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Justice

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# Black Feminist Literacies

## Ungendering, Flesh, and Post-Spillers Epistemologies of Embodied and Emotional Justice

Samantha Pinto, *Georgetown University*

**ABSTRACT**—This essay will think through the possibilities that Hortense Spillers has engendered in her formulation of the flesh as a modality of Black feminist literacy, and map the contours of the current resurgence of her work in Black studies and Black feminist theory. Her landmark explication of the physical and psychic terrain of Black women's gendering has created a network of post-publication relations that map how critical emphases around Black women's affective and embodied experiences have changed since its publication. The interpretation of the essay has shifted as Black studies, queer studies, diaspora studies, critical theory, ethnic studies, and women's & gender studies have tackled the nuanced difficulties of pursuing social, political, emotional, and embodied justice for Black women and girls. The recent cascade of attention to Spillers's work in "Mama's Baby" marks, I argue, a moment of disenchantment with recognized methodologies of representational politics; Spillers seems to offer the contemporary moment both a vocabulary and a literacy that appeals to innovative, affective understandings of justice for Black women & girls, one that sees cultural production as a necessary but not totalizing terrain for justice.

**KEYWORDS**—Spillers, black, feminist, literacy, embodied experiences, new literacies

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AS THE 2007 WOMEN'S STUDIES QUARTERLY FORUM ON HORTENSE Spillers's 1987 "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" highlights, her essay is a benchmark that those of us working on Black women's literature and in Black feminist theory assign and write with frequently. Originally written (as was her "Interstices" in Carol Vance's *Pleasure and Danger*) as a response to the Barnard Conference on Sexuality, the infamous historical site of the feminist porn/sex wars, Spillers's piece now undergirds much of what we might think of as the main thread of Black feminist historical and literary/cultural studies practice—that the language of gender, namely the designation "woman," does not necessarily include Black women. This observation, while not newly brought to the written field by Spillers (one could think of the Combahee River Collective Statement (1984), *But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), or Alice Walker's "Womanism," (1983) to name just a few), is mined for depth and texture in "Mama's Baby," in ways that have reverberated across years and fields of study. Her focus on Black women's erotic, sexual, embodied, and emotional lives as critical to reading and theorizing race, gender, feminism, and sexuality studies resonates deeply in the call for this special issue, and in very recent scholarship that seeks new literacies to speak of and organize politics around Black feminist thought.

This essay will think through the possibilities that Spillers has engendered in her formulation of the flesh as a modality of Black feminist literacy, and map the contours of the current resurgence of her work in Black studies and Black feminist theory. Her landmark explication of the physical and psychic terrain of Black women's gendering has created a network of post-publication relations that map how critical emphases around Black women's affective and embodied experiences—their "lover identities," in the terms of this special issue—have changed since its publication. The interpretation of the essay has shifted as Black studies, queer studies, diaspora studies, critical theory, ethnic studies, and women's and gender studies have tackled the nuanced difficulties of pursuing social, political, emotional, and embodied justice for Black women and girls. I pay particular attention to the recent uptick in attention to Spillers's conceptualization of "ungendering" and "flesh," trying to read the tension lines between existing grammars of, methodological innovations in, and the articulated and unthought futures of, Black feminist literacies across disciplines and political terrains. The recent cascade of attention to Spillers's work in "Mama's Baby" marks a moment of disenchantment with recognized methodologies of representational politics,

while Spillers seems to offer the contemporary moment a vocabulary and a literacy that appeals to innovative, affective understandings of justice for Black women and girls, one that sees cultural production as a necessary but not totalizing terrain for justice.

Spillers essay begins, infamously, with a litany of grammars—names that are also not names, but types (“Controlling Images” in Patricia Hill Collins’s formulation). *Grammar* connotes organized structures of meaning and sequence, rights and wrongs in a network of verbal-linguistic laws. To insist on these racial grammars as organizing national/linguistic structures is to do two powerful things: One is to argue for the power of psychoanalysis, or the idea of things that unconsciously structure our everyday lives, and speech acts/utterances that misname bodies and their contexts—their sense and sequence—in their repetition. The second is to expose the language of gender, particularly *woman* and *body*, as inadequate grammars that attempt to occlude and discipline Black women’s bodies and their particular ontological history. Written through the lens of the law of *partus sequitur ventrem*—the child will follow the condition of the mother—that defined enslavement, the force of the essay lies in Spillers’s quest to locate the possibilities of being able to exceed the grammar of *father* in the unique and disturbing experience of being excluded from the emotional or protective qualities of *mothering* as a normative term.

Spillers then shifts both historical context for African American women’s gendering and the vocabulary used to mark it, specifically through the terms *ungendering* and *flesh*. Spillers argues for the site of the Middle Passage as a process of ungendering where Black bodies are erased of past gender-social identities and made into flesh. Though of course African women and men are still selected and differentially sexed and sexualized even in the architecture of the slave prison and the slaveship’s hold, Spillers’s ungendering is perhaps best pressed on as a radical differentiation in America’s static but quite specifically formed notion of gendering that denotes Whiteness as the base of a normative process. More than mere refusal, the essay creates a set of terms that can acknowledge the specific, violent circumstances of *Black women’s* subject formation. She introduces *flesh* as a way to merge a contemporary focus on the body as a locus of gendered agency and its horrific commodification under enslavement that lingers in the affective, legal, social, and market systems that define contemporary Black life. *Flesh*, for Spillers and those who follow her, becomes a way of marking both violence and the conception of a Black feminist methodology from the specific em-

bodied, emotional, social, and cultural relations that this violence creates—an opening, a break, an interstice that doesn't so much resist as remake what we think we know about the range and pitch of "Black women" and Black feminist political possibility.

Spillers then maps a different structure of feeling for articulating Black women's history and subjectivity, activating a vocabulary that exposes the grammar of gender as inadequate, violent, invisibilizing, and obliterating. In Spillers's case, the vocabulary privileges Black women's ways of knowing and feeling *Black women* as historical, philosophical, material, and political subjects. It is to this epistemological emphasis that I ultimately turn to map and analyze how and why Spillers's vocabulary has recently resurged, even as it never disappeared from Black feminist thought and practice. The renewed attention to Spillers, especially to her terms *ungendering* and *flesh*, rather than *pornotroping*, also marks the continued value and devaluing of Black feminist theory as an object of study mobilized through various disciplinary and institutional sites. Rather than celebrate or critique this resurgence, I will think through how and why it comes at a moment of crisis in theorizing the crucial fight and need for justice for Black women and girls, and also how "Black women" and "Black feminism" are part of epistemological crises in Black studies and women's and gender studies as they struggle to "include" Black women in their institutional practices and visions of justice. Spillers cannot and should not have to solve these crisis points, I argue, but the desire to re-center her work points to both our critical attachments to recognizable systems of analysis for the pursuit of social justice, and our desire to find in Black feminist theoretical history a new roadmap, and new methods, that can point to more just futures for Black women and girls.

### "In the Way That I Do It"

Haunting two generations of Black feminist scholars after her, what turns of terminology or methodology can account for the desire to bring Spillers to forefront of Black studies in its formulations of Afro-pessimism and Black queer sexuality studies, for instance, as well as her continued presence in Black feminist historiography?<sup>1</sup> As debates on the methodological limits of intersectionality also emerge within feminist studies, we might think about Spillers's re-upping as a sort of perfect storm—it practices intersectionality and also has a post-structural philosophical sweep that manages to both critique agency and articulate a longing for it.<sup>2</sup> "Mama's Baby" also

resituates ties between African and African American feminism even as it traffics in the contemporary moment's emphasis on enslavement and death as the key nodes of understanding Blackness. Bringing diaspora texture and context, as well as intersectional and post-intersectional feelings to bear on the contemporary moment, Spillers's vocabulary has resonated across Black studies and women's studies—moving from the human to the post-human, from reason to feeling, from internalized to structural identity politics, from scenes of trauma to sites of pleasure. It is particularly the emotional and embodied literacies she formulates and enables that I will take up in this essay.

As evidenced by the struggle of Black studies and women's studies scholars in public intellectual discourse over the past 30 years, grammar—and in particular, naming—is important to the work they do.<sup>3</sup> As interdisciplinary fields grounded in social justice, they seek to demonstrate the capacity for, and an ethical commitment to, inclusion and expansion (as well as critique, resistance, and redress). But institutional grammar can also seem inflexible—hence the fights about naming (for example, among the names of fields such as Afro-American, Africana studies; gender, feminist, sexuality studies, etc.), as well as debates about inclusion in core curriculum and “the canon” of these fields. These contests and visions can hardly be summed up in the time I have here, but these debates around naming have also exposed, often uncomfortably, our critical desires for specificity, for capacious inclusion, and for a sustainable, defined, and *better* politics—as well as the way these desires act in contradictory ways or even impossible tension in the field. And yet, the recognition of these tensions and unfulfilled desires seems to lie at the heart of the fields, feeding growth and transformation rather than closing off the will to engage. This challenge to adopt and adapt to new literacies is at the heart of Black feminist thought, or Black feminist “study,” to use the latest formulation of theory-as-practice (Harney & Moten, 2013). As Spillers herself has outlined in interviews, she sees the work she does within the institution of the university as a type of expansive history not just in content but in “that I do it the *way* that I do it” (Leonard & Spillers, 2007, p. 1058). In other words, Spillers sees her provocative work as the crucial labor of engendering Black feminist literacies—the methods of reading White supremacist institutionalality as well as the alternate ways of knowing, reading, and feeling that Black feminist practice can offer, provoke, and inspire.

Spillers insists on new ways to read not just history and culture, but en-

tire social structures that organize our everyday political, social, and emotional lives. Her essay opened up—and continues to open up—questions around gender, race, sexuality, and the body that infuse Black feminist theory's interrogations of various sites of inquiry: pleasure, biopower, history, the body, the visual, and the human. She charts this not just through her unpacking of the grammar, linguistic and conceptual structures, that surround and occlude Black women's bodies, but also through the introduction of a series of new conceptual terms for reading: "pornotroping," "ungendering," and "flesh" being the most prominent. Although these terms are not as structuring—not as much an enclosure—as the "grammar" she critiques, they have become touchstones, jumping off points, for fields of inquiry surrounding Black women and Black feminist thought. These fields then look to Spillers to gain new literacies. In the sections that follow, I will briefly explore the afterlives of the terms "ungendering" and "flesh" as vocabularies that move away from representation and visibility politics as the key literacies of justice for Black women. I argue in each that Spillers provides not just new-old analytics that resonate, but that her work offers an epistemological model of *doing* Black feminist thought that compassionately resists the certainty of any one explanatory model of justice.

### Ungendering Literacy: The Grammar of History/the Grammar of Injury

The purchase of "Mama's Baby" in many ways hinges, most clearly, on a way to excavate, challenge, and re-interpret the racialized history of gender, or the gendered history of racialization, which for Spillers is in the class of cultural grammar that "confirm[s] the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of humans social arrangements" wherein these grammars "take[] on constancy, assume[] the look and the affects of the Eternal" (Spillers, 1987, p. 66). To undo the reification, Spillers takes some steps backward in time for her most provocative claim of the piece: that the Middle Passage is a decisive breaking/starting point for the formation of the racial-sexual body, and that it should be treated as the radical break that it is, rather than as a marginal event that is viewed through a more continuous historiography of "gender," particularly "woman," that imagines social organization via a normative Whiteness.

"Mama's Baby" also centralizes gender, sexuality, and the body at the heart of the Middle Passage, even as it claims modern gender's undoing at



the very site. In this, Spillers anticipates and complicates Paul Gilroy's 1993 formation of *The Black Atlantic* through the Middle Passage as the inaugural cultural event of modernity's formation—even more interesting to note in light of Spillers's own suspicion of diaspora studies' rise as a way to get around "gender" (as critiqued in the 2007 forum with Leonard). The work that has been done in the name of and in the aftermath of Spillers's renegotiated primal scene of gendering has, in tandem with scholars such as Darlene Clark Hine, Stephanie Camp, and Deborah Gray White, opened up Black feminist historiography to the deep specificities of Black women's enslaved experience. Providing a conceptual avenue for articulating Black women's invisibility as written through the woman of color feminist articulations of exclusion from feminist- and anti-racist-movement building in the 1960s and 1970s, Spillers has encouraged a generation of historians to think through Black women's subject formation in the New World. Jennifer Morgan's astounding 2011 study of African women and maternity as a discursive precursor and continuous undergirding of the racialized chattel slave trade itself, and Marisa Fuentes's 2016 investigation of the experience of urban enslavement and Black women's difficult archival absent-presences have functioned in similar fashion.<sup>4</sup> As just a small sampling of those influenced by the methodological challenge of "Mama's Baby," these scholars of history, particularly the history of enslavement, find in Spillers's formulation not a retreat from or leveling of gender within Blackness as a category, but a way to engage the formulation of "Black women" as one that marks a set of gendered processes that are not reducible to the margins of White femininity nor to only their points of intersection.

More recent historical investments move further afield from pornotroping—the hyper visual, hyper-gendered practices and vocabularies of Black gender that Spillers calls out for their repetition and solidification into everyday and academic life. Pornotroping defined most of the scholarship on Spillers and "Mama's Baby" in the past. The more recent move to recognize ungendering as the understood key term of her work marks a larger shift than my depiction of continuity across Black feminist historic practice would suggest. This shift away from representation reflects a tension with the literacies available to talk about Black women even within Black feminist studies, including the construction of *Black women* solely through injury, or "wounded attachment," as Jennifer Nash phrased it in a 2017 article. Ungendering represents a departure for thinking and reading, "for living and for dying" in Spillers's terms, a method that echoes the foci

of Afro-pessimist discourses on enslavement and death and Black feminist discourses of redress and the erotics of the living body. The frustration with a larger academic field that seems to both elide and limit Black women to the American grammar scripts that Spillers elucidates is what comes in now, 30 years later, as an attachment to but also a frustration with the critical desires of Black feminist theory writ large, and its political commitments and methodologies, without jettisoning the conceptual terrain of either *women* or *feminism*—or injury and agency—altogether.

At the site of women's studies (understood broadly here to include feminist, gender, queer, and sexuality studies), the re-emphasis on Spillers comes from the continued effort to extricate Black feminist theory from the grips of White feminist paradigms that structure the field(s). Of course, this looks quite different in the current moment, due to the proliferation of intersectionality as the defining feature of both Black feminist thought and of women's studies methodology. As such, Black feminist theory is at once the "hot object" that Ann duCille so richly exemplified mixed feelings about in her 1994 piece, and, as Brittney Cooper diagnosed in 2015, is constantly positing Black women as the undergirding support system of both feminist and Black studies in a mode that leaves Black feminist thought always already theoretically belated. This happens through the elision of intersectionality as a method with Black women as an object of study—particularly as the marked object of injury, the most wounded, in perpetuity (Nash, 2017). As such, *Black woman* as an object of study (I'll address the valance of this problematic terminology of objectness in a moment) are yoked to passé formulations of identity politics, a formulation that largely reshaped feminist institutionalizations and the way these programs, departments, and curriculum are shaped. As many critics and defenders of intersectionality have noted, this leaves Black women as both the static bottom of the hierarchy of power, ironically the top or pedestal of the "oppression Olympics" in any intellectual inquiry, and reduces Black feminism to the unexamined, monolithic, already-assumed, known object—the one that requires no more critique, analysis, or intellectual development as a field.

"Mama's Baby," though it remained a staple in Black feminist theory courses over the years, did not maintain the structural centrality, the interdisciplinary force of organizational and institutional integration that Crenshaw's similarly timed work on intersectionality did. Spillers's vocabulary of ungendering is both the key to Spillers's difficulty and her resurgence, as it is a psychoanalytic and post-deconstruction call to arms that gives action

to Evelyn Higginbotham's later articulation of "The Metalanguage of Race" and gender as diagnoses of feminist studies (1992). Though Higginbotham herself calls for a closer examination and articulation of how Whiteness operates in the field of historical methodology, and references movements like womanism that attempt to find their ways out of the linguistic and representational morass of Whiteness that clings to feminism in particular, Spillers attempts a conceptual and terminological shift away from the grammar—the structure, sequence, and mastery—of "woman" as a category of Whiteness mystified through universal application that keeps White women central to its structure even when it seems to name race. Through ungendering, historians from Morgan (2011) to Hartman (1997, 2008) to Fuentes and Sarah Haley (2016) today, like Spillers, can hang onto to "Black women," but claim a different psychic and structural history for the coming to be of Black women as subjects of history—one that denotes a decisive break with the formation of White womanhood and White feminism. Ungendering potentially unmoors "Black women" from critiques of identity politics and intersectionality by claiming a difference in kind that remakes the terms of Black feminism away from the institutional and intellectual histories of White feminism altogether, arguing not for monolithic or discreet categories that intersect but for a break that allows Black feminist history to excavate Black women's lives through a lens that is not additive or inclusive as much as it is the projection of an entirely new genealogical imagining of "Black women" as a cohesive if not homogenous category of social-historical experience.

In this, Black feminist theorists are not alone, of course. In African gender, feminist, and sexuality studies, the tension between so-called identity categories of gender and sexuality whose grammar "originates" in the West and the erasure and violence done under and through those grammars is evident across scholarly work in the field. Sylvia Tamale's groundbreaking 2011 work on African sexualities insists on sexuality but also questions how and why the study of sexuality seems to start with the West and move to the global south, and never the reverse. The 1997 provocative book by African feminist scholar Oyeronke Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women*, suggests that gender as a significant social organizational concept is largely overstated in African (here, Yoruban) history, misread by those who are already bringing in Western hierarchies of gender and its omnipresence as a significant category of social order. The "Female Genital Mutilation" debates of the 1990s found that arguing against female circumcision could also align one with racist pornotrope of African women and African cultures in the name of

“sisterhood.” These are just a few diasporic sites of contention. Those working on both the history and the present of African sexualities are in constant negotiation with terminology that turns against one’s own scholarship, presuming its “goals” include justice for Black women and girls, as it acknowledges that White queer and feminist studies of the global north remain the unmarked norm that defines theoretical terrains and purchase in the academy and beyond. These very visions and definitions of freedom and liberation are the “insurgent ground” in the next grouping of post-Spillers’ scholars. These writers return to her conceptualization of flesh as a way to rethink the limits and possibilities of studying the Black body, modeling perhaps new ways to *do*—and to feel about the doing of—Black feminist study.

### Reading Flesh: Black Feminist Underpinnings of the Human, the Body, and the Object

If the reset to an ungendered body becomes a recourse to the use of the Black women’s body as “a resource for metaphor” (p. 66), in Spillers’s terms, then a new turn to Spillers as a theorist of the human moves through the flesh itself as a way to foreground embodiment as a significant political site and way of knowing justice that is centered on Black women’s embodied and emotional experience. Instead of privileged acts of resistance or scenes of (un)freedom in alignment with masculinist paradigms of liberation, Spillers’s flesh seems to offer a new generation of scholars a way to hang on to the injury of state and structural violence as central to Black political subjectivity while also making conceptual space for abjection, pleasure, and objectification (to name just a few contemporary sites of scholarly inquiry) as critical questions rather than impossible intellectual and political closures. There are hints of certain negative formulations of pleasure in “Mama’s Baby” itself, which laments the “un-protected female flesh” (207) as one tenant, one recognition of ungendering, and also rests on the break of kinship and motherhood/maternity for much of its emotional-political heft. Spillers herself recognizes the structural pull of these constructions of negation, in this piece as well as in her “beached whale” metaphor in “Interstices,” the companion piece to “Mama’s Baby”, as she narrates the process of finding it difficult to come up with a “sexuality,” in the way we usually employ the term as a positive structure, for and in Black women’s experience (1987; 1984). Leaning on discourses of the primacy of women’s protection and the affective norms of maternal feeling is a double-edged

sword of ungendered thinking, of course—one wants to acknowledge the deep and documented losses of enslavement, while also not wanting to reify the White normative narratives of gendered meaning as sole sites of value. The work left in her essay's considerable wake, then, seeks space for a fuller range of affective and kinship attachments in creating visions of justice for Black women and girls.

The repetition of equating pleasure with power and agency, and then pleasure with sexuality, and hence sexuality with liberation/choice, remain a critical entanglement that haunts Black feminist and Black sexuality studies. But, as a tension, it also animates some of the recent “uses” of enfleshment, and the kind of literacies it has entailed “for living and for dying,” for Afro-pessimism, optimism, and Black erotics. In Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus*, for instance, Spillers's formulation of the flesh is what, along with Sylvia Wynter's articulation of the “genres of the human” (18) allows Weheliye's turn to Black feminist thought as the antidote to critical theory's limited understanding and depiction of humanism and bare life (Weheliye, 2014). Weheliye is not interested in “Black women,” per se, but what the flesh seems to open up to him and to others is a space of thinking Black political subjectivity and possibility differently, outside of freedom/resistance narratives that privilege a liberal humanist agency and action as their core of recognition, and their core political goal for reparation. Flesh offers Weheliye a new literacy, in other words, a new way of reading for, and reading against, anti-Blackness, like the challenge Spillers's own map of the flesh with its lack of agency offers to her in trying to articulate something other than a “beached whale” metaphor. In this, he turns to Spillers as an investigation of biopower—who will live and who will die, in Michel Foucault (2008) and then Achille Mbembé (2003) and Jasbir Puar's (2007) formulations—with flesh as biopower's key resource. But, like Spillers, Weheliye is also interested in the flesh because of what it retains—its materiality, its possibility to become something else entirely out of a recognizable discursive grasp.

Weheliye then claims Black “flesh as the limit of the human and the possibility for its un- and re-making as a political subject, and in doing so claims Black feminism via Spillers as the conceptual center of Black studies and political thought.” This relationship between human and post-human studies and the new persistence of Spillers's work emphasizes how Black feminist theory has shifted conceptual and not just grammatical terrain, and how a theory like Spillers's flesh has the potential to ground Black women as the conceptual, touchstone subjects of social and political life even when it

is not speaking directly about Black women as objects of study. Fred Moten's work transforms the discourses of injury, as well—the pornotrope, thingness, objectification—by arguing for objectification not as the end but the start of what he names “Black study” (2013). Inhabiting “thingness” cannot be the limit of Black study, for Moten. And this, too, is the innovation of Spillers's flesh in that it provides that interstice, that opening, of wound and portal, in Octavia Butlerian terms, to imagine the injury not as the end of inquiry, but its very beginning (Butler, 2003).

For Moten and Weheliye, Spillers stands as “Black feminist theorist” not to represent “Black women,” but to represent a theoretical contribution to Black studies by a Black feminist theorist that is then portable to other areas of exploration and analysis within the field. As pleasing as it is to see Black feminist theorists employed as the basis for new conceptions of the human without the constant recourse to thinking and representing Black feminism as too specific to be broadly applicable, I do want to think about an expanded field of criticism where one could both imagine the broad application of Black feminist theory beyond Black women's bodies, but also imagine those bodies themselves—specifically fleshed, raced, gendered, sexual bodies—as significant to the political projects of social, anti-racist justice. Here I may betray a bit of my own tense excitement and skepticism about Spillers's circulation in work that does not consider gender a central category of analysis, just as Amber Musser's review essay on Weheliye's book cautions (Musser, 2016). As a citational matter, she points to another collective body who has remade the flesh of Spillers's essay into a question of Black erotics, which I turn to here, and which Musser gently suggests is a body of work that Black studies scholars like Weheliye might find as rich and necessary interlocutors in the project of Black political remakings of the public sphere—and which, I will argue along with those scholars taking up this queer enfleshment of Spillers, is also remaking what we think of as the literacies of Black feminism.

Though Spillers herself does not often dwell on the space of specific literary representations in “Mama's Baby,” she does begin with some of the “controlling images” that Collins has laid out. Collins, a sociologist by training, was taken up as the dominant methodological paradigm of Black feminist theory in the 1990s, both for the literacy of reading controlling images/representations and for forwarding reading practices of intersectionality as repairs to said images' pervasiveness (with pornotroping being a simultaneous structural diagnosis, in many ways, of representational practices). Spill-

ers, we should remember, is a member of a generation of literary scholars who uncovered, curated, and analyzed the forgotten work of Black women writers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the 1980s and early 1990s, sparking the very nuanced debates about respectability and middle-class conceptions and representations of sexuality that dominate the field through to the more recent moments I speak about in this essay.<sup>5</sup> The body of work they uncovered, and their critical mappings of that work, remain key in thinking about the nuances of sexuality, desire, class, and the history of Black women's cultural production. One could map the way that desire, love, and erotics play out in this scholarship that explores post-emancipation periods as the critical vocabulary Spillers transports to consider the formational moment of the Middle Passage from the positionality of Black women's embodied and affective experience.

Enmeshed in this movement, moment, and set of debates, Spillers's own work on ungendering and flesh also suggests both the uber-significance of the representational sphere to Black feminist intellectual projects, and the limits of reading practices that seek repair in this same domain. Scholars such as Nicole Fleetwood (2010) have articulated this very issue in, for instance, taking up the visual-as-site-of-repair in terms of race when it is the very terrain in which racial subjection so often happens—a move similar to that of Aida Levy-Hussen (2016), who critiques the turn to historical narrative fiction as the route to psychological repair in contemporary African American literature. Rather than police for a different but just as stringent grammar of “good” representation, Spillers suggests representation's inescapably problematic presence. Here the work of Musser (2014), Darieck Scott (2010), Ariane Cruz (2016), Michelle Stephens (2014) and Anne Cheng (2011) on skin, Christina Sharpe's (2016) wake work, Jennifer Nash (2014) and Mireille Miller-Young's (2014) work on Black women and pornography, and even Carolyn Cooper's (1995) earlier work on the embodied presence of Black women in the sonic and performative spaces of dancehall might form another genealogy of Black feminism, along with Evelyn Hammonds (1994), that fits into this queer and post-humanist critical moment of flesh. This body of work collectively seeks to undo such binaries and fictions of legible corporeal and representational agency. It is post-representational, in that none of these scholars chooses to focus intellectual energy on dis- or recovering “good representations” to counter the easily locatable “bad” ones. Flesh, in its metaphoric materialism, offers a literacy of both/and, and beyond. It is operationalized as the vocabulary of the future of Black feminist

subjectivity that refuses the terms of liberal humanism as its base and its limits, but also refuses to abandon the important territory of cultural production even as it questions our methods of reading and recognizing representational politics.

Critics who are in direct and indirect conversation with Spillers's flesh have remade the field in their investments in the position of Black women's bodies as those implicated by but not contained within traditional constructions of political subjectivity in the U.S. and the neoliberal order beyond its borders. Musser engages Spillers directly but reframes the flesh as something that can trade on and within schemas of power and pleasure that both question and retain agency—à la the uncomfortable tableau of Kara Walker installations that offers “perverse” versions of enslaved sexuality as both challenging and pleasurable visions of thing-ness. Fleetwood engages Spillers to create a theory of “excess flesh,” a methodology that recognizes hypervisibility as a Black feminist strategy that employs and deploys varying desires for both artist and audience that, she hopes, can take us beyond looking to the visual field as both the cause and the cure of bad racial representation. Cooper (1995), Daphne Brooks (2006), and Nash all reposition the performing Black female body as not fully captive of masculinist, misogynist structures of meaning and media, in dance, theatre, and pornography, respectively. Dorothy Roberts (1997) and Alondra Nelson (2016) (as well as Cathy Cohen [1999], Katherine Bond Stockton [2006], Ashon Crawley [2013], Scott [2010], Shatema Threadcraft [2016], and others) reinvigorate not just the study of race, health, and embodiment but ways that Black flesh has, in fact, ordered our very vision of the body and its interactions with the social and political structures of the state—again, not necessarily in direct relation to Spillers, but still defining a field of study that leads us to better understand her resurgence. Elizabeth Povinelli (2006) extends this to work across queer and indigenous studies to theorize the flesh as a porous and vulnerable site—a site of care and of violence, a site of freedom and responsibility/interdependence. James Bliss (2015), Kara Keeling (2007), Tavia Nyong'o (2009), Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016), and C. Sharpe (2016) find in Spillers, specifically, spaces that realign our ideas of kinship and sociality to include racialized-sexualized terror as well as other forms of intimacy. “Flesh” here is a portable affective vocabulary—“fugitive,” in Gumbs's terms—even as subjects and bodies remain enclosed by other grammars.

“Mama's Baby” offers a literacy that includes histories of terror but also, for contemporary scholars, modes of theorizing uncertainty and vulnerabil-



ity, intimacy and pleasure, that are nonetheless unthinkable outside of historical, structural, and present-tense violence. To insist on the oppositions between terror and intimacy is to force the two into dialectical relation—as Musser insists on her own work on enfleshment. Sexuality is not free from physical and emotional violence but exists within it, and vice versa. Spillers’s literacies cannot be contained or controlled, then, as much as one might be pained to see them in use beyond their original objects of study or of critique. They are instead rooted in and routed through the centrality of Black women’s bodies, histories, and experiences, reorienting the political subject around vulnerability, risk, and interdependence: the flesh, exposed and enclosed, alienated and embodied. Spillers’s critique of grammar doesn’t abandon Black women, but it also doesn’t just include them—it demands rethinking the entire process of (un)gendering, of becoming (un)human, through the Black female body.

If, as Spillers insists, “words will most certainly kill us,” her methodology seems to endure in her conceptual, anti-grammatical critical vocabulary (1987, p. 60). These terms, this flesh, are offering depth and texture to the map of intersectionality that Black feminism has been drawn from and to for the past 25 years as well.<sup>6</sup> “Mama’s Baby” asked and asks: How can Black feminist thought maintain a distinction from White feminist discourse (as well as Black studies that assume the masculine subject) and its normalizing tendencies without only inhabiting the genres of injury and tragedy? And how might flesh travel even when, like the Black women it adheres to and is, as ontologically constructed through Spillers’s vocabulary, it can’t materially or discursively get out of “objectness”? Most uncomfortably, how, some of these critics ask, can we bring ourselves to imagine an enfleshed subject that would not *want* to escape from objectification—who occupies, in the terms of this special issue, an unrecognizable or politically unpalatable “lover identity,” or a set of relations between race, gender, and sexuality that is as yet illegible or unthought in our terms of justice?

Spillers’s work is a flexible paradigm whose use we should both diffuse and question, much as scholars have interacted with Crenshaw’s model in the field. One does not have to figure out how to religiously adhere to her reading, or even her method. She is of this time and also being pushed ahead of it, and we might mark that convergence not as divine but as desired, also asking who will be brought up as the crucial paradigm of Black feminist thought in the coming years, in future moments that seem to demand other literacies—those theorists, staples on Black feminist syllabi and

footnotes, who have already and might again provide future ground to reinvigorate Black feminist study through attention to the alternate analytical vocabularies they author. As we continue to mine earlier eras for “new” critical genealogies of Black feminist thought, we should be aware that reactivation inevitably involves looking for what we already know—backdating, as it were, a story we’d like to tell—as well as marking our exhaustion with existing methodologies for seeking emotional and social justice for Black women and girls.

Spillers offers us a desired vocabulary and a reflection on our current critical needs that lean in to the complexities of Blackness and the body. The enthusiastic re-exercise of Spillers’s vocabularies signals a critical desire to reanimate and realign Black feminist critical thought in a moment of political intensities that careen across “the living and the dying,” between suffering and the capacity for pleasure, sometimes pitching one against another. Spillers speaks to both impulses—to track the names given and to feel and do something different for and as Black feminist thinkers, readers, and writers. Though “Mama’s Baby” allows us to backdate the stories we are telling and want to tell now, we shouldn’t confuse that with Spillers, or us, being eternally “right” about the exact terms of engagement. We can mark the essay’s move to epistemology itself—to upending our ways of knowing and doing “Black women”—as the work of Black feminist literacies, and justice for Black women and girls. “Mama’s Baby” imagines the world as it is ordered by and through Black women’s embodied and emotional histories. In following Spillers, we trust that this world made of and by Black women’s lives and thoughts is expansive beyond our current critical measure and moment, and so remains open to the invention of new genealogies, new politics, and new strategies for the just futures of Black feminist thought.

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## Notes

1. Of course, Hortense Spillers is still an amazing, active scholar. It is not my intention to reduce her scholarly influence to “Mama’s Baby,” or to foreclose her future impact. I truly seek to map the popular influence of this particular essay from this particular moment in her career.

2. See articles by J. Nash (2014) and books by A. Carastathis (2014), and V. May (2014) on intersectionality debates.

3. See R. Wiegman (2000), R. Lee (2000), W. Brown (1997), J. Butler (1994) for a selection of the women’s studies name debates, and J. Joyce (2004) and R. M. Karenga (2009) for a bit of the history on name debates in Black studies.

4. I should add: as well as so many other Black feminist historians and historians of Black women and slavery, too numerous to name here.

5. See H. V. Carby (1987), Duval Harrison (1988), C. A. Wall (1995), C. Tate (1993), D. E. McDowell (1995), M. H. Washington (1987), A. DuCille (1994), etc.

6. Not that Crenshaw performs this flattening, but the wider application of and insistence on—indeed, the conflation of all and every Black feminism as—intersectionality has produced some critical fatigue and enthusiastic re-exploration of its utility.

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