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## Physics of Blackness

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## The Problem of Return in the African Diaspora

Its implied diasporic scope complicates the Middle Passage epistemology, thereby suggesting that the question of returning, whether physically or metaphysically, to the collective's point of origin inevitably arises. Rendered in its most basic form, a linear progress narrative struggles to be diasporic, because the notion of return suggests a reversal of the progressive direction from the narrative's origin to the present day/era. Nondiasporic epistemologies accommodate the idea of return more easily—they chart an (uncritical) march forward through progress, but they do look back. Indeed, the problem of return and the paradoxes it entails attend any linear progress narrative: to ground oneself in an origin means that the collective, at any moment, must always be able to define itself through a direct connection to the etiology that first defines and necessarily frames that collective. In other words, nondiasporic epistemologies may indeed notate themselves as always already moving forward, but there are many, many backward glances and fantasies of return. Within epistemologies of Western civilization, ancient Greece and Rome (not to mention the Enlightenment) are often asserted as origins without, it seems, widespread reflection on this progress narrative that is somehow always looking backward.

In contrast, diasporic theorizing of return in the Middle Passage epistemology tends to be far more self-aware: the past is often engaged ambivalently and understood as having ambiguous effects; progress is often deconstructed (especially white Western claims of progress); origins are often shifted and rendered fluid (between Atlantic slavery and the West African departure from the Door of No Return); and agency and Otherness often haunt textual expression, obliquely or directly. In creative discourse, it is Black speculative fiction that most often takes on these questions and problems of return brought about by a Middle Passage epistemology, sometimes to surprising effect.

These ambivalences, I argue, are the result of the limits of Newtonian spacetime (i.e., that space and time always flow forward in linear fashion).

These limits are highlighted in creative discourses that compare and contrast imagined Black identities in the past, present, and future by featuring scenes and characters that underscore the importance of horizontal *as well as* vertical connections when exploring Blackness through time. The argument is not that the discourses I discuss in this chapter use Epiphenomenal spacetime as a “solution” to the limits they highlight. Instead, this chapter demonstrates that, taken together, these texts reveal how using both linear and Epiphenomenal time to analyze the limits they encounter and explore can provide a more cogent, cohesive, and inclusive analysis of Blackness than the former spacetime alone.

When I speak of vertical connections, I have in mind identity categories that emphasize hierarchy (fathers/sons, leaders/followers), whereas horizontal categories *allow for*, if not always constitute, more equal, or peer, relations (friends, cousins). Unfortunately, hierarchies can also be established in those relationships categorized as “peer”; this is why one can find only structures that allow for, rather than establish, a relationship negotiated between equal identities. As this chapter will show, the vertical assumptions that may accompany uncritical interpellations of Blackness through a linear spacetime are hobbled by limitations and logical paradoxes predetermined by the linear narrative. In addition, I will show how the most successful critiques—those that provide broader and more inclusive readings of Blackness—also emphasize the presence of Epiphenomenal time, a time frame in which return is a matter of not simply backtracking along the progress narrative but recognizing that one is manifesting the past in the present moment.

This chapter begins by showing exactly how and where the idea of Newtonian linear spacetime breaks down and finds itself limited through Newton’s four laws of motion and gravity. It then reveals five influential discourses on return and the Black relationship to the past in Middle Passage discourses. The first analyses come from the first two decades of Black/African Diaspora studies: Hortense Spillers’s 1987 “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Octavia Butler’s 1979 time-traveling novel *Kindred*, and Maryse Condé’s 1983 *Heremakhonon*. This chapter concludes by discussing more recent but also acclaimed discourses in Saidiya Hartman’s 2007 *Lose Your Mother* and Mat Johnson’s 2010 *New York Times* best seller *Pym* to assert that they, too, critique the limits of linear spacetime but also incorporate successful “horizontal” or peer identity relations that in fact dominate their texts and produce diverse, inclusive models for exploring Blackness.

Physicists joke that time travel is in fact possible—we are doing it now—because nanosecond by nanosecond, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, year by year, we are traveling into the future. However, it is the temptation to travel back into the past (the directional assumption on which the joke is premised) that appears impossible—or at least it appears impossible in the real world; “on paper” (or whiteboard, computer screen, etc.) the equations for time and space actually allow time to move both “backward” and “forward.”

Moving “*forward*” is itself a concept that takes a bit of unraveling: what exactly constitutes “forward” on a planet, a spherical solid occupying a space that is largely symmetrical, that itself does not appear to privilege any single direction of movement within that space? Yet many endogamous and exogamous bigotries across the globe assume “Northern” regions, cities, and nations as more civilized—as regions that have advanced further forward in the progress narrative than their “Southern” counterparts, who are “backward,” lazy, bigoted, and so forth. This logic operates in bigoted discourses in the United States, Europe, and Africa (in the latter specifically anti-immigration discourses in North and East African nations such as Morocco and Egypt). Considering organic matter (ourselves, animals, plant life), we of course do observe movement over time: babies, puppies, and bamboo shoots grow “out” and “up” as they grow older. Yet even as such things *do* appear to move “naturally” through time, this movement is not exactly “forward” but is more aptly described as “out” and “up.” Furthermore, science does not help to clarify this phenomenological conundrum—the mathematical notation for time actually allows for time to also move in reverse. As far as physics is concerned, the old man *can* become a baby, the dog *can* become a pup, and so forth, even if we never observe such phenomena, without violating any laws of nature.

This paradox is known as the “arrow of time,” and lay discourses by physicists (such as Sean Carroll, quoted following) profess that physicists are still baffled by exactly what it is:

The arrow of time, then, is a brute fact about our universe. Arguably *the* brute fact about our universe; the fact that things happen in one order and not in the reverse order is deeply ingrained in how we live in the world.

Why is it like that?

The answer lies in the concept of “entropy”. . . . Like energy or temperature, entropy tells us something about the particular state of a physical system; specifically, it measures how disorderly the system is. A collection of papers stacked neatly on top of one another has a low entropy; the same collection, scattered haphazardly on a desktop, has a high entropy. The entropy of a cup of coffee along with a separate teaspoon of milk is low, because there is a particular orderly segregation of the molecules into “milk” and “coffee,” while the entropy of the two mixed together is comparatively large. All of the irreversible processes that reflect time’s arrow—we can turn eggs into omelets but not omelets into eggs, perfume disperses through a room but never collects back into the bottle, ice cubes in water melt but glasses of warm water don’t spontaneously form ice cubes—share a common feature: entropy *increases* throughout, as the system progresses from order to disorder. Whenever we disturb the universe, we tend to increase its entropy.<sup>1</sup>

On paper, entropy/time *can* “go backward”—there are no properties that physically prevent this. Yet as Sean Carroll observes, we have never seen the arrow of time reverse itself. When one begins to imagine an object moving back in time—such as an omelet into an egg—our concept of time as linear is immediately betrayed. All those mixed pieces of egg have to uncook and reparate into their beaten mixture within the bowl before swirling about to reformulate clearly delineated white and yolk in a cracked and then whole shell. This is not a neat, linear repacking of chaos but a series of distinct movements literally, physically taking place as that omelet recollects itself as a single egg. The same nonlinear obstacles occur if we attempt to reverse the course of history—or even just one day in one individual’s life. This is because there is not much linear movement in daily activities—one rises from sleep, from the ground or bed or pallet, and then *circulates* about the living space and so forth throughout the day. Even when engaged in a task we think of as strictly cause and effect (and therefore linear in concept, with cause followed by effect, that effect causing a further effect, etc.), such as building a wall, many of the movements involved in the activity (such as unplanned pauses, interruptions, hesitations, mistakes, or accidents) will appear extraneous and therefore nonlinear.

This is simply to state that the thought of traveling back through time in a linear progress narrative is inherently limited, because physics shows

that our movements “forward” are entropic, not linear. Imagining a reverse entropy not only is startling and astonishing (to anyone who has ever seen a film run in reverse to show a transition from high to low entropy, such as a splattered watermelon regathering itself) but also thwarts our attempts to imagine *humans* traveling back through time.<sup>2</sup>

This difficulty in imagining more than one spacetime (one that moves both “backward” and “forward”) in a linear progress narrative has not stopped Western discourses on racial difference—or their diasporic counterdiscursive interlocutors—from critiquing and recommending peoples, civilizations, ideas, and behaviors variously as “backward” or “progressive.” As *Becoming Black* has argued—and as has been shown in a far broader and more diverse context in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*—anticolonial, antiracist, and postcolonial counterdiscourses that frame racism as antiprogressive (and the fight against it as correspondingly progressive) can be not only compelling but also popular and effective strategies. At the same time, readers from dominant groups appear to respond to this critique through spatiotemporal segregation that deflects blame and responsibility for an antiprogressive past. In the United States, for example, liberal white discourse often enjoys assigning labels such as “white trash” and “rednecks” to Southerners who live “below” the Mason-Dixon Line in rural areas and in “backward” ways—that is, in another space and time altogether.

Perhaps one of the most prominent and compelling arguments that offers a sustained focus on Blackness as “stuck” in a racist West that irrationally and viciously denies it progress is Hortense Spillers’s 1987 “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” After all, it was Spillers, in her now-canonical article originally published in *Diacritics*, who famously provided a new theoretical landscape through which one might interpellate an epistemology as a mediated ontology—that is, the Black body as a (performative) site of knowing.<sup>3</sup> Auspiciously published at the same time as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the scholarly argument and the blockbusting novel both sought to show how slavery was not a neatly delineated “past” episode with little relevance to contemporary African American subjects. Spillers reworks Lacan’s statement that the unconscious is structured like language, arguing here that a “symbolic grammar” inherited from the slave codes still informs the ways in which Black subjects are interpellated by white Americans. In this way, “Mama’s Baby” posits a collapse of time and space that not only anticipates Avery Gordon’s

and Saidiya Hartman's tropes of "haunting" and "social death" (in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* and *Scenes of Subjection*, respectively) but remains an unaccredited influence on works of the African Diaspora that explore Black subjectivity and agency through the Middle Passage, including my own.

"Mama's Baby" begins by privileging the body over other forms of retrieval. "Let's face it," Spillers begins, "I am a marked woman,"<sup>4</sup> memorably combining the ontology of (Black) female identity with the signification of U.S. white racist discourse.<sup>5</sup> After reading the title, the signification of being "marked" can take on three immediate valences. The first is the most striking, because it suggests that Spillers is "marked" by some authority or malevolent body for punishment or perhaps even death. The phrase "marked woman" may also suggest a body that is seen as having defied heteropatriarchal norms, or it may remind us that to be marked in an "(American) *Grammar Book*" may suggest a special notation, an important exception to the rule.

Yet Spillers reveals that her marking also involves a specific spatiotemporal status. The first three name-tropes she invokes, "Peaches," "Brown Sugar," and "Sapphire," manifest variously from an interracial epistemology in which both Black and white U.S. discourses on the Black female, racist *and* antiracist, produce her as sexually luscious, sexually promiscuous, and a shrew (respectively). By contrast, her use of "Auntie" and "Grannie" carry specific U.S. connotations because they were patronizing pet names given to enslaved or otherwise exploited Black female caregivers by their white wards, owners, or employers. These marks-cum-epithets become more elaborate over the course of the article, shifting from their antebellum connotations to phrases that suggest that even a professional Black woman must now endure the same racist attitudes from whites—and perhaps from her fellow Blacks as well: "Miss Ebony First" and "Black Woman at the Podium." Here, "Miss Ebony First" denotes achievement (being the first to do something) tainted by the perception that one's minority status simply relegates one to being, as it were, the best of the worst. At first glance, "Black Woman at the Podium" strikes one seemingly as a statement of fact, yet it does the same kind of racist work on the Black female body: simply mentioning the fact of Blackness deprives the speaker of her celebrated individual role and returns her to the collective.<sup>6</sup>

Being "marked," then, is both a grappling hook and an impossible weight. It is the latter in refusing Spillers's contemporary interpellations—her

status as a Black female grounds her, in a fully negative sense, within the imagined slave past. Yet the former yanks her at her moment of agency (the act of speaking): she might remain at the podium physically, but the white gaze interpellates her attempt to move outside of the spatiotemporal cage of her (enslaved) antebellum status as the Black female Other. “My country needs me,” Spillers ironically notes at the end of the first paragraph, “and if I were not here, I would have to be invented,”<sup>7</sup> exposing the heart of a bigot’s logic—in order to feel superior, the bigot must find someone inferior. Inferiority is thus always already located on the social body that lacks the same power or access to power as the dominant body.

“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” fully intends to be devastating. Perhaps the term that is squashed between all the others should command our attention first: “God’s ‘Holy Fool,’”<sup>8</sup> an old trope of the West suggesting that those who are most divine are most often misunderstood, implying that the harshness of their truths must be cloaked, perhaps by acting as a beggar, or the king’s fool, as in *King Lear*. One becomes the “Holy Fool” to escape becoming a Cassandra, the mocked prophet whose warnings of doom are fated to go unheeded. The truth Spillers seeks to show us becomes partially revealed as she explains that these names are examples of how deeply the Black female figure is overdetermined by white U.S. society; indeed, the racist-misogynist discourse is layered on so thick and these “markers are so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean.”<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, Spillers defines the buried Black female body as an agent despite facing overwhelming objecthood, thus distinguishing between what the United States would *like* the Black woman to be and what she *is*. Yet in order to activate that agency, à la Hegel, a great deal of effort must be made: “In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness . . . the personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function.”<sup>10</sup> She may be an agent, but she is first and foremost one who reacts rather than acts.

It is clear that Spillers must unwrap and exhume herself, unraveling the patterns of “historical order” (i.e., the dominant discourse’s linear progress narrative), but what is unclear are her own “marvels of inventiveness” that, seemingly, will finally spring her from this prison of time and racist discourse. A potentially problematic synecdoche is also at work here: Spiller’s

“I” that explicitly speaks for all Black women complicates matters—how does one unravel the untruths of a racist history by using one person to represent the entirety of that history?

We can connect Spillers’s synecdochal use of herself with the Middle Passage epistemology’s use of collective memory and the linear progress narrative—in other words, “Mama’s Baby” is indeed using this epistemology to define the Black collective and the racist obstacles they have faced in the United States since their ancestors first landed. By understanding herself as representative of a Middle Passage Black female collective, Spillers is using a “vertical” logic of collective representation, a common property of collective linear histories. In one of the aforementioned quotes, Spillers also uses the concept of meaning made by an “excess in time.” This concept of knowledge as a quantity that increases through progress is also a property of most collective epistemologies that deploy a linear notion of spacetime marked by progress.

As Spillers ironically notes, such an accumulation buries her further beneath the weight of her anachronistic notation, and an interesting visual figure comes into play—that of a white force moving forward as its acceleration creates an accumulation that eventually reaches far enough back to further bury the Black woman in her imagined stasis. While dominant groups traditionally imagine their progress as positively accumulative (sometimes imagining that this progress also brings the “less fortunate” alongside them), Spillers argues that the antebellum stereotypes that threaten to bury her are part of this accumulation. In other words, that very Western progress is at least partially based in the continuing oppression of U.S. Blacks.

We have already seen that Spillers’s article uses a vertical logic of representation (in which her body stands in for all women) and suggests the possibility of agency (in the resistance of unraveling the grammar that stereotypes her). Yet how are origins defined and deployed (if at all) in this article? This is perhaps the most pressing question, because Middle Passage narratives of return logically require an origin, a spacetime to which one can “return.”

“Mama’s Baby” seeks to answer this question through the lenses of gender and sexuality: part of the resistance, it insists, to white racist caricatures deployed against Black women involves returning to the heteronormative gender and sexuality roles that preceded enslavement. Spillers explains her logic by reading Lacan via the Moynihan Report, which asserts that

the matriarchal “Negro” household lacks authentic (male) leadership and therefore lacks the means to interpellate itself through the dominant epistemology of U.S. normalcy, or what the report terms the “American society.” Spillers notes that in this reading she also locates herself (in service of the “collective,” she writes) within the wholly Western tradition of “patrimony”—that is, of vertical identity relations.<sup>11</sup> As such, she notes that the masculinization of the Black female mother in “American Grammar” (here represented by the Moynihan Report) perversely creates a “stunning reversal of the castration thematic, displacing the Name and the Law of the Father to the territory of the Mother and Daughter, becom[ing] an aspect of the African-American female’s misnaming.”<sup>12</sup>

More specifically, “Mama’s Baby” continues, “‘Sapphire’ enacts her ‘Old Man’ in drag, just as her ‘Old Man’ becomes ‘Sapphire’ in outrageous caricature.”<sup>13</sup> While a Black queer theorist might, in another context, argue that this mutual drag performance is at least subversive if not liberatory, Spillers posits that this is instead a “*prescribed* internecine degradation” (Spillers’s emphasis). In other words, according to Spillers, this performance is foisted on us by state-sanctioned/created racist-misogynist discourses. This forced mutual performance of Black drag between father and daughter is most damaging because it “adhere[s] to no symbolic integrity,” but the origin or basis of that integrity is not named here. Rather than evoking biological purity, Spillers’s use of “integrity” seems to denote the repetition of tradition as the “class of symbolic paradigms” spoken, believed in, and perhaps most crucially *performed* by dominant Western subjects. “Integrity” becomes that which fits in with the behemoth of Western tradition—and *both* the African American female and African American male do not. At the end of the day, interpellating Blackness through vertical relations will harm the entire collective, Spillers argues, because Black men are eventually subsumed by a white racist patrimony.

Spillers herself is not unaware of the implications of her call for a return to “traditional” gender roles, especially at a time when, as she notes, queer theorists are celebrating the subversion of these very roles. Yet, she argues, “undressing these confections of meaning, as they appear under the rule of dominance, would restore, as figurative possibility, not only Power to the Female (for Maternity) but also Power to the Male (for Paternity).”<sup>14</sup> In other words, in creating tradition, the weight of time and repeated performance also creates a “Power,” but Spillers does not go on to explain a logical corollary of this equation: what should we do

with those subjects who do not/cannot find power in their reproductive abilities (paternal or maternal), figuratively or literally? For the Spillers of “Mama’s Baby,” the fixed nature of “ethnicity” (“fixed in time and space”) is what allowed the slave trade not only to endure but to flourish, and it disfigures the written history of the trade with an indelible mark of horror. Bills of lading, slave codes, and new laws and debates among merchants, newspaper editors, and legislators chillingly show what can happen to human beings when their subjecthood has been crushed into objecthood. However, the Spillers of “Whatcha Gonna Do?: Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’” sees the limitations in this older article and the need for some reinterpretation:

I think that is what I was trying to do, at the same time that I wanted to point out what is problematic about Black women stopping at the gender question because the refusal of certain gender privileges to Black women historically was part of the problem. At the same time, that you have to sort of see that and get beyond it and get to something else, because you are trying to go through gender to get to something wider. . . . If there is any such thing as a kind of symbiotic blend of melding between our human categories, in this case of the diasporic African, then this is the occasion for it.<sup>15</sup>

*Physics of Blackness* argues that there is in fact a “symbiotic blend of melding between our human categories” that can be achieved to explore diasporic Blackness, but one first must remove the interpellative limits that are fixed in the properties of linear spacetime. In “Mama’s Baby,” Spillers seeks to overturn the fatal effects of the American grammar that fix the Black woman in the past with a counternarrative that reimagines a Black African origin in which “traditional” (and of course) heteropatriarchal societies were the norm.

Yet as first-time travelers clutching our guidebooks, we do not know what to expect of the past and therefore can only project onto it whatever questions, ideas, and information occur to *us* in the present moment. Unlike my analogical traveler, who (goodness willing) will reach the desired destination, we can only summon our version of the past, not actually travel back to it. As a result, when we construct a marker of identity, such as the traumatic continuum for U.S. Black women who have Middle Passage ancestry, we begin with our assumptions: that sexuality is a

category-friendly set of behaviors in which “heterosexuality” is the default (and therefore barely a category of analysis, more an implicit norm) and other types of sexuality did not exist.<sup>16</sup> Nonheteronormative sexualities existed long before the birth of Europe, of course, and our actual histories are also far less linear and monochromatic; “Middle Passage Blacks” can trace themselves back to Africa, yes, but also to Europe, to Asia, and to South America—not to mention to the first peoples of North America. Even more confusingly, our ancestral lines comprised not just victims but their victimizers as well: we are the result of trauma but also of many other actions—triumphant, cowardly, dastardly, ingenious, predictable, astonishing, and so forth. The trauma continuum does not shine brightly against the background of our past but is a carefully sculpted notion, with many poignant histories chiseled and smoothed away—and thus needing to be found “elsewhere.”<sup>17</sup>

The simple linear progress narrative of the Middle Passage epistemology seems so easy at first glance, but its need for return requires both the collapse of time and space and the use of both a scalpel and a shovel to rid itself of the messy overlaps of peoples, places, and times that fully constitute the histories of most U.S. Blacks, not to mention Blacks across the Diaspora. In other words, we cannot travel back through linear time as a collective, because our pasts comprise not one line but innumerable strands. By seeking to retrace our steps directly to “West Africa” and to it alone, we produce a past that perhaps reflects more on our present imaginings.

This means that the site of trauma is often displaced in the act of linear return. The manifold spacetimes of the Middle Passage past specifically remain unimagined in favor of an oversimplified past in which unmediated Blackness moves from Africa to the Americas and then back again. One can see the pull of this illogic: if contemporary Black subjects imagine themselves as racially “mixed,” containing threads of other peoples and places, they might well understand themselves as less “pure” than those Black Africans who (supposedly) remain “unchanged.” The assumptions that often define the differences between Black Diasporas and Black Africans are linear and in fact deeply racist but also ubiquitous to any contrasting of diasporic peoples with those who occupy the “homeland.” Because “home” is also the origin in a linear spacetime epistemology of a collective, it becomes fixed in time, untouched by change, but only theoretically: the continent of Africa, like every other continent, is always changing and never static.

While *Spillers* seeks resolution by returning to an origin that predates Atlantic slavery, Octavia Butler's speculative novel *Kindred* draws the past and the present into a comparative parallel where each appears to inform the other. The protagonist of *Kindred*, Dana, speaks an ambivalent foreshadowing of her violent travel back to slavery in her introductory descriptions of her courtship and marriage to her white husband, Kevin. Dana describes the employment agency where they meet as a "slave market" and not much later relates Kevin's intense anger over her continuing refusal to type his manuscripts for him—even though, she notes, they are both professional writers. Dana's initial description of figuratively being a slave, paired with her mention of Kevin's forceful suggestion that she should understand her labor as due in the first instance to him, reveals how Dana interpellates her contemporary moment as a strictly Middle Passage interpellation—that is, its thematic origin of enslavement by white Americans.<sup>18</sup> Seeking a job as a writer and being married to a white man both invoke the ancestral experience of slavery.

Neither of these instances would attract especial notice if this were not the story of a Black woman who fantastically and repeatedly is "pulled back" in time and in one instance must pretend to be Kevin's slave in the antebellum South. After her second sudden and physically punishing "yank" through time, Dana quickly becomes convinced that the cause of her travel is Rufus, the young Southern white boy who appears to "call" her when he encounters moments of extreme physical distress. Upon learning that this is indeed her white slave-owning ancestor, she assumes the reason for her time travel must be to ensure Rufus's survival—or, at least, to keep him alive long enough to father what will become her family tree.<sup>19</sup> In other words, Dana assumes a vertical relation of identities between herself and Rufus despite the fact that she and Rufus are produced through very different spacetimes; as she explains to her skeptical husband after returning from her second spacetime trip, she has been "called back" into enslaved service. Here the text lays bare for us a perverse logic of the linear progress narrative in a Middle Passage epistemology when defining contemporary Blackness through a fixed past.

Dana's logic (and, likely, the readers' own, as the trope is a common one in science and speculative fiction) is purely Newtonian: that history is a series of cause and effect events, and some force has recalled her to the past to fix a "mistake"—some hiccup that now derails, has derailed, and/or will derail the straight track that connects the past to the present.

While this premise is entertaining in a story such as *Back to the Future*, it carries more serious significations in the logic of a Middle Passage epistemology. Because the rape of Black women was so prevalent during slavery, reading oneself as the product of the past means one is also the product of rape—a violence one condemns and yet . . . would anyone sacrifice his or her existence in order to undo these rapes that exist in the antebellum family tree?

This leaves a question for Dana—to what degree is she a coconspirator in rape and other forms of brutalization?—a question that is easily extended to almost all individuals on this planet by moving far back enough on a family tree. The history of world civilization is also the history of violent overthrow, conquering armies, and attendant rape; one would be hard put to find anyone, even the descendants of royalty (or perhaps, considering all the forced marriages, them *least* of all), whose entire family tree is free of involuntary procreation.

Yet this question of culpability achieves shape only through the moment into which Dana is yanked back—one can just as easily locate the “beginning” of her family tree in West Africa in earlier decades, centuries, and so forth. In other words, the whole concept of culpability exists only through the Middle Passage epistemology because of the origin it chooses as well as the cause-and-effect logic that drives its motion forward. Dana’s family tree can be seen as “starting” anywhere because it is like all other family trees: intensely pruned so as to define a more recent generation through a particular set of interpellations. The question of Dana’s agency and culpability in her enslaved past is created by Dana because she chooses to honor a perverse heteropatriarchal logic that locates and defines a white slave owner as her forefather. In other words, why is *this* great-great-grandfather, out of the eight that she possibly can claim, the one whose survival compels her collusion? It is because Dana’s time travel is informed by the text’s spatiotemporal epistemology (or, as Spillers would term it, the perverse logic of our “American Grammar”) that it can manifest in such a circumstance.

In “Speculative Fictions of Slavery,” Madhu Dubey argues that a conundrum such as Dana’s occurs because “speculative fictions of slavery attempt to know the past as something other or more than history.”<sup>20</sup> Describing history as a “register,” Dubey suggests that, at least in the U.S. imagination, “history” is both enduring and evanescent—always present but ghostly and ultimately inaccessible:

Common to all these works is the phenomenon of an actual rather than figurative return to slavery, and the fact that return always results in an involuntary but powerful identification—not connection, but identification—of the present-day African American subject with a slave. . . . If historical knowledge involves a distanced relation to a past that is no longer available as direct experience, the devices of return to slavery in novels such as *Kindred* . . . make possible an unmediated relation to the past as something that has not quite passed into the realm of history. To really know slavery in [these] novels . . . is to know it subjectively, to know it as something other than the characteristically remote object of historical knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

Dubey lays out the complexity of Black speculative fiction's engagement with the past. It is impossible to reconcile with the linear progress narrative's notion of a fixed origin that is static, locked in time, and far away, and it does so by underscoring the slave past less as an epistemology (a form of knowledge) and more as an ontology—a form of being, the “visceral experience of slavery.” Reading through Dubey, we can see how the theme of return in this genre's tradition is used to highlight another paradox of return through linear spacetime: that if the collective must always be defined through its origin, then the origin cannot be fixed—or cannot *only* be fixed. As I argued in chapter 1, origins in a linear progress narrative must dominate the narrative, and each event that follows its predecessor must be linked clearly to the origin. In other words, origins must operate in at least two spacetimes—the fixed past and the fluid present.

*Kindred*, I would argue, does indeed come to this conclusion through its final metaphor when Dana returns from her final journey, having killed her increasingly oppressive and monstrous ancestor, but with one of her arms apparently fused into the wall of her home. Dana is alive and well, but her arm is elsewhere. If we read this moment through Dubey's “Speculative Fictions,” this deeply injurious encounter with the past has taken part of her body and left it as fixed, fused, and immobile as an artifact of a linear past.

Whether one argues for the validity of the Middle Passage epistemology's progress narrative or asserts an Afro-pessimist interpretation (that progress has been denied and the Black collective still inhabits an oppressive stasis), it is the problem of origins that leads to this impasse. Because

the Middle Passage epistemology begins with white actions and Black reactions (not as a historical but as an ideological “fact”), it produces a Black collective identity that is not only predicated on white agency; it is a specifically malevolent white agency that brings the fact of Blackness into being. As a result, even within a progress narrative the question of a nonreactive agency arises: at what point can African Americans define themselves outside of white anti-Black racism, or, as Dubey puts it, “possible futures unbound by the racial scripts of the past”?<sup>22</sup>

In “Mama’s Baby,” Spillers seeks agency against a tsunami of overdetermined signifiers that interpellate the Black female as Other by seeking alignment with a heteropatriarchal Black African past. As noted earlier, Butler’s *Kindred* initiates Dana’s journey into the past when she herself interpellates her present moment through signifiers of Middle Passage slavery—but both Dana and the narrative argue that the *actual* time travel is caused by Rufus.

Throughout *Kindred*, the question of agency is complicated by the fact that some of its most profound plot twists are based in knee-jerk, instinctive, or even wholly unconscious reactions from all characters, but most meaningfully from Dana and Rufus—the time traveler and her ignition key, as it were. While Dana and Rufus often state their intentions, those intentions are changed and waylaid by both themselves and others. Rufus, for example, both exploits and is constrained by the strict and perverse mores of Southern slavery, which limit his options and choices; Dana decides that she must variously enable and disable her racist slave-owning ancestor in order to ensure her “future” birth. While *Kindred*’s construction of return is traditionally linear, its understanding of the individual as intersubjective and operating on a number of conscious and unconscious levels of behavior logically defies that epistemology’s understanding of slavery as a spacetime of fixed vertical relations. Instead, because the narrative produces slaves who make choices and whose resistance and negotiation is sometimes successful and produces white owners who are fallible and incapable of being omnipresent and thus omniscient, the outcome of all conflicts between slave and slave owner is *not* foregone. Instead, we see how even in a strictly vertical or hierarchical system horizontal relations can have their sway.

To use a more familiar model of power relations—Hegel’s master–slave dialectic—*Kindred* provides moments when the slave does not recognize the master as a master but as a human being who is vulnerable in specific

contexts or circumstances. In doing so, *Kindred* does not deny or downplay the whippings, beatings, murders, and everyday ubiquitous tortures that attend enslavement—that is, the vertical relations—but it also argues for the existence of the horizontal. When agency is “released” from wholly vertical identity relations, moral fixity may also evanesce—in other words, the Black subject can and will act selfishly as well as selflessly.

Seen through this lens, Maryse Condé’s 1982 novel *Heremakhonon* can be understood as combining Spillers’s later move in seeking horizontal relations for the Black (female Subject) with Octavia Butler’s exploration of the Black female subject at the intersection of horizontal *and* vertical relations. Condé’s novel is often read by leading literary theorists such as François Lionnet and, more specifically, Susan Z. Andrade in “The Nigger of the Narcissist” as a pessimistic reminder of intertextuality, because it shows how the Black Subject suffers multiple alienations due to her subaltern identities as Black, female, and Black female: “*Heremakhonon* confronts its male predecessor on racial/sexual issues and the position of black women in the Antillean context while upholding aspects of his ideology which do not address gender, thereby exhibiting its feminist stance and larger political interests. . . . Veronica’s ideological perspective makes her, in Lionnet’s words, ‘a victim of her own alienations and mimetic allusions.’ Her location in the novel, however, generates a rich and complex field of response to the problems of the construction of history, sexuality and political identity that subtend Caribbean discourse.”<sup>23</sup> As Andrade makes clear, *Heremakhonon* locates its protagonist Veronica within “larger political interests” that may intersect with, but are not limited to, her race and gender.

In Condé’s novel, Veronica Mercier is a resident of Paris funded by her Guadeloupean family’s bourgeois fortunes who “returns” to Africa for reasons that are largely unclear to her. A painful and seemingly pessimistic narrative of selfishness, violence, and betrayal ensues, as her desire to retain autonomy while making friends and lovers within the heteropatriarchal collective in the fictional West African dictatorship ends in rape and psychological violence. Yet the keys to Veronica’s survival and, as Andrade asserts, the text’s role as “more than a bleak commentary on post-colonial nomadism” are indicated from the first paragraph, which opens with Veronica en route from Paris to an unnamed West African nation:

Honestly! You’d think I’m going because it is the in thing to do.  
Africa is very much the thing to do lately. Europeans and a good

many others are writing volumes on the subject. Arts and crafts centers are opening all over the Left Bank. Blondes are dying their lips with henna and running to the open market on the rue Mouffetard for their peppers and okra.

Well, I'm not! Seven hours on a DC-10. On my left, an African desperately trying to make small talk. Behind me, a French couple as average as they come. Why am I doing this? At the moment, everything is a mess, and this whole idea seems absurd. I can see them now. My mother, sighing as usual. My father pinching his thin lips.<sup>24</sup>

The first collective through which Veronica interpellates herself is that of Parisians, a category that actually unites rather than divides her identities (as Lionnet suggests). This bourgeois Parisian attempts to separate herself from her fellow passengers by mocking the white French cultural tourists as purely superficial and the Black African man beside her as annoying and thus an unworthy companion. Her knowledge of how, why, and where white Parisians indulge in their Afrophilia links her, in many ways, to this collective, but her uninformed and unexplained assumption that the African passenger is sexually interested in her foreshadows Veronica's alienation from West African identities. The imagined disapproval of her parents interpellates her as a disobedient Guadeloupean daughter, and her ability to simply visit West Africa without worrying about time and funding places her high in the air—in this case quite literally in the airplane. By the end of the quote, the text has effectively reinterpellated its opening lines—Veronica's exasperation is more like enervation, we now know, informed by her interpellations of herself as an authentic Black Parisian native / savvy Black European / disobedient daughter of wealthy Guadeloupeans / Black cultural tourist / Black Diasporan at a moment of existential crisis.

Veronica is in many ways an antiheroine, and in teaching this novel to my classes, graduate students often complain about her “negative” and “chatty” narrative voice. Her various identities and the differences and alliances they create in various moments throughout the narrative cast Veronica as amoral, unethical, and, as Andrade notes, deeply selfish. Yet novels, of course, are not always meant to serve as moral guides but are sometimes meant to explore the multidimensionality of the individual within his, her, or their collectives and the complexity of life. If Condé's Veronica does not tell us how to navigate cruelty and violence in

the African Diaspora, her reflections also do not shy away from it. Inasmuch as this is a first-person narrative, Veronica also shows us her own questionable behavior alongside the corruption and oppression she both witnesses and hears—as a woman who at times must suffer misogynist treatment (often at the hands of her sadistic lover, rapist, and local tyro, Ibrahim Sory) but also as a moneyed woman who is sometimes extended greater courtesies and access as a wealthy outsider, as a Black woman and a cultural tourist, and as a Black Diasporan who is confused and torn by opinions, behaviors, and activities for which her hazy understanding of “Africa” had left her wholly unprepared. Outside of Paris she encounters no unified and noble collective but the complex web of a postcolonial West Africa engaging with a broad variety of influences and spacetimes: colonial, postcolonial, diasporic, precolonial, and “traditional.”

In her final thoughts of the narrative, Veronica concludes, “I’m leaving because it would be too easy to stay” and, if she had done so, “I’d continue to shuttle back and forth between Heremakhonon [Sory’s compound] and the town.<sup>25</sup> Until one of us got tired, you the first, of course.” Inexplicably, she then claims to have “helped kill him” even though Sory is alive and well, as she admits when hypothesizing that *if* the town *had* revolted, she would have joined them.

Her last thought of Sory, whether actually spoken by him or not, remains an odd comment: “It’s spring now in Paris.” This moves her reflections from a hypothetical scenario of departure to an anticipated arrival:

Spring? The streetcleaner on the Rue de L’Université will have taken off his thick, blue turtleneck sweater that shows under his overalls. Will he have noticed my absence? How will he welcome me back? Yet another flight! One day I’ll have to break the silence. I’ll have to explain. What? This mistake, this tragic mistake I couldn’t help making, being what I am. My ancestors led me on. What more can I say? I looked for myself in the wrong place. In the arms of an assassin. Come now, don’t use big words. Always dramatizing.

Spring? Yes, it’s spring in Paris.<sup>26</sup>

*Heremakhonon* defies the Middle Passage epistemology’s interpellation of return by ending the novel with the “real” return for Veronica, the return to Paris, thus shattering a neat return to African origin. The text separates

the spacetime of return from that of origin, making clear that Veronica was born and raised in Guadeloupe and appears to make sexual choices in defiance of her upper-class family's strict mores (bourgeois women should be chaste and certainly not choose lovers from a class "beneath" their own). In Guadeloupe, Veronica notoriously took the family's gardener as her lover, a combination of horizontal and vertical relations (pun intended). In West Africa,<sup>27</sup> however, she learns that her relationship with Sory was purely vertical—his casually brutal and unapologetic rape underscores his interpellation of her. By imagining a likely and justifiable overthrow of Sory, Veronica interpellates her agency through a hypothetical past, allowing her to imagine Sory as both defeated and an interlocutor straight out of a classic *film noir* (no pun intended).

Paris (imagined as first spoken by Sory in this conclusion) becomes a space in which Veronica interpellates herself alternately vertically and horizontally. She fondly recalls the street cleaner, suggesting an intimate peer relationship, but the fact that she doesn't know his name, and only encounters him as he cleans the streets for citizens such as her, returns us to vertical relations. With her observation that mistaking her journey to West Africa as a return was a "tragic mistake," the final lines of Condé's first novel connect almost seamlessly to the interpellations of an ambivalently agential Black female subject that this distinguished writer later manifests in such as classics as *I, Tituba*, *Colonie du Nouveau monde* (as yet untranslated), and *Segu*.

Veronica blames verticality—that is, those "ancestors" who preceded her and lured her "back" to West Africa. Yet she also blames herself—for looking in the wrong place, daringly implying a parallel between West Africa and the "arms of an assassin." At the same time, she recognizes (and is likely often empowered by) the spacetimes of "return" and her relationship with Sory as those of her own choosing. Veronica is neither heroine nor villain; in deliberately departing from the fixed vertical interpellation of Middle Passage linear spacetime, Condé provides us with an interpretation of the Black female subject in the Diaspora that is instructive: some Black women enjoy privileges located in vertical identity relations, and when one fails to acknowledge one's own privilege and its contextual basis, moving into alternate spacetimes can lead to "tragic mistakes"—here, disillusionment and violence.

It is not coincidental that almost all the authors under discussion here intervene through Black feminist concerns, possessing bodies that

must struggle to be represented within the linear logic of the progress narrative. Most overarching mainstream histories that understand and title themselves as representative of the Black collective use a vertical synecdoche: leaders represent the collective as a whole, and the effects of their words and actions are explored by those “below” and “above” them on the hierarchy. Dominant discourses in Black studies, as in most other academic disciplines across the globe, assume a heteropatriarchal model for this verticality; its leaders and workers are represented as overwhelmingly male.

As one might imagine, then, it is often easier for heteronormative male narratives to embrace a linear return to African origins and an African past—and these narratives do indeed typically end on clear, happy notes of inclusion and recovery.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, by seeking brotherhood in heteropatriarchy, Black male travelers can find a socioeconomically empowered horizontal interpellation that Black women cannot, as “sisters” are meant to tend primarily to their families rather than sisterhood. This is because the explicit peer relationship premised by the term *brotherhood* is also horizontally interpellated in heteropatriarchy: men mentor, aid, and enable one another (or defeat one another) as leaders in the community. Its complement sisterhood is pulled vertically in heteropatriarchy: sisters are first read as mothers, daughters, or wives before they are (if at all) accorded the figurative and literal spacetime to perform peer relationships.

For the majority of male protagonists engaged in diasporic return, a melding occurs, and while in most cases the history of the Middle Passage is not erased, it is largely attenuated because the diasporic goal has been achieved: a spiritual (and often political, possibly cultural) “return” to one’s African roots. The journey for those Subjects who do not meet these criteria is considerably less clear and considerably more ambiguous.

One of the central points of “Mama’s Baby,” of course, and its lasting value to Black feminist and womanist theory, is the intervention it makes by theorizing return and the relationship to the past for the Black (female) Subject, locating her, in short, within this epistemology as a central subject and object (of racist stasis). As Spillers notes, her earlier enjoinder that a heteronormative practice was needed to overcome this racist “queering” is of limited strategic use. Within the concerns of spacetime, this limitation is due to its final embrace of verticality—that is, seeking to reassert the normative social roles within a vibrant and healthy Black heteropatriarchal community. After having made the Black female visible, “Mama’s

Baby” then seeks to align her with dominant representations and thus begins to cloak her—albeit with reservations.

However ambiguous its conclusion, “Mama’s Baby” provides us with a theory of the Black female subject that continually (re)informs us in our ongoing moments of theorizing Black female subject status, Black subject status, and subject status writ large. Replying to Spillers’s hopes for the contemporary generation, which she encourages to “broaden” the implications of her work, Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* does just that.

*Lose Your Mother*, a highly celebrated and layered first-person account of a Middle Passage “return,” emphasizes negotiations that must be made between existing in the present and imagining the past and the importance of interpellating oneself through peer, rather than hierarchical, groups. Rather than structure her journey as a linear retracing back to her origins, *Lose Your Mother* offers moments marked by several types of interpellations, especially with peers. In doing so, Hartman’s account opens up possibilities, particularly involving the dynamic space of imagining the past in the present by trying to understand what the past was when it was the present. That is, her narrative is always imagining an intersection between two spacetimes, neither of which is fixed: the past-in-the-present and the present-in-the-past. More simply put, Hartman is applying Epiphenomenal time to her consideration of return through the Middle Passage epistemology.

One would not necessarily assume this from the opening lines of *Lose Your Mother*, which at first glance may strike the reader as limiting: “As I disembarked from the bus in Elmina, I heard it. It was sharp and clear, as it rang in the air, and clattered in my ear making me recoil. *Obruni*. A stranger. A foreigner from across the sea.”<sup>29</sup> It is noticeable that the first verb used to introduce this journey of return is “disembarked” rather than “arrived,” “entered,” or “returned,” which interpellates movement from the point the traveler has just left. This shifts the focus of the reader to the traveler so we are reminded that the narration is not “objective” but inevitably subjective. Of course, it is more memorable that, rather than depicting the experience as offering at least the promise and potential of the journey’s becoming a homecoming, Hartman reacts, as if to a gun’s firing, to her negative hailing as an outsider. At the same time, she is not wholly an outsider, as she is partially connected—after all, she is familiar with the term “*obruni*” (which ranges from a pejorative to a nagging tease). Complicating the moment further, the source of the cruel taunting is then revealed—it is

children, and, she elaborates, “They summoned me, ‘*obruni, obruni*,’ as if it were a form of *akwaaba* (welcome) reserved just for me.”

Through these contrastive juxtapositions, the first words of return in this narrative complicate the very notion of the concept itself. Hartman is a welcomed foreigner, at once intimate and estranged. She is able to interpellate herself through the children’s greeting by understanding their signifier of herself as a foreigner and its ability to achieve nuance in the moment of performance. This type of moment is consistent throughout the text, in which moments of insight and intimacy are mediated through the status of an outsider.

While this critique may sound harsh and almost pessimistic, this is so only if one interpellates the status of outsider through a wholly vertical understanding of identity relations. In a hierarchical structure, the outsider is farther away from the center, the most important part of a vertical Diaspora. Given this automatic remove to a subaltern position, one can understand those travel narratives that interpellate outsiders into the center of a largely heteropatriarchal order, thus signaling the end of their estrangement and their successful acceptance and merger into the collective.

If, however, one understands an outsider through the horizontal or peer groups he, she, or they encounter—as, I will argue, Hartman does—“outsiders” can interpellate themselves as agents rather than subalterns. In this opening scene, Hartman develops a peer relationship by choosing an encounter in which it is children who welcome her as *obruni*. Here she occupies the dynamic space of a welcomed stranger, and because her interlocutors neither hold power over her nor are submissive (they are fluent in this landscape and its languages while she is not), the engagement is an *exchange* rather than a forced interpellation.<sup>30</sup> Here, the age difference allows Hartman and the children to achieve a moment of peer relation.

Throughout this yearlong journey—admittedly longer than most diasporic sojourns “back” to West Africa—Hartman’s narrative continually produces similarly complex moments in which her status as *obruni* produces multidimensional, rather than wholly subaltern, interpellations. Rather than producing a *bildungsroman*, perhaps the most famous of creative linear progress narratives, *Lose Your Mother* produces a variety of moments in which distinctive insights and dimensions are achieved. A great summing up, a grand conclusion, is simply not possible, because different moments manifest different meanings; these spacetimes can be intersected with one another, but they cannot be subsumed by one spacetime alone.

Hartman imagines what the children must see, oddly recalling *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land's* famous moment of ventriloquizing the whispers and giggles of two white French women. Yet here it is Ghanaian children whom Hartman identifies for her “intimately estranging” interlocutors; rather than producing herself in the imagination of the Black Other, as Césaire’s narrator does, something quite individually agential yet also *unfamiliar* is achieved:

I imagined myself in their eyes: an alien tightly wrapped in the skin of a blue rain slicker, the big head bursting from its navy pod. . . . My customs belonged to another country: my too-fast gait best suited to navigating the streets of Manhattan, my unfashionable German walking shoes, my unruly tufts twisted into two French braids, fuzzy and unfurling in the humid air. Old and new worlds stamped on my face, a blend of peoples and nations and masters and slaves long forgotten. In the jumble of my features, no certain line of origin could be traced. Clearly, I was not Fanti, or Ashanti, or Ewe, or Ga.<sup>31</sup>

Hartman’s sentences move from the more open signifiers of a horizontal interpellation to one that is painfully vertical. The passage begins with our “outsider” in racial, sexual, and gender ambiguity (and also altogether outside of these categories), a horizontally “big-headed” and “blue alien” (horizontal because it does not denote any sort of immediate hierarchical status), then shifts here into essentialist identities that are static and unchanged through time—“original” in the strictest linear sense. As the Elmina coastal air actively untangles one of Black women’s literatures most famous metaphors for both roots and change, Hartman’s body is suddenly “stamped” (a violently vertical movement) with a mixture of spacetimes (“old and new worlds”) that are specifically unrooted from a linear progress narrative because they are forgotten, and because “no certain line of origin could be traced.” Here we see the fears of the outsider and the introduction of hierarchical difference in combination with the summoning of the verticality of origins and fixed biology.

Importantly, Black African authenticity is also a performance, a nuanced theater that draws on both knowledge and assumptions of its diasporic audience—the desire of so many travelers to be declared honorary natives. For Blacks born far away from their West African ancestors, of

course, this desire is no simplistic “going native” but is often consistently informed by the traumatic history of the Atlantic slave trade. Yet an unintended insult lurks here. Within the logic of linear spacetime, Africa is a land of fixed origin problematically imagined as unchanging—an observation that could not be less true, especially given humanity’s African roots, not to mention its centuries of economic trade and military conflict with European and Middle Eastern civilizations (in addition to its own). By moving to a set of biological metaphors in which historical experience and belonging are stamped on the body, and then interpellating this difference through linear spacetime, this passage shows the costs of reading return through linear spacetime alone. While the Middle Passage epistemology allows for an interpellation imagined through a heteropatriarchal Black African collective identity, this option does not do much for Hartman.

Because *Lose Your Mother* moves from moment to moment, this interpellation is not fixed in the book but instead becomes one type of interpellation that (inevitably) accompanies the traveler. Informatively, at the end of the text, Hartman reflects on who she is now after her journey, and this conclusion does not manifest itself through a linear progressive narrative. She writes that after a year in Ghana “I could still call myself African American.” At the end of this paragraph, a move is made toward the horizontal and away from a wholly vertical set of identity relations for herself: “The legacy that I chose to claim . . . didn’t require me to wait on bended knee for a great emancipator. It wasn’t the dream of a White House, even if it was in Harlem, but of a free territory. It was a dream of autonomy rather than nationhood. It was the dream of an elsewhere, with all of its promises and dangers, where the stateless might, as last, thrive.”<sup>32</sup> Rather than contemplating integration into a hierarchical structure in which space and time are not her own (to “wait on bended knee”), the quote rejects “Great Man” history as well as nationalism and even most imaginings of the Black Diaspora as a transnational heteropatriarchy instilled with “traditional African” values. Hartman interpellates her currently desired future through selfhood. She notes that there is no promised utopia but the joy of an agency where verticality does not define one’s primary relations—“where the stateless might . . . thrive.” The final word of the quote is instructive—as opposed to terms such as *succeed* or *overcome* or *prevail* and so forth, “thrive” is not immediately vertical (which is to say it can, in another context, be deployed as vertical). Not unlike Condé’s stated intention for *Heremakhonon*, which is to denote the danger of

the Black female subject attempting to embrace a Black African nation state (or states) as home (the word *Heremakhonon* is meant to symbolize “the illusions fostered by the newly independent African nations”), Hartman decisively steps outside of the traditional type of return imagined in most diasporic collective identities that deploy a linear progress narrative. Whether figuratively or literally, she eschews seeking agency through the nation-state and begins her explanation by underscoring the perils of submitting to a vertical set of identity relations in both time (“to wait” as suspended time) and space (to be positioned on “bended knee” and thus below the “great emancipator”).

The cover of Hartman’s book, combined with its title, suggests that the act of return—specifically through the slave holds at Elmina Castle—is accompanied by immediate loss, specifically of one’s mother. The subtitle, *A Journey along the Atlantic Coast*, rather than suggesting travel back through time, places the reader in a contemporary moment in which the past cannot be regained. The act of return here underscores the fact of loss, not recuperation. According to Hartman, to return is to signify that one has lost something; strikingly, however, because the loss is in the moment of return, it is one that did not necessarily exist in other moments. The title, after all, is in the imperative (and is also perhaps a warning): *Lose*. Hartman notes that she “*could still* call herself African American” (my emphasis), denoting loss in a counterintuitive manner. To return entails gain and insight, but it also produces or underscores a loss because one may encounter a moment, as Hartman appears to do, in which the (re)claiming of African American identity is a boon, not a burden. It is a desire rather than an unwanted burden, and perhaps this is the one significant difference between earlier and later moments in the text. As the text moves through moments of encounters with other Black travelers and a range of Black Africans, Hartman worries less about seeming alien and recognizes that she possesses a number of identities in any given moment.

*Lose Your Mother’s* emphasis on Epiphenomenal time as its narrative structure—to interpellate and locate oneself in the “now”—radically changes how we might imagine the moment of return within the Middle Passage epistemology. Hartman’s narrative is creative nonfiction, and under a wholly creative lens one can see how a consistent framing of the past through the “now” also creates a wholly unanticipated set of experiences of return. Mat Johnson’s 2010 intertextual satire *Pym* frames its entire narrative on this premise, offering the most detailed exploration of

the use value of using Epiphenomenal time as a critique that identifies the pitfalls of relying on a wholly vertical interpellation of a Middle Passage epistemology in determining a Black identity—in this case for the Black male subject, yet one who is nuanced enough to continually encounter both horizontal and vertical identity relations.

*Pym* is confusing to read because it is heavily intertextual, a contemporary African American riff on an actual unfinished novella by Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's novella, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, is a first-person narrative of a fantastic adventure that its protagonist, Arthur Gordon Pym, swears to be absolutely true. Johnson's *Pym* twists its plot around Poe's strange book even further: in addition to making its protagonist Chris Jaynes a Poe enthusiast, Jaynes informs us that Poe's novel is no fiction but *real*—and he is the direct descendant of one of its "characters." Now feeling even closer to *The Narrative*, Jaynes organizes a crew and sets sail to discover the fantastic lands that Arthur Gordon Pym supposedly discovered: the "Black" island of Tslalia and the "white" frozen cliffs of Tekelia.

In *Pym*, it is not just that the protagonist, Chris Jaynes, "returns" to bizarre alien lands where he and his crew end up committing crimes against humanity (or, more accurately, against fellow sentient beings); it is that this absurd past is entwined in and informed by Poe's reflection of this *white* American absurdist past that is equally ambivalent in its fits and starts of racism and antiracist amnesia. In this way, *Pym* manifests a model of Epiphenomenal time more completely than *Lose Your Mother* by pursuing some of the themes offered in "Mama's Baby" and *Kindred* through the role of the *white Other* in the Middle Passage epistemology's imagining of return and our relationship to the past.

Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* is a fascinating study in its own right, but under Johnson's intertextual engagement, its simultaneously deeply subversive and also traditionally racist nineteenth-century adventure tale can only encourage endless reinterpretation of its meanings. This intertextuality is at once so seamless and yet so dynamic that Johnson's *Pym* is really two tales. One is Poe's unfinished novel, which is an exemplar, as Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* has noted, that relies heavily on its construction of a Black Other to produce white heroics in the face of fantastically primitive savagery. The second narrative in *Pym* is a far less examined thematic, which makes the contemporary satire all the more valuable: how

whiteness often operates centrally in the Middle Passage imagination by defining Blackness through assertions of fixed difference.

*Pym* does not go back into the historical racial past as the Middle Passage or any other linear spacetime epistemology would recognize it. Instead, it imitates Poe's *Narrative* as a fantastic voyage heavy with racist metaphor and distinctly bounded geographies. While seemingly improvising on a broad spread of racial misperceptions and anxieties, the satire's running joke is that twenty-first-century Black fantasies about the white Other can be just as fervently distorted as Poe's fevered fiction about undiscovered territories of the earth effectively locked in the past, where people are wholly products of their environments. *Pym* satirizes the attempt to return to the past through the linear Middle Passage epistemology taken to the extreme to underscore the point that returns to the past are always already voyages made in the present.

Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* is contemporary with the racist adventure fiction of the time: the savage Africa of Germany's Carl Peters's series of novels (and later Nazi films)<sup>33</sup> and Rider Haggard's various forays into the forbidding and cruel terrains of hidden islands and valleys running amok with violent Amazonian matriarchies and savage cannibals.<sup>34</sup> To quote Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, this genre's "dehistoricizing allegory . . . produces foreclosure rather than disclosure. If difference is made so vast that the civilizing process becomes indefinite—taking place across an unspecified infinite amount of time—history, as a process of becoming, is excluded from the literary encounter." Morrison elucidates, "Poe deploys allegorical mechanisms in *Pym* not to confront and explore, as Melville does, but to evade and simultaneously register the cul-de-sac, the estrangement, the non-sequitur that is entailed in racial difference."<sup>35</sup>

*Pym* does in fact use Poe's structure of a fantastic voyage to confront and explore Blackness and whiteness, at least on the surface reversing Poe's white/black symbolism but then complicating that divide in provocative ways. While Poe's protagonist, Arthur Pym, could be considered a typical white male hero—young, brave, and adventurous—Mat Johnson effectively confronts the reader with his version of an antihero who fails to embody a stereotypical Middle Passage Blackness. Professor Chris Jaynes's features and skin color would allow him to "pass"; he is fighting to *not* teach and research his Middle Passage literature and is punished by white administrators for doing so. Jaynes explains that he loves the work of Edgar Allen Poe even though he is exquisitely aware of the author's

racism (and in fact provides a racial critique of the *Narrative* that elegantly coheres with Morrison's thesis).

The desire for return through a Middle Passage linear spacetime haunts Jaynes, perhaps especially when he attempts to deride the importance of this trope in his narrative. In volume three of *Pym*, in which Jaynes and his crew find themselves enslaved by the giant and ghostly Tekelians from Poe's *Nantucket*, he argues that the act of return in effect has been "ruined" by repeated interpellations: "I am bored with the topic of Atlantic slavery. I have come to be bored because so many boring people have talked about it. So many artists and writers and thinkers, mediocre and genius, have used it because it's a big, easy target. They appropriate it, adding no new insight or profound understanding, instead degrading it with their nothingness. They take the stink of the slave hold and make it a pungent cliché, take the blood-soaked chains of bondage and pervert them into Afrocentric bling."<sup>36</sup> Rather than embrace the Middle Passage epistemology as the site and inspiration for being African American, Jaynes complains that he cannot participate because other members of the Black collective have, in his contemporary moment, degraded it. Jaynes, however, is an unreliable narrator, and his narrative is prone to explicit rejections of certain attitudes or traditions that are then followed by an implicit and uncritical embrace of those same behaviors and performances. As his self-serving account of his firing has already revealed, Jaynes avoids reality when it promises to threaten his fantasy life lived partially through Poe's works. His own failure to achieve academic success renders him sensitive to and negative about the achievements of others, whom he assumes must be "sell-outs." He expresses a deep, devoted love to his ex-wife (who left him because of his already lackluster career), yet his descriptions of her seem suspiciously (and hilariously) more attuned to an exoticist African fantasy than a soul mate ("the woman I used to call the Ashanti Doll, her skin a wealth of rich melanin above the white vinyl of her snowsuit").<sup>37</sup>

Most overwhelmingly, *Pym* is the story of return through encounters with Blackness and whiteness in their most extreme forms. Jaynes discovers that Poe's tale is in fact true—and the odd little novella is in fact an actual account by a contemporary of Poe, one Arthur Gordon Pym. Even better, he stumbles across the diary of none other than Dirk Peters, Arthur Pym's inexplicable villain-turned-loyal sidekick—and, as it turns out, a distant relation of Jaynes himself.

Perhaps the key to understanding Jaynes's desire for a specifically linear return lies in the character of Peters (in Poe's *Nantucket*) and its intertextual dialogue with Jaynes's own racial undecidability. In Poe, Peters is first described as a fearsome-looking creature of ambiguous white European and (American) Indian descent. Unlike his other compelling interpretations of Poe, Jaynes unconvincingly asserts that giving this character a mixed-race status is Poe's racist code for Black—but scholars of nineteenth-century white American literature know that racist white literature also has a tradition of explicitly mixed-race individuals. Instead, we might read Jaynes's insistence that Peters must be Black as quite personal in nature. Jaynes discovers Peters is Black through a fellow member of the family tree, one who insists she is mostly American Indian—which would cohere with Arthur Gordon Pym's description of Peters in Poe. Yet as this chapter later details, Jaynes mocks this claim, firmly asserting that Miss Mahalia Mathis is nothing if not Black.

Given that many African Americans are aware of American Indian ancestry, we know that Jaynes can still be Black *and* American Indian, so his insistence on categorizing Miss Mathis away from a mixed ancestry is confusing. However, a sad possibility comes to light: Jaynes is light-skinned, he can "pass for white," and in asserting his Black identity, he demonstrates his refusal to "pass," his loyalty to Middle Passage Blackness.<sup>38</sup> To also claim American Indian ancestry would confuse that assertion—as if he wants to claim he is many things, Blackness among them rather than his primary and most important identity. Because he can "pass," it is implied that part of his ancestry is clearly white, perhaps the majority of it, and it is this implication he must always put firmly to the side.

This possible need for Jaynes to insist on his Blackness to the exclusion of all other identities could be partially met (i.e., only at first glance) by claiming a strictly linear ancestry—one that coheres with the space-time of the Middle Passage epistemology. Even though he is clearly of mixed-race ancestry, Jaynes finds a way to take intersecting lines and render them one: "I am a mulatto in a long line of mulattoes, so visibly lacking in African heritage that I often appear to some uneducated eyes as a random, garden-variety white guy. But I'm not. . . . Let me be more clear, since some people can't get their heads around it even when I stand before them: I am a black man who looks white."<sup>39</sup> It is hard to imagine a "line" of mulattos through the ages, as mulattos are, by their racist definition, typically biracial offspring of one Black parent and one white parent.

Johnson's status as biracial (mulatto) also confuses one's reading of "line," something one is less likely to do when the ancestral line is described as (mostly) racially homogeneous.<sup>40</sup> In spite of the logical odds, Jaynes is quite clear that we are meant to understand him as the result of a linear cause-and-effect sequence. Each mixed-race father in Jaynes's family tree is understood to have reproduced himself, another mulatto, regardless of whom he marries.

Black women are among the more prominent casualties of this fantastic journey. As the previous quote warns, Jaynes's interpellation of himself through a single line appears to privilege one parent over another, because the intersecting strands of each ancestry cannot be represented. By naming his father as the "mulatto," we now know that this linearity will be marked only as men begetting men. His exoticizing objectification of his ex-wife, Angela, also indicates that it is men, not women, who will be agents in this narrative of return.

Intriguingly, the first female character we encounter is also a newly discovered distant relation of Jaynes and provides the essential link between Dirk Peters and his discovery that Poe's tale is true (i.e., that one of Poe's fictional characters did in fact exist). Mahalia, as Jaynes describes her, is a woman whose physiognomy clearly indicates that she is Black, yet her unstoppable mouth is always asserting the contrary. Mahalia's undisguised denial of her Blackness allows Jaynes to perform his racial solidarity—and tellingly rely on a bit of stereotypical sexism—to make the case for his race pride and her shameful rejection of Blackness. Mahalia is an obese hypochondriac hoarder who first greets him with "Niggers!" thus figuratively and literally chasing away her denigrated view of Blackness while ridiculously clad in a "muumuu of green paisley silk and a sparkled turban to match." Mahalia's aversion to Blackness is soon punished when she takes Jaynes to her acronymic mouthful of an association of Middle Passage Blacks who share her aversion to Blackness as well as her fantasy that she is mostly of American Indian descent. At the abrupt end of the Native American Ancestry Collective of Gary (NAACG) meeting, the association's members, with one exception, all discover that they are without question "Negro" and collapse into agonized hysterics.

When interpellating gender in *Pym*, only two types of female roles manifest, and as binaries to boot. In Jaynes's manifestations, a Black woman is either an Angel(a)—an ebony goddess with whom one should marry and mate—or a Mahalia—a traitor who seeks to pass. Their stereotypically

described comparative attractiveness also indicates the narrow sexist lens through which Jaynes reads them—as mating material. Angela's Blackness is her beauty, whereas Mahalia's denials of Blackness, it is so often noted, emanate from an obese and outrageously clad body.

In Poe's tale, the savage Black Tslalians claim the greater portion of the adventure, while the solemn, white, perhaps divine Tekelians enjoy exactly one vague paragraph of description. In *Pym*, the adventure is almost wholly in Tekelia and, with ironic intertextual comment, the Tslalians receive exactly one paragraph. These two texts are also qualitatively reversed, even though, as noted before, they stumble into explicit and implicit narrative contradictions (Johnson's consciously, Poe's unknown). Johnson's (white) Tekelians are smelly, slimy, greedy, and conniving, and visually they have almost become part of their frozen ice landscape, while the Tslalians, albeit briefly glanced, are a gorgeous and welcoming island/paradise people. Johnson makes clear the role of whiteness for the Black imagination seeking return, because the greater part of the tale of encounter is spent in the "other" race's, rather than the narrator's own, collective—that is, it is easier to imagine a utopian return through what one does *not* want, rather than through what one does.

In Poe's *Nantucket*, the events leading up to the discovery of Tslal are marked by strange animals and events. Pym and his crew spot what appears to be, except for its curly hair, a polar bear (and this while on the way to a tropical clime), and a boat of grinning corpses floats by, foretelling the savagery of the Tslalians but also possibly presaging the cannibalism in which the starving white crew, Pym included, engages. The impossibility of such a polar bear indicates that the tale is fueled more by the imagination than by Arthur Pym's true experiences. Because cannibalism is most often attributed to "primitive" races, such as Blacks, Central American Indians, South American Indians, and Pacific Islanders, to have it performed by whites also upsets the binary on which the traditional racist adventure narrative relies. Finally, unlike most other racist tales that feature white adventurers and Black savages, Poe's Arthur Pym relates to the reader his intention to exploit Tslalian labor and create a factory on the island that processes the sea cucumbers the "savages" will retrieve from the abundant ocean.

In Johnson's intertextual satire, Jaynes's story is equally "unbalanced." The encounter with whiteness is interpellated, as in *Kindred*, through the experience of enslavement. When Jaynes and his crew reach Tekelia, one

of their first encounters with the Tekelians is also with Arthur Pym—who, after ensuring that his narrative reached his good friend Edgar Allen Poe, remained in Tekelia. Pym has aged, but only slowly, and of course his racial politics are firmly antebellum: he mistakes Jaynes for a slave merchant and the Black crew for his cargo. Worse, once Jaynes emphatically reveals that he is also Black, Pym and the Tekelians enslave all of them.<sup>41</sup>

Then, also as in *Kindred* but in greater detail and more provocatively, the plot reverses itself as a Black agency is imagined and used to literally kill the white oppressor—as Dana does when she kills Rufus before her final return to the present. While in *Pym*, as in *Heremakhonon*, return can become a “tragic mistake” when imagined as a linear retracing (Jaynes literally retraces the route left by one of Poe’s characters-cum-actual-ancestor, Dirk Peters), the murderer in *Pym* is the traveler, not the “native.”

Like Poe’s Tslalians, Johnson’s Jaynes also seeks to trap and eradicate those who want to control his labor (loosely speaking, as Jaynes admits he was a lazy slave with an even lazier Tekelian master). In Johnson’s novel, Jaynes and the crew plot to commit nothing less than cold-blooded (pun intended by Johnson) genocide against their former masters, liquidating men, women, and children because the Tekelians (rather reasonably) seek to destroy the human ecoshelter whose exhaust is melting their habitat. Similar to the attack of the Tslalians on Pym and his crew in Poe’s *Nantucket*, the Tekelians’ acts of aggression against the Black crew in Johnson can be understood as a fight for their own survival and sovereignty—Johnson’s protagonist argues as much himself in his racial exegesis of Poe’s unfinished novel.

Jaynes, now residing in the shelter after having escaped the Tekelians, agrees to serve the hundreds of them—men, women, and children—rat poison to avoid the certain massacre of his five colleagues and the couple who own the dome. Giving the reader yet more pause, the murder plot is effected by pretending to break bread with the enraged Tekelians in the name of peace, to which they readily agree and proceed to laugh, sing, and eat. Hundreds, in short, are to be poisoned to benefit a pitiful few whose chances for survival (the eco-dome actually runs on oil) are questionable to begin with. The plot is discovered and the rest of Jaynes’s crew, with the exception of himself, Garth (Jayne’s aptly named hapless sidekick), and Pym are killed in battle before the Tekelians all die. In the last few pages, the three set sail and eventually discover the now real island of Tslal. Yet before sighting the island paradise, Pym mysteriously dies and so, conveniently, it

is only the two thirtysomething single Black heterosexual men (Garth and Jaynes) who make landfall. Like any utopian vision, this one most particularly suits young and single Black men who lack socioeconomic status in their own spacetime of the contemporary United States:

Rising up in our pathway was a man. He was naked except for the cloth that covered his loins. He was of normal proportions, and he was shaking his hand in the air, waving it, and we, relieved, waved ours back at him. Past him, minutes later, we saw that he was joined in welcoming us by others, women, more men, and the offspring both had managed. Whether this was Tslal or not, however, Garth and I could make no judgments. On the shore all I could discern was a collection of brown people, and this, of course, is a planet on which such are the majority.<sup>42</sup>

*Pym* concludes with the destruction of whiteness; it also tellingly ends with the destruction of Black identities whose existence is also an annoyance to Jaynes: Angela (after it becomes clear she does not love Jaynes); Jeff-Free, the gay Black activist couple; and, tellingly, the only other Black male, whose convenient demise may have much to do with his withering view of Jaynes and Garth as rather questionable specimens of Black manhood. Garth, of course, an impractical dreamer like Jaynes but also a chronic overeater who is also unemployed, explicitly fails on these two counts (most importantly in Jaynes's narrow self-regard) to play anything other than the role of Chris Jaynes's comic (and therefore unthreatening) sidekick.

*Pym* stages its encounter with the past by literally having it encounter the present—Pym and the Tekelians, in their frozen climate, have remained at a low entropy (not so miraculous when one considers that, yes, for many elements, entropy remains at a lowered state when cold, as cold inhibits movement). Considered in the light of popular discourses on theoretical particle physics cited here in *Physics of Blackness*, *Pym* offers us an encounter between a low-entropy, ordered society and a high-entropy, chaotic society (whose members are literally melting Antarctica) and does not really come down on either side. *Pym*'s narrator relates tales of suffering under the cruel Tekelians, but some of his descriptions of his encounters with these creatures leave nagging questions. He claims that, despite hundreds of years with Pym, the first Tekelian to learn how

to speak is Augustus, because of his affinity for Chris Jaynes. Jaynes also recounts an episode in which the pre-English-speaking Augustus nods in response to a question but narrates this gesture as if it were natural to Augustus, not learned. That a nod is not even a shared sign of assent on the settled continents of the earth begs belief that the Tekelians, whose difference from humans is endlessly underscored by Jaynes, nonetheless use the same gesture to stand in for the same signifier as we do. In short, *Pym* chides us on embarking on our unmediated returns through a strictly Middle Passage epistemology—not many in the collective will survive, and to do so, those survivors must both suffer and commit outrageously shameful acts while embracing an increasingly illogical set of spacetimes that must be invented to maintain the linear flow of events.

Even the experience of being enslaved loses its potential to grant authenticity. Upon being enslaved (importantly, as a twenty-first-century Middle Passage Black, not as a Black slave from the Atlantic world) Jaynes comments—in line with *Kindred's* view and Dubey's analysis of African American speculative fiction featuring time travel to the past—that knowing about slavery cannot prepare one for *being* a slave: ontology is held up over epistemology.<sup>43</sup> Yet Jaynes's narration of being enslaved deconstructs the slave experience itself. He is the slave of the Tekelian Augustus, whose name recalls the ancient Greek and Roman names many white U.S. slave owners liked to mockingly bestow on what they viewed as their profoundly benighted human livestock. Augustus also signifies poorly as a Middle Passage slave master because he is a sad sack: a disempowered and disliked member of the Tekelian clan from whom Jaynes escapes easily after several months of slumping around Augustus's foul hut feeling hungry.

*Pym's* deconstruction of Poe's novella and the monopoly of the Middle Passage epistemology in some narratives of return bear a useful resemblance to what is known in philosophy as "Münchhausen's Trilemma."<sup>44</sup> This "trilemma" (a deliberately humorous neologism for a di-lemma "plus one," named after Baron Münchhausen, who according to legend pulled himself and his horse out of a quagmire by his own hair) argues that justifying any question about causality means choosing one of three inadequate methods. One must either reason in a circle (citing premises to confirm a conclusion that must be cited to confirm one of the premises—as in pulling oneself off the ground by one's own hair); argue forever (because every cause is based on some prior cause, which in turn is based

on a prior cause, ad infinitum); or cite putatively self-evident principles (the self-evidence of which is open to doubt). Whichever method you choose requires you to accomplish the impossible. Applied to the Middle Passage epistemology, it is tempting to give up and accept that causality cannot be determined through a linear retracing because in tracing back the cause of an event one immediately faces difficulties, either running in circles, never coming to the end, or arguing without proof. I find Münchhausen's Trilemma applicable to the futility of interpellating Blackness exclusively through the Middle Passage epistemology because Blackness is always so much richer, connecting, and varying from moment to moment, as searches for interpellations of Blackness that preserve linearity seem to lead one along endless branches rather than a single line.

Jaynes's attempt to experience slavery, therefore, fails, although we do not know exactly where and when because we become unsure as to what exactly does and does not count as authentic Middle Passage slavery. Some slaves, albeit very few, enjoyed masters who liberated them when young and perhaps educated them in a trade or for a profession—can we claim they had the authentic slave experience? In the present, the horrors of Middle Passage slavery are clear—yet in attempting to trace it back and specifically define it for a contemporary Black subject, endless questions abound, informed by what we know and what we do not know about Middle Passage slavery. We encounter Munchhausen's Trilemma and our theoretical line confusingly blossoms into a complex skein of connections.

The Middle Passage past, as James Baldwin once famously described it in "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown" in his essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*, is daunting and ambiguous to the postwar Middle Passage Black subject. Thinking back, Baldwin reflects that "it was much worse than that" and yet at the same time "not that bad"<sup>45</sup>—this, *Physics of Blackness* argues, is what happens when one stages return through Epiphenomenal time. Ambiguity springs up because so many pasts have occurred and are possible—most Middle Passage Blacks possess not simply one or two but many slave ancestors, hence a plethora of Black Middle Passage pasts.

Given Jaynes's deep desire for linear interpellation, this might explain one of the most puzzling anecdotes in *Pym*. Tellingly, in the moment at which he is relating his descent from a "line of mulattoes" and his rejection by his Black classmates for "looking white," "James Baldwin" improbably appears as the worst of those classmates: "In sixth grade a little effete frog

named James Baldwin whupped my ass. He was a foot shorter than me, but he hung with hulking eighth-grade girls, who towered over both of us the entire time, taunting. . . . I had never even met James Baldwin, but it didn't matter, he attacked me anyway. I was different. He was puny, weak, but I was weaker."<sup>46</sup> On reporting the assault to his mother, she is as confused and as disbelieving as the reader in this intertextual moment. How is it that a child who matches the negative description Baldwin gave of himself, albeit having heard it first from his abusive stepfather ("ugly," with a small body, and "frog eyes"<sup>47</sup>), can be so violent and hateful? Read intertextually, we become more confused, because Baldwin's work is celebrated for its emphasis on love and inclusivity—on horizontal relationships between human beings, both within and across "races." As Little Jaynes's bully, however, Baldwin is now brutally vertical. Little Jaynes's mother and the librarian Mrs. Alexander respond to his tale with laughter, with the latter recommending to him, "Gets your little yellow butt down to the library. You gots to learn who you is."<sup>48</sup> Having lost his way in terms of his Black identity, he is encouraged to go to the library, read, and thus successfully (re)interpellate himself through a Middle Passage epistemology. Jaynes, we now know, dutifully did so, with horrific results—and perhaps because he felt disallowed from, or didn't know the existence of, other spacetimes. In order for Jaynes to be wholly Black, he must encounter and eradicate whiteness, and that entails encountering and eradicating all the forms of Blackness that threatened his own illusory linear interpellations.

Perhaps in "whupped his ass" Jaynes means to communicate that he had read Baldwin and found his worldview profoundly challenged. We will never know if this is so, but the following chapter in this book, "Quantum Baldwin and the Multidimensionality of Blackness," shows how Blackness need not limit itself to linear interpellations. More specifically, chapter 3 shows how Black Diasporic encounters can be framed to allow for a broader range of intersections than are permitted in Jaynes's fantastical epistemology, in which he is born from a "long line of mulattoes," eradicates whiteness, and achieves the "end of progress" by reaching an island whose collective offers roles that appear to favor his gender and sexuality.