

On having a non-linear path



Interdisciplinary artist, author, and lawyer Rasheedah Phillips discusses working beyond the 9-to-5, tapping into non-Western ways of experiencing reality, and learning the unique value only you can bring.

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As told to Eva Recinos, 1605 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Writing](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Day jobs](#), [Time management](#).

You're a lawyer, you're a writer, you're an artist. You've worked on numerous projects both as an individual and collaboratively. What's the importance of working in this multidisciplinary way?

It's very hard to compartmentalize across interests and things that I need to do as part of my job, as part of my chosen career—in terms of being a public interest attorney, being an attorney who supports and works with folks who are grassroots-based. That has a natural bleed-over into the kind of art practice that I've been able to engage in, one that is community-based and attempts to be community-engaged as much as possible. And part of that stems from having a non-linear path to these things in life.

I didn't go to school to be an artist. I didn't see myself or acknowledge myself as an artist until way after I was in my career. Part of me having the space and having the awareness to engage with art, and to see myself as an artist, was because I was involved in DIY spaces in Philadelphia that had a lot of overlap with the communities that I was serving as part of being at a legal services organization. And then that had overlap with the things that I needed as a young Black, queer parent, growing up as a teen parent... There's just a lot of overlap in life path and things that are non-linear and have intersected and intertwined with each other.

If I didn't have a way of divesting from the thought process and approach that lawyers typically have to use in their work, and to be able to have an artistic practice or an Afro-Futurist community to be thinking about and challenging the frameworks that I was working within as a lawyer, I don't think I'd be as "successful" in my fields. It's not always easy, either. There are times when I have to be very siloed in my work, where I have to be very focused on how I'm taking an approach. But I've also managed to somehow get myself into places where these things can lead into each other.

How do you balance your day-to-day work and your artistic ambition with the knowledge that we can push back against dominant structures of time? Do you structure your days?

There is no balance, right? What we consider to be "balance" is a fiction, in a lot of ways. Because of the ways that time is constructed in terms of a 24-hour day in our society, and an "eight-hour work day." The type of work that I do is not containable in an eight-hour work day. And then there's a five-day work week. I am beholden to that structure in some ways, because I have to be in the world. I have a family. I have to have a job that is consistent and steady. But I realize that it is a construct. It is just one way of doing things... I do structure my day, generally. Again, there's nuance around that. Although I have the awareness of what I'm doing, the fact is that I realized that it's not healthy. It's unnatural in a lot of ways, and it goes even beyond the structures that are set for it. My job is beyond a 9-to-5. I am often working Sundays. I am often working until 10 o'clock at night—these kinds of things. So even beyond those structures that have been set up for this, it goes beyond that. But there is fluidity at the same time, and being able to have Black Quantum Futurism, doing the sort of

research that I can do—it gives me the ability to not take for granted that it is a construct.

In your book, *Dismantling the Master's Clock: On Race, Space, and Time*, you talk about the regimentation of time as a means of control and surveillance, as a tool for disenfranchisement for Black folks, and how time and space are not neutral in this way. How has your artistic output been a way to process all of this?

It's been a really amazing outlet for it. Because [art] is the place where folks are more open and more willing to experiment, and where you can stretch the bounds of imagination without too much question or push back. In an art exhibit, I'm able to collaborate with someone and create a clock that runs backwards in time or is activated by sound. Or I'm able to create a large floor compass that moves in time with other people, and other people can play with sound and time and space... I can write a book that's questioning these things, and if I were a scientist—or if I were strictly not crossing over into the realm of the speculative, like in my legal work—I wouldn't have as much room and space to write a book like that, from that kind of context.

Reading a book is a different experience from seeing a public artwork. In the book, you also encourage readers to skip around and not necessarily feel beholden to reading in a linear way. Why was it important to translate your research about time to the written form?

I talk about this in other contexts, but for me, writing and reading is literal time manipulation. So I wanted to offer folks the opportunity to do that with the work—to put it into practice. I don't want to just offer something and be like, "Hey, go figure out the rest on your own." But, "Here's actually a way to practice what I'm saying." I realize that these are really challenging ideas to wrap around, and to figure out... It's just offering another way to put into practice the idea that linearity is not the only model—is not even the dominant model—for how we construct or can deal with reality. Those other options, alternatives, possibilities may be healthier. They may be more aligned with how you want to walk through the world. They may be more aligned with your communal ways or your ancestral ways of being in the world, being in space-time.

Do you have any advice or insights for artists who might be curious about making their work more interdisciplinary?

Rather than advice, it's more just an invitation to folks to not silo yourself. Or, to not shrink yourself. To find ways to bring the fullness of yourself—whatever that looks like or means—into things that you do. I know it's easier said than done, and even for my own journey, it's been very difficult to find ways to do that.

As I get older, it's like, "I'm going to just do whatever I want." I [recommend] a little bit of that bravado. Wherever you are in your career, just [saying], "This is me. These are the things that I'm interested in." It doesn't have to look polished, or any particular way... More and more, I have learned the value that I bring as a unique being and whatever it looks like in that moment. And even if it's not accepted by everyone, I have learned that it is where it needs to be. It's in the conversations that it needs to be in. It's with the people that need it, and need to see it. I've gotten that validation by being in community with folks and having those conversations.

There's a passage in your book on non-deterministic futures that I think is so interesting: the future is "not a fixed, inevitable outcome determined by past and present actions" and is actually "a realm of vast possibility." That resonated with me in terms of thinking about this very heavy moment we're living in right now.

One thing about being a part of the Afrofuturist community writ large, and having the opportunity to put into practice some of the ideas and strategies and ways of being that I talk about in a book, is that I literally have come to see the future differently. I even question that idea, or that construct, of being able to see the future. And going beyond our visual constructs, even, because I think that limits us in so many ways—in terms of what we expect the future to look like, versus what we expect it to feel like, what we expect it to sound like.

There are other communal, ancestral, and other civilizations' ways of experiencing reality. [The future] is not just beholden to, for example, a four-year political construct. In terms of being able to think about a future and being able to construct a space-time that is different from the now, I can hold a lot of different things. I

can hold the lessons and the space-times of the '60s. I can hold the space-times of enslaved ancestors, in terms of thinking through what the future should be. There are different types of futures that are possible from the ones that have been constructed by Western, white supremacist, linear space-time. Those futures are actually already active, can be tapped in to, and can be integrated into this particular reality.

Rasheedah Phillips recommends:

Dark, a TV show on Netflix

The film In the Shadow of the Moon

Uli's Gelato (blueberry flavor and seasonal King Pluot flavor)

Cucumber mint tea with sage honey

I recently revisited The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind by Julian Jaynes and it's bringing up a lot of thoughts and interesting conversations in my household

Name

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Vocation

interdisciplinary artist, writer, lawyer

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