

Black Futurism & Anarchism

Tools for Liberation

Emma Weiss

2025

a review of

Dismantling the Master's Clock: On Race, Space, and Time by Rasheedah Phillips. AK Press, 2025

In a discussion during the early winter of 2024 with radical political scientist Richard Gilman-Opalsky facilitated through Incite Seminars, there arose the essential thread of imagination and its usefulness as a tool for decolonization, along with the reaffirmation of future potentialities hidden within playful and creative anti-capitalist exercises.

Anarchism and its practice, oft criticized by the unimaginative for its supposed imagined utopias, Gilman-Opalsky posited the opposing arguments in framing imaginary power being wholly essential to the progress of emancipation and revolution. Black futurism as well as black anarchism since their inception, have worked to achieve similar ends through imagined means, first by embracing concrete functions of science, practice, and lived experience.

So enters Rasheeda Phillips' 2025 publication. Through the exploration of methods of resistance to dominant worldviews, there is the continual thread of dismantling the master's house (a reference to Audre Lorde's 1984 essay, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*) in Phillips' experimental and artistic new book.

Her work is an exercise in and of itself that explores the functionality and presence of time. Due to the deeply held rapture cultural influence and beliefs present within Eurocentric cultures, the book posits that there are often inaccurate assumptions and therefore conclusions of time's presence in life.

Phillips' many interpretations of quantum theory may help to ameliorate and turn back these inherent defects on our collective perception. Whether one has familiarity with quantum theory or not, the reader is brought through the back door into understanding these precepts behind such theories and their scientific evolution. This is done through an artistic approach and spans an array of disciplines.

This is an ambitious project (to say the least) that Phillips has taken on, and one that is tackled methodically by a patient writer and artist. A kaleidoscopic invitation into the arts, the work posits that the reader maintain discipline in imagination and curiosity long enough to follow through the maze of Phillips' interests.

No matter the proclivities or background disciplines of the reader, there is something for all. Those seeking simplistic directives in their reading will find the wild thought and potentially discursive subject matter a frustration. If willing, however, to engage with the text and its concepts, the reward is a potentially new understanding of time itself.

And, what better expenditure (the book would challenge the concept of this noun and its relation to capitalism) of one's time, than to utilize it learning a wholly new and prismatic worldview through the engaging and artistic mind of Rasheedah Phillips. In her conceptual project that is this book, as well as the rest of her artistic life, time is an engaging creature that comes with the morphological features developed from every facet of culture, race, space, and time.

In one chapter alone, “CPT Symmetry and Violations of Black Space Time,” Phillips moves from the music of Herbie Hancock to the origins of clocks and black clock-makers, to biblical history, to NASA projects and the work of black aerospace workers, to early slaveholder accounts, while managing to draw connective threads between them all.

Phillips provides many examples of straight-line narrative theory most prevalent in writing and story telling techniques within a Western framework. In doing so, these essays step outside of dominant concepts to investigate techniques used throughout the African diaspora that move in a nonlinear fashion, and show how science fiction and fantasy culture are themselves essential tenets of black art making.

It is through the multi disciplinarian after all, that the world has seen some of its best expressions of anarchism. To enter into the discussion with the work of emancipation, decolonization, and anti-capitalist movements as anarchism at its best attempts to do, is the necessity for imagining new futures. Black futurism as presented by Phillips is therefore an essential tool, not just an artistic exercise or discipline of thought that lies outside of anarchism, but one that fully embraces its tenets.

Drawing from Swahili, Yoruba, Malian and Mandinkan traditions, Phillips casts a net deep across many oceans, calling time and storytelling to the task. The use of the loose rule of threes in the diction in many given examples throughout the text creates a curious poetic rhythm to the essays. Examples in threes for the storyteller act as a reasoning and rhyming method in and of itself.

As deeply investigative as Phillips is in terms of rooting out cultural perceptions of time, it makes sense that the book is not intended to be read in a linear fashion either. The reader is directed to vertical and horizontal reads that result in a cosmogram a two-dimensional representation of a dynamic and multidimensional framework. Sub-headings of chapters reflect the authors various interests from music, anthropology, poetics and science fiction.

The oft appearing acronyms that appear throughout the text relating to various disciplines of Phillips, become their own language. They are a linguistic invitation into other circles of thought and their interrelation. The benefits of bending times arrow (a conceit threaded throughout the text) through creative pursuits such as music and storytelling are brought to the fore through quantum theory.

One is required to use the imagination to entertain and enact these processes of thinking, and that invitation is extended throughout the text. To use Phillips’ oft appearing acronymic rhythm, I started reading her book at the end of the baseball season.

Let me provide an allegorical story to illustrate the use of quantum theory here: In coastal New Jersey, I watched two teams play. On one batter’s shin was inked a clock face stuck at the hour 2:45. He kept hitting balls out into the darkness toward the nearby beach huts while the Atlantic churned in the background.

Logic might apply here, and one might assume that a few balls might be lost forever to laziness or to their rolling into a storm drain and shooting out to sea. But through the variety of human will present, various figures brought the balls back by bicycle, on foot, even crawling under fences sometimes to retrieve them.

Applying the frame of mind that embraces quantum thinking to this game of baseball here makes sense. The clock face never moved from 2:45 on the man’s leg even as he moved, and the ball always came back to the batter, despite his efforts to get rid of the thing. Entropy and expansion, physics and its results, time moving in nonlinear fashion; these are the tools of thinking needed at this time, at any time, where we should all be required to think beyond constructs.

As David Byrne sings, “Time isn’t holding up, time isn’t after us.” Reading *Dismantling the Master’s Clock* gives the pervasive sense that the utility of quantum mechanics is one of the only functionally relatable and quantifiable tools we can employ to understand time, the human, and the world in a full way.

Rasheeda Phillips shows the necessity for reimagining and reengaging with the perceptions and conceptions of assumed reality that is hitting the ball out into space, and divining the future.

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