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Racial physics or a theory for everything that happened

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ABSTRACT

This political commentary invokes the concept of racial physics, a theory of race and racism influenced philosophically and metaphorically by Albert Einstein's principle of equivalence and theories of relativity, especially in light of the recent political season. The goals for this essay are twofold: (1) provide a critical race conscious assessment of the 2016 political season both within the United States and abroad, and (2) demonstrate how race and racism reflect a broader social cosmology of great consequence, underscoring the tendency among humans to develop constructs that persist across space and time with effects that mirror the nature and properties of matter and energy.

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Introduction

In 2016, from Oshkosh, Wisconsin to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Charlotte, North Carolina to the United Kingdom to France white backlash and retrenchment¹ reared their ugly, though often hidden, heads. White majorities proved to be not so silent. We learned that it will be from white supremacy's cold dead hands that a woman will be president of the United States, that the progeny of Africa and Syria will enter Europe and maybe become European, and that post-racial will never cease being anything more than an anti-black Jedi mind trick convincing the vulnerable and ignorant that the future is now and it will be progressive (e.g. Alexander 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Carbado 2002; Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1995; Emirbayer and Desmond 2012; Feagin 1991; Gilroy 1990, 1993, 2003; Omi and Winant 2014).

Race and racism drew people apart and together in ways that require deeper attention, revealing multiple and overlapping geographies of politics, futures and oppressions. To be sure, the ability of race and racism to have this effect is not new. Whether in pogroms, the passageways of the Underground Railroad or the Toussaint L'Ouverture-led Haitian revolution, the force of

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racism to accelerate white mobility and backlash while simultaneously motivating, organizing and oppressing marginalized peoples has been consistent and effective across space and time (e.g. Cohen 2010; Du Bois 1920, 1935; Harris 1993; Hartman 1997; James 2001; Marx 1998; Rodney 1972).

In my exploration of these persistent properties of race and racism, I found myself dreaming my way into the physics courses of Professor Albert Einstein. Awakened suddenly by the spirit of serendipity I read Einstein's many writings, particularly his theories of general and special relativity. I was especially drawn to his insight about how gravity and acceleration/force collaborate as co-parents of the human experience of nature, matter and energy (Einstein 1952, 2011, 2014, 2015).

"What if human collectives create powerful social systems mirroring processes occurring in the natural world?" I asked as I began mentally aligning Einstein's analogies about dropping rocks, elevators and train tracks with the political events of 2016. This brief essay reflects this intellectual convergence in an effort to offer a new frame and understanding for the persistence and influence of race and racism. The central claim: white power enterprises (e.g. imperialism, colonization and manifest destiny) alongside the resistance and movements of minorities produced the enduring principles of the social world: social gravity and social acceleration, race and racism, respectively.

Stated differently, the history, acts and agitation between the oppressor and the oppressed since the colonial period has participated in making race function much in the way that Einstein characterizes gravity. Much like how gravity affects matter in the natural world, in the social world² race in varying degrees draws people apart and together, binds people to sidewalks, neighbourhoods and institutions of civil society. Racism, in turn, operates as a socio-economic and political accelerant and force that leads to racially disparate outcomes and privileges.

In what follows, I build a theory of race and racism influenced philosophically and metaphorically by Einstein's principle of equivalence and theories of relativity. I will use his philosophical and scientific insights on general and special relativity as a springboard to provoke a new imagining and awareness of the workings of race and racism, especially in light of the recent political season. Thereafter, I build out the metaphor to illustrate how political events of the past year affirm that race and racism are not only obdurate and enduring, but also function and influence the social world in ways that deeply mirror major components of Einstein's theory for the effects and understanding of gravity, acceleration and simultaneity; thus there are two interrelated goals for this essay: (1) providing a critical race conscious assessment of the 2016 political season both within the United States and abroad, and (2) demonstrating how race and racism reflect a broader social cosmology of great consequence, underscoring the tendency among humans to develop constructs that persist across space and time with effects that mirror the nature and properties of matter and energy.

Race as gravity, racism as accelerant

“The present book is intended, as far as possible, to give an exact insight into the theory of Relativity to those readers who”, Einstein (2015, 31) writes at the book’s opening, “from a general scientific and philosophical point of view, are interested in theory, but who are not conversant with the mathematical apparatus of theoretical physics”. To illustrate the physical and philosophical principles guiding his theories of relativity, Einstein offers an example pregnant with great insight. Suppose “I stand at the window of a railway carriage which is travelling uniformly”, Einstein (2015, 39) first asks us to imagine,

and drop a stone on the embankment, without throwing it. Then, disregarding the influence of the air resistance, I see the stone descend in a straight line. A pedestrian who observes the misdeed from the footpath notices that the stone falls to earth in a parabolic curve.

Standpoint and intersectional vantage points are angles in and through the truth about (the) matter. Importantly, Einstein notes that his theories of relativity are not merely a matter of physics but also a philosophy – an epistemology and ontology for the nature and ways of things.

Add to this example, Einstein’s physics provocation better known as the *principle of equivalence*. Roughly, the principle holds that the impact of gravity on mass and the force on inert matter are identical. From Einstein’s provocation, a popular analogy drawn from everyday life has been used often to illustrate this principle: the elevator. Imagine stepping upon an elevator. At the moment of entrance your body feels a force acting, keeping your feet to the elevator’s floor. This same force felt upon entering the elevator is then relatively indistinguishable from the subsequent movement of the elevator upwards or downwards. Of course, the descent or ascent if hurried could mean that the individual would suddenly be lifted from the elevator floor in a state similar to that of free-floating astronauts in space.³

In his later life, Einstein would also provide important criticism of the nature of race and racism that share links to his understanding of physical principles and theories. Not only convinced that “whiteness is a disease”, in a 1946 essay “On the Negro Question” Einstein (2011, 12) aggressively noted how race and racism seemed a form of social magnetism and force historically oppressing black people:

I am firmly convinced that whoever believes this suffers from a fatal misconception. Your ancestors dragged these black people from their homes by force; and in the white man’s quest for wealth and an easy life they have been ruthlessly suppressed and exploited, degraded into slavery. The modern prejudice against Negroes is the result of the desire to maintain this unworthy condition.⁴

This patchwork of Einstein’s theories of relativity alongside his condemnation of whiteness provide an opportunity to explore the enduring legacy of race

and racism of the sort he critiqued, illustrating the resilient gravitational pull of race especially when paired with the force of racism, its relatively indistinguishable kindred social process.

'La resistance' will not be televised because the Queen is brexiting stage left

Racial gravity is a feeling. It is the invisible hand organizing us all. Racial gravity also pulls bodies into formation. And so it was that I arrived to Paris just as the Eurozone was determining where and how to allocate Syrian refugees, African asylum seekers and unemployed (and usually young) Eastern Europeans. During that spring of 2015 several protests occurred all around Paris metro over this allocation and asylum, thus falling under the broad umbrella of "immigration". While in other nations and places immigration may be or appears as a discrete issue, in a country with a history like France this could not be further from the truth (see e.g. Fanon 2007, 2008; James 2001; Memmi 2000).

Over the last decade, France's reputation as one of the world's most pervasive and effective colonizers was now intervening in its future. The revolutions and uprisings that roiled throughout the African continent have roots in the colonial period and also involved (and sometimes required) contemporary intervention by the French, British and United States governments. Though long-forgotten stateside by many white Europeans, in nations across the world, especially in Africa and the Caribbean, the era of the European expansion and colonization set many oppressions, migrations and immigrations in motion (e.g. Beaman 2010, 2015a, 2015b; Lamont 1992; Rodney 1972; Wacquant 2008). And the Eurozone, the popular shorthand for a geo-political economic strategy of European stability and contraction, was no longer proving to be an effective buffer or nation-state binding agent.

I arrived to Paris a few months after the massacre at the Charlie Hebdo headquarters. In the weeks following the attack, extreme conservative Marie Le Pen and her father were politically cashing in on the fear leading to a surge in the nationalist right. Despite the sentiment among white Francophiles that people of colour and immigrants were everywhere in France, I found they were everywhere in certain places. After querying locals on where people of African and Arab descent dominate, I was told time and again of the "lost territories", suburban exurbs of urban France where dreams of white socialism died decades ago. It was on the streets of Parisian suburbs like St. Denis that descendants of those brutalized, enslaved and colonized were seeking refuge, work and full citizenship, many of whom though black were natural born French citizens.

Unable to locate a critical mass of black or Arab elected officials, professionals or rentiers, I saw how race and racism worked much like the elevator

metaphors commonly used by physicists for Einstein's principle of equivalence. There is an elevator in France (the Eurozone) and during the Great Recession everyone who stepped on it could feel the weight. Whether or not someone then gets pulled up or down on that elevator gets understood as an educational, class or moral issue or failing. Yet those who are ascending in French society are still pretty white, and those who were descending look rather much like descendants of the colonized and enslaved.

And so I took the inventive train round-trip from France's Gard du Nord to London's King's Cross Station. That the United Kingdom, England in particular, uses the English Channel as a buffer from the rest of Europe and the world has been a critical feature, if not a metaphor, of British geo-politics and xenophobia for some time (see e.g. Alexander 1996, 2002; Gilroy 1993, 2000; Rodney 1972). A medium through which to retreat, retrench and re-protect, the train rides illustrated just how close and how far away the United Kingdom could be when and if it chooses. Indeed, I dare say the security measures for travel by train between Paris and London rival that of international air travel security, while much less precaution takes place when flying within and across mainland Europe (say from Paris to Milan or Paris to Amsterdam or Belgium to Berlin).

Recovering from its own series of terror acts and threats, the United Kingdom was not unlike France in its noticeable though underreported racial xenophobia. And with the Syrian civil war emboldening Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, breathing new life into Vladimir Putin's Russian empiric dreams, many voters outside of the United Kingdom's urban core wanted out of the Eurozone altogether. Though many saw a need for there to be refuge for Syrian and African asylum seekers, it just would need to happen in somebody else's country.

To be certain, the need to flee areas of Asia Minor and Africa is impacted by current political dangers on the ground, but were set into motion by the purposeful underdevelopment of Africa and neoliberal and neoconservative conquests. As a mechanism of these sorts of geo-political approaches, race again worked as social gravity, putting countries and peoples in their "proper" place. Meanwhile, racism rolled like a wave effect from London to Berlin in hopes of accelerating and decelerating the fortunes of the powerful and the powerless, those at home and those abroad.⁵ Power and privilege are to whiteness as servitude and caste are to blackness. Africans are black, even if they were not born in Africa. Arabs are black. As an emergent permanent service class across Europe, Eastern Europeans are black. Disqualified for many benefits from the welfare state due to their age, youth across Europe are black. Race hits you in the elevator of opportunity, and racism shoots you in whatever direction sometimes without any notice. And so the English countryside and Northern Ireland brexited and Marie Le Pen is campaigning on racial quotas. What a Eurozone this has become.

How America got trumped

“Chickens coming home to roost”, an emboldened Malcolm X proclaimed more than fifty years ago to reporters upon questions about the events surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. An expression of his insight about the collateral damage of white supremacy and anti-blackness, Malcolm X’s comment would lead to his being silenced by the Nation of Islam and a permanent reputation as a radical agitator within and outside of the Civil Rights Movement. As I boarded the plane to Michigan on Election Day, Malcolm X and his provocation had been weighing heavy on mind. I had never been to the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. So when the opportunity came to give a lecture on black Detroit in November I jumped at the chance.

Amidst the clearing rain clouds, I arrived at Detroit International Airport just in time to watch the election returns. During a lively discussion over the drive from the airport to Ann Arbor, I was convinced that our prolonged punishment known as the presidential election campaign season would end with the formal selection of the nation’s first woman president. Focus groups and polls had for the previous two weeks indicated a vast swing in the electorate in favour of Hillary Clinton, with some models suggesting she would win the presidency by significant margins. Still, there was tension and fear in the air. “Trump could still win”, I was reminded just as we arrived at the *Graduate Hotel* in the centre of Ann Arbor.

Once checked-in and relatively unpacked, I began tuning into various stations for the election returns. Exit polls in places like Pennsylvania, my home state, were hot topics. According to early exit polling many white voters had rejected Donald Trump, telling exit pollsters that they instead chose to vote for write-in candidates, the Green Party nominee, Clinton or some derivative thereof. This seemed to make sense, especially after the widely discussed revelation of Trump’s use of mints to bypass laws protecting women from physical harm and molestation. Yet, within a few hours Pennsylvania and Michigan turned red before my eyes. A dejected Rachel Maddow, wall magician John King’s look of surprise, and a solemn Lester Holmes were the sights and sounds of the announcement of the election result that Trump would become the forty-fifth President of the United States.

Like many campuses across the country, the next morning Ann Arbor was sombre and unusually empty. For many, the election was a matter of life or death and the next four or more years will prove trying at the very least. Yet, I cannot help but to continually ask myself: “What would Malcolm X think or say?” – especially given that Michigan was his birthplace. Have we not witnessed an assassination of some sort during this presidential campaign? The integrity of black and brown people, women, immigrants and Muslims has surely been attacked if not assassinated over the last two

years. And there has most definitely been a roosting of chickens. These chickens, however, dissembled their way into the coop.

The exit polls were not wrong simply due to mere statistical errors. Rather, many white voters lied. They lied in focus groups. They lied in robocalls. They lied just before Election Day and sure enough kept on lying. The exit pollsters had been duped. There had never been any real political departure away from Trump. The media and Democrat campaign to disqualify Trump and turn supporting his candidacy into shorthand for being a proponent of racism, sexism, heterosexism and xenophobia did not work. Though many predicted that Trump's temperament, incendiary comments and political incorrectness spelled his doom among educated white women and Latin@ voters, in states like Florida, Michigan and Pennsylvania the tide turned and all of a sudden most all of the map of America was red.⁶

White resentment fomenting during the Obama presidency has concretized into white retrenchment of the sort that black feminist legal scholar Crenshaw (1988) warned of nearly three decades earlier. Indeed, many Trump voters across race, gender and class dissembled until they reached the safety of the voting booth where they roosted, bringing to the surface all of the redness that has been hidden in the nooks and crannies of the American South. Now that America's redness has been exposed and the chickens have roosted, it is white America that has illustrated that race is gravity and racism can accelerate a rich white man into the White House over and over.

Black holes or how the future is black

Though in different locations and time zones and arranged by varying histories, over the last year we witnessed white dissembling and retrenchment that fomented into a resounding political backlash in the United States, France and the United Kingdom. Shrinking white majorities and power elites found themselves, for different reasons, attracted to the effective orienting magnetism of race, closing ranks around the what Painter (2010) effectively dubbed "the history of white people". Einstein's search led him to reconcile that his principles and theories highlighted the eventuality of black holes, physicist's version of Pandora's Box. Black holes it seems emerge from all of this natural commotion, containing and obscuring alternate realities, new futures even.⁷ The same can be said in assessing the passing political season.

The combinations of white dissemblance, xenophobia and retrenchment have opened up holes of opportunity full of black possibilities. The Black Lives Matter global consortium's traction and ascension bespeaks the manifestation of these possibilities (Hunter and Robinson 2016). Perhaps this political season where (white) America and (white) Europe sought to be great again were a stopgap measure on the eventuality of new majorities and

new ways of being complicit. Like the cosmic holes Einstein brings our attention to the future is relatively unknowable and most definitely black. Political eventualities equal the majority's complicity squared.⁸

Notes

1. My conception and use of the term is drawn from Crenshaw's (1988) critical insight about how white supremacy and domination have the ability to dig in their collective heels as juridical, political and social apparatus.
2. Humans are social beings. This observation is a central tenet across the social sciences. That humans perform and accomplish identities and establish and maintain institutions, politics and structures is also a somewhat settled notion. But some serious considerations of this question can be found, for example, in the work of urban ecologists, many of who sought to demonstrate how residential and communal patterns within Chicago reflect a "natural order" of human movement and habitation. Roughly, the urban ecology logic asserts: As new groups age out and are incorporated into the body politic they are then replaced geographically and socially by subsequent incoming groups. However, as a generation of race scholars have shown, conventional wisdom on matters of human sociality and ecology often pay short shrift to the invention and intervention of race and racism in the world order (see e.g. Bronfenbrenner and Brofenbrenner 2009; Park 1936).
3. The elevator analogy is quite common and can be found in provocative iterations in Smolin (2006) and Wald (2010).
4. The quote is pulled a longer powerful analysis offered by Einstein in the essay. Furthermore, his lecture and time at Lincoln University, the Historically Black College, influenced his anti-racists leanings. Einstein (2011, 12) further offers:

There is, however, a somber point in the social outlook of Americans. Their sense of equality and human dignity is mainly limited to men of white skins. Even among these there are prejudices of which I as a Jew am clearly conscious; but they are unimportant in comparison with the attitude of the "Whites" toward their fellow-citizens of darker complexion, particularly toward Negroes. The more I feel an American, the more this situation pains me. I can escape the feeling of complicity in it only by speaking out.

Importantly, Einstein would be one of few prominent intellectuals to volunteer to testify on behalf of W.E.B. Du Bois after the United States State Department falsely accused and tried Du Bois as a foreign agent/spy in 1951.

5. This is not to say that race and racism operate or function in this matter simply because they are mere preference.
6. This conservative shift is well covered and forecasted in great detail in Skocpol and Williamson and their analysis of the "Tea Party" (2012).
7. For a richer and fuller understanding and guidance on and about the impact and contemporary cache of String Theory in physics see Smolin and Harnad (2008), Smolin (2006) and Polchinski (1998).
8. As it turns out my endeavour into the world of Einstein also revealed an interesting professional overlap between physics and race scholarship: those who study general relativity today are neatly packed into marginal spaces across the Ivory Tower. Much like their race scholar counterparts, they are compelled

to integrate their inquiries into the hegemonic areas of interests in their discipline. Surely, infighting abounds from this professional tension mirroring the fraught lines brought to the surface during this political season. For this added insight, I am greatly indebted to my colleague Jacob Foster for help in locating these internal public disciplinary lines, debates and dialogue. See also Smolin (2006).

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