, cultural and historical, which in fact are conflated:

> There at least two different ways of thinking about "cultural identity." The first position defines "cultural identity" in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self" hiding inside

> the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves," which peoples with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people" with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This "oneness," underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of "Caribbeanness," of the Black experience.[7]

Hall's analysis gets at the heart of the problem of seeking to define Blackness in a way that reflects its diversity yet does not deprive it of its historical materiality. Hall understands the construction of collective identity as agglomerations of individual selves who nonetheless also share a common "history and ancestry." Hall's language echoes his understanding of Young and Braziel's worry over "empty" definitions of Blackness by noting that the "one people" defined by this shared history and ancestry are grounded in a "stable, unchanging, continuous [frame] of reference and meaning"—a counterweight to the threat of "shifting divisions and vicissitudes" that provides a pleasingly solid foundation while more "superficial differences" float at the top. In other words, Hall's argument, like Young and Braziel's, views collective history as something that provides Blackness its "weight"—a grounding in lived experiences rather than the misperceptions of outside groups or erratic individuals.

Hall also offers us a warning here, because those "shifting divisions and vicissitudes" come from "our *actual* history" (emphasis added) rather than anything imagined. A closer look at "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" reveals that history achieves two aims—on the one hand it provides stability, while on the other it constantly threatens change and, with that change, divisions. If collective Black identities are historical, how do we unravel the warp and woof of this history?

Most discourses on Blackness in the United States and the Caribbean locate themselves in the history of the Middle Passage, linking our cultural practices and expressions, our politics and social sensibilities, to the historical experience of slavery in the Americas and the struggle to achieve full human suffrage in the West. These histories are both constructed and phenomenological: they are a chosen arrangement of historical events (spaces and times) perceived to be the defining moments of collective

Blackness. At the same time, for the purposes of this theoretical analysis of Blackness, it is important to underscore that these are not so much histories as epistemologies: narratives of knowledge that are taught, learned, relayed, exchanged, and debated in discussions on the "facts" of Blackness.

These historical-cum-epistemological events are usually linked by or narrated under the theme of overcoming obstacles through struggle (or "uplift"), with the defining aspect of contemporary Black collective histories focusing primarily on slavery (Middle Passage histories), European colonization (postcolonial histories), or the dominance of ancient African civilizations (Afrocentric histories). These themes create either a linear progress narrative or, when reversed (as in Afropessimism), a reverse linear narrative indicating that no *Black* progress has been made because of the continual oppression by white Western hegemonies that began with slavery, moved through colonialism, and now deploy an array of cultural, political, economic, and military power through social and governmental technologies to keep Blacks not only as subalterns—those who are subordinated by power—but also as the (white) Western Other.

The question of defining Blackness has become more urgent as the collectives that perceive themselves through these multiple histories find themselves encountering each other more frequently. As recent anthologies such as *The Other African Americans* show, many Western nations are now (and in many cases have been since the postwar era) receiving Black African immigrants whose histories, while certainly tied to Atlantic slavery, more often narrate themselves through colonialism or postwar socioeconomic changes than through the Middle Passage. These two collectives of historical and ancestral Blackness, while most certainly intertwined (and at times also often facing the same kinds of racist violence) nonetheless understand themselves differently. Denoted simply as "Black" almost anywhere outside of Africa, their encounters must negotiate their differences even as Blackness enjoins them to work together toward the common goal of racial uplift. In short, they have experienced differences that these linear progress narratives of Blackness strongly encourage them not to discuss, perhaps not even to *see*, much less acknowledge. However, in many of these moments, experienced or expressed, the phenomenological aspects of Blackness subvert even the most eloquent construct of collective unity. In other words, perceived differences *will* be expressed, but because most dominant constructs of Blackness cannot understand differences within, difference is often expressed as a dichotomy between "Black" and "not Black."

In "Colorblind," her 2007 opinion piece from Salon.com, conservative Black columnist Debra Dickerson produces a cartoonishly distorted imagining of those differences that nonetheless reflect some of the greatest reservations some Black collectives harbor about others.

> Obama isn't Black. "Black," in our political and social reality, means those descended from West African slaves. Voluntary immigrants of African descent (even those descended from West Indian slaves) are just that, voluntary immigrants of African descent with markedly different outlooks on the role of race in their lives and politics. At a minimum, it can't be assumed that a Nigerian cab driver and a third-generation Harlemite have more in common than the fact a cop won't bother to make the distinction. They're both "Black" as a matter of skin color and DNA, but only the Harlemite, for better or worse, is politically and culturally Black, as we use the term.[8]

Like most arguments seeking to separate some Blacks from Blackness, Dickerson's plays fast and loose with history and in doing so also reveals (unwittingly) temporal and spatial gaps that belie the notion of the linear progress narrative. While most scholars of contemporary African immigration would take issue with her qualifier of "voluntary"[9] (when one's family is faced with death by starvation, violence, etc., is emigration truly born of free will?), it is her focus on the differing "outlooks" of the Harlemite and Obama/Nigerian cabdriver that bear the greatest scrutiny. Under this logic, histories not only uniformly shape collectives in the "now"; they are also unbroken, passed perfectly from one generation to the next.[10]

Chapter 1 analyzes Dickerson's article more thoroughly, but for the purposes of this introduction, I will simply note that Dickerson assumes, and Hall explicitly locates, a concept of history as the producer of a common memory passed down through generations. Because, of course, human beings are mortal, the only way to establish a "stable, unchanging" history of the collective is to locate something that is immortal—or, at least, capable of living beyond mortal memory. In Dickerson, one cannot simply receive this memory. The third-generation Harlemite (loaded, it is implied, with three generations' worth of experiential knowledge about the social and political reality of being Black in the United States) cannot imbue Obama's Black consciousness with this same empirical knowledge and thus render him "Black" under Dickerson's terms. We can further infer

that imparting this information would not change his outlook because the status of his Black ancestry is not enslaved, not rooted in an involuntary migration (putting it rather mildly).

The wholehearted embrace of Obama by most U.S. (and global) Black communities belies Dickerson's later assertion that Obama cannot win the presidency due to this difference in outlook, but there is another equally important flaw in her logic of defining collectives through a shared history or outlook: the spatiotemporal gap inherent in all linear progress narratives that she is trying to erase. While oral histories and traditions passed down through generations are facts, not simply false claims, the historical documents and our interpretations of them are always changing, most especially with a collective such as Blackness because its history is so deeply intertwined with most other global histories. Case in point—a July 30, 2012, article by Sheryl Gay Stolberg for the *New York Times* reported that Obama's mother, Ann Dunham, may be descended from a branch of the Punch family whose earliest U.S. ancestors were West African slaves.[11] In other words, Obama may in fact possess that Middle Passage Blackness Dickerson denies, pointing to a production of Blackness that emerges only through two separate histories and is "interrupted" by whiteness (Obama's mother): a whiteness that also exhibits Black ancestry. With Obama, we do not have a Blackness that is wholly outside Middle Passage Blackness; in fact, another one of his ancestries connects him through a heavily interracial family history that is a far larger part of the Americas than most dominant discourses admit.

Whether or not Ann Dunham is a descendant of the Black John Punch, there remains this daunting obstacle in defining Blackness—in this case Middle Passage Blackness—through an unbroken chain of ancestors whose experiences inform our contemporary outlook. Hall's historical reality has come crashing in as we stand back to take a second look at our ancestral trees, which, even if we squint, can no longer be mistaken for a linear growth of branches stemming from one root; instead, we are presented with the tangled roots that theorists such as Paul Gilroy have defined as "rhizomatic" (more horizontal than vertical in structure and with no one clear direction). We are returned to our blankly banal observation that Blackness is everything, intersecting with all humanity, indistinct.

Consider what happens during Internet searches as a useful analogy to horizontal and vertical interpellations. Search engines stress the "horizontal" capability of their software: the ability to take search terms and

provide links to websites ranked according to the quality of their service or content. In other words, the process is meant to be democratic: no matter what you are searching for, you will be provided with a broad array of links from a broad array of sponsors, but the first ones listed presumably return the best information (breadth and depth) or service. Yet consumer groups, other nonprofit organizations, small business owners, and Internet activists often dispute this claim by pointing to the *vertical* nature of the results: ranked first are the largest for-profits and most heavily funded nonprofits.

Chapter 4 examines the effect of "verticality" on Black epistemologies in the West, suggesting that many of these effects can be meliorated through a "horizontal" reading. For example, an online search for "Africans in World War II" returns almost one billion hits, the majority of which reflect a colonial definition of "African" as a synecdoche for a landscape that is owned and controlled by white Western nations. The search primarily returns links to African campaigns carried out by the Axis and Allies, African colonies, and the Afrika Corps, and their sheer preponderance almost smothers what few horizontal links there are to narratives in which Africans are subjects, much less agents. Rather than a vertical, hierarchical interpellation of "African" as a colonial possession, the savvier scholar can navigate past these vertical returns by inserting more "horizontal" search terms, such as "African civilians," and even more horizontal temporal parameters (which I reveal at the end of the book).

However, we can (severely) prune this tangled skein of ancestries by imposing Hall's and Dickerson's argument about perception—that we "chop off" all those lives that we do not perceive as having lived the social and political realities of their times of being Black (and, ideally, those persons who did not perceive themselves in this way). Yet perception also produces its own problem: for example, if we want to consider Barack Obama "Black," we must allow for a diversity of perceptions and performances of what it means to be Black. We must reattach all those ancestors whom Dickerson sheds and thereby precludes from concern and who bring their own definitions of Blackness that will likely challenge one another as well as the contemporary definition of Middle Passage Blackness through the sociopolitical outlook to which she alludes. To what degree would Barack Obama Sr.'s ancestors identify as "Black," adhering to the outlook of Ann Dunham's "Middle Passage Black" ancestors? It also stands to reason that those possible Dunham ancestors who passed as white Punches would not share contemporary views of Blackness. In reading President Obama's

Blackness as the product of both constructs and phenomenology, many Blacknesses appear, but they are not easily represented on *any* of the linear timelines that define the Black collective, including the most frequently discussed, published, and assumed epistemology: Middle Passage Blackness.

Obama is far from the only Black individual who often finds his identity excluded from the linear progress narrative of Middle Passage Blackness. Indeed, *most* Black bodies are excluded from most discussions on Blackness because the majority of dominant discourses in Black studies, like most white discourses, implicitly or explicitly favor and focus on the heteropatriarchal male body as the Black norm in these histories and theories. It should be stressed that this exclusion is rarely accompanied by sexist or misogynist expressions. Unfortunately, these exclusions, conscious or not, can manifest many of the same effects that a deliberate and explicit bigotry would. When women, LGBTTQ (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/transsexual/queer and questioning) Blacks, and other students of these narratives struggle to apply the examples and abstract theorizations to themselves and cannot, this implicit exclusion of their voices and experiences from the "main narrative," in spite of the occasional paragraph or perhaps chapter giving voice to their existence, reinforces a sense that they are somehow not "normally" Black.

This problem has hardly gone ignored or neglected: there are generations of scholars who have lastingly contributed to their disciplines by both recovering marginalized narratives and theorizing them back into dominant epistemologies in Black studies. Yet as those works—most recently of Marlon Bailey, Stanlie James, Audre Lorde, Roderick Ferguson, Deborah Gray-White, Robert Reid-Pharr, C. Riley Snorton, Darlene Clark Hine, Sharon Holland, E. Patrick Johnson, Thavolia Glymph, Tera Hunter, Dwight McBride, Paula Giddings, Daylanne English, Nikki Brown, M. Jacqui Alexander, and many other distinguished scholars of African American women's and queer histories—make clear, Black women do not always share the same historical timeline as men. Black women gain the right to vote decades later; African American women are formally removed from leadership positions as the Civil Rights movement achieves its official structure; and LGBTTQ Blacks find themselves consigned to the shadows, often as victims of white brainwashing like their white counterparts until the Stonewall Rebellion, but now encounter a Stonewall almost wholly reappropriated by queer white representations accompanied by statements that implicitly exclude Blackness from queerness (i.e., "Black have their Civil

Rights—now we want ours!"). As a result, these identity narratives, even after famous and influential books that create and theorize them emerge from the aforementioned authors, do not change the focus favoring the heteropatriarchal Black male body in the mainstream scholarship that follows.

At the heart of this problem of accurately representing a Black collective is the fact that "Blackness" does not exist outside of its intersection with other collective identities. If I cannot tell you whether the collective or individual under discussion is male, female, gay, transgender, Brazilian, an adult, or a child—if I can tell you nothing other than that the "person" is Black, I truly have the "empty," weightless identity of which Young and Braziel warn their readers, signifying nothing. Because trying to narrate all these collective identities appears impossible, they are primarily narrated through the lives of perspectives of Black men, under the default assumption that they are the leaders and therefore the agents of the collective. These narratives rarely claim to be speaking for *all* members of the Black collective *all* the time; instead they hope to represent *most* of the collective *most* of the time by considering various historical events, ancestral narratives, cultural practices, sociopolitical movements . . . the list continues. While the problem of holistic representation is understandable, its effects are hard to swallow: as certain bodies crowd the foreground of our representations, we begin to assume and look only for similar bodies, producing an inaccurate history of which peoples, groups, movements, or individuals were part of which events, much less of the (interpretive) effect of those moments on their lives. In other words, we run the risk that our mistakes will only be compounded in future generations: raised on histories that primarily feature men, we grow up to assume that women didn't accomplish anything and same-sex desire and relationships rarely if ever occurred.

This conundrum that accompanies all attempts to inclusively represent Blackness is not merely abstract; it affects which groups become forgotten in history when we historicize Blackness (as historians are always so painfully aware), and it affects the ability of county, state, federal, and private nonprofits to draw attention to, accurately represent, and effectively advocate for Black populations that are either passively or actively disqualified from city, county, state, or federal support; educational grants; and health studies—to mention just a few of the resources that Black communities struggle to access. As the Middle Passage epistemology itself attests, there is something truly soul-destroying in the repeated discursive erasure from

or marginalization of vulnerable identities, whether in the media, on the street, in the classroom, or in the legislative chamber.

The only way to produce a definition of Blackness that is wholly inclusive and nonhierarchical is to understand Blackness as the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined—the "now" through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated. Constructs of Blackness are produced through history, culture, and ancestry, which are predicated on a notion of time and space that is linear and driven by progress (with setbacks along the way); however, this linear spacetime, while offering the necessary "weight" of a material Blackness, at times excludes those who, in the contemporary moment, perceive and perform themselves as Black but do not share that linear timeline.

As the linear spacetime that dominates the academic canon on Black diasporic identities, the Middle Passage epistemology is a commanding one: it negotiates the complexity of the origins of Blackness in the West by stressing the process of being ripped from one existence and brutally thrust into another; it forces us to question the very heart and intention of white Western democratic discourses by presenting centuries of the moral and ethical corruption of chattel slavery and the equally corrupt logic that attended its constant justification; it belies those anti-Black discourses of African inferiority by presenting an endless fountain of thinkers, warriors, scientists, politicians, activists, artists, and entrepreneurs who achieved far more than the supposedly superior white majority. Intellectually, its counternarrative to Western claims of Enlightenment and modernity do not erase but complicate our understanding of those claims. Morally, it has not only been invoked and successfully used to critique older and contemporary forms of slavery but also been borrowed by Western women's movements and LGBTTQ movements to locate these identities within Western history writ large and assert their progressive nature. In other words, those scholars who have toiled in previous centuries and decades to bring the Black experience to light have inspired and driven not only Black studies but also a host of other disciplines such as sociology, history, literature, psychology, education, and so on.

Western physics and philosophy define in large part the linear spacetime that shapes and informs the Middle Passage Epistemology. Newtonian laws of motion and gravity, a hallmark of the European Scientific revolution, reveal, as Newton himself asserted, that "absolute, true

and mathematical time, in and of itself and of its own nature, without reference to anything external, flows uniformly." Nevertheless, as Dan Falk's *In Search of Time* suggests, "Newton's view of time built on—but also departed from—the recent work of Galileo and Descartes. Galileo had envisioned time geometrically as a line marked off at regular intervals. . . . Newton went further by envisioning both time and space as geometrical structures that had a real existence."[12] Indeed, this "real existence" therefore rendered them, as Newton also asserted according to Brian Greene in *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, "absolute and immutable entities that provided the universe with a rigid, unchangeable arena. According to Newton, space and time supplied an invisible scaffolding that gave the universe shape and structure."[13]

While Falk and Greene add "space" to their discussion of Newton's theories of time, not all physicists or Newton scholars agree that Newton did indeed understand his theories as implicitly applying to space. This is where the humanities offers its own distinctive lay discourses on time; borrowing from my own fields of postcolonial studies and poststructuralist theory, which argue that time and space are inextricable from one another because each informs the other in our *discourses* (i.e., not the physical world), this book uses the term *spacetime*.

"Newtonian spacetime" is *not* equivalent to Newton's theories but rather is how philosophy and political science—as well as nearly all Western discourses, really, academic and lay—have (mis)translated Newton's concept of linear time into a linear spacetime or progress narrative. Newton's laws, with the addition of Einstein's argument that time is complemented by rather than wholly separate from space, operate quite well in the observable physical world and related technological applications. The problem arises with the translation of this concept of linear spacetime into the humanities and social sciences. The idea that time, as we experience it, only moves forward became popular among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European philosophers and political scientists who increasingly came to argue that if we do not already see the evidence borne out by science (we see the young only growing old, not the other way around; an egg hatching, not reassembling), we can see it in the progress of "mankind" from huts, villages, and tribal chiefs to buildings, cities, machines, and "more advanced" forms of government.[14]

Given the immediate cogency it provides in presenting information and knowledge, it is no surprise that the linear progress narrative

is what organizes most of our knowledge and knowledge production in the West. Today across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, we organize most of our epistemologies according to this spacetime, teaching and arguing that our current knowledge is the result of or based on previous achievements and that we are more "advanced" than previous generations of scholars and practitioners—that word itself presuming a linear movement forward. Sometimes we use *post* to further indicate how far we have come—as in postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postlapsarian, the postwar era, postfeminist, even "post-Black"—even though scholars who work with all these ideologies point to the illogic of claiming to be "past" that which one still needs to define oneself (post-Blackness defines itself *through* Blackness, not outside of it, and so forth).

In physics, Newton's assertions that linear time provides the "scaffolding" of the universe no longer monopolize all theories of spacetime. Einstein's equations—later demonstrated to be true—revealed that time does not move uniformly but in fact can speed up or slow down. In particle physics, experiments on subatomic matter, most famously Wheeler's 1980 "which path" experiment, demonstrated that subatomic particles travel haphazardly through space and can even exist in two places at the same time. This means that one cannot attempt to track a particle though linear space or time; one can only use the present moment, more specifically, the *now*, to determine the location of an object. In philosophy, the "now" moment is understood roughly as epiphenomenal time. As noted before, because my own deployment of Epiphenomenal time is not tripartite but consists of one moment, it is not based in a linear relation between cause and effect; that is, as in the history of collectives, causalities abound in physics, but it is always impossible to assert convincingly that there is one single reason for any effect. No moment one experiences depends directly on a previous moment in order to come into being. We do not come from the past but exist only in the now, and we are repeatedly mediating that now with recollections, readings of, discussions on, and experiments about the past.

This idea that time does not flow forward in a linear fashion—that is, as a progress narrative—has also achieved some popularity in lay and academic discourses outside of the natural sciences. Performance studies and poststructuralist arguments (in gender and sexuality studies especially) have introduced arguments that social identities are performed and, as

such, are at least partially phenomenological. Religious studies scholars are very familiar with epiphenomenal time as an enduring conceptual touchstone that has been adopted by theologians in various centuries to explicate some of the more preternatural aspects of religious dogma concerning embodiment. Unsurprisingly, theories of embodiment also explore the "now" of performance.

Exploring identities through intersecting spacetimes can produce a diverse but coherent narrative. When applied to an exploration of Blackness in the African Diaspora, we can not only produce Blackness as a "when" (rather than as a "what" or "thing") that is richly incorporative of a diversity of identities but also bring to light Black identities that had been erased, marginalized, or forgotten until our postwar moment of interpretation. At the same time, as all these readings of postwar Blackness show, we cannot find these moments until we first locate them on a linear timeline. That timeline is most often the Middle Passage Epistemology in academic discourses in Black studies, but it can also be a postcolonial or Afrocentric spacetime, both of which locate Africa as an origin but differ at times regarding the events, personalities, and ideas that mark the advance or block the progress of the collective.

Blackness is well suited to a progress narrative. Its linear structure offers immediate clarity and representation; its dynamic of cause and effect appear rather self-evident in our lived experiences scientifically, physically, and psychologically; and the progress narrative's philosophical tenet that knowledge can be accumulated and we can progress to a greater state of understanding offers an almost altruistic and thus worthy goal: to improve the lived experiences of the Black collective but also humanity at large. One can understand why so many scholars try so hard to cram the dizzying diversity of Blackness into this particular notion of spacetime.

Just as the microcosmos, which resists Newtonian behavior, has created a Holy Grail in physics, the Grand Unified Theory (GUT),[15] so do our most traditional theorists struggle to reconcile Blackness, in all its diversity, with our most dominant notion of a linear Black "spacetime." In their authoritative anthology *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, leading scholars Henry Louis Gates Jr., Maria Diedrich, and Carl Pedersen wrestle with these limitations of Newtonian spacetime. Seeking to encompass the global diversity of the African Diaspora produced through the Atlantic slave trade (a.k.a. the Middle Passage), they argue that the linear can in fact encompass all forms of Middle Passage Blackness:

> In arguing for a spatial and temporal continuum of a Middle Passage sensibility, the editors and contributors of this volume define a topography that extends from the interior of Africa across the Atlantic and into the interior of the Americas. . . . Several intermeshing elements constitute this new conceptualization. Instead of looking at the Middle Passage as a phenomenon of constricted space and limited time, the essays collected here extend its meaning in time and space from the particularities of internal African migration to current meditations on the relationship of African Americans to their past, from the hierarchical spatial relationships of above/below (the deck of the slave ship and its hold) and center/periphery (e.g., the Great House and its slave quarters . . .) to the syncretic notion of a space in-between that links geographical and cultural regions.[16]

The "spatial and temporal continuum of a Middle Passage sensibility," as the authors put it (or the linear progress narrative that comprises the Middle Passage epistemology) addresses that key element that is so desired by discourses defining collective identities: a "continuum" or historical continuity for any given group. Yet that continuum, that unbroken continuous line, no matter how far one stretches it, cannot encompass all the Black Africans directly impacted by the slave trade, nor all the African-descended Black communities in the Americas (or South Asia or, in a few cases, Europe) over the centuries.

The editors acknowledge the reality of spatiotemporal "gaps" by filling them with a "syncretic notion of space in between that links." Yet they leave the "notion" as a placeholder and do not define its nature or full function. In order to enjoy continuity (and this is true of all collective identities), one must sacrifice diversity—after all, human beings are like cats (perhaps a bit more diverse) and have the "bad habit" of wandering off from the group, weaving in and out, or disappearing entirely from the linear progress narrative of history.

To date, discourses on Middle Passage Blackness that account for its formation through this spacetime are stuck in this baffling state of affairs: how can one retain the historical continuity (and thus be able to point to the existence and pedigree of Black culture, Black politics, Black music, Black literature, etc.) of Middle Passage Blackness *and* accurately represent all its many manifestations? It is the continuity that is the problem, the linking of events through a logic bound by cause and effect that ties the

past to the present and provides direction for the future—in short, it is the very basis of this timeline's continuity that is preventing all Black peoples from being represented within the "when" of Middle Passage Blackness.

In *Warped Passages: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Universe's Hidden Dimensions*, Harvard physicist Lisa Randall discusses resolving this contradiction: "In theoretical particle physics . . . an object of study increasingly appears to possess a phenomenon that cannot be synchronized with the dominant phenomena observed. . . . Selecting relevant information and suppressing details is the sort of pragmatic fudging everyone does every day. It's a way of coping with too much information. . . . When appropriate, you ignore some details so that you can focus on the issue of interest, and not obscure it with inessential details."[17] Understanding Randall's "dominant" phenomena observed as Middle Passage Blackness, we can equate this "pragmatic fudging" to our current treatment of Black identities that do not adhere to the linear timeline of the collective (whether it be postcolonial, Afrocentric, or Middle Passage in its history). Rather than highlight this contradiction, our discourses "ignore some details" so we can "focus on the issue of interest"—that is, select those Black collective identities that adhere to the Middle Passage collective identity we are interested in exploring. There is a cost to this, as Randall explains, because those "inessential" details that stubbornly refuse to adhere to the timeline do not go away—or else they disappear and others arrive. In discourses seeking to accurately represent Blackness through not just the Middle Passage but the entire African Diaspora (such as postcolonial theory writ large), "pragmatic fudging" only puts off or delays the problem.

Randall explains that "multiverse" theorists such as herself (i.e., those who believe that we exist in one of many universes, most of which we cannot perceive or experience with the naked eye) understand these diverse phenomena as distinct "dimensions": distinct spacetimes that exist all around us and produce the phenomena that we observe and struggle to integrate into the laws of our "Newtonian" spacetime. Without committing to the multiverse theory, I find Randall's explanation of dimensions for her lay reader especially informative because she likens them to social identities. Her comparison helps this project to make a more cogent argument in discussing the difficulty involved in integrating more Black identities into our discussion, lectures, interpretations, and scholarly studies.

The Middle Passage epistemology operates as a formidably successful structure in analyses in the social sciences or humanities of Black identity

because it provides us with the basic dimensions of Blackness—(three-dimensional) space with the added dimension of time to form a linear progress narrative. Nonetheless, *Physics of Blackness* shows how Black discourses can endlessly expand the dimensions of our analyses and intersect with a wider range of identities by deploying an Epiphenomenal concept of spacetime that takes into account all the multifarious dimensions of Blackness that exist in any one moment, or "now"—not "just" class, gender, and sexuality, but all collective combinations imagined in that moment.

If the spacetime of the Middle Passage Epistemology can be represented by a line (or an arrow), then the postwar epistemology (a more convenient form of the more properly named World War II/postwar epistemology) should be represented as a circle with many arrows pointing outward in all directions. This nicely sums up the argument of *Physics of Blackness*: *in any moment in which we are reading/analyzing Blackness, we should assume that its valences will likely vary from those of a previous moment.*

The circle denotes the "now" of the present moment, and the arrows represent all the spacetimes that intersect with that "now." Reading Blackness from the "now" does not mean erasing or marginalizing the past: on the contrary, many historians take care to remind the reader that all engagements with the past are mediated by the present so that we do not radically distort the past with "presentist"—that is, unmediated—questions, concepts, categories, or even conclusions. A badly rendered history, we are often told, is one in which the narrator refuses to honor the present moment and instead insists that the totality of a past moment can be wholly captured (not unlike an anthropologist insisting that the totality of a culture can be captured and represented by the interpretive dominance of the moment in which he, she, or they[18] are present).

The World War II/postwar epistemology is in fact very much caught up in the past and relies on the Middle Passage Epistemology to orient and situate any reading of the "now" that draws on the past, the present, or the future. Indeed, one could argue that, in its insistence on honoring the past as an object of study that is far more complicated than anything our "now" could ever possibly capture, the Middle Passage epistemology offers nuances and ambiguities worthy of our respect while never foreclosing on the possibility that there are more to be discovered.[19]

In the social sciences and in some areas of the humanities, many of the tenets that guide postwar spacetime will be familiar. After World War II, the demand for more "public histories" in the field was accompanied by a

change in methodologies of representation. The viewpoints of the ruling classes were challenged more frequently by the viewpoints and recorded lives of those they ruled, shifting scholarship from a more hierarchical, or vertical, system of denotation to one that examined a variety of peer, or horizontal, relationships. Today, for example, a history of U.S. slavery that relied entirely on the viewpoint of slave owners and white politicians would quickly be dismissed by historians, public intellectuals, and others who hold the view that the ruling classes cannot speak for those that they ruled. This hypothetical problematic history would have to be corrected by either honestly recasting itself as a study that considered only how the ruling classes represented their lives or expanding it to truly become a "history of U.S. slavery" that incorporates slave diaries, Amerindian histories, white working-class accounts, freed slave narratives, and so forth. The vertical or hierarchical nature of this "expanded" history would remain in place—if for nothing else than to inform an exploration of the disparity of perceptions involved! At the same time, its reading of collective experiences would incorporate data and narratives based on peer relationships—how the slaves understood their identity not only through those who ruled them but through their daily (nay, hourly) exposure to and relationships with other slaves.

In sociology, the vast majority of studies on African Americans conducted today focus considerable attention on both vertical and horizontal relationships. Vertical representation is pursued through studying how participants might perceive the effects of the state and its formal and informal representatives on their lives—including those running the study. Horizontality would come from studying how participants interact with one another and considering, among other things, how they narrate those interactions. In African Diaspora studies, theories of Blackness almost always predicate themselves on seeking total or near-total inclusivity, but as many, including myself, have complained, we lack a model that could accurately represent the majority of the Black Diaspora at *any* historical moment.

Advocates of twentieth-century sociopolitical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (or of Voloshinov, who may be either a pen name or a separate person)[20] will find resonance in Bakhtin's theories of the novel and the epic, in which the spacetime or "chronotope" of the latter is rigidly monologic, reflecting only the spacetime of the hero even when it produces contradictions (such as minor characters whose imminent peril is forgotten in the course of the story or who fail to age or change in the absence of the hero even though

the hero does so, or vice versa). The novel, by contrast, is understood by Bakhtin to be dialogic, comprising the competing spacetimes of both major and minor characters (although Bakhtin never explicitly works out how all these spacetimes actually cohere through one narrative).

In Black studies, Mae G. Henderson, in her foundational "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," builds on Bakhtin's dialogic and philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer's concept of intersubjectivity to argue that individuals such as Black women, who often intersect with other minority collective identities, speak to all identities and are thus "dialogic" rather than "monologic" in their expressions. Yet like Bakhtin, Henderson also does not explain what this kind of dialogic spacetime or chronotope looks like.

Physics of Blackness distinguishes itself from these arguments by asserting that all collective identities are, in fact, dialogic in varying ways when read at distinct moments through intersecting linear and Epiphenomenal spacetimes. To be mercifully less abstract, the academic discourses surrounding the historical figure of Olaudah Equiano also serve as a useful example. Equiano, a.k.a. Gustavus Vassa, is famous in both African American and African Diaspora history as the author of the canonical *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, an autobiography that contains a narration that takes the protagonist from initial enslavement (at the age of eleven) through the journey of the Middle Passage into the equally unfortunate and brutal fortunes of Atlantic slavery until he secures his freedom and eventually enters posterity as an ardent transatlantic abolitionist.

Equiano's text is a rich and valuable link in history, literature, cultural studies, and political science courses (among others) that use a Middle Passage Epistemology to explore Blackness. It quite literally links, through personal narrative, the nearly incomprehensible journey from Igbo (and nobility at that) to Atlantic Negro slave to, astonishingly, self-emancipated Black Briton/Igbo abolitionist activist and scholar. Equiano's career, both within and without his *Narrative*, is one of the rare embodiments of the highest ideals that drive this progressive spacetime—the incorruptible drive for freedom for the Black collective and the achievement of concrete goals for the Black/African collective. Equiano's life thus not only represents the Middle Passage Epistemology; it also reconnects African and Black Diasporans because his abolitionist career took him back to Africa, where he worked in Sierra Leone while raising money in the British Isles

and helping the Black Londoner community of which he was also a part. Teaching, discussing, and analyzing Equiano and his narrative, therefore, is an effective and compelling way to represent the extraordinary individuals who are part of Middle Passage Blackness and its understanding of that collective as always driven toward higher or more complete states of freedom and knowledge.

Yet several years ago, a prominent Equiano scholar, Vincent Carretta, came across new and unwelcome evidence that suggests that Equiano might have been born in South Carolina, not an Igbo village as he claims in his *Narrative*.[21] For scholars seeking to discuss Equiano through a Middle Passage Epistemology, this makes for a difficult situation: even if the rest of Equiano's narrative (following transport) is more or less accurate, how does one celebrate an African American who pretended to be African royalty? One could understand affecting such a ruse, as Carretta surmises, to escape one's captors (and the *Narrative* tells of more than one instance of slave owners reneging on their promise of emancipation); yet why then keep up the ruse, deceiving that very collective that he claims to represent so proudly?

This ambiguity about Equiano makes it difficult to locate him in the linear spacetime of the Middle Passage epistemology, because we can no longer be sure about the truth of his *Narrative*. If we cannot know where Equiano was born or exactly where he traveled before arriving in England, we cannot be sure that his life reflects a heroic drive for freedom rather than a compromised and self-interested career in pseudoheroics (perhaps hiding yet more deception)—or something in between. The meaning of his *Narrative* now escapes us. He cannot be pinned down because his extensive travels across the Atlantic and his status in most of those geographies as something he was not (the equivalent of an object rather than the resourceful human being he was) make him unlocatable without his *Narrative* to provide the coordinates—which are now in dispute with other coordinates left behind in state, county, and maritime archives. We cannot ask, "*What* was Equiano's Blackness?" and receive a satisfying answer with the archives in such direct dispute.

We can ask, however, "*When/where* was Equiano's Blackness?" and receive not one but a revealing multitude of answers produced by the multidimensionality of Blackness in the African Diaspora at that moment as we read it in the now, with all its possibilities. Unlike a progress narrative, which must move ever forward, reading oneself in the now allows for a broad variety of possibilities, some or all of which might be true in

another spacetime, but at present exist as possibilities presented in all the conflicted discourses that make up the "evidence."

This argument that any one given moment of the "now" contains several viable possibilities is not wishful thinking—in particle physics, it is called the "principle of superposition," which, according to Adam Frank, a physicist at the University of Rochester, "holds that things at the subatomic level can be literally two places at once. Worse, it means they can be two things at once."[22] In applying the concept of superposition to our "now," when we do not know exactly where/when Equiano was at certain moments of his narrative, we need not cancel out any possibility that has not been proved false. As such, Equiano exists in several "places at once," because it is possible that Equiano existed in any and all those places. After all, we are not looking for Equiano in spacetimes that are clearly impossible—that is, Nigeria in 300 BCE or eighteenth-century Antarctica. Should we ever discover the exact place and time of Equiano's birth, all the falsely hypothesized birthplaces and times will disappear. Yet, in this moment, this "now," we do not know where and when Equiano was born—we only have several educated guesses. This ambiguity serves us, because it means that we can investigate not only his possible birth places and times but also other possible spacetimes that intersect with his life through Black collective identity or identities that exist in other possible spacetimes. Most of these identities are "horizontal"—that is, they involve Equiano's membership in peer groups among Black slaves and freemen of South Carolina (or possibly beyond) or citizens of his home village in what is now called Nigeria (and again, perhaps beyond). In other words, allowing for these possibilities does not further compound the ambiguity but instead produces many specific dimensions of Blackness that intersect through Equiano in all these possible manifestations.

Equiano exists in South Carolina, in the birth record of a slave child; Equiano also exists in the little Igbo village in, some scholars insist, a traditional oral narrative of his birth and childhood; in the possibly true *Narrative*, Equiano exists on the sea, as both captive and seaman, as a successful deceiver and courageously intelligent former slave now more than ever devoted to seeking abolition. Because we have so many more spacetimes opened up (and this list is not exhaustive) in which Blackness operates, we can then ask whether and which other horizontal (peer-collective) identities for Equiano may come forth in West African oral narratives, contradictory slave archives, naval archives, the records that

may exist of those poor Black Londoners and Blacks who worked for total suffrage in Sierra Leone, and other scholarly enigmas of the African Diaspora. In other words, in how many other unanticipated ways might we find Black collective identities intersecting with the discourses of that era, whether oral or written, self-notated or set down by authority? We cannot read Equiano accurately through the standards set by the Middle Passage Epistemology itself, because his seemingly limitless intersections with so many geographies, traditions, archives, and so forth point to his multidimensionality in this moment—the endless possibilities of this "now."

The Middle Passage Epistemology produced and was in part produced by Equiano's text, and that does not change. When our attempts to read him within that epistemology achieve a difficult moment, the fixed orientation of that linear spacetime allows us to then "spin 'round," as it were, in the now and look for all the possible "Equianos" that occur when we read, listen to, or debate the historical and academic record. If we read Equiano as a "what," it is difficult to do this, because a "what" cannot occupy several spacetimes at once. If we ask "when and where" Equiano was and frame this question in the now, using space and time as our categories for analysis creates the greatest number of Blacknesses that are possible and viable.

Both the Middle Passage and postwar epistemologies seek to understand Black collectives within vertical *and* horizontal frames. Both are concerned with questions of equality, nuance, and accuracy in representing Black collectives. There are moments, however, at which the former is limited in its ability to achieve its goals by the spacetime it uses. Because it tracks the collective as a whole—those moments in which some Black identities do not fit on the timeline (e.g., LGBTTQ Blacks during decolonization and Black Power movements in Africa and the West)—it implicitly reformulates that collective into an ever narrower and more homogeneous membership. The qualitative value of Blackness is much lower in this moment, failing to accurately reflect important nuance and diversity, or a "qualitative collapse" in the moment of interpellation (as chapter 4 explains). Furthermore, the tendency to misread this Blackness as a "what" imposes even more fixity so that Blackness, as a vaguely biological "what," takes on an eerie resemblance to those anti-Black discourses that first claimed Blacks were indeed a "what"—a distinct subhuman species "marked by Nature," as Jefferson opined.[23]

Because our Western notions of linear time borrow heavily from classical or Newtonian physics, and analyses of Epiphenomenal time are

currently most extensive in particle or quantum physics, these lay discourses written by science journalists and noted physicists inform my argument but also make clear the disciplinary distinctions. Methodologically and theoretically, this book locates itself at the intersections of poststructuralist and postcolonial theories of identity that use discourse analysis. As a result, lay discourses on spacetime from physics operate as vigorous and rigorous interlocutors for my theorizations of Black spacetimes; there is no place for judging whether they are subordinate or superior to the latter.

Chapter 1, "The Middle Passage Epistemology," argues that, like most collective identities in Western discourses, discourses on Blackness in the African Diaspora explicitly or implicitly interpellate it through a linear progress narrative. While this narrative is crucial for all collectives that are part of Western discourses on identity, when used alone it fails to do the job with which it was charged: to provide an accurate representation of that collective.

While Sir Isaac Newton is not the author of the progress narrative, I show how his famous laws of motion and gravity in classical physics usefully correlate with the linear progress narratives that developed during the Enlightenment and that we use in the West today (across *all* disciplines, including the way in which all sciences organize their epistemologies). The chapter begins with an analysis of how mistranslations of Newton's three laws into discourses that use linear progress narratives specifically create three logical problems for any collective identity seeking to interpellate itself through this linear arrangement of spacetime. First, the assumption of fixed origins forecloses the inclusion of members who do not share in this origin but appear elsewhere in the narrative. Second, Newton's laws establish cause and effect, a dynamic that translates badly into theories of identity for two reasons: (1) the assumption of cause and effect in a collective's linear timeline simplifies collective memory by asserting it as perfectly preserved knowledge enjoyed by every member of the collective such that each succeeding generation accumulates yet more knowledge (but does not lose or change any) and (2) the cause-and-effect framework, when translated into theories of collective identity, deeply inhibits agency by asserting that all members of the collective are the product of and reactors to history rather than agents with choice. Third, the linear nature of the progress narrative forces the collective to be represented through one traditional body (usually that of a heterosexual man), which can distort

and marginalize the specific experiences of unrepresented members (most often women, queers, and those with the least economic power).

Using the earliest and only other use of the Middle Passage epistemology I have found, educational scholar Annette Henry's "There's Saltwater in Our Blood," chapter 1 reveals how Henry's reservations about this epistemology, which she otherwise strongly advocates, can be best understood through the aforementioned laws and their problematic mistranslations. More specifically, Henry opines that, while the "Middle Passage Epistemology"[24] provides a necessary service in raising her two informants, Mavis's and Samaya's respective daughters, it lacks the ability to interpellate experiences specific to Black women or girls. Also, she notes, it never fully explains how it understands its relationship to dominant white racist epistemologies: designed in part to resist them, it is therefore part of them and yet at the same time implies or states that it is wholly separate.

In order to retain as much clarity as possible, and to demonstrate that the Middle Passage epistemology, as I understand it, does in fact cohere with Henry's designation, chapter 1 reads Mavis, Samaya, and their daughters through the scholarly versions of the "Middle Passage Epistemology" that Henry cites. When interpellated through the cited Middle Passage epistemologies of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey*, and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, Mavis, Samaya, and their daughters do enjoy a rich history that logically justifies their presence in the West even as it condemns the white racist timelines that attempt to read all Blacks as located outside of Western civilization's spacetime as inferiors.

Yet while the Middle Passage epistemologies created by Du Bois, Gates, and Gilroy seek to interpellate entire Black collectives (or most of the people most of the time), those identities that ultimately do not fit a heteronormative masculine definition of Black progress are erased or marginalized in these texts. These exclusions can become yet broader when the Middle Passage epistemology is deployed to exclude U.S. Black Africans and their offspring, as well as U.S. Middle Passage Blacks of recent white or Caribbean ancestry. Using commentaries on Barack Obama's Blackness by the aforementioned Debra Dickerson and political scientist Ron Walters, as well as a *New York Times* interview with Gates and Lani Guinier on "Middle Passage Blackness" and college admissions, I show that intentional, explicit exclusions (as opposed to the implicit and likely unintended ones found in Du Bois, Gates, and Gilroy) produce even larger

and more obvious problems in the interpellation of Blackness when the Middle Passage epistemology is used alone.

Chapter 2, "The Problem of Return in the African Diaspora," concludes the two-chapter analysis of the Middle Passage epistemology by focusing on its use as a spatiotemporally *diasporic* identity for Blacks outside of Africa; that is, in addition to the linear progress narrative, there is another line, dotted perhaps, that *returns* to West Africa, confusingly reversing the progress narrative's movement "forward." The introduction to chapter 2 also begins with an examination of the "arrow of time" as explained by theoretical physicist Sean Carroll in *From Eternity to Here*. Theoretical physics, Carroll relates, also struggles with the notion of "moving backward" through time. Simply put, the problem appears to be entropy, or the way in which time is defined at the atomic level and above. While everyone is familiar with experiencing entropy in the context of forward movement (growth, expansion, decay), no one has ever witnessed the reverse occurring: a grown woman becoming a baby, shrapnel and debris reassembling into a bomb and its target, or rotting food turning fresh.

There is a correlative to the "arrow of time" in African Diaspora discourses that explore the meaning of return; they also contrast the idea of traveling back in time with the physical journey itself. More specifically, whether understanding return as a matter of survival (Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"), involuntary (Octavia Butler's *Kindred*), an informed choice with ambivalent yet insightful results for Black Atlantic women (Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*), or an opportunity to explore the U.S. Black male psyche (Mat Johnson's *Pym*), all these works, as I will show, ask us to rethink any assumptions we may harbor about return. All five works demonstrate that embarking on return is insightful but also paradoxical—difficult and, ultimately, impossible. Indeed, return always seems to end in failure, most especially when the subject thinks the journey has been wholly successful—that is, that a utopian past has been accessed.

Hortense Spillers's landmark essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" provides the entrance to the theme of return for chapter 2 because of its compelling interpretation of return as central to the intellectual, physical, and spiritual well-being of U.S. Blacks. Spillers famously determines that U.S. whites' pursuit of progress on their own timeline relies fundamentally on the vicious and unending interpellation of U.S. Blackness as Other. While Spillers begins the essay by calling

for the reader to take her own body as representative of the Black female experience, her definition of return as the need to embrace pre–Middle Passage West African heteropatriarchal mores excludes those men and women who cannot or do not want (often because of queer loved ones) to belong to a collective that espouses such questionable values. Yet in an interview conducted several years later, Spillers explains that she herself struggled to see any other solution at the time of writing "Mama's Baby" and calls on today's generation to find a way to understand Blackness that is broader and more inclusive.

The rest of the chapter takes up this challenge through *Kindred*, *Heremakhonon*, *Lose Your Mother*, and especially *Pym*, a novel of speculative fiction, a pessimistic postmodern narrative of return, a travel narrative, and a surreal satirical novel, respectively, all of which offer possible solutions to this problem of return. Unlike Dana's literal return to the antebellum South in *Kindred*, which reaps equally literal damage through the loss of an arm, Veronica Mercier, the savvy yet selfish bourgeois Guadeloupian and Parisian protagonist of Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon*, embarks on a more figurative return and pays a cost in the same register through psychic damage. Like the character Dana, Condé the writer also attempts a vertical interpellation to explain her "return," here a historical one to an unnamed twentieth-century postcolonial West African nation. Butler's Dana returns from her adventure with part of her body left behind (supposedly ensuring her own continuing existence on the linear timeline), but this appears to have been the price she was required to pay to ensure her return to her "normal" spot in the present on the Middle Passage timeline. By contrast, Veronica returns "punished," it seems, for her failure to recognize the reality of postcolonial West Africa, where she is violently disabused of any notion that Africa could be her "home." For Veronica does not seek to engage or bond with working men and women, much less the impoverished citizenry, instead seeking out sexual relationships and friendships among society's socioeconomic elite—those who, like her, directly benefit from an oppressive military-industrial complex and its neoliberal justifications.

Saidiya Hartman's tale of "return" highlights horizontal rather than vertical relations between herself and those she encounters. In those rarer moments in which Hartman interpellates herself as somehow subaltern in her relation to West African collective identities, the text also switches to vertical viewpoints and logics, away from those she encounters in the now

and away from the knowledge and questions and the connections they bring, however friendly or hostile. Mat Johnson's *Pym*, the focus of the last half of the chapter, is an intertextual satire that takes Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* as its point of departure and goes furthest in its rejection of linear logic when its characters embark on a return to an unfinished American interracial literary past: *Nantucket*'s fantastic lands of Black Tslal and white Tekelia.

Chapter 3, "Quantum Baldwin and the Multidimensionality of Blackness," turns the discussion to postwar epistemology, exploring Epiphenomenal time and its ability to interpellate Blackness "multidimensionally" by locating an individual at the intersection of multiple collective identities, or epistemologies. The chapter begins with theoretical particle physicist Lisa Randall's "multiverse" theory to introduce its own concept of identities as "dimensions" when interpellating Blackness. While Randall seeks a single unifying spacetime for all possible dimensions, chapter 3 more generally emphasizes how Epiphenomenal time interpellates a single individual as the point at which many collective identities intersect—but that individual does not become the unifying umbrella for those identities. In other words, the individual being interpellated is an intersecting site for a broad variety of other collective epistemologies; in Epiphenomenal spacetime, unlike in linear spacetime, the individual does not then become the dominant representation that subsumes all those collective identities.

James Baldwin's collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son* is a uniquely instructive, if also flawed, example of exploring Blackness through a broad array of intersections with other *peer* collective identities, or the many unlimited dimensions of Blackness in any one moment. Unfortunately, as I also note, Baldwin's essays are woefully devoid of Black female agents. While the essays that make up the first two sections of *Notes* are used to explore Baldwin's ambivalence about the Middle Passage epistemology (he both uses it and advocates expunging it from discourses of Blackness), the chapter concentrates on the four Europe-focused essays that conclude *Notes* and the way in which they interpellate Blackness as global, intersecting, boundless, and unpredictable by understanding encounters with other Black and white identities as equal, peer, or "horizontal" rather than as "vertical" or hierarchical (i.e., the Black African is rendered subaltern in her encounter with the white European; the U.S. Black is rendered less authentically Black, and therefore subaltern, in his encounter with the Black African).

Most specifically, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," which opens the third section, moves us through Paris at eye level as the African American reflects on and encounters fellow U.S. Black expatriates, white Parisians, and finally a French African soldier. Baldwin largely uses these spatially horizontal, eye-level devices, moments of chance meetings (on street corners) and encounters at intersections (the Eiffel Tower), to explore the temporally horizontal: an open and shared moment of postwar Paris in the 1950s.

While "Encounter" creates a space in which Blackness productively intersects with other collective identities and even another interpellation of Blackness, those textual interpellations are many but brief and do not begin to reflect the broad array of Black identities that could intersect in this otherwise very promising spacetime established by "Encounter." Chapter 3 therefore first intersects through this spacetime coordinate (Paris in the 1950s at the Eiffel Tower) with Bernard Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris*, before linking Dadié's text to other Black creative and biographical discourses from Ghana, Mali, and Brazil that reflect on Blackness in World War II and the postwar eras. Baldwin's encounter at the Eiffel Tower is turned into a diasporic trope for encounter, producing a broad array of positionalities and views on Blackness that also reflect its diverse national, economic, social, and political identities.

The chapter concludes with a closer examination of *Notes*'s use of vertical interpellations, using the chiefly vertical structure of the Eiffel Tower to explain how even the horizontally focused set of interpellations offered by *Notes* cannot be assumed to be free of verticalities. Using Geraldine Murphy's "Subversive Anti-Stalinism," the chapter concludes by looking at how *Notes*'s own deployment of the Middle Passage epistemology ends up condemning Richard Wright through a strangely homophobic and heterosexist linear logic.

Chapter 4, "Axes of Asymmetry," brings together Epiphenomenal time and the World War II and postwar eras (but mostly World War II) to outline the problems and solutions offered by World War II/postwar epistemology. The vertical hierarchies one finds in Baldwin are endemic to most dominant discourses on World War II, showing that the *quantitative* richness the Second World War offers in terms of geographic breadth, archival material, and accessibility on a global scale is threatened by moments of *qualitative* superficiality. For example, although the Second World War was a truly global war that affected all inhabited

continents, most dominant histories fail to reflect that diverse territorial and demographic reach.

This leads to "qualitative collapse," a term I use to define discursively the moment at which interpellating a collective identity through World War II discourses will yield almost no search results, as in the case of interpellating Black African women's identities through World War II. The chapter explains the solution—namely, recognizing the vertical logic in one's question (i.e., "What did Black African women do during the Second World War?") and changing the question to one that is horizontal. Using Evan Mwangi's concept of "internal heteroglossia" (or dialogic exchanges between peer groups) advocated in *Africa Writes Back to Self*, the last chapter reveals how even seemingly "neutral" terms such as *African women* and *World War II* rely on hierarchical reasoning, a verticality under which the answers we seek to our questions are not likely to be found. In other words, we cannot presume that the answer we seek is *subordinate* to our question; it is problematic to assume that the answer was created, written down, or recorded somewhere in the archives with the expectation of satisfying our future question. Instead, we must consciously frame ourselves and our question in the "now" *and* understand the answer we seek as having been written in the *now*, the product of "internal heteroglossia" or conversations between peers.

After showing how Black African women's histories during World War II can be found through this spatiotemporal reframing of the question and the anticipated answer, the chapter and the book concludes with a final framing in the now: where did Newton receive the ideas that interpellated the phenomena he observed in experiments into his theory of linear time? The answer, as one might imagine, does not honor the verticality of our question, but it does, I hope, launch us into another productive set of questions that further reveal and underscore Blackness endlessly intersecting across the globe through a multitude of radiantly meaningful identities.

Writ large, *Physics of Blackness* is intervening into two large debates: one on knowing, and the other on being. The first, extending back at least as far as the European Enlightenment, is about the shape and formation of knowledge itself—how we know what we know. By underscoring, as I do in chapters 1 and 2, the logical flaws and paradoxes inherent in the linear progress narrative, I am also jabbing a finger at the central and dominant way in which we imagine knowledge formation in both the West and

beyond. Although tens of billions of dollars are invested in the notion that knowledge constituted by the linear causality created by the past and present allows news analysts, investors, matchmakers, economists, seismologists, meteorologists, political and social scientists, technology geeks, politicians, urban planners, business leaders, and so on to predict our future, we all, on some level, know that this is very, very difficult to do if not impossible. We are not shocked when economists fail to predict financial crises, and we even turn to them again the next day to find out what set of concerns should preoccupy us next. At least since Newton, bold statements in physics have claimed that the key to understanding the entire universe is just around the corner—only to find that the next discovery opens up a whole new series of inquiries because that "key," or answer, actually requires a wholly different kind of lock, or set of questions. Even those things that we label "predictable" are not, as we well know, assuredly so: Medical researchers cannot explain how some bodies, infected with a fatal disease, nonetheless recover without remission (meaning that a "fatal" disease is not always fatal), and we do not fall back in shock when a computer, cell phone, car, or some other electronic or mechanical device fails to work—nor do we look agog when on the second, sixth, or twenty-fifth try the device now does work. We might even argue that the way we marvel at accurate predictions is testament enough to our experience that such things are not commonplace.

At the same time, it is difficult to imagine navigating any sort of human day that didn't take certain predictions into account: the sun rising, our place of work still existing and expecting us, our loved ones recognizing us when we see them. We must assume if we are to act, but we must also understand those actions as performance: the spatiotemporality of our identity manifested in the moment rather than a thing we have carried with us since our first breath. If identities are not "things" but moments in space and time, then it makes no sense to mindlessly insist that all women, all Blacks, all trans folks, all Kazakhs, or all airline pilots, surgeons, or soldiers all think, behave, and act exactly alike in all moments—not the least because individuals who read themselves into specific sets of identities in one moment may not do so in the next. In order to imagine itself as progressive, Western civilization rests on this notion that identities are fixed, physical things are possessed by bodies, because progress also requires a notion of fixity (how else can one know how far one has come?). The recently renewed craze for researching one's ancestral and genetic histories

reveals not only the degree to which state, nonprofit, and academic institutions believe in this myth of fixed identity and Western progress but also the degree to which so many individuals also seek to "know" who they are by supposedly unspooling their long chains of genes back through a linear past until arriving at a fixed origin.

Yet to claim we have progressed is a hard qualitative argument to make: the corruption, violence, and bigotry that infest contemporary societies are no better or worse than the ills of preceding societies, only sometimes different. The earth's human population has not progressed from a fixed origin, much less seen any bodies, religions, ethnic groups, or nationalities "improve" on their predecessors or contemporaries. Those living today are not in fact more advanced than those now dead; men are not more advanced than women; heterosexuals not advanced over queers, liberals over conservatives, Northerners over Southerners, and so forth. If identities are performances, then we cannot claim to possess superiority or inferiority in our being: we are a series of performances in distinct moments, and thus we are impossible to compare as if we were hypostatic entities. This links us to the second debate into which this book wades, and one that has gripped me for as long as I have been interested in issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class: how does one define, much less establish, equality in the midst of diversity? If we are not all "the same" (not even the same individual from one moment to the next), how can we establish equal relations between us? Sometimes this question has been misunderstood or even posed in the assumption that some people are superior to others. The last two chapters of this book take up this issue of ontology by showing how we are not fixed quantities but ever-shifting qualities. Equality, then, is a matter of qualitative connection rather than quantitative sameness. We achieve an illusion of superiority only when we create a false rubric for it: we ask, for example, which nation carries the highest suicide rate and inevitably find one that takes the top spot so we can ask what is wrong with that nation—what is its cultural, social, economic and or political failing? What we do not ask is whether it matters when other nations top that nation's suicide rate on certain days, or in certain months, and whether it did in the years before and whether it will do so afterward—and this is before we ask what kinds of people make up the statistics. In other words, by ignoring time, the moments in which we create our questions and come to our answers, we create illusory hierarchies that primarily reflect our prejudices, anxieties, and obsessions.

Many years ago when I began my graduate studies, my focus was on poststructuralist theories, but the inability of these discourses to theorize racial difference—that is, the degree to which their premises held only if one assumed a white masculine norm—intrigued me, to say the least. While I had never assumed that these vaunted theorists had solved "everything," I was surprised at how heavily they relied on a narrow set of parameters in order to theorize supposedly global phenomena. As I became more deeply engaged with African American, African Diaspora, Black European, and Black Atlantic studies, the lack of a detailed, explicit definition of Blackness became a dynamic touchstone for me, mostly because Blackness intersects with so many identities so frequently. In "uncovering" what ultimately drives and defines our concepts of Blackness—space and time—*Physics of Blackness* argues that becoming aware of how spacetime operates in our everyday and more formal discourses on identity can help us retrieve those identities that have been consigned to the margins as "rare" and "unique" and bring them into their true place as a site for enriching intersections with other bodies, other times, and other histories. This mechanics, or "physics," of Blackness ticks in every one of us, because in any given moment we are in the hearts of all sorts of human diasporas.

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