As I write, in early May 2016, the term “CPT” (or “colored people’s time”) has just enjoyed its fifteen minutes of fame. First New York City mayor Bill de Blasio, explaining his delay in announcing his support for Hillary Clinton’s presidential candidacy, said, “I was running on C.P. time.” MSNBC called the remark “racially insensitive,” perpetuating a “stereotype that African-Americans are lazy, unreliable and often late to appointments.” Three weeks later, Barack Obama, presiding over his last White House correspondents’ dinner, swiped at the controversy, saying, “I was a little late tonight. I was running on CPT, which stands for ‘jokes that white people should not make.’”1 The President might well have added that CPT is a term that MSNBC should refrain from defining, for like so much of the language of race, it really is “racially insensitive” when whites say it, but among us people of color it serves as an in-joke on lateness and languid performance. Hence indigenous Americans may joke among themselves about “Indian time,” Pacific Islanders about “island time,” but whites trying to earn credibility among us should refrain from joking.

There is another CPT, and among philosophers it sparks its own, albeit quieter, disputes. Frank Arntzenius defines it: “The CPT theorem says that any (restricted) Lorentz invariant quantum field theory must also be invariant under the combined operation of charge conjugation C, parity P, and time reversal T.”2 Arntzenius argues that what is called the CPT transformation should be called a PT transformation, “that is, a pure space-time transformation.”3 In the world of race relations, banishing the C from CPT would eradicate the source of temporal interpretation, a situation that could save face for future mayors of New York.

Michelle M. Wright announces the goal of her new book Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology as the provision of “a model for


3 Arntzenius, 633.
defining Blackness across the Diaspora that easily locates and corrects the common exclusions so often found in our everyday speech, scholarly canon, and public assumptions" (5). If this goal seems unrelated to the subject of time, her elaborations of constructed and phenomenological blacknesses make the connection: “Our constructs of Blackness are largely historical and more specifically based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progress narrative, while our phenomenological manifestations of Blackness happen in what I term Epiphenomenal time, or the ‘now,’ through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted” (4; emphasis in original). For Wright, then, the in-joke of CPT would double back on itself: We may be late, but lateness is now.

When last fall I assigned Physics of Blackness to a 400-level class in theories of race, I focused on Wright’s definitions of blackness. I had organized readings around the subjects of color and colorism, with texts ranging from art historians’ examinations of painterly colors and social scientists’ research into skin-bleaching to Michael Keevak’s history of the word “yellow” in racial taxonomies. I assigned Wright’s entire book, but found that one chapter, focused mostly on James Baldwin’s reverse diaspora in France, poorly suited the course scheme. Also, one student fell into the trap of a too-casual reduction of the book: that is, Wright rejects linear progress narratives (hereafter LPNs) because they assume that all American blacks are products of the Middle Passage and ignore the multiple other sources of blackness. Wright herself says that the forcing of “nonprogressive narratives into linear narrative frameworks will cause a qualitative collapse of Blackness” (146). This collapse, or at least a serious unsettling, is exactly what Wright seeks to prod: “linear spacetime generates paradoxes that manifest through failed interpellation, or qualitative collapse, which can create an either/or Blackness according to which one must choose one interpretation over the other to reposition Blackness in that linear spacetime” (146). I devoted too little of my course to Wright’s senses of blackness as functions of time and thus might well have inadvertently contributed to the problem she aims to redress: the ways in which conventional LPNs fail to make blackness inclusive.

In her closing chapter, “Axes of Asymmetry,” Wright devotes seven pages to the history of World War II, arguing that dominant narratives fail to account for the multiple presences of people of color: “World War II involved almost the majority of Black Africans and Black Diasporans across the globe, whereas slavery—which forms the cornerstone of the Middle Passage epistemology—did not” (152). Epiphenomenal time, Wright says, produces productive ambiguities in truly inclusive histories of the war. Her claim that even standard temporal demarcations between war and postwar fail to account for the experiences of