

Louisa Zerbo

Professor Rejouis

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“Rasheedah Phillips’ and John Keene’s Colligating Modes of Illustrating Constructs of Control”

In *Dismantling The Master(s) Clock(work Universe)*, Rasheedah Phillips calls on the reader’s attention as she unravels Western structures – specifically the modern-day system of time measurement – and points out how Western time has become so popular that its history has been forgotten. Phillips’ work is an attempt at revival, and an act of remembrance. Systems such as these are embedded into daily life with brute force, and these impositions are commonly referenced in the writing of oppressed peoples. Adjacent to Phillips’ work, John Keene’s *Annotations* illuminates the indelible impressions of Western culture through a narrative form, and his vague prose juxtaposes Rasheedah Phillips’ dense, analytical approach.

Phillips plunges the reader into a fact-based discussion of the modern Western time system’s roots in slavery – establishing it as yet another construct which plays a major part in racial history. She points out how science continues to prove that Eastern event-based time is more accurate to the world’s natural movements. These systems were built on reason, intended to make sense of the world and optimize our time in it, rather than to assert and maintain power. The irony and failures of Western time are revealed when Phillips asks *when* slaves were freed after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation – where is their freedom marked on this

linear scale? The master clock does not have a bookmark for anyone's freedom but America's own, as "The so-called Emancipation Proclamation of enslaved Africans from bondage did not automatically free them" (Phillips, 24) – not from slavery, and certainly not from these systems built on their oppression. Phillips puts the reader in a reflective position which questions linear time with historical evidence that has been swept under the rug.

Keene's writing, though less academic, requires extreme thoughtfulness of the reader. Even more it requires, experience. He lends no hand to his audience, leaving them to lean on their own selves to comprehend what they can and hope that they can grasp what he is saying – though this rhetoric is not for "grasping." The title is fitting: *Annotations* is the writing in the margins of a life, rather than a description of the life itself. It is a time capsule of childhood in the Black communities of 1990s St. Louis. Keene's language is deliberately vague, passive, ironically impersonal – different from Phillips' work in every facet. It's heavily steeped in memory and always inaccessible to some degree. No two people can read it the same.

One of the notable subjects Keene tackles is religion – particularly Christianity – in St. Louis; the contact it makes with class and, of course, racial disparity. The behavior of Catholics is described as rhythmic, "leaving abstract yet indelible imprints on the etching-plate of others" (Keene, 15). His poetic prose paints a delicate picture of such an imposition as Catholicism, which he describes as a "paralyzing force of such inflexibility" (Keene, 16). Its invasive nature is expanded on in the next chapter, *Texts, Context, A Fear Of Contamination*, as it becomes an accepted part of this community's livelihood. On page 19, Keene mentions the city's first Black Catholic bishop, and the effect his appointment had on the society of St. Louis. The following page is a blur of details of this man's life, interspersed with relevant memories of childhood –

learning about Black inventors, staying awake at naptime, and severing his fourth grade class into two groups.

Memory, something which Keene touches on in the previous chapter (“Memories, like cataracts, sometimes blind us to the present” (Keene, 17)), proves to be an integral part of Christianity’s structure. The majority of page 21 is designated to the religion’s emphasis on the value of truth, and Keene’s understanding that lies themselves are impositions. He asserts the idea that when a person, particularly a child, tells a lie, they are changing who they are in their memory, and they are changing who they become as a result: “If you therefore were one who regularly lied, then your childhood recollections might consist of the sum total of your childhood fictions” (Keene, 21). As if a lie can become something honest, by its being what is remembered, truth is forced upon fabrication – as if Catholicism’s push for radical honesty is a reaction to, participation in, itself. And so memory is cleansing, so long as you yourself are clean – “A cleansing thus ensued, an art of remembering developed, a renewal undeniably the result” (Keene, 21). This notion suggests that a personhood can be manipulated at will and pushes the distinctly Christian belief that truth is clean and lies are dirty.

Truth, guilt, Christianity – all are thus imposed on St. Louis’ Black population, not unlike the Western system of time discussed in Rasheedah Phillips’ work: these systems are embedded so deeply, so persistently, it’s inevitable that they become a part of daily life. Their origins as just one tactic of many, a short segment in the extensive history of control. Phillips challenges these constructs, beginning by uprooting what Western history has cast aside – time systems labeled “abstract” due to their lack of conformity to linear movement. Immediately, religion is brought into the conversation: “It is through religion and politics that a linear temporal orientation first came to be discerned, simultaneous to the development of Western culture” (Phillips, 16). Linear

time allowed for Western culture's precedence of institutionalization to thrive, placing the human body in an evenly-spaced, cyclical timeline, which could be divided with precision and sectioned off like a fourth grade class. It endorses ceaseless forward movement – with that, a “right” and “wrong.” “Backwards” is not an option. In fact, there are no choices available to be made at all. Silently, unidirectional time chips away at autonomy, discourages a lie.

Phillips reminds us that the Western time system is not exclusively used for evil – “An accurate measurement of time became crucial to maritime navigation...A clock or timekeeping device was necessary to accurately measure longitude” (Phillips, 18) – but at times was simply a way to map out the world, a mathematical approach to deciphering the intangible. It allowed for the trading of goods, which aided this forward movement. However, slave ships were a large part of the transportation of these “goods,” and so the innocence of the system is truly limited.

Fluidity reigned in Indigenous nature and event-based timekeeping. “In many Indigenous African cultures and spiritual traditions, time can be created, is independent of events, is not real until experienced, and is often intimately connected to genealogical, astrological, and ecological cycles” (Phillips, 20). This gave space for individuality and consequently, humanity, which European industrial standards could not afford to permit. And so along with the Indigenous people, their time systems were conquered in order to promote a less natural, capitalist lifestyle which relies on the artificial designation of time. The segmenting of seconds, minutes, days, months paved the way for due dates, arrival times, and holidays – especially those belonging to the Christian faith.

These are the holidays which American society is built around, ignoring those of other faiths. These days are counted down to in weeks, hours, minutes, etc. They're indicative of seasons, the passing of time as it marches steadily towards the future.

The Catholic Church is skillful in encoding itself in the foundation of a human being. From a young age, as Keene discusses in *Annotations*, children are taught under the eye of the church that they are their words. This is only one of many ways in which the church has managed to worm its agenda into the human brain. This closely resembles the way in which “enslaved Africans came to internalize some form of a linear time construct” (Phillips, 22) – for their own well-being or for any other reason, the master clock achieved its goal of inescapability.

The inevitability of the Western time system’s integration into the Indigenous psyche was something which really stood out in Rasheedah Phillips’ work. When freed, former slaves found themselves still reliant on these same measurements which previously bound them – the time system acted as a real-life metaphor for the Emancipation Proclamation’s falsity. Despite their efforts to stay in contact with their own cultures’ usages of time, they had no choice, “the Western, linear construct of space and time was already encoded into every aspect of the American way of life, social order, economy, transportation, and communication” (Phillips, 24). It has been accepted as fact. Its fixation on the future establishes it as colonization of time, its basis proven less accurate than systems of measurement which prioritize events over linearity and structure. Though studies only serve to dislodge its position, the Western time system does not budge.

This is not the only inconsistency these constructs generate. When put in conversation with *Dismantling the Master(s) Clock(work Universe)*, Keene’s *Annotations* brings into the foreground the deep irony of the Catholic Church’s emphasis on truth in a society so hell-bent on inciting the erasure of entire histories. Children are taught that they are the person who they tell, and more importantly, show others they are – even and especially to themselves. This of course impacts who they are as adults in the world, whether their existence works in correspondence

with or against the church's ideals, Western goals, the future it's working towards. While this assertion is true, that people *are* to an extent a product of their actions and words, beginning from an early age, the manner in which the church executes this is threatening, its motives askew. They are taught to confess and atone for their sins under the threat of a system which was built by people who did not hesitate to displace, disassemble, and ultimately destroy another life – with no regard to what these actions make them. Phillips' piece dissects this reality carefully, feeding the reader a harsh truth which the Western world set aside no space for.

*Dismantling the Master(s) Clock(work Universe)* thus juxtaposes *Annotations* in such a way that it helps to fill in the gaps that Keene leaves to the reader's interpretation. It is complementary in that it does so indirectly, its relevance to *Annotations* is subtle and accidental – the only way it could work, since Keene's entire objective is to write authentically, avoiding spoon-feeding his audience. Keene's writing still compels the reader to sift through the passivity and fog of his language for meaning, though Phillips does provide some guidance, at least to one small piece of a much larger puzzle.

Works Cited

Keene, John. *Annotations*. New Directions Publishing, 1995.

Phillips, Rasheedah. *Black Quantum Futurism: Space-Time Collapse I: From the Congo to the Carolinas*. Afrofuturist Affair, 2015.