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BLACK IN TIME: EXPLORING NEW ONTOLOGIES, NEW DIMENSIONS, NEW EPISTEMOLOGIES OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA¹

This paper explores the way in which contemporary physics offers different categories of time, or temporal coordinates, that can help shed life on the “closed” epistemologies in African Diaspora Studies. Using the example of Kamari Clarke’s “New Spheres of Transnational Formations: Mobilizations of Humanitarian Diasporas,” this article argues that Clarke’s use of what physicists refer to as “B series time” provides a broader, more inclusive epistemology for the study of the African diaspora in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

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In “New Spheres of Transnational Formations: Mobilizations of Humanitarian Diasporas” Kamari Clarke argues that the past few years have witnessed a sea change (pun intended) in the work and focus of many of the leading scholars in Diaspora Studies. More specifically, scholars such as Clarke (2009), Iton (2008) and Reid-Pharr (2007) have argued that socioeconomic difference, most frequently invoked by the rapid gains made by African Americans in their newly minted postwar “super power” nation, necessitates a reconsideration of the different political, social, and economic differences between Black communities across the globe.

Clarke uses ontology as the primary analytical lens and “in this regard I reevaluate the centrality of both trans-Atlantic slavery and race as the single most important problem of the 20th century, in order to detach and reattach a new ontology of sub-Saharan Africa in crisis to African America.” In short, Clarke first moves to decouple what I term a “Middle Passage Epistemology,” which I would argue is the dominant formation imagining, justifying, and celebrating what has been termed the “African diaspora” in the 20th century, beginning with St. Clair Drake, and perhaps most famously cemented in contemporary Black studies by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey* and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*.

As Clarke notes, some scholars already have moved away from trans-Atlantic slavery as an organizing principle for understanding Black collective identity. She notes that in her 2007 book, Bayo Holsley deliberately uses the term *transnational* in place of or in addition to diaspora in order to enable a more diverse analysis of the slave trade in Ghana. Scholars such as Tina M. Campt (2003) have focused on Black European communities traditionally excluded by a framework that focuses on the Middle Passage. Perhaps most influentially, in *The Practice of Diaspora*, Brent Edwards offers the concept of different “spacetimes” in order to construct a non-hierarchical notion of difference between different diasporic communities, arguing that we can apply a revision of Léopold Senghor’s theory of articulation—that is, difference is not only useful, it is necessary for meaningful movement—to best understand engagement through difference, and unity through difference.

While one would not ordinarily think of Black consciousness as a product of time, one must always first locate blackness in both space and time. Edwards’ invocation of “spacetime” deliberately evokes a different discipline—physics, or more specifically theoretical particle physics, where “spacetime” is both a subject of debate and a means toward understanding the deeply counterintuitive world of the subatomic particle, aka the quantum (Falk 2008; Greene 2004). As Falk explains:

With special relativity, space and time are much more closely related than Newton could have imagined. In the Newtonian world, two events may be separated either in time or in space, or both. A position in space can be given three numbers (for example, latitude, longitude and altitude), while a moment in time can be described by a single reference (for example, giving the precise time and date). With special relativity, however, we have to imagine combining these two sets of information. We must now

think of events laid out in a four-dimensional array that we can call “spacetime.” (167)

Focusing on the last sentence of the quote, we tentatively can transfer this understanding to the new arguments Clarke invokes and adds to on the African diaspora and transnational studies. More specifically, Clarke makes clear her intervention is about adding another dimension to Diaspora Studies because the current single dimension from which we work, “the centrality of both trans-Atlantic slavery and race as the single most important problem,” occludes or at least radically marginalizes a vast array of other diasporic experiences, other dimensions so to speak.

Clarke points to how “trans-Atlantic slavery and race” detaches other diasporic ontologies, the focus of her paper being to “reattach” (dovetailing nicely with Edwards’ use of articulating limbs) a “new ontology of sub-Saharan Africa in crisis to African America.” This is reorganization is crucial, she argues, because

In the twenty-first century, it is not the color line that summons our urgent attention, but the crisis of death and global complicity to live and let die. The dilemma of various weakened African state polities whose significant economic and political decisions are brokered outside of the country with international donors and institutions, must be seen alongside diasporic survivors of slavery in the Americas whose ontological formation emerged from a pre-Westphalian order. Yet while this comparative evaluation points to the central divergence of relationships in transition, it insufficiently addresses their pressing need for analytic attention. (2)

Although her focus is on ontologies, Clarke’s passage primarily uses time to define “problems” and solutions at work in this debate: “trans-Atlantic slavery” is an era; the “twenty-first century,” and “pre-Westphalian” likewise are invoked to define the frame of study and explain key differences between different Black communities. In other words, not unlike the way in which contemporary physics asserts time is a necessary dimension, so do Clarke (and, equally notably, Edwards’s theoretical terminologies) argue that time—at least here in the form of specific historical eras—must be considered, invoked, located, and defined to better understand the complexity of our diasporic formations.

Most of the Social Sciences and Humanities derive their standard notion of time from physics—specifically Sir Isaac Newton’s notion of

time as a fixed constant, linear in its movement—physics itself abandoned Newton’s belief a century ago. In its place are a variety of theories that begin with Albert Einstein’s discovery that time is not in fact a constant, but can speed up or slow down and, as such, may not exist. In other words, what we categorize as “time” may be a misnomer, an amalgamation of other phenomena we do not fully understand, an error of the mind and memory, or at the very least deeply misunderstood. As a result, physicists approach the concept of time with great care and caution while we in the Humanities tend to invoke it with the same assurance as the Enlightenment philosophers, who seized upon the “discovery” of Newtonian time as a means to develop timelines of progress against which they could compare and contrast the meaning and value of European civilizations against others. In short, they used Newtonian time to develop epistemologies.

If there is any area of conflation between African Diaspora Studies and Enlightenment philosophers, it is in the construction of epistemologies as linear “progress narratives,” in which in a metaorigin is determined, and all ensuing historical events are understood as a series of causes and effects that eventually relate back to this origin. Simply speaking, conservative Europeans and North Americans embrace Ancient Greece and Rome as the origin of their civilizations, and place non-Whites in an unenviable position of being mere, passive footnotes in these timelines. African American Studies, has responded quite successfully with what I call a “Middle Passage Epistemology,” in which our origin is the slave trade and slavery, or our yardstick of progress measured by how far away we are from those terrible centuries of chattel.

“New Spheres” makes its intervention by arguing that the Middle Passage is not a constant for all Black communities, even for (or perhaps especially) those located in Africa and defined outside of the “pre-Westphalian order.” Clarke argues that to ignore the influence of this era, this particular functioning of time, “insufficiently addresses [these new ontologies’] pressing need for analytic attention.” When we deploy an epistemology, we do so in order to observe, analyze and/or interpellate (in this particular case, to interpellate collective Black identities). In doing so, we unwittingly (or, perhaps, wittingly) change what we are interpellating and occlude other possibilities. In deploying the same epistemology, time and time again, in this case the Middle Passage Epistemology, we do in fact do what Clarke warns us of—automatically occluding other

types of information, other dimensions to our object of study.

Until recently, I thought I was the first to coin this term, but it is in fact in Annette Henry's "'There's Saltwater in Our Blood': The 'Middle Passage' Epistemology of Two Black Mothers Regarding the Spiritual Education of Their Daughters," first published in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* in 2006 (v19 n. 3 May–June 2006:329–345). Henry uses the term in a way similar to my own, albeit as an intimate discourse used by two African American mothers passing on a positive and productive identitarian counter-epistemology to their daughters:

The narrative of Mavis and Samaya evoked tensions produced at the intersections of living in American society as Black mothers and practitioners seeking a home pedagogy that resonated with their African-American heritage and traditions. As educators and as former students in American educational institutions, they mistrusted the mainstream system for its poor record of producing competent Black citizens. Thus, they sought alternatives. Their hybridized practices carried the hope of developing their daughters academically, emotionally and spiritually. Their insistence on the church and rites-of-passage programs for girls rested on their desire for a larger set of formative experiences in their daughters' lives than the curricular and philosophical orientations espoused either in public schools or at Malcolm X School. And, as mothers of pre-teen girls, they expressed, in veiled tones, a hope that these practices would protect their daughters against violent or regrettable situations specific to girls. (340)

As Henry memorably shows, the MPE is used here to sustain and protect young African American women from the more hostile, or at best indifferent or fetishizing epistemologies in which their race, gender, or both is disabled rather than enabled through interpellation. In like kind, many of the books of the Black Studies/African Diaspora canon seek to serve the same function—of offering Africans and peoples of African descent an enabling rather than disabling interpellation by, interestingly enough, using the Middle Passage and slavery as our interpellative events.

Yet even here the MPE also occludes many other Blacks, diasporic identities. While Henry uses what physicists have called "A series time," "simply the everyday notion of time in terms of past, present and future," Clarke uses what they refer to as "B

series time," "refers to fixed labels that we attach to specific moments in time . . . this is sometimes called the 'tenseless' view of time." (Falk 2008:146.) The difference is loaded: contemporary theoretical physicists such as Lee Smolin, Lisa Randall, but also those over a century back, such as John McTaggart view "A series time" as at least deeply problematic (Randall 2005; Smolin 2007) and at the most simply illusory, a trick of the mind because experiments in particle physics seems to indicate that time does not flow and, therefore, tenses of time exist only in the linguistic and psychological register, not the physical world (McTaggart 1908). Simply, put this is because "A series time" requires a fixed point of reference that allows one to then speak of the past, present and future, whereas "B series time" provides "exact coordinates," so to speak, which do not require a universal fixed point of reference.

I raise this distinction to link Henry's definition of the "Middle Passage Epistemology"—a counter epistemology to allow a less harmful interpellation of African American female subjecthood (or "consciousness," as Henry terms it)—to my own definition, in which I also question the MPE's fixity in "A series" time. Henry uses terms such as "African American," "rites of passage," "hybridized practices" that assume fixed meanings accorded by the MPE. A Somali-American for example, is quite literally an African American but has trouble being interpellated by the MPE even in Henry's brief quote above—she is not determined by the Middle Passage, and may understand herself and be understood by her community as a woman at the age of 13, but it is unlikely Henry means "girls" must be 12 and under, and "rites of passage" in the Chicago African American community Henry studies will likely be different from those in the Somali community. Yet the reliance on "A series time" implicitly locates this hypothetical Somali-American wholly outside Henry's discourse, regardless as to whether Henry seeks this exclusion. In Clarke's article, by contrast, the invocation of "pre-Westphalian" and other "B series time" markers, quickly and clearly invokes all black communities because there are several points of entry rather than the fixed timeline of the Middle Passage Epistemology in which past, present and future can only be accessed by those willing and able to interpellate themselves through this epistemology.

When we interpellate ourselves, announcing our identity, we do so through time and a specific ordering of knowledge. Given the breadth and depth of African diaspora identities, it makes sense that the ontologies and epistemologies through which we interpellate ourselves should be more open and

tolerant rather than closed and fixed. Edwards, Clarke, Holsey, Campnt, and others are all moving away from “Middle Passage Epistemologies”; we are entering into a new era of being black in time.

NOTES

1. Depending on whom you read, “Black diaspora” and “African diaspora” are either interchangeable or very different (the former often suggesting a non-Africa centered structure, the latter just the opposite). As this paper is in response to Kamari Clarke’s I will adopt her exclusive use of “African diaspora,” and leave my own contribution to the debate for my book-length manuscript, *The Physics of Blackness*.

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