

Blackness, epiphenomenal reality, and “our painfully shared humanity”: an interview with Michelle M. Wright

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ABSTRACT

Renata Morresi interviews Michelle W. Wright about the origins and function of her concept of time, which she began to explore in *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015). ‘Epiphenomenal time’ challenges the supposedly objective view of time that we usually adopt and, in doing so, expands and deepens the notion of Blackness by identifying its ‘where’ and ‘when’ rather than just the ‘what’, thus shedding light on the blind spots of history, including the subjects who have traditionally been marginalized by overly linear narratives, and making us aware of the presence of the past in the now. Discussing Black women who made important cultural contributions that have long been misrepresented, such as Black Renaissance writer Nella Larsen and jazz trumpeter Valaida Snow, and considering speculative writers such as Nalo Hopkinson, Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin, Wright discusses the polydimensionality of complicated identities that cannot be easily classified and invites us to explore “our painfully shared humanity” and the possibilities for change.

Keywords

Time, epiphenomenal time, history, progress, Blackness, race, Black women

Renata Morresi: Your notion of ‘Epiphenomenal Time’ rethinks history in a more inclusive fashion, making room for marginal subjectivities, invisibilized bodies, and unthought conceptualizations against the linear progress narrative that frequently fails to account for what does not fit into a cause-and-effect relationship. It is a challenging way of re-designing history and extremely fruitful for bridging those gaps and oddities in the archive (or what ‘look like’ gaps and oddities) that often concern Black subjects. Has it been difficult to integrate this view within your expertise in postcolonialism and poststructuralism, where the suffix ‘post’ evokes a more classical view of time, or is it not rather the other way around, that these theories, each in its own way, have generated the seeds from which your concept of time has grown?

Michelle M. Wright: You know, you would *think* that exactly that sort of conundrum would have inspired my theorizing of Epiphenomenal Time, and it may have in some way, but it was really this lack of conversation over the definition of Blackness that spurred me. I didn’t

understand how we could be comfortable just dropping this label on everyone from Pharaoh Ramses II to Alexander Pushkin to Beyoncé.

This question of how we define Blackness is very salient to me as an African American who is biracial and grew up in Western Europe, attending school with the sons and daughters of Black U.S. military personnel as well as the sons and daughters of extremely wealthy (and usually royal) West African diplomats. As a child, it was clear to me that there were many different ways to be Black, and that some folks had every reason not to identify with that label, especially when they grew up as Akan in Ghana, say, and did not encounter this term “Black,” until someone from the West placed it on them.

We have – and have had – growing communities of Black folks from the Anglophone and Hispanophone Caribbean, West and East and Central Africa, and North Africa but haven’t adopted a language that enables those differences and all that wondrous diversity to be defined. At the moment, what we have is two dominant notions of Blackness, both really developed in the West: African Americans who identify as descended from enslaved peoples in the U.S., and West Africans, usually Nigerian and/or Ghanaian.

So I was searching for a way to be more inclusive and accurate in representations of Blackness, and my theorization of an “Epiphenomenal” spacetime allowed for that – the inclusion of different kinds of peoples in the African Diaspora and from different eras. Epiphenomenal Time also works, as you point out, when it comes to the temporal markers we use in academe, such as poststructuralism and postcolonialism.

It’s interesting that there have been so many academic debates around the ‘post’ in postcolonial, but not so much the ‘post’ in poststructuralism (that I am aware of)! With regard to the postcolonial, I would argue that almost everyone who works in postcolonial studies has difficulty integrating the ‘post’ part of it because, as Engels argued with Marx, historical events and their aftermath do not stop on nice, neat little moments in the dialectic; there is always ‘overflow’, or whatever you want to call it. So, whether you believe that colonialism did indeed end, did not end, or is still carrying on under other names (and other ways), you still have to contend with colleagues whose works reject your point of view.

For me, the ‘post’ in poststructuralism is worth ruminating on for completely different reasons. I think it was Lisa Thompson, a playwright and scholar at University of Texas at Austin, who said to me that *Physics of Blackness*, like so many other theory books in Black Studies coming out at that time, uses poststructuralism but doesn’t acknowledge it. I am not sure if I agree with her observation (and one reason I like your question is that you presume it does not), but I do think that many of the central tenets of poststructuralism have embedded themselves in contemporary literary theory, so there are times when people are using it and not necessarily aware of it, or even willing to acknowledge it. In this context, the ‘post’ isn’t a site of contestation (there is no ‘de-structural’ movement to complement the rise

of decolonial studies), but rather an anchor, I think, that has sunk itself rather deeply into our scholarly minds.

In this moment, I am answering your question with Epiphenomenal Time – exploring all the ways that ‘post’ signifies to me: where I struggle, where I observe, where I feel gaps. I suspect it is quite difficult – if not impossible – to ever really do away with a concept. At best, it is forgotten but nonetheless reprises itself under other names, so rather than eschew or embrace either ‘post’, I use them to remind myself and my audience of the absolute rarity of closure when it comes to historical events, and to treat these attempts at historical markers as opportunities to explore their incompleteness.

RM: In 1940, Benjamin wrote about the concept of history and how its continuum would be disrupted every time the revolutionary classes decided to take action. For the historian, it is not a matter of listing events like the beads of a rosary, he says, but of recognizing constellations in which different eras coexist. His thought was influenced by Ernst Bloch's: "Es ist immer nur halb geschehen, was geschehen ist, und die Kraft, die es geschehen ließ, die sich in ihm ungenügend genug heraussetzte, treibt in uns fort und wirft auch noch weiter ihren Schein auf all das Halbe und Weghafte, immer noch Zukünftige hinter uns" (Bloch 1971, 335).¹ Your concept of Epiphenomenal Time strikes me as still different: rethinking the past in a nonlinear way casts new lights on the present, yes, but it creates a virtuous circle that reflects those lights back, and allows us to discover not only what was hidden, but what was in plain view and we did not yet know how to think.

MMW: First, thank you for that lovely translation of Bloch! I have had some folks compare my notion of Epiphenomenal Time to Benjamin, which is flattering but, exactly as you point out, not quite accurate. I think Benjamin, like Bergson, is unwilling to relinquish a certain sense of stability – even stasis – within temporality, even as both work to integrate the subjective experience into our understanding of time. In this case, by ‘stability,’ I mean certain fixed causalities. Epiphenomenal Time simultaneously reduces and explodes spacetime, doing so by insisting on the contingency of the ‘now,’ the simultaneous capaciousness and precarity of this moment. I have to admit I am a little entranced by your language here about a reflection of lights that “allows us to discover not only what was hidden, but what was in plain view and we did not yet know how to think.” I would add that some things also become enshrouded, lost, or misunderstood in this moment as well – the ‘now’ giveth and the ‘now’ taketh away! The work to understand is unending, as is our capacity to forget, misremember, confuse, which is why Epiphenomenal Time can only understand progress – a sense of moving forward towards what is most productive and leaving behind that which was unproductive – as always already existing in a vacuum. Whenever one truly works to take in the meaning of a moment, there will be such an array of

dynamics and interpretations one should acknowledge, so any attempt at defining a continuum is either impossible or needs to remain quite consciously narrow.

This leads me to the second area where I stray from Benjamin, and which causes some deep consternation on the part of some African American scholars familiar with my work. I do believe that we primarily live in the world through our perceptions and that if there is anything transcendent out there, not subject to change, we have no means of truly grasping it. So any light that shines, any truth we come across, is always contingent, always changing as our notions of good and evil, sane and insane, rational and irrational, important and unimportant, endlessly transform.

When I think of Walter Benjamin in 1940, I see the need to firmly establish a line between truths and fascist lies, and I am not interested in troubling that (even if I could). At the same time, here I am today in 2022, witnessing a former President seeking to overturn US democracy, and I don't fully stand with the left-wing pundits who declare that such hatred, violence, cruelty and disrespect for the rule of law is unprecedented in the U.S. That really depends on one's perspective, on how one defines such terms as cruelty and criminality. I push against discourses that attempt trumpet their views from a position of moral superiority.

To get back to Benjamin's observation about revolutions disrupting the continuum, I disagree that there is such a thing as a continuum. I think continuity is a mirage, and instead, what we have is endless actions that are an attempt to perpetuate certain methods and beliefs. I argue this because people often think of racism and capitalism as self-perpetuating monoliths or a form of a continuum. This, I think, suggests that both are natural offshoots of human nature, and I don't believe that is so. I think those who gain from bigotry and violence and cruelty may believe this, but they are the ones who are endlessly lobbying governments, boards of trustees, and "C-suite" executives, as well as major shareholders at corporations, to crush opposition, to deny that ethics and morality have a place in the state or the military-industrial complex. These things, I firmly believe, can be changed, and sometimes they happen overnight.

RM: In "1619: The Danger of a Single Origin Story", published two years ago on *American Literary History*, you look at Nikole Hannah-Jones' 1619 Project and question whether it is wise to identify the commonly accepted beginning of chattel slavery in North America as the foundational moment of US history. Not because it undermines a utopian ideal, but rather the opposite: in offering a homogeneous narrative that is immediately readable, it relies on exclusionary scripts and contributes to denying complexity. In your article, you point out a series of aspects that are often forgotten: that there are historically marginalized subjectivities that can no longer be neglected or work as special cases, that the dimension of social class also plays a role in cultural analyses and that should not be underestimated, and

that it is ill-advised to pretend that US Blacks constitute a uniform group. At the very moment of affirming one's subjectivity, one tends to downplay multiplicity and diversity, as if they were somehow disempowering: how do you explain this paradox?

MWW: This question segues nicely from the last one! I am not sure if the paradox you mention is grounded in human nature or perhaps capitalism with its focus on the individual (which, I think, tends to lead to a variety of individuals who all identify themselves as members of the same collective, yet who nonetheless individually proffer highly personal, individual definitions of that collective), or some mixture of various phenomena. I do believe that one conundrum we seem to face worldwide is that all collectives resist interpellating, or reading themselves through any historical narrative outside their own – and yet pretty much all collectives demand that all other collectives need to drop their own narratives and redefine themselves through *their* specific historical narrative. That is the beginning of the paradox – the tendency to reject all other histories that are not from one's own point of view. I think this rejection is due to what I argue in *Physics*: that we tend to deploy histories as epistemologies, narratives of knowledge that provide us the moral meaning and justification for our collective. When you change the history, that meaning and justification are challenged. This means that not only are collectives prone to rejecting the histories of other collectives as legitimate, they are also prone to rejecting those members who come from more than one ethnic or religious background.

There are some collectives, I think, who embrace that multiplicity – but not many. I am not a Caribbeanist, but I am struck by how so many Caribbean folk proudly point to their multiracial and/or multiethnic ancestries. For them, as I understand it, Blackness is a capacious category that can encompass racial difference: they are proud of their African, Asian, South Asian, European, and indigenous roots, and it in no way “dilutes” the fact of their Blackness.

It is not a popular opinion amongst Black scholars in the U.S., but I do believe that trying to deploy a Middle Passage epistemology in its strictest form as a universal truth – as Hannah-Jones does – pushes one group into the spotlight, another group slightly out of it, and the rest of the United States, indigenous peoples, Latinx, Chicanx, Asian Americans, South Asian Americans, Arab Americans, those who are literally *African* Americans, are erased once again from consideration.

Now, to be sure, when we weigh one historical narrative, or collective epistemology, against another, there are also power differentials to consider. White conservatives howl with a deeply bruised vanity and arrogance when someone like Hannah-Jones dares to challenge their truly offensive and deeply erroneous version of history (that white settlers were simply seeking ‘freedom’ from ‘tyranny’ when they came to the U.S., and that their embrace of Black enslavement and deliberate genocide of indigenous peoples is somehow exaggerated or

simply unimportant). What they ignore, of course, is the fact that ‘their’ version of history is usually the only history most U.S. schoolchildren – and adults – know! It is by and large the only one deemed ‘legitimate’ by those who control school curricula, determine what is published as ‘history,’ and what can be approved for a film, documentary, TV show, etc. They act as if they are truly under attack when in fact all that would really happen is that some of the history she discusses becomes appended to this mainstream white history – it becomes one day’s lesson plan or one chapter from a book or one question on an exam and, as such, simply reinforces the incorrect assumption that U.S. history is mostly a history of white accomplishment with minor contributions from a handful of minorities. So “1619” is hardly a threat.

All the same, I don’t think much change comes from trying to replace one collective’s history with another’s. I also don’t think it’s possible to create some sort of universal history that speaks to all people. I do think, however, that we need to ‘try,’ as best we can, to provide our students and our citizens with as inclusive and accurate a history as we can.

I think the best way to be as accurate as possible about a nation’s history is to acknowledge the blind spots that attend every moment. Rather than attempting to teach history from some sort of omniscient, perfectly objective space of transcendent truth (which is pretty much how U.S. universities teach knowledge), we get closer to the truth by telling our students that we will work to teach them what we know right now, what the politics of historicization are right now, what histories we must still work to learn because they have been ignored, forgotten, dismissed, denigrated and/or distorted for so long (i.e., indigenous histories of the United States before and after it became the United States). I think that approach enables students to think about and look for the aporia in our lectures and scholarship, which in turn can empower them to seek out answers. When we teach history from that fictional space of omniscience and transcendence, we cover up those holes, and minimize or hide those distortions, so that most students will not be aware of the rather ragged and uneven narrative they are being taught.

RM: You are working on Black Germans during the Second World War: I can hardly imagine how difficult it is to work on their ‘unexpected’ presence in an archive that seems dominated by a now almost crystallized view of who might have been there, why, and in what capacity. An example: for years I have encountered Salaria Kea’s name in footnotes or mentioned in the correspondences of others. Kea was, among other things, an African American nurse who joined the American Medical Unit during the Spanish Civil war. Only recently more articulate studies have emerged that could clarify her story and make her own narrative heard. As Carmen Cañete Quesada notes, for a long time, “critics were discouraged by the gaps and inconsistencies they encountered in her personal history,” so much so that they “accused her of ‘self-aggrandizing’ her memoirs” (Cañete 2019, 116).

These questions about her reliability and authenticity seem to conceal a form of insecurity, or a cognitive bias, on the part of scholars, as if we should first make sure that the Black person confirms a pre-existing Black ideal before considering the specificity of her individual presence and material experience. Are you coming across similar cases?

MMW: I have never heard of Salaria Kea, so I have to read more about her – thank you for calling her to my attention. And yes, when it comes to similarities, there are two cases that come to mind immediately: that of the Black Renaissance writer Nella Larsen and Valaida Snow, a Black female jazz trumpeter of the 1930s and 1940s whose virtuosity was directly compared to Louis Armstrong (who dubbed her the “world’s second best trumpeter” after himself. While this sounds arrogant, it was actually quite gracious given the intense discrimination Black women musicians faced in the world of jazz, not to mention Armstrong’s unrivaled title as the genius of jazz).

In both cases, it was African American women who doubted the narratives these women related about themselves. In the case of Larsen, Thadious Davis, a highly (and rightly) celebrated historian, couldn’t find any supporting evidence for Larsen’s claim that she had visited her biological father’s homeland of Denmark when younger. This wasn’t a mere quibble because literary scholars know about the famous scenes in Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* where her protagonist, Helga Crane, actually visits Copenhagen and finds that while Denmark doesn’t have anything resembling the Jim Crow laws one found in the U.S., she is nonetheless treated as an exotic object rather than a human being.

So Davis, unable to find any corroborating evidence, wrote in the Larsen biography that Larsen must have invented this trip to appear more interesting, authentic, etc. Several decades later, a white male historian named George Hutchinson was working on a biography of Larsen and he in fact found evidence (ships’ logs) that she did indeed visit Denmark when younger and, in doing so, changed the scholarship on Larsen. We now read *Quicksand* as a novel deeply influenced by Larsen’s own life experiences in both the United States and Denmark, rather than as a novel in which she imagined what it might be like for a mixed-race African American woman to try and find some measure of freedom and acceptance in Europe.

In the second case, novelist Candace Allen, decided to write a novel based on the life of Valaida Snow. Like Larsen, Snow is a bit of a mystery, with little known about major parts of her life. What we do know is that Snow, like many African American jazz musicians facing intense and constant harassment from the police and exploitative contractual agreements from white club owners (not to mention having to work in clubs where only whites audiences were admitted), decided to work in Europe in the late 1930s and 1940s. Once the Nazi invasion had reached through all of Western Europe, most African Americans returned to the U.S., but Valaida wasn’t among them. She eventually did show up in very poor health and

suffering from what we would now likely assume to be PTSD. Valaida related that she had been arrested while in Denmark, and had ended up in a prison camp before being freed and sent back to the United States through a prisoner swap.

For whatever reason, Allen chose not to believe this story, and went further than Davis' commentary on Larsen by casting aspersions on Snow's mental health, veracity, etc. because she could not find records proving that this had happened. I consider this a much more egregious case than Davis' analysis of Larsen because neither the Nazis nor their fascist collaborators in Europe were particularly interested in keeping accurate records of arrests – and as we all know, what records that existed were largely destroyed once it became clear that the Allied invasion was going to be successful. So Allen chooses to believe a corrupt and viciously racist regime known for its mendacity rather than a Black woman who had no reason to lie and was certainly not known to be a liar.

In both cases, however, Black women's accounts of their lives were discounted for no better reason, it seemed, than that they were Black and female and accomplishing extraordinary things, exactly like Salaria Kea. When we contrast this against, say, historians disputing claims that Thomas Jefferson would have fathered children with one of his enslaved women simply because Jefferson officially wrote that he abhorred the idea of such liaisons, it allows you to see the degree to which sometimes history comes down to how one historian personally considers the likelihood of a scenario.

RM: I am writing these lines during what seems to be the hottest summer in Italy in two centuries. There has been much talk about turning off air conditioners – a great technical advance over the short distance but over the long haul a tool that fuels global heating. It makes me think of the way you dismantle the assumption that in the passage of time itself there must be a form of progress. This inability to foresee the consequences of a series of actions and understand their side effects should make us wary. I also think of Octavia Butler's imaginative gesture of thinking not just the impossible, but the unthinkable: when the protagonist of *Kindred*, Dana, travels back in time and finds herself a slave in a slave system, Butler shows us, among the other things, what we often refuse to think about, that slavery exists to this day, and in many parts of the planet. Black history certainly teaches us how to become aware of the discontinuities and failures of so-called modernity, their legacy in the current state of affairs, and the regressive dangers that still loom over us all. I wonder: can our traditional view of time (and an awareness of its limits) fuel a form of defeatism?

MMW: I love this question! Yes, while at first, it may seem counterintuitive, I think time – or, at least, what we think of as time, which tends to be a linear progress narrative – has a great deal to do with the question of slavery, racism, human nature, and the “end game” for human civilization.

Interestingly enough, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is the most popular of all of her novels (which is really saying something, given the popularity of so many of them!). According to an interview I read a few years back, Butler was very interested in the question of survivor's guilt – that is, to what degree contemporary U.S. descendants of Atlantic slavery might feel guilty for being alive after so many generations of their ancestors has to endure the truly unthinkable while enslaved. It is a profound thought: to endure, to survive, from the brutal trek on bare feet from potentially any part of the continent of Africa to the West Coast, the darkness and claustrophobic crush of bodies, the suffocating smell in the dungeons at a place like Elmina, the terrifying shackled voyage, chained to the living and the dead, the rape endured and, of course, the nightmare of enslavement in the Americas at the hands of those who saw you as animal rather than human. I have thought about this, and Butler has thought about this, so I am sure there are others who also wonder if all that pain and suffering could ever be viewed as “worth it” when contemplating the warp of our own lives.

The very pit of that question, however, is centered in a particular notion of time, that linear progress narrative, which claims a direct link between ourselves and our enslaved ancestors. Yet, as I argue in *Physics of Blackness*, that concept of time moving forward in a straight line, isn't based on any sort of scientific observation of time; it was an assumption made by philosophers based on their (mis)understanding of Isaac Newton's laws of motion and gravity. Time, if it does exist, does not move in a straight line. Ancestrally, genetically speaking, it's even less linear and connected: geneticists now estimate that we do not share very much genetic material with our ancestors, especially the further back you go. In other words, there is no actual material connection between you and *most* of your oldest ancestors: you do not have their specific DNA. This is one of the reasons why siblings are different from one another: there is some variation in DNA between them, and some DNA from your parents never appears in any of their offspring.

So this connection we imagine between ourselves and our ancestors is more imagination than anything else. This isn't to claim that there is *no* connection; I know some folks feel it must be “all, or nothing at all” – but it 'is' to claim that we should probably focus our sense of connection on those who live all around us right now rather than our ancestors. After all, our actions are entangled, truly, with the lives of our contemporaries, so it may well make more sense to contemplate the life of our mail delivery person, the lives of the elderly neighbors who live alone and feel unseen, or our annoying work colleagues who may know no other way to express the pain or fear they endure at home – all those to whom we both do and do not feel affinity and yet to whom we are entangled.

But to get to your question on our understanding of slavery. Yes! One of the first lectures I give to students when I am teaching a unit that engages with the Atlantic slave trade, is focused on context. Black people are not the only people to have ever been

enslaved. There are Black people still enslaved today, and enslaved in both Italy and the United States. There are enslaved people in our cities, hidden away, sold for sex and labor, and we likely see them without knowing it. And, finally, slavery has always existed and may well exist for as long as human beings will exist due to that desire to feel superior to others, that greed for power and wealth and, sadly, something as seemingly innocuous as our love of chocolate, because most cocoa bean workers are enslaved children. So I work to communicate that slavery is not something U.S. Blacks have a monopoly on claiming, nor is it something that has ceased to exist, nor is it a practice from which every one of us doesn't in some way profit from. Cheap food, cheap labor, cheap clothing, etcetera.

This is one of the sobering elements to Epiphenomenal Time: that the evils of the past are not in the past, but in fact endure today, often in changed form, and therefore in ways that we do not recognize. As stated earlier, progress only happens in a vacuum: when one claims that something has progressed, one is clearing away all of those people for whom things have not improved. This doesn't mean we should censure mentions of progress, but we do need to contextualize it.

Finally, you ask if our belief in the linear progress narrative is more harmful than helpful because we feel as if we are simply leaves caught up in the current, victims to that unrelenting force moving forward. Honestly, I don't know! I can see how it both helps and hinders, and it really can come down to outlook. For some, the linear progress narrative signals that a better day 'must' be coming; for others, it is dismal proof that humanity is headed off the cliff to self-destruction. In either situation, Epiphenomenal Time should serve as a contextualizing complement, encouraging us to look all around, down and up, 'within,' and not just straight forward, if we want to try and comprehend this moment as best we can. Almost all things are possible in any given moment – good and bad; what we choose to do about it is, of course, the most meaningful element of all.

RM: At the microscopic level, Newtonian laws no longer work, and physics must devise an alternative way of thinking about space and time, a way that inspires how you deconstruct the certainties that sacrifice diversity in the name of a consistent time continuum. Looking at Simone Leigh's giant sculptures at the 2022 Venice Biennale, thinking about the way they become a source of empowerment by tying together very distant elements, objects from African traditions, American tropes, huge architectural spaces, and singular bodies, I wondered if it is not also the macroscopic, the global, what is so large as to be ungraspable, that requires from us a different understanding and greater care when we try to devise a framework that accounts for many relationships and much complexity. Is the Black imagination, so close to the experience of diaspora and its many routes/roots, especially gifted in planetary thinking? I can think of Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*, for example.

How striking the way the author imagines the Great 'Nansi Web planetary entity and the nanotechnologies called *eshu*, which become interconnected voices in the human minds. She blends the human and the machinic, alien organisms, folkloric figures, and digital entities, creating a universe in which, through new symbioses and alliances, multiplicity is accommodated, making the most of each singular experience...

MMW: I'll just briefly note, to begin this answer, that the question of scale confuses me, just as it confuses physicists right now: Newtonian physics and particle physics (what is often called quantum physics) seem utterly unrelated. Yet how can it be that a large ball of dirt will obey the basic laws of gravity, but the atomic particles that comprise that ball do not?! Then you think about how scale is relative – what you refer to as the macroscopic is infinitesimal from a cosmic point of view, and so forth. Yes, scale absolutely baffles me, and I am still trying to think my way around it.

To the rest of your question: I've always said that I went into Black Studies not because I think Black people are the most fascinating people in the world, but because it is one of the best ways to 'learn' about the world. After all, Blackness can begin with the earliest of humanity, it intersects with all major civilizations, from the Middle East to Asia and South America, Oceania and Russia, the Artic Circle, Antarctica, the Americas and, of course, Europe. Not only that, but those intersections – and, in many cases, conservative white Western denials of a Black presence, which even precedes the denial of Black contributions – provide not only insight into history but sobering reminders of how all histories are jealously curated by those in power. For example, trying to tell the history of the United States rapidly devolves into nonsensical mythologies if one elects to skip or downplay the Atlantic slave trade (as, for example, President Trump and now Florida Governor Ron De Santis are trying to do in the school curricula). A truly holistic engagement with African American history would also bring in indigenous histories because we are also intersected with almost all Native American nations, from being enslaved by some, such as the Chickasaw, and being allied with others; as Buffalo soldiers, African Americans participated in the attempted genocide of those nations, and today, Black Seminoles are suing for the right to be recognized as members of that nation.

We are often told that history is written by the victors, but there are two caveats to that. One, the victors are not the only historians, and two, their histories are often propaganda, with little truth to be learned. Polydimensional engagement with marginalized histories is the richest, most complex, most challenging, most revealing, most educational, most precious, and most truthful. – As you point out, exceptional works of art reflect that polydimensionality. I find Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* exactly as you say – a deep reflection on the posthuman, the cyborg, the real, the fantastical, and the Anthropocene. N.K. Jemisin's

Broken Earth trilogy is, to me, much the same. Neither author, like Octavia Butler, uses speculative fiction to denigrate one group and praise another: they instead explore our painfully shared humanity, our deeply flawed existence, our complicated identities; our polydimensionality, if you will. In fact, I am currently co-editing a special issue of the U.S. journal *The Black Scholar* with Professor Susana Morris, where we focus on the largely overlooked analyses that speculative fiction authors such as Nalo Hopkinson, Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin offer on the Anthropocene, the post-human, climate catastrophe, and the obsessive drive for power over others that some humans have.

RM: One of the twelve basic articles of the Italian Constitution states, "All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions." Recently, some Italian intellectuals have proposed deleting the word 'race' from the article as an invented and deadly construct. Others argue that it should be left as evidence of a Constitution founded on the struggle against Nazi-Fascism, which made racial ideology one of its cornerstones. I am not asking your opinion on an internal debate in a country whose fascist regime took part in the Shoah, a country with a colonial and imperialist past that is still largely unprocessed, and that has only recently begun to work out its own multicultural reality. However, it seems to me that once again there is confusion here about the meaning of the term 'race': it can't be one-dimensional given its hi/stories, which have occurred and are still occurring at different *spacetimes* on the planet. Can we come up with better tools for defining 'race'?

MMW: I am writing my response to your question on the day of Italy's election results, with Giorgia Meloni's fascist *Fratelli d'Italia* party poised to now lead a far right-wing coalition. This is a painful example of an Epiphenomenal moment. As you note in your question, Italy is now slowly coming to grips with its multicultural past and, at the same time, Italy's right wing is ascendant; progress only happens in a vacuum.

To your question of race. I think the term "race" is such a popular term because it hides so many sins and myths, and is void of the accuracy it seems to promise in defining its signified. It is, at its vile heart, the attempt to claim a shared biology within a group of people, when in fact that determination is made almost solely from superficial looks.

I think you would agree with me that it's also important to have a bit of historical knowledge about the history of this term in the modern world. In *Physics of Blackness*, I discuss how the past is never really past – it is all around us in changed form. All the people that lived, the buildings, food, etc – either they exist, like buildings, looking much the way they did when erected, or else in changed form through decay, decomposition, and repurposing – something the natural world is exceptionally good at. Fascism never really died, and one salient proof is the stunningly ignorant way European conservatives handle

this question of race by pretending it is a category from nature rather than the invention of rather feverish minds in search of power and profit. In failing to recognize their own progeny – this invention of race as a so-called genetic or biological collective – European politicians and intellectuals almost guarantee its chaotic, destructive existence as a shibboleth and scapegoat (and perhaps that is the goal)?

Europe has never been white. Before there was such a thing as “Europe” and “Negroes” or “Moors,” there were Black people in Europe. Conservatively speaking, the Roman Empire was unable to expand until it conquered the North African civilization of Carthage, and that same Empire was threatened again by Hannibal, one of the greatest African generals. Europeans have always had an African past, and it isn’t one that began with colonialism and the slave trade, the way the modern invention of the race began.

In the U.S., anti-racist scholars tend to use euphemisms for race – we say “ethnicity” or even “culture” – as a way to deploy the racial essentialisms we seek to use without calling it as such (the right-wing used to do the same thing to casually disguise their own racism, but they are no longer afraid to be bluntly ugly and openly violent). So both racists and anti-racists seem to have a need for this word, meaning it won’t go away any time soon. And I don’t believe we can truly eradicate or censure anything because nothing really goes away or disappears; instead, it’s displaced, changed, or repurposed.

If we want this clumsy, vague, dangerous, and chaotic notion of race to be minimized, subverted by something else, then we will need to change our behavior – which I think we can. We have to stop, I think, looking back with such yearning onto our imagined pasts and mythical ancestors, we have to stop dreaming of impossible futures with perfect progeny and engage, right here and right now, with our Epiphenomenal reality. We must acknowledge our entanglements with one another, as horrid and as repulsive as we find some of them, and acknowledge those parts of us that are entangled – and we must work to change those entanglements into symbiotic relationships of care rather than hierarchical relationships of service.

Notes

¹ “What has happened is only half happened, and the power that made it happen, which was insufficiently expressed in it, continues to drive us and also casts its glow on all that is still incomplete and distant, still future behind us.” Author’s translation.

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