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"There are better ways and places to spend your time": historical stillness, quantum narration, and Black spacetime(s) in Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book*

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ABSTRACT

Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book* presents a peculiar narrative structure through which two stories that at the beginning are apparently unrelated progressively overlap, resulting in a blurred temporal dimension in which past, present, and future are tangled together. While such temporality seems to replicate the oppressive timeframe projected by the afterlife of slavery, the historical stillness in which Black Americans are ensnared by their nation's "racial calculus," this essay suggests that it is possible to read the novel as an attempt to place Blackness in a multidimensional narrative that breaks free from the spatial-temporal constrictions imposed by institutional racism. In so doing, *Hell of a Book* arguably rebuts Afropessimistic claims about the narrative being inherently anti-Black by disrupting linear spacetime and projecting a chronotope that can be described through quantum physics – and more specifically through the paradox implied by the principle of quantum superposition and the Many-Worlds interpretation of that same principle.

Keywords

Afterlife of slavery, Afropessimism, narrative, possible worlds, quantum physics

> "For this world also which seems to us a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale."
>
> Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*

Still in the afterlife

In *Just Us: An American Conversation*, Claudia Rankine asks: "Do time's constraints turn out to be human constraints?" (2020, 74). A rhetorical question that, read in the context of the poet's investigation of the tangible and invisible privileges afforded by whiteness, suggests that the ways in which Black people experience time may be the result of racialized oppression. In Rankine's words, then, time is not only man-made but rather a white-devised instrument aimed at supporting a racial hierarchy. In the same way, exploring the subtle relationships between race and time and their not-so-subtle effects on the lives of Black people, sociologist Rahsaan Mahadeo writes that, in the context of Critical Race Studies, the common "benign" question "what time is it" should be better reframed as "whose time is it?" (2018, 186). Focusing on the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul and reading the power relations that underlie such

contemporary American urban landscape through the lenses of time, Mahadeo suggests that "[i]nvestigating the different dimensions of power associated with time […] reveals how individuals and groups are rendered legible, illegible and/or non-existent within conventional temporal terms" (2018, 186). "[W]hite people have *taken* all the time in the world," he goes on, "by amassing tremendous amounts of wealth through global capitalism, slavery, conquest, genocide, displacement, dispossession, and environmental degradation, leaving many others at a temporal deficit" (Mahadeo 2018, 191). Mahadeo points out how the conjoined forces of neoliberal capitalism and institutional racism have imposed a feral logic according to which certain targeted identities exhaust a considerable portion of their existence, trying to carve a safe space in a relentlessly oppressive environment. Everyday life for such people is often a literal fight for their existence – a continuous struggle for the supposedly universal right to administer, or simply experience, their time.

In mentioning slavery among the roots of the temporal disparity that characterizes contemporary American society, Mahadeo is implicitly pointing out how this supposedly extinct institution is still playing a role in sustaining unequal power relations. He is, of course, not alone in this. Scholars such as Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe have offered some cogent reflections on the ongoing repercussions of slavery and segregation on Black people in America, also in terms of their relationship with time. Hartman coined the eerily apt definition of the "afterlife of slavery" to indicate the "racial calculus" and "political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago," and that are still at work in plaguing Black Americans with "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment" (2007, 6). Similarly, in her ontological investigation of Blackness, Sharpe firmly situates contemporary Black life "in the wake" of the path marked by chattel slavery, declaring how "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (2016, 13-14). According to these scholars, the relational dynamics of slavery are far from being a thing of the past. As a result, African American people are stuck in a temporal loop where plantation economy is still exerting its deadly influence, although hidden in different disguises. Black lives are forced into a state of precariousness, a constant exposure to the possibility of death, which, together with its rather material and tragic effects, also brings about a warped relationship with time. Rankine calls this condition "an absurd stuckness" (2016, 145), a description that echoes Hortense Spillers's famous definition of the enslaved as "the essence of stillness […], an undynamic state, fixed in time and space" (1987, 78).

It is necessary to add a point of clarification here. I am in no way suggesting that all the scholars mentioned above are converging toward a single, unified understanding of Black agency and Black temporality. As a matter of fact, their methodological approaches and theoretical assumptions sometimes greatly differ, as for example, in the case of Mahadeo's sociological

materialism and Rankine's artistic dissection of whiteness. Pondering the nuances, as well as the macroscopic divergences, between these analyses, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the current debate on Blackness – and especially in its relation to time and history – but such an effort is beyond the far more limited scope of this essay. Suffice here to acknowledge that the (of course incomplete) mosaic of reflections I provided above clearly highlights how the biased relationship between Blackness and temporality is an issue that covers an ample theoretical spectrum and thus stands as a crucial issue for Black Studies at large. Rather than an oversimplification of legitimately diverse scholarships, this review should be considered as a collection of heuristic tools able to suggest how the harrowing impact of slavery and its afterlives is not only felt in the socio-political sphere but also stands as a conceptual, philosophical problem – a problem that can be understood in aesthetic terms. As Hartman again posits:

> There's another way in which the afterlife of slavery produces a certain set of aesthetic and intellectual, conceptual challenges, and I think one of those for me is around temporality, and how do we narrate time? […A] way of thinking about the afterlife of slavery in regard to how we inhabit historical time, is the sense of temporal entanglement, where the past, the present and the future, are not discrete and cut off from one another, but rather that we live the simultaneity of that entanglement. […] How does one narrate that? (Hartman 2018)

African American literature has provided a number of interesting examples that try to answer the question of how the afterlife of slavery and its relationship with time can be narrated. Among these, two recent novels stand out as being particularly in touch with the formal and conceptual challenges mentioned by Hartman.

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) takes the idea of an afterlife of slavery to its extremes, presenting the reader with a narrative world in which Blackness comes to be defined by the aftermath of plantation economy even in the hereafter. One of the novel's protagonists, Richie, is killed while being incarcerated in the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Parchman Farm, and finds himself unable to leave the prison's premises even as a ghost, forever doomed to haunt the place that robbed him of his life – and apparently also of his afterlife. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing* the mundane afterlife of slavery also brings about a metaphysical afterlife of enslavement, suggesting how the structural ensnarements that hinder Blackness from existing in a liberated spatial-temporal dimension extend also into the metaphysical. The existential collapse here is total, as Ward even deprives African Americans of the "consolation of transcendence" (Wagner 2009, 2), the ideal aspiration to cross into eternity, embrace time in its totality and be freed at last from the fetters of this world.

Another interesting example of how philosophical meditations on Blackness and time have crossed into narrative can be found in Jason Mott's *Hell of a Book* (2021), a work that offers a rather compelling exploration of the "temporal entanglement" Hartman writes about. In

this novel, an African American writer roams the contemporary United States promoting his first successful book – a hell of a book, it seems – in what will turn out to be a journey of self-discovery and a meditation on what it really means to be Black in America. At the same time, the novel tells the story of Soot, a Black kid living in the South in the recent past, whose path crosses that of the upcoming writer in a rather unexpected way. Mott demonstrates a peculiar approach to the depiction of time from the point of view of two Black subjects stuck in the eternal present of slavery. *Hell of a Book* is characterized by a consistent shifting back and forth in time that could suggest a sense of evolution, a dynamic relationship with temporality. But the feeling of "stuckness," as Rankine calls it, can still be felt in the background, still able to frustrate the characters' desire to project themselves into another spacetime, one in which actual liberation is possible. "There's too much of a backstory of sadness that's always clawing at [Black Americans'] heels," the novel's first-person narrator muses, "[a]nd no matter how hard you try to outrun it, life always comes through with those reminders letting you know that, more than anything, you're just a part of an exploited people and a denied destiny" (Mott 2021, 245).

Through such commentaries, the novel gives us a rather hopeless picture of the Black condition. "[T]he Black condition? What kind of condition is that? You mean as in existing state of being? Or a condition as in a state of health – like an illness?" the first-person narrator asks (77). The idea that Blackness could function like a disease is tantamount to equating Blackness to enslavement, especially regarding the time frames these conditions project. An illness that is caused, or better imposed, by exertions of power is nothing but an example of necropolitics, Achille Mbembe tells us, a condition in which citizens are willingly and continuously exposed to the possibility of death and in which they act as if they "were already dead, as if the time of daily life no longer counted" (2019, 144).

And the first-person narrator is indeed suffering from a condition, although a quite peculiar one: gifted with a powerful, uncontrollable imagination, he sometimes cannot discriminate between reality and the figments his mind generates in order to cope with that same reality. "Reality as a whole – past or present – just isn't a good place to hang out, in my opinion. There are better ways and places to spend your time," he states (46-47). It is the urge to imagine a different reality that causes the protagonist's illness, an illness that is, in turn, related to his being a Black person in America. Ultimately, his fabrications serve the scope of giving sense and value to contemporary Black existence, and their work is inextricably connected with time. It is by taking time off from the relentless attack on the ontological and corporeal integrity that characterizes everyday Black life and investing it in creating alternative worlds that the protagonist attempts to find a way to experience a more affirming, meaningful existence. "Maybe that's what time is for," he affirms, "to give meaning to the things we do; to create a context in which we can linger in something […]. So maybe time is just how we measure meaning" (68). The oscillation between Blackness as a deadly ailment and a

conscious, meaningful way of inhabiting time and reality itself is the conundrum at the core of *Hell of a Book*, a problem that is also explored and represented through a distinctive temporal dimension – or better, through a distinctive wave of different temporal dimensions.

In the pages that follow, I will analyze Mott's representation of the peculiar temporality in which Black life has been precipitated by the afterlife of slavery to illuminate how the author's narrative strategies, at the same time, reflect and push back against this ontological and epistemological entrapment. In doing so, I will show how *Hell of a Book* performs what Sharpe defines as "wake work": an effort to imagine how to actually live, and not simply survive, in the afterlife of slavery, and "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme" (2016, 18) in an attempt to at least envision a way out of the temporal stillness and existential void caused by slavery's haunting permanence in contemporary Black America.

A narrative catastrophe[1]

As I briefly mentioned above, *Hell of a Book* tells the intersecting stories of an up-and-coming, nameless African American writer on a never-ending book tour, who discovers his Blackness only one-third or so into the novel and an "impossibly dark-skinned" (22) kid nicknamed Soot, who randomly appears during the tour and might or might not be a product of the writer's over-excited imagination. Mott weaves together these narratives through a series of chapters that alternate between the first-person, present-tense account of the nameless writer's wanderings through the States and the third-person, past-tense story of the mysterious kid. The temporal structure of the novel is thus entangled, as the present is regularly interrupted by seemingly unrelated events from the past. These narrative arcs could be described as specular: the narration of the young writer's rise to success is paired with the sombre story of Soot, whose father is killed by the police for no reason at all and who will meet the same fate shortly after at the hands of another trigger-happy cop. A progressive narrative dedicated to the affirmation of a Black person in contemporary America, and a reverse narrative chronicling the undoing of an innocent Black kid. A story of redemption and one of damnation finely woven together in a disjointed timeline in which past and present struggle to make sense of Black existence. But, going back to Hartman's question, how does one narrate that?

Frank B. Wilderson III, an Afropessimistic critic who, like Hartman, has also reflected upon the paradigmatic position of Blackness in terms of narrative, would answer the previous question by saying that the actual condition of Black people simply cannot be narrated. "Black emplotment is a catastrophe for narrative," he writes (Wilderson 2020, 226). At the core of Afropessimism, a critical framework that also informs Hartman's and Sharpe's theorizations – although the two scholars reject its

radical nihilism – there is the conflation of Blackness and Slaveness, or, as Orland Patterson would put it, of Blackness and social death – and, ultimately, of Blackness and non-being, Blackness as nothingness itself, as philosopher Calvin R. Warren asserts (2018, 9). Expanding on this iconoclastic premise, Wilderson comes to consider narrative itself as an instrument of white oppression: "History and redemption are the weave of narrative. As provocative as it may sound, history and redemption (and, therefore, the narrative itself) are inherently anti-Black. […] To put it differently, social death is aporetic with respect to narrative writ large (and, by extension, to redemption writ large)" (2020, 226-227). This is, of course, a provocative claim, but let us follow Wilderson's line of reasoning before moving back to Mott's novel to see how this paradigmatic inability to participate in historical time (and hence in narrative) is reflected and elaborated in *Hell of a Book*.

According to Wilderson, the aporia created by narratives of Blackness lies at a metalevel rather than being intrinsic to the logics of storytelling proper. In other words, it is not altogether impossible to tell a Black story, but the meaning of this act is always threatened by the grand narrative of Western history in which such a story exists – a grand narrative that denies Black people the possibility of an actual denouement (be it narrative or existential) because of their peculiar paradigmatic position as non-subjects of that same narrative. As Wilderson writes, the racist violence that has been directed against Black people, born out of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and later progressed into the afterlife of slavery, has had the effect of removing them from the paradigm of modern history: the ontological and epistemological time that Western modernity shaped (and by which it has been shaped in turn), and that proceeds from post-Enlightenment grand narratives of progress and civilization – the same grand narratives responsible for conceiving and supporting discourses of racial superiority, slavery and colonialism. Within this paradigm, "Blackness and Slaveness are imbricated *ab initio*" (Wilderson 2010, 340), a condition that bars the Black/enslaved from experiencing a proper historical (and hence narrative) dimension by force of the paralysis in which they have been trapped as objects (or better, abjects), rather than subjects and agents of modernity.

Elaborating on Hortense Spiller's definition of the enslaved as a site of spatial-temporal void, Wilderson affirms that it is precisely this absence of time and space that determines the impossibility of narrating the true status of Blackness. "If social death is aporetic with respect to narrative, this is a function of both space and time, or, more precisely, their absence," he writes (2020, 227). Because of all these reasons, "[t]he narrative arc of the slave," Wilderson concludes, "*is not a narrative arc at all*, but a flat line of 'historical stillness'" (2020, 226). Although it is clearly impossible to verbalize a

narrative void existing at such a high level of abstraction like the one Wilderson writes about – a book faithfully representing this radical immobility would arguably be a blank book or even a book that has not been and cannot be written – Mott's novel deploys rhetorical-structural strategies that suggest the existential precariousness and temporal stillness in which plantation economy and its aftermaths have encapsulated Black existence.

A hell of a chronotope

If, as Wilderson affirms, time and space are the weaves of narrative, the first thing we should analyze is *Hell of a Book*'s spatial-temporal fabric – its chronotope.[2] In this regard, Mott's novel projects a spacetime that is firmly set into the mournful, ever-present afterlife of slavery, a dimension primarily defined by social death in which the novel's protagonists try to assert their precarious existences. Lying in the background of Soot's and the writer's intersecting narratives, among sometimes vague and always shifting temporal-spatial coordinates, there is only one fixed element: an apparently unending, nationwide protest for the homicide of a Black youth by a police officer – a young boy that, in a later turn of events that is not unexpected but still shocking, is revealed to be Soot himself. Starting from this well-established point of reference, Mott gives shape to a chronotope that clearly reflects a post-Black Lives Matter, post-George Floyd America – a landscape of uninterrupted mourning in which "there is no quotidian without the enslaved, chained, or dead Black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against" (Rankine 2016, 147).

Hell of a Book strongly evidences this impossibility of thinking of everyday life without racist violence; since the shooting of the kid and the protests that follow function as the ground against which the stories of the writer and Soot stand out, the biggest picture of reference from which their personal narratives proceed and by which their existential coordinates are defined. The humorous voice of the writer character, his alcohol-fuelled, picaresque adventures, and his obstinate unwillingness to fully acknowledge what is happening around him cannot conceal the turmoil, outrage, and desperation that populate the novel's spacetime texture. No matter the protagonist's reluctance to talk about – and be defined by – this tragedy, his attempts to exist outside of the permanent precariousness that characterizes Black American life are hopeless. He is slowly but steadily forced to confront these events as the violence that surrounds his successful life as a literary star finds its way into the main narrative, moving from background to foreground and progressively imposing itself as the novel's main, belated subject.

In this regard, it is meaningful that the writer's discovery of his Blackness comes right when the narrative introduces us to a Black Lives Matter protest.[3] "Little more than a block away, a wall of people suddenly emerges from a neighbouring street," the nameless writers

says as he describes his first encounter with the protestants, "BLACK LIVES MATTER, their signs, banners, t-shirts claim and voices proclaim." He goes on: "They hold up poster board photographs of Emmett Till and Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, George Floyd, and all the other names that will be added to America's list between the time I write this and you read this" (72, 73). There is an evident paradox here – a time paradox, which makes it interesting for the sake of this discussion. The writer seems to suggest that the endless demonstration is a kind of a continuously updated archive of the dead that could potentially show photographs and names of Black people who have not been killed by the police yet. He is witnessing something of a disjointure in the linearity of time in which movement does not equal progress – a temporal dimension that is entirely composed of an eternal, unchanging present in which (non)time is marked by death, and death is the all-encompassing dimension that defines Black life. "People being shot is how we mark the passage of time," declares the writer (100). Blackness, then, is once again presented as synonymous with absence: not only the absence of a future but also of an actual present: the endless mourning flattens the narrative into a single dimension that, aligning with the dead, is continuously regressing towards the past in a gothic-like ensnarement that devours any real chance of progress or change.

There seems to be no actual narrative arc, no redemption for these characters – a condition that apparently dovetails Wilderson's nihilistic claims. On top of that, Mott adds another revealing element to his decidedly Afropessimistic depiction of contemporary America. The title of the novel, *Hell of a Book*, is also the title of the successful novel the writer is being celebrated for – a book whose content readers are never told about except at the very end of the story. It is a fantastic book, a hell of a book indeed, as we are continuously reminded, but what exactly is this book about? Reading the silence that surrounds the writer's work from an extradiegetic, metanarrative point of view, we could simply say that we are experiencing the creation of the book as the narrative unfolds, that we are actually participating in it because the writer often breaks the fourth wall through metalepsis (as the previous quote about the Black Lives Matter protest demonstrates). But, if we read the writer's aphasia regarding his much-praised book from the intradiegetic level, it is also possible to interpret the absence of the novel – that is, the story told by the novel within the novel – as an efficacious way to represent Wilderson's conceptual meta-aporia in literary form. There is no book here simply because a book on the actual meaning of Blackness cannot be written, and it cannot be written because, again, the historical paradigm that rejected Blackness from its weave won't let such narratives be told.

This is presented in highly comedic tones in a scene in which the nameless writer is 'media trained' to explain his book to the press by a coach specifically hired for the job. "I'm going to train you to become you," the farcical coach says, "I'm going to help you get to know

your book" (Mott 2021, 90; 91). The whole conversation aims at instilling in the writer a total identification with his work, reinforcing the idea that the novel-in-the-novel could genuinely be a faithful rendition of the Black identity in narrative form. "Who are you in plot form?" the coach asks (106). But this narrative is never revealed as the protagonist is continuously interrupted and unable to explain himself. The push to pour the entirety of the writer's self into the book shatters against the most important rule, one that paradoxically bars the protagonist to actually write about his experience: "Don't write about race. Specifically, don't write about being Black. You can write about Black characters but just don't write about being Black. No," the smiling coach says (106). This overly parodic but bitterly political section of *Hell of a Book* puts Wilderson's aporia in historical perspective by declaring how the nation's grand narrative cannot allow an actual depiction of Blackness to find its way into the public discourse because it would reveal the whole foundational archetype of American progress to be simply a white racist construction:

> [T]he future of this country is all about patriotic, unity-inducing language. Post-Racial. Trans-Jim Crow. Epi-Traumatic. Alt-Reparational. Omni-Restitutional. Jingoistic Body-Positive. Sociocultural-Transcendental. Indigenous-Ripostic. Treaty of Fort Laramie-Perpendicular. Meta-Exculpatory. Pan-Political. Uber-Intermutual. MLK-Adjacent. Demi-Arcadian Bucolic. That is the vernacular of the inclusive, hyphenated, beau-American destiny we're manifesting here! You and me! Book by book we're making it happen! But it doesn't happen by planting flags and picking at the scrabbed-over wounds of a certain Dispossessed Neo-Global Cultural demographic committed at the hands of a onetime possibly improprietous proto-nation. (107-108)

This pompous, nonsense "word soup," as the writer defines it, seems to me a perfect representation of how the actual historical dimension of Blackness – as it came to be defined in the United States in this specific case – cannot be narrated because of its aporetic relationship with the institutionalized paradigm of history. There is no place – indeed, there is no time – for such narratives because the paradigm of history itself is but an "extension of the master's dominion" (Wilderson 2020, 227). The linear narrative of American progress and all its discursive accouterments parodied in this excerpt frame Blackness through what Wilderson would call a "rubric of antagonism" rather than a "rubric of conflict" – the fundamental difference being that the latter implies the existence of conceptual problems that can be dialectically solved, while the former postulates "an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions" (Wilderson 2010, 5). "[H]istory has given you a specific role in this world," the successful writer later tells Soot, "A specific burden to bear. And it's not the prettiest one" (205).

Once again, the novel aligns with an Afropessimistic understanding of American society in suggesting how the paradigmatic position of Blackness is elaborated through that of the enslaved expelled from the teleological (and hence progressive, transformative, and redemptive) historicity of Western modernity. In all his undeniable comic verve, the narrator is

quite clear about this when he finally offers us a taxonomic classification of African American people: "*Americae excommunicatus*," he writes (194), the American Other and the human Other itself – "a void and stasis of temporal linearity" as Calvin L. Warren writes (2018, 16).

Significantly enough, when we are finally made privy to the novel-in-the-novel's subject, the writer describes it in a single, brief sentence: "It's about the death of my mother" (286). The amnesia surrounding the novel thus is revealed to be a – conscious or unconscious – repression of the loss of the protagonist's mother, a circumstance that reminds one of the conditions of the enslaved as described by Saidiya Hartman. In reporting some Ghanian folktales about how slave traders made their victims forget their past through concoctions aimed at turning them into docile, mindless creatures, Hartman mentions a specific plant that supposedly served this scope: *manta uwa*, a name that translates into 'forget mother'. In every slave society, she explains, "slave owners attempted to eradicate the slave's memory, that is, to erase all the evidence of an existence before slavery" (Hartman 2007, 155). No mother, no history, no future, and a present defined only by excommunication, Otherization, paralysis, violence, and mourning. The picture *Hell of a Book* depicts is one of utter darkness, "a reality that's bleak, and painful, and full of woe and sadness," the story of a people excommunicated from the realm of the human, a "whole nation, unwanted and unsought, born into exile in the belly of another nation" (205, 206).

Many-worlds Blackness

But maybe the most striking feature of Mott's latest novel is how it manages to take the narrative of Blackness to its most extreme and despairing point of utter nihilism and only then find a way out of this ontological and epistemological dead end. And it succeeds in doing this by adopting a rather peculiar approach towards the temporal representation of Blackness, one that refuses to elaborate this condition through the same linear paradigm from which it is expelled, and by which it is defined as the paralysis and void Afropessimists write about.

As I illustrated above, a key point in the identification of Blackness with enslavement, and hence with historical stillness and a non-human condition substantially unable to experience time, comes from measuring the paradigmatic dimension of such condition in relation to the episteme of Western modernity: a master narrative that, in chronicling "a seemingly ordained movement from proverbial darkness to transcendent light, […] from formlessness to perfect form" (Russell 2009, 2), is always linear, causal – and, more importantly, normative. Trying to elaborate a grammar (and more precisely, a narration) of Black liberation within these temporal-epistemological directives is an attempt that is unavoidably going to fail because of its inherent flaw, one shared by many projects of emancipation and one against which Audre Lorde warned us some fifty years ago – "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (Lorde 2007, 112). If the paradigm of

modern history is unable to restore Blackness to a dynamic state possessing ontological value, the only solution is to change the epistemological paradigm entirely, to demolish the master's plantation and build something else in its place. As Heather Russell writes, "It is not enough to simply replace History with a more ideologically compelling version using the same systems governed by 'ethnocultural hierarchy and chronological progression,'" rather this conception of history itself "must be interrogated, disrupted, and reformulated" (2009, 3).

In *Physics of Blackness*, Michelle M. Wright has convincingly argued that, in order to achieve a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Blackness, we should intersect the usual linear spatial-temporal axis with what she calls "*epiphenomenal time*, or the '*now*,*'* through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted" (2015, 4). Wright's analysis aims at making visible the otherwise forgotten social identities that could be obscured by Blackness when the latter is understood as an identity predicated only on the linear spacetime that proceeds from the Middle Passage. Arguing for the necessity to understand Blackness also as a "when" instead of a simple "what," Wright roots her study in quantum physics and opens Blackness to a multidimensional interpretation that, focusing on the contemporary moment too and not only on a consecutive timeline, is able to achieve a "wholly *inclusive*" definition of Blackness (2015, 4). In the case of *Hell of a Book*, the principles of quantum physics that inspired the critic should be taken quite literally: Mott's novel is precisely trying to bring to the page a narrative that accounts for a multidimensional representation of Blackness.

Throughout the book, we are often given some ambiguous details about the relationship between the up-and-coming writer and Soot, the real-and-imagined kid shot by the police. The novel is full of reticent foreshadowing that progressively instils in the reader one rather crucial doubt: are Soot and the writer the same person? A number of hints are disseminated throughout the text, some more revelatory than others. In one of the passages that make the connection overt, we read that the writer's father is dying of cancer when the protagonist is about Soot's age. While the narrator is at his perishing father's bedside watching TV, news of an African American man killed by the police – Soot's father – appear on the screen: "The dead man on TV was barely past thirty, but hell if he wasn't the spitting image of my old man," the narrator says. "And the icing on the cake? [… His son] was damn near my doppelganger" (129-130). In a similar way, when Soot's mother is introduced towards the end of the story, the writer-narrator describes her as such: "She looks so much like my mother I can hardly breathe. […] She is my dead mother, and she is the Kid's mother. She is the dead mother of all the dead sons, dead daughters" (288).

But if the Kid has been killed by the police, how could he grow up to become a successful writer? After clearly suggesting how the two stories of his book could de facto be two timeframes belonging to the same narrative, Mott resolves this death paradox in a rather unconventional way. The two protagonists are and are not the same person at the same time;

their stories belong to the same narrative arc, but then again, they don't. We are faced with a literary translation of physics' paradox of quantum superposition – and indeed, the narrator concedes that this unresolved duplicity is something of a "Schrödinger's" situation (130). The reference is to the popular thought experiment devised by the Austrian physicist, in which a cat placed in a sealed box containing a flask of poison that is expected to break sooner or later is simultaneously dead and alive after a certain amount of time. The aim of the experiment was to explain, in more widely intelligible terms, a quite counter-intuitive implication of the principle of superposition: at a subatomic level, things can "be literally two places at once. Worse […], they can be two things at once" (Frank 2012).

It is striking to notice how Mott not only openly refers to Schrödinger's thought experiment but actively recreates it in narrative form. So, is the nameless writer/Soot dead or alive? Just like with the physicist's much-discussed cat, the answer is: he is both. The author writes: "In one iteration of this [story], he is a boy who goes on to become a writer who tours and drinks and dreams. In another iteration, he is a child who dies and, yet, somehow finds a way to go on" (306). Michelle M. Wright's quantic interpretation mentions the same principle of superposition to argue how different identities can intersect with Blackness in a given moment, producing "many specific dimensions of Blackness" or a number of "Blacknesses that are possible and viable" (2015, 24, 25). Mott's focus is not on the otherwise erased or marginalized iterations of Blackness but rather on Blackness as a whole and its possibility to exist in another spatial-temporal dimension, one in which Black life is not hindered by the afterlife of slavery and not excommunicated from 'history' as narratively formalized in the West. By translating Black existence into a multiverse of possibilities, Mott, not unlike Wright, is questioning the traditional Western episteme itself, turning a singular, linear, normative, and exclusionary conception of history (and of stories) into a plurality of non-hierarchical narrative planes, all of which concur in creating possible worlds where, at least potentially, "all imaginings of Blackness [are] mediated" (Wright 2015, 14).

A possible aporia could be identified here. Wright's *Physics of Blackness* is, at its core, especially concerned with the risks of conflating all the different declinations of Black identity into a linear and undifferentiated conception of Blackness, one unable to account for the endless possibilities that characterize Black existence at every given moment. Mott's novel, on the other hand, does not offer the same sophistication, largely falling into the kind of Middle Passage epistemology that Wright's study oversteps. In other words, while Wright argues for a conception of Blackness that is always different from itself, irreducible to a generalized, self-standing identity, *Hell of a Book* seems to suggest a monolithic understanding of Blackness that could erase a more nuanced representation – and, more specifically, those iterations of Blackness whose expression is obscured by the novel's dominant male-heterosexual point of view.

At the same time, though, Mott's novel openly defies a rigidly linear timeline. Its unusual narrative structure bears some striking similarities with the "Many-Worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics, one in which reality "is not the reality we customarily think of, but it is a reality of many worlds" (DeWitt and Graham 1973, v). In a reality described by the many-worlds interpretation, every possible outcome of an event implies "a continual splitting of the universe into a multitude of […] equally real worlds" (DeWitt and Graham 1973, v). The emphasis here needs to be placed on the reality of the different iterations of Mott's story. If the novel demonstrates a lack of epistemological depth in its clear limitations regarding the recognition and expression of a richly layered conception of Blackness, its narrative structure can nonetheless be interpreted as hinting at a different ontological model – one approximating what analytic philosophy defines as a Many-Worlds ontology. In such a system, the actual world we inhabit is just one of the many (and perhaps infinite) possible worlds. In the simplest possible terms, multiple worlds (and hence Many-Worlds ontology) arise from the basic intuition that "things could be different from what they are" (Bell and Ryan 2019, 7).

Given the fact that in the novel, both the anonymous writer's and Soot's narrative worlds are clearly defined as 'real,' *Hell of a Book* leans towards an interpretation of Many-Worlds ontology akin to that of philosopher David Lewis: modal realism. In short, Lewis's theory posits that "there is no ontological distinction between the actual world and merely possible ones: both kinds are made of the same substance, that is, of material things and events" (Bell and Ryan 2019, 9). At this point, the nameless writer's successful career is not to be read as the daydream of a traumatized, doomed kid like Soot but rather as a concrete possibility, a viable timeline for Blackness that, within the novel's storyworld(s), is as real as the one inhabited by the young boy. And vice-versa: Soot is not (or not only) a figment of the nameless writer's over-excited imagination but exists in an equally feasible, real version of the same narrative. "Am I real?" Soot asks the writer towards the end of the novel, to which he answers, "You're as real as I am" (316).

Modal realism has a counterpart in a 'temporal' theory of multiple spacetimes. While the former sees reality as consisting of virtually endless possible worlds, the latter "holds that reality consists of many momentary worlds, which are usually called *moments*" (Kachi 1998, 42). Going back to *Hell of a Book*'s potentially conflictual relation with *Physics of Blackness*, it seems to me that, with her focus on the possibilities implied in the 'now', Wright comes closer to this 'momentary' understanding the multiplicity of spacetimes. Her interest lies in how Black identity can be re-figured as being "trans-moment" (Kachi 1998, 43), as a complex system that spans potentially endless 'nows' and that at each moment reveals a specific configuration of itself. Although in ways that obviously differ in intention and theoretical sophistication, Wright and Mott concur in proposing a paradigm shift in the way we think about Black spacetime, leaving behind the constrictive normativity of monologism and linear temporality to embrace a

multidimensional understanding of Blackness able to reveal – and hence actualize – possible worlds that would otherwise go unrecognized.

To describe the subtle difference between these representations of Blackness in mathematical terms, we could use a wave function such as Ψ (**r**, *t*) where '**r** is Blackness and '*t*' designates the time variable.[4] As is, the function is able to describe the system's whole spectrum of configurations. But when we assign a value to *t*, determining the specific 'now' in which we observe Blackness as Wright suggests, the function 'collapses'; that is, by focusing on an individual moment in time, all the possible iterations of Blackness are reduced to a single state we are able to appreciate, no matter its complexity. Of course, the collapse of the wave function is not a reduction of Blackness' possibilities, but simply a formal process through which we are able to 'measure' its qualities at a specific point in time. In the Many-Worlds interpretation of Schrödinger's equation, though, this collapse never happens, and every possible outcome of the wave function takes place. What if, Schrödinger himself half-believingly proposed, the alternatives implied by the wave function are not alternatives at all, but they all happen simultaneously? (Schrödinger 1995, 19). Something like this is at work in *Hell of a Book*. The novel's blurred, non-linear temporality seemingly transfers the subatomic dynamics Schrödinger muses about to the ontology of Blackness itself, making it an entangled flow of two concurrent possibilities taking place at the same time.

In light of the above, Wright's theory is no longer at odds with *Hell of a Book*'s narrative: it is just a matter of the wave function collapse happening or not happening and how. Placing Blackness in a system of storyworlds that (at least partially) obeys the Many-Worlds interpretation of the principle of superposition, as Mott does, in no way rules out the possibility of focusing our attention on a specific moment happening in a certain world, to collapse the wave function and determine what kind of more nuanced configuration Blackness has taken in that particular moment. Using the language of mathematics again, we should think about a reality of many worlds, such as the one *Hell of a Book* hints at as a wave function of possible (hi)stories whose actualization is just a calculation (or a narration) away.

Conclusion: "the unseen and the undeniable all at once"

As a matter of fact, the faith that Mott puts into the possibilities of storytelling is not limited to the book's narrative. When the author writes about all the iterations of his story, he adds a supplementary metanarrative dimension. In one version of the story, Soot is shot by the police; in another, he grows up to become a successful writer; and in a third one, "he is a child who goes on to become a writer who hides so deeply in his characters that the stories he tells of them become muddled in the story he fears to tell of himself, so he throws in dashes of truth among the lies, until even he cannot tell which is which" (306). 'Muddling' the writer's story in those of his characters and declaring how he is both as real and as unreal as they are (2021,

315), Mott refuses to draw a strong line between fact and fiction, stressing instead the all-embracing powers of narrative. In a substantial rebuttal of Afropessimism's claims regarding diegesis, *Hell of a Book* conflates life and narration, reinstating the world-creating abilities of storytelling, and thus the possibility to imagine and eventually actualize times and spaces wherein Black lives can break free from the stillness and death of the afterlife of slavery, experience evolution and eventually redemption.

Ultimately, Mott is suggesting how Black people in the U.S. exist within a single, shared network of actual and possible stories and how these stories – good or bad – should ultimately help African Americans to break free from the painful, frozen timeline of slavery's afterlife and move into the future – or better, into a plethora of possible spacetimes. "We all carry the same weight," Mott writes, "[s]o we stay put, running in place. Most of all, people like me fear that we can't do anything to break the cycle" (318). But it is precisely through the creation of this shared network of narratives, through what Afrofuturist theoretician Isiah Lavender III calls a "black networked consciousness" (2019, 5), that the agency required to break this cycle, to conjure a different world, is created, and freedom becomes a possibility within the otherwise relentlessly oppressive timeline in which Blackness is constricted. "Agency develops […] through communication," Lavender writes, and through agency, the Black networked consciousness "generates hope, a charged impulse representing the desire for life, liberty, and knowledge, the essential psychic drive seeding resistance, rebellion and subversive writing" (2019, 6; 7). In light of the quantum interpretation of *Hell of a Book* proposed here, we should not think about these potential narratives as being simply ethereal projections of spurned desire, able to provide comfort but ultimately confined to the realm of pure fantasy. The possibilities implied by the principle of superposition, physicist Adam Frank writes, "shows us that potential realities matter just as much as the single, fully manifested one we experience" (2012).

Thanks to Mott's, Soot's, and the nameless writer's "unconfined if not actualized mindscapes" (Lavender 2019, 196), Black existence is reaffirmed even in the precariousness of the present. It might be "unseen" to most, but it is also "undeniable" (319): a force set in motion despite the temporal, ideological, and narrative efforts aimed at erasing it. Reality is still a dangerous place to be, but through storytelling, communion, struggle, and hope, *Hell of a Book* is at least conjuring the possibility of breaking the timeless cycle of death. After all, as the dialogue that closes the book affirms, "reality is something you continue to struggle with" (n.p.).

Notes

[1] Here I have briefly summarized Wilderson's argument on the impossibility of Black emplotment. For a more detailed discussion of this provocative topic from a narratological point of view see Petrelli 2023.
[2] I mediate the term 'chronotope' from Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in which the critic uses it to indicate "the inseparability of space and time" (1981, 84). Interestingly enough for the scope of this essay, Bakhtin also defines time as "the primary category of the chronotope" in literature (1981, 85).
[3] This is to be expected after all because, as Bakhtin writes, "the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic" (1981, 85).
[4] The mathematical interpretation proposed here is purely heuristic in nature, as calculus has never been my forte. During the peer review process, I have been asked to try and provide an analytic description of the relationship between Schrödinger's cat and Blackness I propose (a suggestion that is in turn wholly indebted to Wright's study). This is my attempt at answering that thought-provoking question within the necessarily narrow limits of this essay.

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