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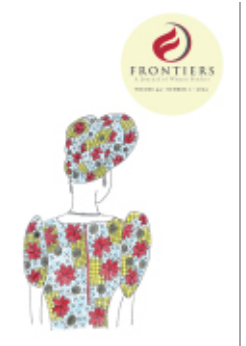
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On the Lateness of Pandemic Time

WILLIAM MOSLEY

Abstract: This article applies the Black queer vernacular form of “late” to interrogate arrival the of a privileged group into a consciousness of crisis and recasts the actions of Black LGBTQ+ people during the pandemic as part of a longer history of surviving catastrophe. The colloquial usage of late demonstrates Black queer awareness of the interconnection between the definition of time; its variable valuation; and the multiple, sometimes competing temporalities in which Black queers live and die. Racial disparities to the response of policies implemented during the rise of COVID-19, as well as the ways in which the habits and pace of Black LGBTQ+ life remained relatively unaffected by the pandemic, reveal the ways history and time unevenly impact different populations within the same crisis. Using Black studies theories of time, Black feminist theories of touch, and Black queer theories of gender and sex, this article illuminates the continuity between constructions of state-sanctioned notions of progress, a contemporary development of pandemic time, and the timing of whiteness as ontologically late. Through a reconsideration of the habits of Black queer life as always already attending to one urgency or another this article argues for building toward a crisis-oriented futurity with less concern for or and impulse to redress the lateness of other people.

Keywords: late, ontological lateness, Black studies, theories of time, COVID-19, pandemic time

Even after being locked down, socially distanced, and living for months in isolation I am astonished by how the pace of Black queer life remained unaffected by the arrival of “pandemic time.” As a Black studies scholar with feminist politics situated in a queer community, the precarity I already walked in, the knowledge that crisis was already upon us, was finally aligned with the beat of the outside world. Perhaps this had to with the fact that my work transitioned to remote delivery with relative ease. Or maybe it was the alleged democratization of vulnerability brought on by pathogen in the air. At the start

of the COVID-19 pandemic I was in the middle of teaching my course “Black Queer Feelings,” the subject matter of which centered on the expressive cultures of HIV/AIDS and the radical politics of its creators which, to my student’s surprise, uncannily resonated within the contemporary crisis we now experienced together.¹ By the end of that semester, the anxiety experienced among my (non-Black, non-queer) students would be reflected in cable news, statistics, and by the institutions that cared for them. However, for the Black queer and questioning youth I taught the synergy of two crises, one seen as their history and another unfolding before them, compounded the fact that whiteness and straightness shielded their counterparts from a sense that the time for crisis had begun well before 2020.

Personally, I wondered if my inability to match the energy of the latest crisis was due to the obtuseness of my queer life, my experience as an Afro-Salvadoran, first-generation American, or something less obvious. Several generations of my families, both blood and chosen, were already contending with another pandemic, or another political failure, or another sociocultural catastrophe. For some people, pandemic time was described as democratic in its impact. But for Black queer folks, the conditions of life-in-crisis were already reflected in the expressive cultures produced before the quarantine. The transition from Black-queer-business-as-usual to pandemic time was seamless, and this was our problem.

Beyond the particularities of my own life circumstances, the steady hum of Black queer goings-on during the pandemic signaled that my own interpretation of the crisis was shared by other Black queers. I, like other butch queens, femmes, studs, house mothers, nb’s, and trans folk knew work and life to be filtered through the lens of crisis before any of us heard the phrase, “COVID-19.” HIV/AIDS, poverty, mass incarceration, and suicide ideation were already the perpetual issues of our time. In podcasts such as *Fanti*, *HIM*, and *Marsha’s Plate: Black Trans Podcast*, in Black gay pride events in the city of Atlanta, and through dating apps such as *Jack’d* and *Grindr*, the sociology of this moment affirms two truths: the survival of Black queers has always been a matter of crisis management; meanwhile, the privilege of living less attuned to catastrophe makes others susceptible to interpreting disaster as a novel experience which, to use the Black queer vernacular to which I am accustomed, renders them *late* to the time of crisis.²

As the world at large was reckoning with *the* health issue of their *time*, and despite the risks associated with exposure, Black LGBTQ+ communities continued to gather at annual balls, celebrate at Black pride events, and organize for the movement for Black lives. We reflected openly about the parallels between COVID-19 and HIV/AIDS. And, according to data sets

published by *Grindr*, we kept having sex.³ These parallels between HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 would become common knowledge but there were also the similarities that remain less conspicuous. Between one crisis and another, these overlapping traits would occupy the interior space of Black gay/queer minds. This habit contextualizes the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and life in its shadow as, well, a day in the life of Black queers in an anti-Black, anti-queer world. From our perspective, Black queers were surviving in pandemic time before COVID-19. Since this was the case, it meant white, cisgender, and heterosexual communities were experiencing the overhaul of their privileged pace of life for the first time despite crisis being in effect already.

Lateness is identifiable through actions, behaviors, and postures that can be interpreted as anachronistic or politically myopic considering the space and the people such qualities impact negatively. African American vernacular applications of words such as “corny,” “wack,” “awkward,” and “coonish” convey a general sense of something being misaligned with cultural or social norms, siphoned through a notion of Black authenticity mitigated by the observer. Lateness, in its Black queer vernacular etymology, always signals the costly effect of being out of figurative or literal time. Lateness can often overdetermine the quality of relation between a Black queer person and someone else who might be, though is not always, outside of the community. A person or group’s lateness can be a bellwether of Black queers’ time running out, a harbinger of worse things to come, and a toll to be taken at the cost of Black queer survival.

Calling out or *reading* lateness can be done explicitly, yet doing so may lead to deleterious consequences. Instead, Black queers can choose to *clock* lateness, adapting our own behaviors to the lateness of the world, and *shade* it from a safer distance. An historical example of this is Marsha “Pay It No Mind” Johnson, whose sobriquet catchphrase indirectly calls attention to the sorts of lateness Johnson experienced as a Black, genderfluid sex worker. Such offensive interactions were well documented in films such as *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* and *Pay It No Mind—The Life and Times of Marsha P. Johnson*.⁴ Despite countless episodes of people misgendering Johnson or when her words were taken out of context, she is remembered for her generosity of spirit and genteel personality. Paying no mind to antiblackness or transphobia may have been a strategy Johnson developed for surviving lateness while advancing the political platforms of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries and other radical ventures.

But the applications of lateness are endless. When white people “don’t see color,” when Black folks are referred to as “you people,” or when a woman is pretty “for a Black girl,” all phrases said under the guise of well meaning, liberal or racially-sensitive ideology, the moment is hereon late. Across Black

sexual cultures, lateness arrives when a john acts surprised by a sex worker's rate or a non-Black person is in search of "BBC." In pandemic time, witnessing white folks contend with crisis for the first time, or hearing their cries to return to office settings known by others to be anti-Black, and ignoring the parallels between the political negligence that spawned the AIDS crisis and this one, are also examples of lateness. As a coercive phenomenon, lateness must be clocked or identified and responded to in order to neutralize their threat or at least question the motives of the late entity. If not, the cost to Black queers could be too great to survive in the long run. Being able to identify a person or situation as late is an important facet of Black queer survival. Equally significant is knowing how far to take the retribution for the disrespect it entails. As Johnson and other Black LGBTQ+ ancestors make clear, shading the lateness can be a safer route to take than reading the person who is late.

Controlling for the presence or absence of global catastrophe, what Jafari Allen calls "Black gay habits of mind" remain constant and, in some rare cases, Black queers used the shifts of the world in the wake of COVID-19 to explore new ways of being.⁵ To be clear, we all watched in real time how politicians, business owners, and other influential figures intentionally mismanage, neglect, and leave under resourced the world's most vulnerable. The exposure of one layer of lateness gave way to more extreme grammars of white supremacy which then led to lateness of such searing hot whiteness it became impossible to observe from a safe distance. White supremacy was not going anywhere and it was worth dying and killing for.

In the first two years of pandemic time flash point moments appear in my mind in black and white: Activism ignited by the police murder of George Floyd and protests of gym closures by mostly white male patrons; crowd-funding efforts of Black and Brown families who lost their income source and the advertisements for funding Donald Trump's reelection; Black audiences live tweeting *Versuz* battles; and white people hosting "COVID parties" for the purpose of getting infected and, by their rationale, accruing immunity. In pandemic time we live and die through the Center for Disease Control and Infection's recommendation, the politicization of these recommendations by public servants, and news outlets and social media platforms' narration of the event of the century. Rather than take into account compounding issues such as identity, inequity, or access, the pandemic was cause for reducing complex human modalities for getting through a crisis into good actors and bad ones. Sometimes people will tell on themselves—using the Instagram stories feature to share moments of going out; politicians boasting about being the first to receive the COVID-19 vaccine; able-bodied folks refusing to wear a face mask while belligerently demanding entrance into stores.

Other times, such posts would be screen captured, shared with a wider audience, and moralized into absolution. This is not to say that moments of social justice, philanthropy, and social distancing were strictly the purview of non-white groups. Nor would I argue that all white people contributed to the Trump campaign or defied social distancing protocols. However, between the racial disparities in preventable COVID-19 deaths, the racial reckoning of summer 2020, and fearmongering of “super-spreader” events, a critique of the nation’s failure to keep people alive was superseded by the policing of individual behaviors that could be either right or wrong, good or bad. Under this racialized, classed, almost Machiavellian determination, the things people did in pandemic time were either sanctioned as essential action or selfish desire that can either be honorable or damnable.

According to post-structuralists, time is subject to political intervention. Some can be post-racial. Some construe Black politics as a matter post-Civil Rights or post-Black Lives Matter.⁶ We are in a post-welfare state and perhaps living in a world that is post-COVID-19. Pandemic time cuts across many temporalities that overlap and intersect. What these senses of time end up having in common is their impact on those who were already living with a sense that the world as we know it has been unlivable for some time. Black feminists reckon with the notion that Blackness often serves as the threshold between time’s pre- and post-ness. These Black studies theories of gender, time, and touch measure COVID-19’s impact on Black lives alongside, say, Trump’s presidency, the police, and the gutting of public services. Where hegemony, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy tell the story of pandemic time in Black and white, the queer, feminist, and radical among us are attuned to the untimeliness of another story. They acknowledge the sociopolitical apparatuses that bind time to anti-Black action and Western progress to Black stillness. Just as lateness has always characterized the nexus between race, time, and violence in the US and the West more broadly, the crisis experienced now is constituted by the refusal of those in power to address the anti-Blackness and antiqueerness that foments the pandemic’s arrival, toll, and only outcome.

Theories of time within Black studies argue historiography, history, and progress to be the discursive tools of hegemony which promulgate an uneven racialization of space and time. To the Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers, the effect of using flesh to mark time registers on and through Black bodies, always out of time and emblematic of Blackness’ alleged anachronicity. As “nothing more than a *mode* of memorial time,” the violating touch suffered by Black flesh is a literal and temporal rupture (an atmosphere of anti-Blackness begets vulnerability to being touched in more ways than physical).⁷ Thus, anti-Black, violent touch functions as the “beginning” of an anti-Black, “advanced”

society. Folded into memorial time of Western sociality are the discursive and libidinal cornerstones of an “American grammar,” as Spillers argues, and the language of crisis today, as I argue here.⁸ From this blood-stained start, Black flesh, in its ethnicity (another mode of racial mapping) sustains a symbolic “stillness” that detaches Blackness from normative notions of time, paving the way for the progress narrative of an entire nation.⁹ Practical applications of anti-Black time can be found, for example, throughout Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. For Sharpe, the notion of wake time and work in the wake couple the conditions ordering contemporary Black practices of care to time as a form of anti-Blackness itself. Thus, wake work is a mode of caring for each other when one is out time and death is a part of life. Within this “temporality, the long durée, the residence and hold time of the wake,” structural silences are produced.¹⁰ This is how Black people can be excised from historical records and figuratively cast/run out of time. For Black feminists, Black flesh not only serves as a mode, measure, and genre of time; as an antagonist to progress narratives, conquest narratives, and authority, the ability to coercively touch Black flesh impresses a notion of Blackness as untouched by the speed of progress that colors modern society. In other words, time accumulates significance specifically at the moment of re/producing anti-Black touch, a process that is repeated through rituals marking some as backward, deviant, out of time and others as the normal vanguard of time’s proper movement.

There is an anti-Black start to state-sanctioned history, memory, and time and the insidious nature of these origin stories become darker as Black bodies transgress sex and gender in addition to racial categories. Cultural historian Saidiya Hartman identifies slave culture as a key site or “primal scene” of anti-Black violation which is integral of the task of forming the nation’s history.¹¹ Similarly, Spillers finds the grammars of touch to have been fundamentally altered under the rubrics of slavery in which the dual function of touch as curative and violative are robbed of the former and the latter is taken to extreme ends. “In a situation in which flesh becomes a medium of exchange it becomes hard to imagine what intimacy . . . or what the career of touch would be under the conditions defined by violent coercion.”¹² Thus, the “stillness” Spillers describes elsewhere is in part codified through violation and is a critical component to holding Blackness out of time. Black trans studies scholar Matt Richardson theorizes this relationship between Blackness and time as a matter of queer incompleteness, as “what is irresolute and irresolvable about the Black relationship to normative definitions of gender, sexuality, and family.”¹³ As Richardson, Jafari Allen, and other scholars of Black Queer Studies insist, the inability to operate under normative definitions of time is not to

be moralized into condemnation. In *There's a Disco Ball Between Us: A Theory for Black Gay Life*, Allen posits a question that takes seriously the alternative spatiotemporal realities produced in Black queer worlds that exceed the stillness of their pathology: "Can this Black/queer time-space also become a fertile interstice for the constitution of new affinities and communities of support among gender and sexual 'outlaws' across borders?"¹⁴ On the whole, Black studies scholarship on time acknowledges the indifference hegemony has toward the feeling of Black flesh. Yet more to the Black queer point, such theories of time, race, and queerness also ask questions about Black senses of time that account for anti-Black temporality while looking for answers beyond mere negation of what we are not.

If blackness is ontologically tethered to notions of time for those of us operating within state-sanctioned temporalities, pandemic time also dramatizes the connection of antiblackness, hegemony, and the stories we tell about ourselves. As crises from previous disasters continue their uneven impact across race, imminent issues become politicized in Black and white yet converge in pandemic time, indexing the pandemic's function as a proper "event" of a different kind: one whose eventfulness accounts for that which was historically relegated to the status of "nonevent."¹⁵ The arrival of pandemic time, and the pandemic itself as an alleged universally applicable phenomenon, signals that between the dominant and the subsumed, between the ontologically backward and the beneficiaries of an American grammar, *this* time's relationship to Blackness has shifted from one of antagonism to one of identification. The language of crisis, pandemic, urgency, and mass death that is old hat for Black people, but especially lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queers, is hereon adopted by predominantly white and heteronormative institutions.

By clocking this strategy of identification, I read this time as nothing short of ontological lateness. It is a cruel irony that the people who stereotype Black folks as always arriving to places late, are now themselves finding merit in Black struggles for more time. Whiteness has the authority to collapse antiblackness into the unfolding of time, the power shift time in its favor, and demands our complicity. Suddenly, what was marginal became *en vogue* or politically relevant. For the privileged few to adopt a consciousness which, until recently, was deemed pathological because of its association with anti-Black modes of identification, is the height of ontological lateness. Non-Black, non-queer institutions reconfigure the language of crisis and envelop a political strategy used for generations by Black and LGBTQ+ communities. At the same time, this crisis spawns new problems as First World demands for resources directly impacts the less powerful and the powerless. This is all happening despite disparities in COVID-19's impact on communities which are

delimited by class, nation, race, and power. In this moment of alignment between *their* crisis and *our* time, in this era in which the demands of the few becomes the motto of those in power, after decades of organizing and politicizing, the construction of pandemic time is met with irritation and a sense that is already too *late*.

The global impositions of quarantines, lockdowns, social distancing, and vaccines elicited various responses from African Americans who are also part of queer communities. On the one hand, government-sponsored medical treatments in the form of vaccines brought up histories of anti-Black medical experimentations, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The Black community's vaccine hesitancy was a response to the ways the US government took advantage of Black men and women and intentionally exposed them to illness. On the other hand, with the mandates to limit social interactions, Black queer folk had little to no options to form community in "safe" ways. Black queer studies scholarship shows the important role of social clubs and house parties which have always been where Black LGBTQ folk go in times of crisis. It was the case with the HIV pandemic and Black queers continue to congregate en masse as the virus that causes COVID-19 maintains its spread.

"What might it mean to understand Blackqueerness as the refusal of the politics of the proper?"¹⁶ In an essay on the posture taken by attendees of Atlanta's Black Pride in the summer of 2020, Jordan Mulkey poses this question in the context of the fabrication of the "Blackqueer" archetype in which Black LGBTQ persons were reduced to mere pathogen as a result of HIV stigma, policy buffs, and moralists. Still, even in light of how Blackqueer death and irresponsibility figures in these conversations, "[t]heir vulnerability to death seems eclipsed—as it is already more generally—by an intracommunal propensity to play with precarity." From the outside looking in, one might deduce involvement in Black Prides during a global pandemic as a heinous act, the selfish behavior of an inconsiderate few. However, it is unfair and racist to assume that the risk of exposing oneself and one's family to COVID-19, and the social implications of doing something against pandemic time morality, went unaccounted by Atlanta Black Pride promoters and attendees. During the pandemic, play also took place in Carnivals across the Black diaspora. Play was also happening between strangers in bedrooms by way of *Grindr*, *Jack'd*, and *Tinder*. Playing our way through a pandemic may be motivated by the desire to keep going and to disrupt pandemic time. Does this hurt? Not right now. Are we exposed? We answer seldom a word.

As a global crisis which constitutes as a proper event, pandemic time involves the uneven distribution of care across ecologies, nations, and people. Emergency rooms and hospitals around the world would reach or were on the

brink of full capacity, elective surgeries and other routine medical procedures would remain pending, and the people who were most impacted by the hoarding of care were communities already exploited and left destitute by richer, whiter power. Checkups with primary care physicians, dental cleanings, hair care, physical therapy, and other services requiring professional touch were done so at great risk of exposure to the coronavirus or simply postponed indefinitely. In the worst of cases during lockdown, people with critical health issues, compromised immune systems, and tenuous access to health services would never be told their case was desperately tender. Thus, pandemic time brings us to the question, *if play is worth the risk of incapacitation, what are we failing to prioritize in these conversations on Black queer life?* The actions of the sum of us suggest that the right to Blackqueer touch is inalienable, the need to override anti-Black touch is undeniable, and the desire to experience something beyond the lateness of others is how we survive. Pandemic time may have stopped the clock on the flow of goods and services, but some communities, systems, and individual behaviors during the lock down illustrated touch, play, and risk is a hallmark of our ability to survive in times of crisis.

In pandemics, in slave cultures, in “Black/queer space-time,” the racial and libidinal economy founded upon (with)holding touch comes to the forefront of our consciousnesses. For Black queers, as folks whose subjectivities are both a liability and a vulnerability, adhering to the moral high ground or to the status quo was always a non-choice. Pandemic time forces us to consider the hypothetical situation in which the conditions and temporality needed to affirm why we endure anti-Blackqueerness are disappeared. As a person’s actions during a pandemic became a synecdoche for who they are a familiar genre of prejudice was repackaged and this time with the weight of the modern scientific community behind it. In a moment when remote work and social distance became almost privileged modalities despite being unsustainable for entire communities, people who were found wanting were thusly characterized as unhuman. For Black queers, for those of us finding fertility in the interstice, the fact that our sense of life and death came into alignment with the world at the start of a new post-something is a source of irony, a moment to reflect on our function in these systems and to ask ourselves what truly motivates us to keep going. As someone who has spent years observing white folks, their lateness, and their complicity in the precarious living conditions plaguing marginalized communities, I really wanted to read them. After years of clocking, shading, and educating them about their whiteness, pandemic time was the nearest I came to getting them together. But I cannot condone kicking a proverbial dead horse nor can I waste any more time. Now, there is little need to continue shading the lateness of others. That tea was just about

cooled. Instead, I must pause to consider the cost of merely surviving the perverse time of hegemony and instead imagine the business of thriving by way of risk, communing despite condemnation, and attuning ourselves beyond the crisis of living among the perpetually late.

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