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Physics of Blackness

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The Middle Passage Epistemology

This chapter focuses on how the Middle Passage epistemology both operates and “stalls,” revealing how it sometimes fails in its attempt to represent an integrative and diverse representation of Blackness in its construction of collective Black identities in the West. It also shows how these limitations are caused by logical paradoxes that result from understanding time as linear and progressive. I begin with a brief exploration of the linear progress narrative as it is defined in lay discourses on theoretical particle physics and then discuss the specific behavior of this spacetime when it is used to define Black collective identities. As noted in the introduction, this mistranslation of Newton’s laws of motion and gravity into the linear progress narrative was not committed by the humanities alone but in fact dominates how all disciplines and laypersons organize knowledge as *progressive*, from discoveries in physics to the history of pop music to autobiographies to self-help books. Most significantly, as the book’s final chapter will show, many religious doctrines also espouse a linear development toward a higher or more divine consciousness.

Interpellating a collective through a progress narrative assigns the collective itself to a cause-and-effect framework, but the “cause” is not the collective but what (supposedly) drives its members forward: the desire for equality and inclusion into a nation, nationhood, the dominance of its nation-state or group, and so forth. Yet because individuals belong to many distinguishable collectives, not just one, attempting to interpellate a given collective through a certain effect, such as the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment, which supposedly guaranteed the right to vote to African American men, creates ambivalent interpellations of Black women in our “now.” For example, regarding activists who helped to “cause” the amendment to be passed, some readers would criticize Black women for fighting for the enfranchisement of men but not of themselves because Black women are not relevant to the “effect” (their status remained unchanged; they had not progressed). Yet even when the Black

collective can be securely interpellated as a cause, they are not true agents; they always react to or act against white racism. In the strict logic of cause and effect, white racism is the agent that sets the historical agenda for the Black progress narrative because it initiates the *Atlantic* slave trade (as opposed to slavery within Africa), Atlantic slavery, segregationist laws, racist violence, terrorist acts against Black communities, and exploitation by the state, medical professionals, science, industry—the list goes on, and in each moment, whiteness is the actor and Blackness the reactor.

While the crude fact of racism and its effects cannot be denied, the mistranslation of Newton's laws into the linear progress narrative and its cause-and-effect framework reduces Blackness to something far simpler than what it actually is. The history of Blacks in the West, like the history of all peoples, is a history of negotiations. Even when enjoying superior numbers and superior weapons for murder and terror, oppressors must constantly threaten and terrorize or torture and kill members of the oppressed collective in order to maintain their compliance. Even so, not all members will comply; some will resist until they are dead, some will escape, and a rare few will become quite famous, even historically successful, subversives and revolutionaries. These horizontal negotiations deeply inform everything from how lives are actually lived (versus the historical records left by the oppressors) to how laws are inaugurated and how some historical events occur and conclude, but they are often lost in linear progress narratives unless they fit neatly on the timeline.

Newton's concept of linear time was adapted to the idea of linear progress with space as well—hence the appellation “spacetime.” One already denotes spacetime when speaking, for example, of the “pre-Columbian” era in the United States, or its “colonial” era—that is, we rename geographies depending on which temporal era we mean to denote. These markers are also often marked explicitly or implicitly by notions of progress. We use “prehistoric” to denote an era that precedes human dominance and therefore in which no “history” took place; time passed and organic matter changed, but that is all.

In *Black Bodies and Quantum Cats: Tales from the Annals of Physics*, science journalist Jennifer Ouellette offers a useful set of definitions for understanding the Newtonian laws on the basis of which the linear progress narrative was established across academic disciplines. Indeed, it is hard to dispute the apparent logic of what are among the most famous dicta of Western civilization:

1. A body at rest will remain at rest and a body in motion will remain in motion, unless an outside force—such as the friction of a collision with another solid object—intervenes.
2. The greater the force applied to an object, the greater the rate of acceleration.
3. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.¹

These three laws have become so deeply embedded in the consciousness of so many individuals that they might first strike us as disappointingly obvious, but their implications are vast and astonishing. These three laws are meant to tell us how everything, from kings to crocodiles to diamonds, comes into being and behaves while it exists.

Equally important, these laws assert that their application not only can reveal an object's *past*, how it came to be, but can also predict its *future*. Reflecting on this, we assume as much—the king was once a baby and will go on to become an old man; the log was once part of a sapling and will eventually fossilize (if it remains undisturbed); we know that diamonds were once mere coal but over a billion years or so of heat and pressure became precious gemstones, which they will remain for an even longer time (if no longer rare). As science writer Dan Falk relates in *In Search of Time*, Newton summed up time thus: “Absolute, true, and mathematical time, in and of itself and of its own nature, without reference to anything external, flows uniformly.”²

The concept of time as flowing in one uniform direction (forward) was not unheard of before Newton. As Dan Falk narrates, long before Newtonian physicists, mathematicians and other scientists and philosophers had explored notions of time as possessing movement or direction:

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's predecessor, Barrow, shared that vision. René Descartes (1596–1650) saw time as a measure of motion but considered the idea of duration as something subjective, “a mode of thinking”. . . . Newton went further by envisioning both time and space as geometrical structures that had a real existence. Newton's universal clock ticked away at a rate independent of stars and planets, independent of our perceptions. It was simply *there*. . . . It was fundamental.³

The central concept emphasized here is that space and time form a neat line; space moves “forward”—that is, *chronologically*—pushed by time’s natural progression. This is, in a nutshell, linear spacetime—and even today, despite the contrary findings since,⁴ it dominates the Western imagination to such a degree that it is difficult to think of space and time functioning in any other fashion. Newton, by building on and confirming established concepts of time with his laws of motion, gave the linear progress narrative of time its appeal as the “divine mechanism that drove God’s great creation of the Earth.”⁵ By imagining time as a *natural* force that moves development *forward*, Newton provided Enlightenment philosophers with a stunningly simple yet compelling understanding of time through which they could interpellate Europe as the vanguard of civilization.

Their resulting argument, that Western civilization is more progressive than other civilizations, remains a central tenet of conservative intellectual thought in the West. Indeed, this shared view of spacetime as linear and more progressive in Europe may be the one shared viewpoint of the Enlightenment’s alpha and omega of phenomenology: Emmanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. Moving against claims that Hegel opposes Newton, philosopher Terry Prickard argues, “Thus like Kant, Hegel takes Newton’s use of the concepts of absolute space and time as paradigmatic for how proper science is to proceed since these concepts function in just that kind of a priori way for Newton, although they were hardly there before Newton introduced them. Unlike Kant, of course, Hegel ascribes objective reality (not transcendental ideality) to both space and time.”⁶ In other words, what is most compelling about this linear progress narrative is its transcendence, according to which it assumes a divine status because it is not controlled by earthly endeavors but operates the other way around: time predicates motion. Even though it still holds fearsome sway today (one is hard-pressed to find a book, article, or documentary on Western civilization that does not define linearity as exemplary of progress), on closer inspection the white Western linear progress narrative is linear only through strenuous manipulation of the facts. It is hard, for example, to claim that the European genocides and mass murders committed against Africans and Asians⁷ and in the death camps of Europe are more progressive than the barbarity sanctioned by the emperors of ancient Rome or the Spanish Inquisition.⁸ Making the line progressive requires defining European colonialism as altruistic and Nazism as a pure aberration, the exception that proves the rule of progressive (white) Western history.

Western civilization does not use linear spacetime only, however; it also uses “Epiphenomenal” spacetime, albeit often implicitly. A variation of this model (which is tripartite and partially causal) of spacetime is found not only in discourses from theoretical physics but also in medieval Christian discourses. Whereas linear time and standard models of Epiphenomenal time are at least partially, if not wholly, tripartite, moving from past to present to future, my version of Epiphenomenal time comprises only the “now”—but a “now” that encompasses what is typically labeled the past and the future.

In physics, Epiphenomenal time correlates with a definition of entropy, or the movement of molecules from “low” entropy (order) to “high” entropy (disorder), which means that the “now” is always in process—that is, the present and future are not discrete moments but rather are conflated into the one moment that is the now. This supposition is currently further borne out by Wheeler’s 1980 “which path” experiment, in which it was discovered that when subatomic particles traveling at the speed of light encounter changes in their paths, the particles can somehow anticipate the changes and adapt to them *before* having encountered them. Rather than interpret this as the ability to “change the past” by “seeing into the future,” physicists theorized that it indicates the primacy of the present moment, which is *neither an effect of the past nor a cause of the future*. The “now,” or this book’s definition of Epiphenomenal time, corresponds to the “indeterminate, fuzzy, hybrid reality consisting of many strands” that physicist Brian Greene describes in *The Fabric of the Cosmos*.⁹ The present, Greene argues, can even influence the “far away” past because “an observation today can therefore help complete the story we tell of a process that began . . . a billion years earlier. An observation today can delineate the kinds of details we can and must include in today’s recounting of the past.”¹⁰ As he also admits, “In the psychological arena, rewriting or reinterpreting the past is commonplace; our story of the past is often informed by our experiences in the present. But in the arena of physics—an arena we consider objective and set in stone—a future contingency of history is head-spinning.”¹¹

Yet the primacy of the moment that is Epiphenomenal time reaches us not only through theorizing the results of subatomic experiments but also as phenomenology—we experience time as sometimes overlapping, sometimes disconnected, moments. If we study a subject at school or learn a trade, we do not experience a reassuringly steady progression in our abilities in hour-by-hour, day-by-day, or even week-by-week or month-by-month

fashion. What we forget in one moment we remember in another, and despite the ubiquitous encouragement to live our lives as progress narratives, we often look back at earlier moments as perhaps unsettling evidence that we have already “peaked,” whether in high school or in achieving our last noted accomplishment.

Creative works have of course played with Epiphenomenal time—reading one moment through the experiences of many, or perhaps a series of moments through the experiences of one. Social histories often take a single murder case or political scandal and explore all the lives that intersected with it. In this way, Epiphenomenal time can also be understood to empower the exploration of a spacetime *horizontally* rather than *vertically*. The movement can be horizontal because instead of simply interpellating the plot of the situation comedy or novel through the eyes of one character alone, the views and experiences of many others are presented as all equally valid, exactly like dialogism. This, in turn, renders the moment under interpretation as multivalent with no one truth that dominates and thus orders the importance of the various participants in that spacetime. As Brian Greene explains in *Cosmos*, “The alternate paths an electron can follow from [one point to another] are not separate, isolated histories. The possible histories commingle to produce the observed outcome.”¹²

Yet Greene also notes, “Some paths reinforce each other, while others cancel each other out”—and linear spacetime does the latter through its vertical relationships. In many moments of reading about or listening to dominant discourses on Western civilization, many peoples who understand themselves as part of it are either ignored or marginalized in progress narratives that detail the birth and growth of a collective or a nation state. Women, queers, and socioeconomic and political minorities often make fleeting appearances, exceptions that prove the rule of male dominance; until the past few decades, the working classes were wholly ignored, and ethnic and racial minorities alternately symbolized an empire’s greatness or else elicited pity for their primitive sufferings. As Heather Love has argued in *Feeling Backward*, (white) queer historical narratives are routinely ignored, and no amount of evidence will convince textbooks or other dominant discourses to amend their inaccuracies. Western civilization is often, when boiled down, a pageant of white heterosexual masculinity firmly in tune with progress. Other bodies are affected, but they are rarely agents.

It makes sense, then, that those Western collectives that are routinely excluded by dominant discourses would revise these narratives to insert their own rightful places within the terms of “progress.” Most often, when revising these narratives, the question of progress is redefined—dominant groups and nation-states are found wanting in their treatment of the oppressed, and the oppressed are represented as progressive in their scientific, economic, political, and cultural contributions to Western civilization—above all else in their fight for equal rights.

The Middle Passage epistemology is a compelling narrative used by millions to tell themselves how they “know” they are Black because they can locate their ancestry within this history. It is also, it should be stressed, at least a little bit different every time it is enunciated (like all dominant narratives) but *always* operates on the assumption that the “natural” flow of time is supposed to be progressive. Unlike dominant collective epistemologies that, for example, narrate the history of a nation, the Middle Passage epistemology is often more deeply grounded in historical fact than in wishful myth (such as the myth of freedom-loving Founding Fathers seeking a class-free, gender-neutral, and raceless society), rendering it one of the most compelling narratives in the West, told and retold in literature, film, documentaries, and high school and college courses, as well as popular music. Its central historical events, arranged on a linear timeline, move from slavery to rebellions to civil disobedience and some form of social, political, or even economic gains in the present moment, in which reactive, racist state, corporate, or even military interests seek to deprive Blacks in the West of what few sociopolitical and economic gains they have secured.

Constructing Black collective identity through a linear progress narrative and thus underscoring Black achievement and drive makes good sense, especially when one considers the oppressively racist conditions under which “Blackness” was first invented by Western thinkers, politicians, scientists, and fervent advocates of a racialized slave trade.¹³ It is no wonder that we find this narrative at work in much of the early Western Black studies canon, advocating universal racial suffrage for those directly connected to and impacted by the Middle Passage. Such Black texts include those written by Mary Prince, Ignatius Sancho, Alexander Crummel, Martin Delany, Ida B. Wells, Frances W. Harper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Sutton E. Griggs. The Middle Passage epistemology allows us to cogently and compellingly graph the antiprogressive thrust of white Western

politics and practices, all the while documenting a history of defiance and collective uplift, and one in which reason and justice triumph over the nonsensical and uncivilized cruelties of racism. In the late decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, progress and uplift were the official watchwords of African American leadership; during the 1960s and 1970s, throughout the Atlantic, their revolutionary histories continued to coalesce with African collectives, as Middle Passage, Pan-African, postcolonial, and Afrocentric linear progress narratives converged, while unfortunately also consolidating a false notion of normative Blackness within the heterosexual male.

The Middle Passage epistemology is just as important today as it has been since its codification in antiracist discourses in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century, because new racist arguments are constantly being invented based on old and long-disproven beliefs. Its distorting representation, one in which the majority of Black collectives (women, children, LGBTTQ Blacks, and Blacks outside the United States or the Caribbean) are not represented the majority of the time, has been tended to and amended, leading to partial inclusion. Absolutely crucial and critically acclaimed work has been accomplished by a broad variety of scholars of Black and African Diaspora queer, feminist, Lusophone, Hispanophone, European, and Asian studies. Yet despite the value of these contributions, they rarely find their way into most mainstream narratives that are based on the Middle Passage epistemology. From high school history textbooks and college courses, television programs and hip-hop lyrics, to websites for students and advanced scholars, histories of the Middle Passage tend to include only a fraction of the contributions, viewpoints, and struggles faced by Black women, Black queers, and Blacks from outside the United States (and only sometimes from the Anglophone Caribbean). Because these millions in fact make up the overwhelming majority of Black identities who understand themselves as possessing Middle Passage origins, this distortion should give us pause.

However, given the vast proliferation of Black identities in the United States alone (differing by gender and sexual identification, national origin, religious affiliation, etc.), one cannot hope to encompass all of them within a linear timeline. As noted before, some bodies find their marginalizations erased or even justified, while others trace an immediate or even slightly more removed ancestry through other geographical pathways—from Africa to Europe or Asia or the Middle East, or from Africa to the Caribbean, or from Africa to South and Central America—before arriving in

the United States. To represent them all, we must separate all these linear progress narratives from one another, perhaps allowing them to intersect when and where all groups can agree that the experience of progress or setback is equally shared. Indeed, this is what a comprehensive graphing of all these progress narratives might look like. Visually, it is enticing, but when fleshed out into narratives, it is a nightmare—more than a triptych, an all-encompassing narrative of our “master graph” would interrupt any linear flow, challenged by the attempt to unite the multiplicity of narratives through common themes.

As an instructive case in point, I recall the late eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century Jamaican Creole entrepreneur and Crimean War “doctress” Mary Seacole, who at least in our present understanding stands alone in her narrative, yet in her celebrity and uniqueness always begs further study and engagement. As told in her autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, Seacole was born to a Scottish father and “Creole” mother. She inherited their inn and later married a white English sea captain. Once widowed, Seacole took her (self-proclaimed) formidable talents in both enterprise and medicine to first run boarding houses in Central America and then tend to wounded British soldiers on the battlefields of the Crimea.

Seacole barely intersects with slavery except as an outraged observer. Rather than devote her life to the cause of abolition as a Middle Passage Black (as so laudably undertaken in Olaudah Equiano’s, Mary Prince’s, and Frederick Douglass’s narratives, to name just a few), she revels in her devoted service to her “sons” of the British army—although the primary reason for writing *Wonderful Adventures* was to exact donations from a patriotic British public to escape penury. The titles of these autobiographies themselves indicate the dominant spacetimes each author uses: Equiano and Douglass with “narrative,” Prince with “history,” and Seacole with “adventures”—the latter suggesting that the textual structure will foreground a series of moments rather than a chronology along which events are causes or effects of one another.

The immediate clarity of the linear progress narrative allows individuals to grasp a series of events in a cohesive fashion, something that Epiphenomenal narratives do not facilitate. In an Epiphenomenal narrative, they must be taken together, but in order to take them together, it is crucial to identify the three properties of linear progress narratives that limit or “stall” more inclusive interpellations of the collective and of events involved.

The first limit on linear progress narratives is that of origins, which, under scrutiny, can never be absolute, because the causal antecedents of an event or an era can always be traced just a bit further back—indeed, it is often the goal of the ambitious historian or archaeologist to subvert established origins—to find an even earlier example of Black European writing, evidence of even earlier Mayan settlements, and so forth. On a linear timeline, origins also hold pride of place, which becomes problematic because they define the entire timeline—meaning that each event on the timeline must reflect the thematic of the origin. A (progress) history of medicine does not continually note that we have failed to cure the common cold and at times have misdiagnosed both the cause and the cure of various illnesses. While this provides what is likely a necessary clarity, it also helps inhibit radical revisions: those realizations and breakthroughs that cannot be incorporated because they threaten the entire premise of the timeline—its origin.

The second limit, also noted before, is that linear narratives must use hierarchical or vertical means of representation. Histories of collectives can therefore track the progress of only the “leaders” of the collective—and in the majority of Western collective histories, these are men. While women and queers might achieve marginal mention, their achievements and contributions are erased, thus perpetuating the false belief that men did indeed dominate the intellectual, cultural, political, and economic contributions of that collective’s timeline. Detailed histories of scientific discoveries, for example, often point out that the person credited with the invention in popular or dominant historical narratives was not the only one—or perhaps even the first—to deserve fame and credit. This means that many if not most histories of collectives are woefully distorted—yet including “the rest” of the collective would destroy the clarity of the timeline.

Inclusion might also contradict the origin at some point—while the timeline might celebrate the political independence of its property-owning male members as “Independence Day,” the socioeconomic minority (likely the numerical majority) would reject or counter the marking of this day with their own arch note about their own status at the time of this “independence.” Because the origin of this timeline inaugurates a progress history of the collective *as a whole*, the options are untenable: only one group can represent the collective. This does not mean that achievements by women and queers cannot be noted, just that such histories cannot

include any events that point to the failure of the history to do what it claims: trace the shared progress of an entire collective.

The third limit to linear progress narratives involves agency, but this pertains only to collectives that originate as an *effect* of others' actions—such as the Middle Passage epistemology's direct reference to the white European and U.S. slave ships that transported millions away from their homes and families. The Middle Passage epistemology has a complicated origin because its theme is not only progress but progress *against* anti-Black racism. Each event on this progress narrative therefore always refers, explicitly or implicitly, to triumph over white racist obstacles, tying Black agency to white racist actions. In other words, Black actions are always *reactions*, making Black agency highly contingent and ambiguous rather than a celebrated given.

To return briefly to Seacole, if one reads her through the Middle Passage epistemology alone, she is almost “ungraphable,” because she does not intersect with the struggle that defines its original thematic, nor does she meet or otherwise comment on the personages and events that define it. Yet if we add Epiphenomenal time, Seacole actually connects the Atlantic, from her birthplace in Jamaica to her time in Panama to her eventual home in England—and beyond (the Crimea). She does so, Epiphenomenal time reveals, by virtue of her status as free, widowed, the inheritor of property, and the recipient of an informal education that nonetheless launched her into a successful career as publican and “doctress.” Seacole's text is also an Anglophone text that connects the Hispanophone Diaspora to the dominant Atlantic narrative, however briefly, by noting work on the Panama Canal (an enormous source of jobs for Black Caribbean men) and the transport of slaves through South America as well as the commerce between U.S. slave traders and their even more southern counterparts.

While the Middle Passage epistemology uses a linear spacetime, there are scholarly narratives—both emerging and established—that gesture to the need for an alternative spacetime. One such narrative, from Annette Henry, offers a nicely dialogic place to start, because it not only explicitly invokes the need for adopting at least a complication of a single linear spacetime for interpellated Blackness in the United States but also focuses on women, invokes earlier examples of established Middle Passage narratives, and also uses the term *Middle Passage Epistemology* (which, as noted in the introduction, explains my use of the small *e*).

The original use of the term occurred in an article by Henry that makes a powerful call to fellow scholars and educators to consider more seriously adopting lay epistemologies of the Middle Passage that are taught in households by Black parents and guardians to their children. Forced to look on the bright side of coming in second, Henry's definition of *Middle Passage Epistemology* explicitly expresses what many scholarly works only imply. For Henry, this epistemology is very much an informal, quotidian means of negotiation between African American identity and the often passive racism that is taught to all schoolchildren in U.S. schools, both public and private.

In her 2006 article "‘There’s Saltwater in Our Blood’: The ‘Middle Passage’ Epistemology of Two Black Mothers Regarding the Spiritual Education of Their Daughters," Henry, a professor of education, documents the process by which two "Black women educators" seek to offset the effects of a public education through "spiritual practices [that] suggest ambidextrous epistemological terrain."¹⁴ Henry elaborates:

As I continue to extend Black women teachers' standpoints here through these educator-mothers' narratives, I want to suggest that the quest for a holistic and spiritual education for their daughters situates their "both/and" practices in a conceptual Middle Passage or, as [Homi] Bhabha (1994) has theorized, in the "spaces in-between" a "both/and" practice is a familiar concept for those in the margins, a hybrid perspective resulting from lives lived at the intersections of two cultures. Scholars across disciplines have challenged the "either/or" thinking in Eurocentric, patriarchal thought, as modernist thinking categorizes the world and all therein in static, binary oppositions (e.g., White/Black, man/woman, Standard English/Non-Standard English, Christian/heathen). These scholars have illustrated in varying ways that consciousness and experience can syncretize sometimes contradictory angles of vision. As Paul Gilroy (1993) has suggested: "Striving to be both European and Black requires some specific forms of double consciousness" (p. 1), which he describes as "trying to face (at least) two ways at once" (p. 2). I shall explore the "both/and" spiritual educational practices of Mavis and Samaya as they embraced both a Historical Past and a Contemporary Present.¹⁵

Henry focuses on the need for the Middle Passage epistemology to negotiate or counteract the effects of living as a Black woman or girl in a majority white Western nation-state. This is a preoccupation, she notes, that one can trace back over a century to Du Bois. In Henry's experience as an educator, this timeline is always in some ways doubled, exactly like Du Boisian double-consciousness, in which Black progress is often impeded or even driven back by encounters with an antiprogressive white racism. Moments of stasis and reversal as well as progress occur, depending on the ferocity of the white assault and the depth of Black defiance. Although the actual functioning of the syncretic model remains unnamed here, one can note that *The Souls of Black Folk* does indeed use *moments* of encounter—that is, the shared spacetimes of an Epiphenomenal frame—to analyze Black progress and its enemy in racism.¹⁶

Henry's invocation of a "historical past and contemporary present" (being and becoming) also intersects with the claims made here in *Physics of Blackness* that one must use two spacetimes to accurately denote the full multiplicity of the dimensionalities of Blackness created in that moment. Henry denotes a "Historical Past" through an Africanist and womanist perspective using a linear continuum of space and time in the form of a collective memory: "Womanist and Black feminist theorists have emphasized the importance of intergenerational knowledge passed down from our foremothers. Both women [Mavis and Samaya] drew from their historical and cultural memory in an attempt to create a pedagogy for the children that would allow them to embrace their heritage and participate fully in their African-American communities and in the wider society."¹⁷ Here Henry departs from the use of both linear and Epiphenomenal spacetimes by defining this epistemology through "progress." In this quote, the contemporary present is not a moment unto itself but squarely part of cause and effect: maternal memory is the culmination of all previous eras and will, it is presumed, grow ever more voluminous through successive generations, beginning with Mavis and Samaya. While the passing down of knowledge from generation to generation is cherished by almost all collectivities, it does not operate as smoothly as most discourses describing it would prefer. As historians can attest, not only are we in the contemporary moment ignorant of many past eras, but our understanding even of many "known" historical periods and movements is imperfect and prone to moderate or even radical revision. If we add to this the hard fact that each generation can never be sure if it understands the true intentions

and motivations of its successors or predecessors, the spiritual education Henry describes may or may not be wholly remembered or imbibed by Mavis's or Samaya's daughters. We can at least be sure it will undergo some retranslation as both oral and written histories are wont to do.

This assumption—that progress creates an accumulation of history enjoyed by each contemporary generation—can also be understood as an assumption of the “vertical” over the “horizontal.” Mavis's and Samaya's daughters will most likely absorb a great deal of information and opinions on Blackness, and the most lasting and profound may be absorbed not through their vertical relationships with authority figures (parents, teachers, police, etc.) but through “horizontal” or nonhierarchical peer groups who may or may not interpellate or “read themselves through” the Middle Passage epistemology.

In addition to the problem of cause and effect, “Saltwater” also encounters problems with origins. Mavis and Samaya articulate a specific type of Blackness that resonates among many U.S. Blacks but likely would be interpellated by other members of the African Diaspora, especially Africans, as questionable. Mavis and Samaya both argue that they are not “American” but “African”—yet Africa is not a homogeneous nation; it is a vast continent that incorporates a diverse range of nations and cultures—from Libya to Zimbabwe, the People's Republic of the Congo, Morocco, Nigeria, and Sudan—whose populations, borders, fortunes, and roles in world history have changed continually over the centuries. Many Black Africans would balk at this claim and react as perhaps any member of a collective would when listening to or hearing an “outsider” (someone who is unfamiliar with the language, history, cultural practices, or other epistemologies of the collective in question) claim to be a member, as if membership need only be spoken, not achieved.

Within linear spacetime, their claim to this identity is completely logical: they are the direct linear descendants of Africans and of course are defined by that African origin, as linear time requires. Yet ancestral or family trees are the result of heavy pruning—some of it deliberate, some unknowingly committed—so an accurate mapping of any one person's ancestry rapidly becomes a tangled bush. Chances are great that Mavis and Samaya would also find themselves linked to white Europeans, but perhaps also to American Indians, Central and South Americans, early Chinese settlers, Eastern Europeans, Japanese, Vietnamese, and so forth. Through this valence, the role of white racism in the Middle Passage

epistemology becomes deeply problematic, as Mavis and Samaya may find they are also the descendants of white slave owners, thus entangling white racist epistemologies with Black progressive ones in troubling ways.

“Saltwater” offers no simple argument, but its focus is not on spacetime interpellations, so its call for a syncretic understanding of the Middle Passage epistemology must be pursued through the texts it cites as inspiration: W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Souls*, Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*, and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. In other words, where do these texts offer moments of interpellation for Mavis, Samaya, and their daughters—and where (and why) do they encounter limits? Du Bois begins with all the requisites of the linear progress narrative—a fixed origin, a linear space-time continuum in the form of collective memory, and a drive for progress achieved through cause and effect. It is also the most famous evocation of the “two-ness” that Henry’s article commends for introducing a means of expressing the otherwise contradictory epistemologies that inform the Black subject in the West: “In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being spit upon by his fellow, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”¹⁸ Here the origin of the “Negro American” is a merging, with Africa fused to the landscape of “America,” creating a new identity that nonetheless seeks to preserve the two “older selves.” Unlike traditional Middle Passage narratives that directly trace the African American from Africa to the United States—as we see in “Saltwater”—Du Bois instead envisions Blackness in the United States as a merging of two strands. This might well be Henry’s “both/and.”

Outside the notion of a “Negro American” that is both doubled and merged with two other progress narratives, visual clarity ends there, and the creative rhetoric that is then used confounds and intrigues. In his writing, Du Bois notes a birthplace in America for this body with “two souls” (“an American, a Negro”), but Africa arrives as a verb (“to Africanize”), a set of practices that could be deployed to change America—reinterpellate Americanness, so to speak, through an alternative epistemology. Because the text states that the “American Negro” would be the agent of this change, Du Bois’s rhetoric imagines not a distant homeland but a power to reinterpret and change one’s home space.

Spacetime works well as a common denominator here, because it meets Du Bois's dizzying range of descriptions and expressions. Rather than attempt to negotiate the odd gaps that the American Negro occupied in the dominant spacetime of the white U.S. imagination—as an Other from within—this first part of *Souls* produces an identity that is the product of action, agency, and choice, in which identities are verbs and abilities rather than static locations. Blackness is agential here, because it can reinterpellate (a white-controlled) America by “Africanizing” it. At first glance, it seems as if the paragraph finally settles on a biological concept of Blackness (“Negro blood”), but the actions of the blood (“has a message for the world”) strongly suggests blood as a synecdoche for the “Negro American,” collective because it is difficult to understand “blood” communicating a message when deprived of the rest of the body. Thus even in the blood lurks an agency committed to this epistemology's drive for progress.

The activity assigned to Blackness appears to be purloined directly from the white Western notion of the linear progress narrative as first imagined by Newton and then manifesting at various moments in Enlightenment philosophy as well as proslavery and procolonial Western discourses. Time, like Blackness, moves forward *naturally*, the mechanism that unites the universe. Racism or racist whiteness, of course, attempts to reverse this natural progress and thus is naturally antiprogressive.

This critique of Western epistemologies (beginning first with Du Bois's anecdote of being accosted in the street by boorish white Americans who even in their sympathy cannot help but misunderstand racism as a “Negro problem”) certainly aligns with the goals of the Middle Passage epistemology as Mavis's and Samaya's respective offspring are taught to imagine and deploy them. Simple logic dictates that the anti-Black racist discourses they encounter in the United States betray the goals of their own progress, while resistance to racism, including alternative education, moves the Black collective forward.

Yet excluding women from this undeniably linear and progressive trajectory of equality-seeking (or simply being able to open and walk through the “doors of Opportunity”) in this first section of *Souls* (the pronouns are all insistently male, in line with the dominant discourses of the time) creates an obstacle, however small, for the two girls if they are to read themselves as *these* “Negro Americans” bravely pushing forward for progress. As Hazel Carby's brilliant critique of *Souls* in her book *Race Men* argues, it is difficult for Black women to read themselves into *Souls's*

Negro American drive for progress. Black women are not excluded from the text or the Middle Passage narrative—they are memorably present, just not as agents of progress; they are victims of racism whom the Middle Passage Black man is sworn to try to rescue or protect. Carby points out that *Souls* does mention African American women, but not in the same agential capacity Du Bois grants to educated “Negro American” men: “Although [Du Bois] declares that he intends to limit his striving ‘in so far as that strife is incompatible with others of my brothers and sisters making their lives similar,’ beneath the surface of this apparent sacrifice of individual desire to become an intellectual and a race leader is a conceptual framework that is gender-specific; not only does it apply exclusively to men, but it encompasses only those men who enact narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity.”¹⁹ If Mavis, Samaya, and their daughters could access traditional Middle Passage narratives today that were free of these masculine assumptions surrounding the cause and effect of Middle Passage progress—resistance, challenge, and combat—this old-fashioned logic might be of little note. Yet our iconic figures of resistance, challenge, and combat are overwhelmingly male: Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Martin Delany, Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Walter White, A. Philip Randolph, and so forth. Our iconic female figures are celebrated for passive, feminine means of resistance that almost seem at first to signify submission rather than subversion: Harriet Jacobs is famous for lying prone in an attic for seven years; Harriet Tubman for traveling by night and also for hiding; Sojourner Truth for insisting that she is, indeed, a woman;²⁰ and Rosa Parks for sitting down and refusing to stand up.

This is the “vertical” logic that dominates our Western narration of human communities almost worldwide: a narrative according to which all communities can be broken down neatly into heteropatriarchal family units, whether nuclear or extended. If a man is not the primary breadwinner or somehow otherwise the head of household, we have a symptom of a troubled family/community. Oddly and ironically, in protest of an entire people’s suffering under racist treatment, *Souls* asks us to see and seek agency in the (heterosexual) male body alone.

This does not mean that *Souls* is unworthy of reading for Mavis and Samaya, but it is to note that they are less likely to thrill in the role of a Du Boisian Black maiden in distress, as in “On the Coming of John” or as sweet, simple Josie. They may instead wish to emulate Alexander Crummel or wonder why Du Bois views the vocational curriculum of Booker

T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute as beneath the dignity of the Talented Tenth but perhaps not that of other Middle Passage Blacks.

The Signifying Monkey is a Middle Passage epistemology par excellence—indeed, outside of *The Black Atlantic* and *Souls*, it is the only one with which scholars outside of Black studies are widely familiar. In the following quote, Gates's arguments contain all three of the fundamental demands for interpellating a collective through a linear progress narrative: it is predicated on a fixed origin (West Africa); an unbroken line of a collective continuum (the practice of “signifying” first through the folktales of the somewhat Ghanaian trickster monkey Esu, then through the creative and artistic productions of contemporary Blackness, which “signify” on racism, whiteness, and so forth); and a progress mechanized by cause and effect because signifying is a performance of resistance:

The Black Africans who survived the dreaded “Middle Passage” from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone. Violently and radically abstracted from their civilizations, these Africans nevertheless carried within them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music (a mnemonic expression for Bantu and Kawa tonal languages), their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance.

Common sense, in retrospect, argues that these retained elements of culture should have survived, that their complete annihilation would have been far more remarkable than their preservation. The African, after all, was a traveler, albeit an abrupt, ironic traveler through space and time.²¹

While Gates's introduction states that “*The Signifying Monkey* explores the relation of the Black vernacular tradition to the Afro-American literary tradition,” the temporal-geographical scope cited here is the entire Middle Passage from West Africa to all the Americas. Gates undergirds this vast span with a doubling notion that recalls Du Bois's invocation of the Negro American ability to “Africanize” America, albeit a bit more complexly. Whereas for Du Bois the Negro American is a merger of the African and America, here Middle Passage Blacks are the survivors who carry their ancestors with them—or rather, their ancestral epistemologies and practices.

This also dovetails neatly with Mavis's and Samaya's interpellations through the Middle Passage epistemology: as per Gates, they may reject my own critique that they are not in fact "African" and point to a practice with which they are likely familiar—signifying, or "reading," as the colloquial term goes. Gates draws on the famous West African tales of the trickster monkey and links this tendency to create ambivalent meaning in both minority creative discourses and quotidian practices.

However, in such a quotidian practice, they may find themselves, as they do with Du Bois, sidelined by their gender again through the oppressive logic of vertical relationships. In this example of how Black communities perform their identities, women become objects while male actors take the foreground. Gates draws on poet, novelist, and painter Clarence Major's *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* to identify the "Dirty Dozens" as a performance of signifying, which is defined as "a very elaborate game traditionally played by Black boys, in which the participants insult each other's relatives, especially their mothers. The object of the game is to test emotional strength."²² On the one hand, it is possible to read the reverence for mothers as explaining why the "Dirty Dozens" can be considered a masculine challenge. At the same time, in turning its denigration of mothers into an art form, it will also always read, especially explicitly, as a humiliation of women. Even further, it suggests that one way to achieve masculinity is through the mastery of a specific form of misogynist discourse.

Matters are not helped by *Signifying's* interpellation of U.S. activist and writer Alice Walker's bestseller *The Color Purple*, whose unapologetic indictment of Black male violence against women implicitly echoes the vague worries expressed by Mavis and Samaya about the challenges of womanhood that face their daughters. Gates reads the actions of the central female characters—Celie, Shug, Sofia, and Nettie—as making up a successfully resistant Black feminism through their transformation of the domestic space: "Houses confine in *The Color Purple* . . . but Celie, Nettie, [and] Shug . . . all find a form of freedom in houses in which there are no men. The home that Nettie and Celie inherit will include men, but men respectful of the inherent strength and equality of women."²³ Through a Black feminist interpretation of signifying, Gates nicely interprets Walker's feminism here as one that is constructive and productive—seeking to reject misogynist behaviors rather than men as a whole, a very viable approach for Mavis and Samaya.

Yet exactly which men Gates suggests will or will not be allowed into these spaces appears at odds with Walker's text. Gates quotes from a scene between lovers and allies Celie and Shug, in which Shug states, "The problem is not only 'the old *white* man,' but *all* men."²⁴ While not elaborating on this, *Signifying* does go on to interpret this assertion through Rebecca Cox Jackson's *Gifts of Power*. The last paragraph in the chapter begins and ends with a summary of its argument: "Shug and Celie's conception of God Signifies upon these passages from Jackson. Jackson's 'white man' and Celie's, the speaking interpreter and the silent reader, are identical until Celie, with Shug's help, manages to 'git man off your eyeball'. . . . Walker's text points to a bold new model for a self-defined or internally defined notion of tradition, one Black and female. The first step towards such an end, she tells us, was to eliminate the 'white man' to whom we turn for 'teaching' and the 'giving of understanding.'"²⁵ Here Gates argues that Shug's indictment of not just old *white* men but *all* men, coupled with a plot teeming with misogynist abuse from fathers and other male mates, can be summed up as advocating the elimination of the white man and his epistemologies. Yet he does not explain how this is achieved, so neither Mavis nor Samaya can take away a Black feminist tradition of signifying in the Middle Passage. While the erasure of any identity from an epistemology risks unproductive distortions, to erase white men from the Black feminist epistemology effectively erases a telling and complicated history of negotiating both physical and sexual violence committed through the privileges of white capitalism. All the same, as in Du Bois's text, here they once again will encounter moments of difficulty, such as these, in which the insulting of Black women is blithely passed over and a famous Black feminist narrative of misogynist violence and physical abuse in Black households is interpreted to bypass its very explicit critique.²⁶

Engaging with Paul Gilroy's introduction to *The Black Atlantic* offers an inclusivity that Du Bois and Gates do not. Here, Middle Passage Blackness is read as coming into being at the moment of Western modernity, a defining experience that can encompass those classmates of Mavis's and Samaya's respective offspring who have come into the West through means other than U.S.-based Atlantic slavery. Although they may find themselves as actors in Gates's articulation of Middle Passage epistemology, it is unclear whether Mavis, Samaya, or their daughters can interpellate themselves as agential subjects, because modernity is first something acted

on them due to their ancestors' forced removal to the New World. Their negotiations with modernity are not so much voluntary as forced.

Mavis, Samaya, and their daughters will not find themselves theorized at great length in *The Black Atlantic*, nor will their classmates find many explicit references to themselves, as critics such as Simon Gikandi, Natasha Barnes, and Laura Chrisman have observed.²⁷ Yet adopting Gilroy's focus on space and time to read the Black subject in the Atlantic offers marvelous possibilities. In his first chapter, he elaborates on the "routes and roots" through which Black collectives have literally and figuratively encountered the West:

I have settled on the image of the ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons that I hope will become clearer below. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.²⁸

When cast against the linear graphing through which *Signifying* organizes itself, here we are almost given a whirlpool: a notion of motion through water, of returning and circulating, a sense of "roots and routes" that effectively links the continent of Africa to the Atlantic (despite the complaints of critics such as Pius Adesanmi).²⁹ Mavis's and Samaya's daughters will have to do more work here, but they are not faces marked by outright expulsion or a troubled interpellation over the course of the linear progress narrative of the Middle Passage epistemologies offered in *Souls* and *Signifying*.

If we use the linear progress narrative to connect the African continent to Middle Passage Blacks today, we run into a logical problem, because our timeline moves through geography *chronologically*, with enslavement taking place at the beginning, or the past, and the march toward freedom moving through the ages toward the far right end of the line or arrow, which also represents the present. Exactly insofar as Gates's engagement with West Africa is with Africa of the sixteenth century and beyond, and as Du Bois, albeit more obliquely, defines Africa as one of the "past selves"

in the beginning of his book, never to mention it again, Africa inadvertently becomes locked in its past—as Dagmawi Woubshet has put it, in “romantic arrest.”³⁰ While this problem will be elaborated on further in the following chapter, here we see a problem that Mavis, Samaya, and their daughters might encounter when attempting to claim “African” identities in dialogue with peers whose parents, or perhaps themselves, were born in an African nation.

Gilroy also proposes, as mentioned in the introduction, a rhizomatic structure for interpellation (e.g., a root-like formation that grows both horizontally and vertically) to counteract the effects of the verticality that is found in some Middle Passage epistemologies: “The first part [of this chapter] addresses some conceptual problems common to English and African-American versions of cultural studies which, I argue, share a nationalistic focus that is antithetical to the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, transnational formation I call the Black Atlantic.”³¹ While he does not define “nationalistic” in this passage, by characterizing it as the antithesis of the “rhizomorphic, fractal” structure of his own formation of Blackness in the West, one could assume that the former has a more hierarchical, straight-up-and-down vertical formation as opposed to a tangle of horizontal and vertical roots. As he explains a few pages later (and particularly emphasizes in a subsequent work, *Against Race*), Western structures of nationalism, whether imagined as Black, white, or any ethnically or racially bound identity, are “tragic” and based on “especially crude and reductive notions of culture that form the substance of racial politics today.”³²

The Black Atlantic’s advocacy of a rhizomorphic structure allows us to pursue this critique of nationalism in a way that opens the text up to explicit links with Black women and queers of the Atlantic world. The nation-state, as Angela Davis (*Women, Race, and Class*), Patricia Hill Collins (“It’s All in the Family”), and Iris Marion Young (“The Logic of Masculinist Protection”) observe, hierarchizes bodies within a largely gendered logic that “feminizes” the working class and racial minorities by attesting to their irresponsibility, lack of rational behavior, lack of emotional control, and tendency to abuse power in chaotic and destructive ways when such misfortune occurs.³³ This would link Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* with a shared interest in Black and white U.S. feminisms, but of course it also intellectually links postcolonial feminist critiques of the British Empire with the status of the subaltern. Once they are in college or the

workforce, Mavis's and Samaya's daughters could use these links to understand their connections to other classmates/colleagues and see how the British Empire has produced them as semiliberated subjects of a former British colony that links their oppression as women in Black and white communities to that of women under the British Empire, slave women in the Atlantic, and colonized peoples across the globe.

Gilroy pursues this question of individual liberty under the state through the theories of Edmund Burke and Raymond Williams before linking them to Black male intellectuals, primarily from the United States (Martin Delany, Alexander Crummel, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright). The rhizome, roots and routes, and circulation of Gilroy's structure manifests most often between white and Black Anglophone men, distorting the true reach of his views and influences. *The Black Atlantic*, after all, established a means of thinking through Black collectivity in a way that *did* put us in more effective dialogue with postcolonial, poststructuralist, and postcolonial studies. Yet by focusing mostly on male speakers from the Anglophone world, Gilroy's rhizome is more of a horizontal stick or a dynamic whirlpool of dialogue that other voices find difficult to enter.

I want to pursue this question of visualizing conceptual structures because conceptualizing an integrated structure for Blackness—and one with agency—is the goal of both *The Black Atlantic* and *Physics of Blackness*—indeed, of most theorizations of Blackness in the African Diaspora. The previous quote explains how Gilroy also seeks out a history of Black agency to curtail the repeated relegation of Blackness in the West to the “elephants’ graveyard” of scholarly consideration.³⁴ In other words, his epistemology of the “Black Atlantic” seeks to correct the marginalization of Blackness in (white) Western epistemologies by moving both horizontally (across peer structures, such as his dialogues between white and Black male intellectuals) and vertically (with the negative influence of the nation-state and its racist, sexist, and classist oppressions).

While *The Black Atlantic* explores and analyzes Blackness through a Middle Passage epistemology, unlike in *Souls* and *Signifying*, the chapter themes do not move chronologically. *The Black Atlantic* begins in the “now,” as a matter of fact, to stage its question, before moving back to revisit the encounter between slavery and modernity, then passing through a history of Black music, before moving back to Du Bois, on to Richard Wright, and then to the role of memory and Atlantic slavery within his epistemology. While the narrative is circulatory and rhizomatic, as promised,

the chapters also interpellate their themes through the intellectual and historical moments located in the Middle Passage epistemology—slave insurrections, musical revolutions, sociopolitical dialogues on freedom—producing the epistemology not as a linear timeline but as moments on that linear timeline that are connected to each other horizontally.

Even in this third, most nuanced and rhizomatic iteration, the Middle Passage epistemology implicitly forecloses anything but a male source of agency, further suggesting that even for Black women and queers, narratives by and about Black men and modernity are the most universal. In *Souls*, Mavis, Samaya, and their daughters find themselves represented sympathetically but without agency; in *Signifying*, they find their African connections validated, but their contemporary instantiations are partially veiled through silences on sexist and misogynist violence and behavior in contemporary Black communities; in *The Black Atlantic*, they find themselves valorized as Black Atlantic agents of Western modernity but without a voice in the actual discussions. Whether vertical, diagonal, or more fully horizontal, the linear spacetime of the Middle Passage epistemology—explicitly stated or implicitly constructed through key moments of horizontal circulation—cannot always incorporate all the dimensions of Blackness it seeks or sometimes even claims to represent.³⁵

It is admittedly strange, but nonetheless useful, to understand this limitation as one having both physical and metaphysical dimensions. An object in four-dimensional spacetime can be shown in only four dimensions, but the Blackness of the Black Atlantic and the African Diaspora has more dimensions than that to represent multiple geographies within multiple temporal frames (i.e., multiple contemporary moments in distinct spaces, and multiple past moments in distinct spaces), multiple personages, outlooks, viewpoints, and so on. The only spatiotemporal moment that can accommodate all these dimensions is the current moment—not the present, so to speak, but the moment of the *now*, in which the present and the future are conflated and as many past and present moments exist as we can currently discuss, actively linked to Blackness.

These problems of exclusion become even worse when a simplistic emphasis is placed on the rather shaky mechanisms that supposedly constitute, drive, and preserve linear spacetime as our primary mode for understanding space and time. *Souls*, *Signifying*, and *Black Atlantic* are all works of deep erudition that offer notions of origin, a linear spatiotemporal continuum, and cause and effect that in some moments are inclusive

due to more nuanced theorizations of these three limitations. In these three books that read Blackness through the Middle Passage epistemology, origins are not so much fixed as understood to be meaningfully transitory passages that point to a past and an unfolding future that is always changing, thus deflecting the paradox of origins (that, when fixed, preclude the existence of earlier and thus truer origins). *Souls* and *Signifying* understand that spatiotemporal continuum that squarely links each moment to its antecedent and successor as a practice of multivalent expression that is passed down through the manifestation of performance from generation to generation. *The Black Atlantic* demurs on the question of such an established practice and instead suggests that the phenomenology of being Black in the West is what links and establishes us—that shared experience of negotiating modernity as an ostensible Other. *The Black Atlantic* also demurs on the notion of cause and effect; *Souls* embraces it (small wonder, given its dialectical logic),³⁶ but *Signifying* is the most adamant about its clear functioning, scoffing at those who dare to question its existence (“Common sense, in retrospect, argues that these retained elements of culture should have survived, that their complete annihilation would have been far more remarkable than their preservation”³⁷).

Yet even as nuanced and thoughtful as these discourses are in their exploration of Middle Passage epistemology, there are many others, equally or more influential in their audience share, which make strident claims and assumptions whose illogic is rarely challenged. In the mass media arena, both thoughtful and thoughtless notions of Blackness are manifested together in “real time.” Taking an example from mass media here will, however imperfectly, reflect the views of and exchanges between the capitalist class and the working poor, journalists, specialists, and laypersons—however asymmetrically and imperfectly. In these places we also can see Blackness read through the Middle Passage epistemology, and the view is not a little terrifying, recalling Gilroy’s admonitions against race-based notions of collectivity in *Against Race*. After all, when we consider Mavis’s and Samaya’s encounters with discourses on Blackness, we see that not only will they inevitably encounter media discourses but those media discourses may in fact be the primary way in which they engage with discussions on Blackness and through which they are most often inspired to reflect on, define, and speak about Blackness.

In this respect, Mavis and Samaya most likely heard about and discussed, many times over, the candidacy, first election, and presidency

of Barack Obama. Debra J. Dickerson's January 22, 2007, article "Colorblind" from Salon.com, which I mentioned in the introduction, casts into stark relief the extremes of the Middle Passage epistemology that have entered public discourse, beginning with the arresting lead, "Barack Obama would be the great Black hope in the next presidential race—if he were actually Black." In a tone that is both caustic and canny, Dickerson begins by noting all the coverage that U.S. senator and 2008 presidential hopeful Barack Obama had been receiving since his speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention (further enhanced by his landslide election to the U.S. Senate in 2006) before going on to comment that "my hopes for Obama are as high as anyone else's [but] I'm of the camp that he isn't quite soup yet." Dickerson then moves on to argue that Obama's ancestry necessarily makes him a new and different candidate from past and present African American power brokers on the political scene (i.e., Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton), not only regarding his public profile, but also in the nitty-gritty arena of fund-raising:

Just as the Negro-friendly Bill Clinton had to gamble on retaining that base while reassuring whites he knew how to keep Blacks in line, so Obama has to reassure Blacks he is unafraid to tell whites things that whites decidedly do not want to hear. Never having been "Black for a living" with protest politics or any form of racial oppositionality, he'll need to assure the Black powers that be that he won't dis the politics of Blackness (and, hence, them), however much he might keep it mute. . . . Homie has some rings to kiss and a kente-cloth pocket square to buy.³⁸

Dickerson begins the next paragraph by aligning Obama with a white American and then delineating him relative to other prominent Black American political power brokers through his lack of political activism, which allows for an implicit condemnation of his political "bona fides" and, more crucially, also suggests that Obama, although a Democrat, may in fact adhere to a conservative vision in which Black people are the problem rather than anti-Black racism.

Dickerson's characterization of this elitism is shared one year later by Professor Ron Walters at the University of Maryland. In "Barack Obama and the Politics of Blackness," Walters defines those questioning Obama's Blackness as "Black nationalist," such as the journalist Stanley Crouch,

who argues that despite Obama's claims in *Dreams from My Father* that he made common cause with African Americans, his lack of "plantation slave ancestry" excludes him from the collective.³⁹ By contrast, Walters argues that Obama's Blackness should not be questioned purely through "cultural markers," first stating that recent debates on affirmative action admissions for "non-Middle Passage Blacks" to U.S. colleges and universities runs against the intent of the original legislation, which was to secure proportionate representation of "Americans of African descent." Obama's need to capture the center of the electorate, Walters opines, requires that Obama not speak from an *explicitly* Black point of view. Applying a more horizontal interpellation of the "Black community," he reasons that what should matter most for African Americans is not someone's skin color or ethnic origin but that person's politics—in other words, that she or he will champion platforms that benefit the Black community, even if not in name. Antipoverty programs, reproductive rights for women, equal treatment under the justice system, raising the minimum wage—these are issues that impact Blacks but not only them: they are also national issues. On these issues, Walters sums up, "The record shows that beyond his physiognomy, Obama has established a credible record of both assimilation into the Black community and political representation, which stands as a credible claim for Black political support. However, his 'Blackness' is weakened by his tendency to exercise considerable caution with respect to strong support of symbols and issues of Blackness."⁴⁰ By framing Obama's Blackness wholly within the terms of appealing to a majority of the U.S. Black electorate, defining the "strong assets" of his "cultural presentation" as "of African descent, he married a Black woman, he belongs to a Black church, and he lives in a racially integrated community," Walters offers a new avenue into Middle Passage Blackness, albeit one that sits on a sliding scale (at least in the political arena), in which one's Blackness is "weakened," like Obama's, by failing to engage with certain issues. While suggesting that he views Black nationalists such as Stanley Crouch as too partisan, he does in fact adopt the view of Pan-Africanists and Black nationalists that Black people share a common cause that is not limited to, but is wholly inclusive of, that of the descendants of the Atlantic slave trade. Middle Passage membership is thus expanded, but the requisite ideology, or political perspective, becomes all the more important. In short, both Walters and Dickerson vet Obama's imagined application for membership through what they understand as an authentically "Black" notion of socioeconomic and political progress.

Who decides these politics? Walters admits that his list of Obama's political views and actions are defined as tenets of the liberal platform even though he argues that Obama is speaking from the center. Yet even within the confines of political identity, collapsing U.S. liberal platforms with "Black" political platforms means that conservative Blacks are not "Black." Because Walters notes the importance (but argues against the centrality) of family ties in asserting one's membership in the Black collective, one would suppose that Clarence Thomas would be Black by ancestry and family ties (excluding marriage, it seems) but not by politics. The notion that some bodies are able to claim a "stronger" Blackness over others is troubling even if limited to the political sphere, not least because Walters identifies that sphere as not specifically Black. Political Blackness thus becomes a subset of the U.S. centrist left wing. Even further, African Americans of more recent African descent are expected to make common cause with these platforms in order to "strengthen" their (political) Blackness.

Despite his disagreement, then, Walters's analysis largely dovetails with Dickerson's. By framing the notion of "Blackness" within a socio-political argument, specifically the continuing protest and denunciation of institutional racism practiced by members of the Congressional Black Caucus, Dickerson is specifically separating an "illegitimate Blackness" symbolized by "Ebonics" and Kente cloth from an "authentic Blackness" constituted by a social and political awareness of institutional racism. Here, the Middle Passage epistemology is used to exclude those who seek to read themselves through it by intersecting at certain key moments. Here is an extended version of the rather loaded Dickerson quote I included in the introduction:

"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 in politics. At a minimum, it can't be assumed that a Nigerian cabdriver and a third-generation Harlemiter 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 Harlemiter, for better or worse, is politically and culturally Black, as we use the term.

We know a great deal about Black people. We know next to nothing about immigrants of African descent (woe be unto Blacks when the latter groups find their voice and start saying all kinds of things we don't want said). That rank-and-file Black voters might not bother to make this distinction as long as Obama acts Black and does us proud makes them no less complicit in this shell game we're playing because everybody wins. (For all the hoopla over Obama, though, most Blacks still support Sen. Clinton, with her long relationships in the community and the spillover from President Clinton's wide popularity.)⁴¹

While Dickerson and Walters cohere with Gilroy in reading Blackness as the moment of negotiation with the West informed by the Middle Passage epistemology, they strike out in a wholly different direction by insisting on the existence, as in *Signifying*, of an enduring collective memory of preserved and accumulating experiences caused by the effects of slavery and the attendant forms of racist harm and exclusion that followed in Western nation-states.

Before looking more closely at this assertion of a linear collective memory as the product of cause and effect, there are two other distinctions that separate Dickerson (and Walters, but only somewhat) from the Middle Passage epistemologies found in *Souls*, *Signifying*, and *Black Atlantic*. The first distinction depends on understanding Blackness as geographically diverse, even when located within a shared moment in the United States. Rejecting intersection with other Black communities who share similar moments (Dickerson argues this explicitly by insisting that U.S. Blacks of U.S. Middle Passage ancestry experience racism differently from the "Nigerian cab driver") ahistorically occludes the vast majority of Blacks in the African Diaspora who possess ancestries that came into the West. This narrow expression of Blackness will, of course, come into immediate conflict with the bevy of Black Americans, African Americans, who are quite literally from both the United States and the Americas or Africa. Yet within the perverse logic of a linear spacetime, it must be pointed out that Dickerson is purely Newtonian in her assumptions—that any Black collective that moves generationally through the Middle Passage timeline is the cumulative product of a series of linear causes and effects (enslavement, Emancipation, Jim Crow, the world wars, Civil Rights, Black Power, the rejuvenation of white conservatism in the nation-state, etc.). As such, such

a collective is a specific product of a linear set of generational experiences that do not intersect with those of other collectives who may share many of the same historical moments—and here at least seventy million Black Brazilians should be of note.⁴² Walters allows for intersection through marriage and the production of children (a vertical alignment) but does not elaborate as to whether there are other ways than marrying and reproducing to intersect with the Middle Passage epistemology.

Both Dickerson and Walters fudge on the second concern—Black agency, something foregrounded in the three academic texts (albeit imperfectly so). For Dickerson, suffering is the effect of the causes of the Middle Passage epistemology, where Blackness is squarely located in slavery and racism, and lack of agency is what marks the Black subject. For Walters, suffering is also the basis for Middle Passage consciousness, but his allowance for intersection and understanding of suffering and his horizontal reading of the Black community open up the possibility of Epiphenomenal time and therefore agency. By forging elective affinities with other subaltern groups (rather than wholly focusing vertically on the white oppressor) and sharing identification of common obstacles (if not the same one), Blackness becomes an identity that faces obstacles, but Blackness itself is not an obstacle. This is only a possibility, however, as Walters's focus, like Dickerson's, is on Blackness as a subaltern status.

Agency bedevils the Middle Passage epistemology because, unlike the white Western epistemology of its history of civilization, it begins with Blackness as an object of white oppression (or Black African slave traders and leaders of African slave-trading nations). On a linear progress narrative driven by cause and effect (based on Newton's three laws of motion and gravity), to enter as an object without motion means that one's path has always already been determined by another moving object—or as philosophy would term it, one who creates changes, an agent. Indeed, it is worth considering whether scholars such as Mary Lefkowitz refute the researched claims of Egyptian and Levantine influences on ancient Greece and other parts of Europe by Martin Bernal and Ivan Van Sertima, because they enable a reading of whiteness that is always indebted to Blackness, always "colored" by it, pun intended.⁴³

This analysis of the linear progress narrative that structures the Middle Passage epistemology concludes by returning to a media discourse that represents the views of two academics, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and celebrated legal scholar Lani Guinier, to show how Dickerson's exclusions are

shared in other moments when Blackness is read through a strictly linear Middle Passage epistemology. In the introduction to a June 24, 2004, *New York Times* interview with Gates and Guinier, both faculty at Harvard University, the interviewer notes,

While about 8 percent, or about 530, of Harvard's undergraduates were Black, Lani Guinier, a Harvard law professor, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., the chairman of Harvard's African and African-American studies department, pointed out that the majority of them—perhaps as many as two-thirds—were West Indian and African immigrants or their children, or to a lesser extent, children of biracial couples.⁴⁴

They said that only about a third of the students were from families in which all four grandparents were born in this country, descendants of slaves. Many argue that it was students like these, disadvantaged by the legacy of Jim Crow laws, segregation and decades of racism, poverty and inferior schools, who were intended as principal beneficiaries of affirmative action in university admissions.

What concerned the two professors, they said, was that in the high-stakes world of admissions to the most selective colleges—and with it, entry into the country's inner circles of power, wealth and influence—African-American students whose families have been in America for generations were being left behind.

"I just want people to be honest enough to talk about it," Professor Gates, the Yale-educated son of a West Virginia paper-mill worker, said recently, reiterating the questions he has been raising since the Black alumni weekend last fall. "What are the implications of this?"

Both Professor Gates and Professor Guinier emphasize that this is not about excluding immigrants, whom sociologists describe as a highly motivated, self-selected group. Blacks, who make up 13 percent of the United States population, are still underrepresented at Harvard and other selective colleges, they said.⁴⁵

While admittedly Dickerson's ultimate agenda is to attract and increase her readership, Gates and Guinier nonetheless share a common goal with her in that both seek to distinguish "Middle Passage" Black Americans

from “other” Black Americans. Whereas Dickerson jumps from argument to argument, never quite resting on any one argument long enough to tip her hand toward either pure mockery or sober assertion,⁴⁶ the Harvard professors are quite serious—and at pains to avoid being viewed as neosegregationists. So while Walters vacillates between a liberal political platform and family ties, and Dickerson plays with ancestry, history, activism, and white liberal guilt, Gates and Guinier establish a relatively constant delineation between those Black Americans for whom “all four grandparents were born in [the United States], the descendants of slaves” and “West Indian and African immigrants or their children [and] children of biracial couples.”⁴⁷

Unlike Dickerson, Gates and Guinier are careful in their enunciations, yet their determinant seems, at first glance, even more provocative than Dickerson’s. At once a fanciful inversion (and therefore, inevitably, a reiteration) of the One Drop Rule (whereby slaves possessing at least 1/16 “Negro blood” were deemed Black and thus likely candidates for enslavement or at least racist discrimination) and similarly reminiscent of the Nazi mathematics that informed their Nuremberg Laws (in which the equation of a contemporary “Jew” was broken down into grandparent-components),⁴⁸ their definitions recall historical eras in which minority groups were solemnly separated from one another to determine anything from punishment to enslavement to extermination.

What supplies the troubling cast to their formulations is, ironically, the desire for accuracy—even Walters’s desire to include Obama requires establishing boundaries to which there are alarming exceptions. Walters’s stipulation of blood ties to African Americans, even according to its own logic, recalls a false but forceful discourse that binds all African Americans to biology. “The Politics of Blackness” somewhat circumvents this by adding cultural interaction, yet that still leaves out Black U.S. citizens who are recently arrived from Africa or other parts of the Diaspora. Walters includes Black immigrants to refute Dickerson’s exclusivity, yet his conclusive definition leaves out those who are not meaningfully linked to “Middle Passage” Black communities. There is a deeply frustrating truth here: any fixed stipulation for membership, whether national, biological, cultural, political, social, or otherwise, initiates a simplistic framework with essentialist consequences.

Dickerson’s desire to prevent her terms from backfiring on her argument (such as avoiding the term *African American*) allows her to skirt

the larger issue of attempting to design generic categories that can be imposed on individual personalities and histories. After all, this is what makes “Blackness” so very different from “whiteness” in the United States (and, in certain contexts, also from other Anglophone nations such as Australia, England, Jamaica, and New Zealand), because the former spreads a much wider net than the latter thanks to the One Drop Rule. To that end, at least in the Anglophone world, Black communities have always boasted a wealth of ancestries that whiteness, by its own rules, simply cannot tolerate—in all meanings of the word.⁴⁹

Gates and Guinier’s evocation of grandparents is a telling reflection on this—they cannot draw a broad distinguishing line between “pure” African ancestry and “mixed” race Blacks because the overwhelming majority of, if not all, peoples of African descent in the United States and Caribbean have non-African ancestors.⁵⁰ So in denoting “four Black grandparents” as their minimum standard to be categorized as “Black” (the same term Dickerson uses, we should note), the odd aspect to this equation is that those grandparents could in fact all be mixed—and probably all are to one extent or another (at the very least, it is doubtful that more than one could honestly claim “pure” African ancestry).⁵¹ As in Dickerson’s piece, time plays a key role here: if the grandparent in question, say, possesses three Black grandparents of his or her own, then according to Gates and Guinier, they are Black now, but their grandchild of the exact same “grandparent-component” is *not* Black.⁵² Even more intriguing, under these Gates-Guinier categories Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Sasha and Malia Obama today would be classified as “not Black,” as all had one or more white grandparents.

This contestation, however, is too superficial, because the temporal qualification Gates and Guinier bring to bear is not unplanned. Whereas Dickerson invokes “Middle Passage Blackness” by discussing a particular mind-set that marks those who possess this ancestry, Gates and Guinier invoke a historiography of Blackness—that is, what it meant to be Black in earlier eras as opposed to today. Under this logic, an African American who today we would call “biracial” would not on this basis have been exempted in the antebellum South from the same kinds of treatment that befell other Blacks.⁵³ There is a problem, however: a biracial Black American is not immune from racist treatment today and certainly can’t be assumed not to have been “disadvantaged by the legacy of Jim Crow laws, segregation and decades of poverty and inferior schools”—that is,

biracial Black Americans should be included among those whom Gates and Guinier argue are meant to be the “principal beneficiaries of affirmative action in university admissions.” This glaring fact may explain the qualification the Harvard professors add to this category (“to a lesser extent”), but it does not wholly erase its problematic assumption: that by having a white parent (the term *biracial* is often incorrectly limited to Americans with one white and one Black parent), a Black American is no longer Black because he or she is likely to have had led a life free from racist treatment and at the very least remains unmarked by the history “Middle Passage Blackness” narrates (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, institutionalized racism).

Indeed, what is intriguing here is the obvious elision Gates and Guinier are making: in attempting to delineate which Blacks are most likely the victims of socioeconomic discrimination, the category of economic power remains absent. As such, they are rewriting a broad and odd history in which “West Indian and African immigrants or their children” endured neither the Middle Passage (in the case of the former) nor colonialism. Yet directly following this categorization, Gates and Guinier qualify it further by redefining their “four Black grandparents” group as “African American students whose families have been in America for generations”—in short, nonimmigrants, which of course recalls over a century of ugly anti-immigrant rhetoric one usually attaches to white Americans.

The Harvard professors hasten to note that their observations are “not about excluding immigrants”—unfortunately, a surefire way to convince your skeptical listener or reader that that is indeed what you are seeking to do. At the same time, it would be highly problematic to align Gates and Guinier—both noted for careers rooted in combating racism and seeking to destroy racist barriers—with the anti-immigrant lobby, which often revolves around the same logic of racial Others that the former seek to destroy. As Blacks in America, Gates and Guinier, despite their lofty status, still belong to a minority group that many non-Black Americans believe to be lazy and lacking in intelligence. Indeed, an ugly reminder of this is the *New York Times* reporter’s own phrasing, which tellingly inserts into the discussion the idea that immigrants are described by sociologists as a “highly motivated, self-selected group.” Agency, it seems, is suspect in conservative readings of the Middle Passage epistemology as a progress narrative.

Linear progress narratives are essential, necessary, and useful for reading Blackness as a collective identity in the West: they inspire and make up

the bulk of what we know about Blackness throughout Western history, and they quite often retrieve Black individual and collective identities in the West of which historical discourses previously had no knowledge or had forgotten. At the same time (literally and figuratively), they are best empowered and enabled when read through the Epiphenomenal moment of the now, which, not unlike Gilroy's moments of circulation, his roots and routes, produce Blackness as a negotiation through active dialogue. It is not unlike driving a car (as my dear friend calmly reminded me the second time I ever practiced): you cannot direct the car from the position you occupy; you must imagine a straight line ahead (or a diagonal one for a curve, but straight nonetheless), because by the time you make your speed and direction adjustments, you have already left the place from which you were originally navigating. Our present moment is conflated with the future, a "now" that requires a direction forward even as it must take into account encounters in the now (in our driving metaphor, the pedestrian at the corner who looks as if she is going to run into the street just as we pass, or the annoying tailgater who seems to be accelerating at an alarming rate).⁵⁴

In those moments when Mavis, Samaya, and/or their daughters cannot interpellate themselves through a Middle Passage epistemology, Epiphenomenal time can help. Such a framework can, first, remove the latter from their subaltern status as "children" rather than adults in this progress narrative, which reads children as Subjects in the making and therefore unworthy of extensive study until adulthood is achieved. Rather than daughters, or more specifically Black females whose mothers have not yet taught them the entirety of the Middle Passage epistemology, Mavis's and Samaya's respective offspring can claim full subjecthood, full dimensionality in the "now."

Because they read themselves in the "now" moment, Mavis and Samaya need not worry about countering those who disagree about their identities as Africans. Because the Epiphenomenal structure uses the now to connect with a variety of collectives in various and shared spacetimes, there is no origin but instead a series of intersections. To interpellate oneself through a broad variety of collectives based on the physical, emotional, and intellectual stimuli creating the interpellation in that moment is to be agential: one defines oneself. Ideally, especially under the conditions of the postwar epistemology, in which Black agency is predicated through its interpellation in the "now," Mavis's and Samaya's daughters would be directly quoted;

because we do not have that, we can instead interpellate them as we do the following: as postwar Subjects who necessarily intersect with a variety of identities across the globe (e.g., as young global Internet users).

If we read Mavis, Samaya, and their respective offspring in this moment, they can produce the multifarious aspects of their Blackness—as mothers and young women, as urban dwellers, as two generations, as teachers and students, as denizens of a neighborhood, and so forth. By reading themselves in the “now,” through encounters with their different peer groups, this foursome can interpellate a postwar Blackness that intersects with a broad variety of Western and perhaps even global experiences.

Although this chapter has outlined the three limits of linear space-time and has explored how, where, and why they inhibit more inclusive interpellations of Blackness, there is another aspect to the Middle Passage epistemology that can also produce interpellative limits that has only been touched on here: the act of return. Because the Middle Passage epistemology is often understood as diasporic—that is, containing not just a thematic but some aspect of a physical or spiritual need to return to “origins”—I examine the act of return through a linear progress narrative in chapter 2.