

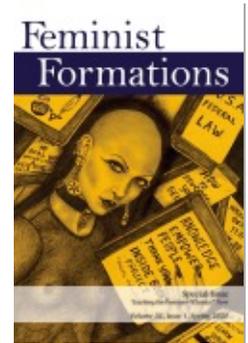


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Kirin Wachter-Grene

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“Teaching Three Copies of ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’”

Kirin Wachter-Grene

I meditate on three well-worn copies of Hortense Spillers’s famous 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Each bears an affective weight based on successes and failures. The first copy captured my grad student imagination. The third copy is central to my curriculum. But I reflect most on the second copy, used in a failed teaching demo. I use that negative experience to consider the ironic, troubling implications of the parallels between Spillers’s purpose in writing the essay (an urgent response to the academic dismissal of Black feminist analysis) and that same scenario within the demo. This speaks to the continuous importance of Black feminist critiques of the academy, and to the need for Black feminist praxis in approaching Black texts. I remain committed to my lesson plan, which I share, as it models a Black feminist praxis that rejects white, Western (male) expertise in favor of inquiry-based discussion of Black women’s texts. I offer questions and actions white scholars can use to critically interrogate our intentions and approaches in teaching Black texts. We must listen to and utilize the work of Black women critics and teachers to dismantle the academy’s white power structure and epistemic violence.

Keywords: Black feminism / Black feminist thought / Black, Hannah / Christian, Barbara / Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe / pedagogy / praxis / Spillers, Hortense

I keep three well-worn copies of Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in my filing cabinet, each testifying to a different time in my life as a student, scholar, and now teacher-scholar. Each bears an affective weight based on my successes and failures with the respective copies. The first, covered in marginalia, is an artifact from grad school. The course

was “Legacies of Black Feminism” and the year was 2011. It was the first time I encountered Spillers’s essay with its historical sweep, political necessity, and style. Published in *Diacritics* in 1987, “Mama’s Baby” is a classic of Black feminist scholarship, and Spillers is one of the field’s most cited critics. Her most famous essay theorizes Black female gender construction, opening with the well-known line “let’s face it. I am a marked woman” followed by these racist markings before speaking to the urgency for Black women to sift through “layers of attenuated meaning, made an excess in time, over time” in order to speak a truer word about themselves (65). Toward the end of the essay, Spillers suggests that the historical ungendering of Black people initiated by the Middle Passage, codified in chattel slavery, and reaffirmed by the infamous *Moynihan Report* uniquely situates them in a position to dismantle patriarchy. It is a foundational essay that has informed a generation of Black feminist thinkers, as influential, it has been suggested, as *The Souls of Black Folk*.¹

In that small graduate seminar comprised only of women, we discussed the implications of Spillers’s essay amid Black feminist texts both critical and fictional. We grappled with the essay’s radical potentialities, with Spillers’s differentiation between *flesh* and *body*, with her intervention into debates about Black feminism as intellectual work, self-definition, and social activism. These were dynamic conversations that would later, through the hard work of sustained reflection and intellectual grappling, inform my teaching practice. But at the time I was left questioning, intuiting that there was so much I was missing in the text.

As I said, I have three copies, not one. “Mama’s Baby” remains an essay that compels me, one I continuously contend with. Looking through my three copies, the same sentences are highlighted. Similar questions are posed with greater complexity. And new connections are forming, which is why I decided to teach it. Now a professor no longer approaching texts with the same marvel of a young doctoral candidate, I ask, how might my students bring a perspective that will challenge me/our class, push me/our class further? What might they see in it that will afford us collaborative knowledge production?

The third copy of Spillers’s essay appeared in my African American literature class in the fall of 2018—my first semester as an assistant professor. Looking at that third copy my notes no longer expose the musings of a student humbled and invigorated yet ignorant to the breadth of the Black theoretical tradition that Spillers’s essay helped to define (*Is Spillers articulating a Black feminist analytic?* one of my early notes read). Rather, the notes marking my third copy are written from the focused perspective of a teacher-scholar thinking about how to engage students critically with complex “How and Why” questions (*How do we understand the project Spillers is giving shape to?*), and eventually, teaching them to form their own questions to guide the class, to teach themselves, one another, and the teacher herself.

So, what then of the second copy, a copy that bears witness to this learned trust and commitment? To teach “Mama’s Baby” in my class, I relied on the

lesson plan I spent extensive time preparing two years prior for a teaching demonstration performed for the founders of a prominent community-based teaching and research institute. That demo featured my second copy. It was the winter of 2017 and I was a full-time lecturer in New York City, pursuing a tenure-track job but also dreaming of alternative opportunities inspired by my teaching in a writing-intensive summer course for incoming freshmen. It was a transformative teaching experience, to risk such clichés, and I had romanticized the institute as providing what I was looking for. I was deeply influenced, and remain indebted to that summer program’s interdisciplinary approach to pairing texts in counterintuitive ways that invite students to draw upon a range of knowledge. I assumed this approach would match the institute’s mission to integrate rigor and accessibility.

The class I had pitched and interviewed for was a Black Feminisms course (at the time, this was a sorely needed addition to the institute’s curricular offerings). Inspired by my summer teaching, for my demo I chose to place “Mama’s Baby” in conversation with contemporary conceptual artist Hannah Black’s 2014 short film “My Bodies.” The three-and-a-half-minute film juxtaposes the faces of white male politicians with R&B samples of Black women singing references to *my body* before moving into a poetic, abstract meditation on the transcendence of the body altogether. I framed this lesson with a lecture contextualizing both texts within a genealogy of Black feminist thought about embodiment.

Although the faculty had not read Spillers’s essay prior to my teaching demo, in the full lesson plan students arrive in class having read and annotated it. I explain to them, as I did to the faculty, that “Mama’s Baby” was written in 1987, the same year Black feminist theorist Barbara Christian wrote “The Race for Theory.” Both were writing from a place of urgency to make space for Black feminist thinking in the academy, a sentiment established earlier in 1982’s groundbreaking Black feminist anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Much like the introduction to that anthology, Christian’s “Race for Theory” critiques Western theoretical methodologies of literary criticism and privileging of abstract logic that diminishes/ignores women of color and “Third World” literature, and ignores how women of color have long theorized, albeit in other forms. Her essay calls for Black feminist epistemology rooted in experience, narrative, and responses to reading/experiencing Black cultural production. Likewise, Spillers’s essay was written in response to the academy’s white power structure. She writes, “The need to confront psychological violence, epistemic violence, intellectual violence is really powerful. ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’ was about bolstering myself” in such an environment, an environment that mirrors centuries of patriarchal, racist, and colonialist dismissal of women’s (particular women of color’s) intellectual and political contributions (Spillers et al. 2007).

With the stakes of this burgeoning Black feminist scholarship on our minds, we read the first two paragraphs of Spillers’s essay out loud. I then break students

into small groups with guided discussion questions, asking them to support their interpretations with textual evidence (*How is Spillers setting up her argument? How do we understand her argument about names/naming, specifically? How do we understand the project Spillers is giving shape to?*). What follows is an open class discussion and my framing lecture about Black feminist theories of embodiment and representation. This lecture provides the foundation to watch Hannah Black's "My Bodies," which we do twice, taking notes the second time about what we observe and respond to. I then provide new questions for the small groups (*How is Black enacting theory-making in her video? How is she representing a theory of the Black female body, and/or of embodiment, and how do you respond? How does Spillers help us to consider Black's video?*). It is important that I invite students to draw upon Spillers's language to consider both Black's video and the relationship between texts because, as Farah Jasmine Griffin (2007, 497) points out, there is a great "rarity of using the work of a Black woman thinker, not only as a text to be analyzed but as a tool and lens through which to analyze culture and history." Further, such a unique pairing aligns with "feminist/womanist pedagogies [which] invite . . . alternatives to traditional education by opening up new thinking about previously unexplored curricula" (Henry 2005, 96). We finish the day's work with a full class discussion that might move from the texts themselves to a consideration of additional concepts and/or material circumstances the texts inspire.

Pairing Spillers's densely theoretical prose with the visual abstractions of Black's film for a room full of diverse students accustomed to experimental pedagogy and visual analysis worked. As we educators know, we often have to find creative ways to make accessible concepts that at first can elude our students. Showing students how Black is working through questions of Black female embodiment in visual and auditory modes feels, to me, to be a way into Spillers's complex argument, just as the first two paragraphs of Spillers's essay feel to me like a concrete historical foundation with which to approach what can be understood, by some, as alienating contemporary art. I am excited to refine and teach this lesson in my upcoming Black Feminisms class (and grateful that I have the opportunity to make manifest what was, in that demo, just a dream). One of the ways I intend to refine it is by giving two class periods to a discussion of "Mama's Baby" so students have a greater opportunity to unpack and comprehend the text prior to situating it in conversation with Black's film. When I consider how long it has taken me to begin to grasp the essay's many arguments and interventions, the need for more time to reflect together feels crucial.

However, my success in the classroom and ability to continue to teach Spillers's essay did not, and does not, alleviate the sting of an affective weight still bound up in the pages of that second copy prepped for an ultimately failed demo. I spent hours rereading it in preparation. I knew—or thought I knew—my audience. I had been mentored by an institute faculty member/friend, who was

not part of the hiring committee, to come across as an *expert*, a term I wince at as I do not imagine, nor proclaim myself to be such for both personal and pedagogical reasons. I was warned the faculty does not look kindly on those who flail or admit ignorance. I marked up the second copy with definitions, glossing as many of Spillers's references as I could identify. I would be ready to engage these faculty deeply.

But the faculty I demoed for had no interest in engaging with the discussion questions I had prepared (and replicate, above). Rather, they asked me to put Black and Spillers in conversation with Plato, with Irigaray, with Derrida. I do not mean to suggest that one cannot or should not put Black texts in conversation with the Western tradition.² But why should one *have* to, when there is a richly diverse legacy of Black theoretical, philosophical, literary, and artistic thought and creation in which to situate and open up the work? Seriously engaging Black thinking is what Spillers was practicing and advocating for. As Alexander Weheliye (2014, 39) argues, “Spillers creates an intervention within the fields of Black studies, feminist criticism, and critical theory in order to theorize some general dimensions of modern subjectivity from the vantage point of Black women, which develops a grammar, creates a vocabulary that does not choose between addressing the specific location of Black women, a broader theoretical register about what it means to be human during and in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, and the imagination of liberation in the future anterior tense of the now.” Did the committee steer the conversation toward the Western tradition because I am white? Was this because they wanted to see my theoretical and intellectual range and my capacity to engage non-specialists? Was it because, regardless of the framing lecture I provided, *they* lacked the knowledge necessary to engage Spillers and Black on their own terms within a genealogy of Black feminist art and thought, and were unwilling to try, thus driving the conversation back into familiar territory?³

As Spillers makes clear in much of her work, that familiar territory is one predicated on the willful omission of Black women's intellectual contributions. And this has tremendous consequences. Annette Henry (2005, 96–97) argues,

As Black feminists point out, the distortions and omissions of traditional curricula damage not only Black people (by omission of their contributions, perspectives, and issues of concern to them), they also damage all people. Students lose the opportunity for growth and change if they cannot clearly examine and understand the historical dimensions of current societal dilemmas and oppressions or the ways in which they may help dismantle them. This lack of analysis misleads students to believe and accept that existing societal problems and educational inequities are in reality “natural,” “inevitable,” or due to the inherent characteristics of certain classes and cultures. . . . It also perpetuates dichotomous thinking, which serves the dominant group (us-and-them politics). Many feminists and people of color have critiqued this binary Western masculinist thinking.

My refusal to situate Spillers and Black within a framework shaped by centuries of Western thought was purposeful with the intention to honor the works' critiques of this very structure.

Later, I heard from a faculty member of the institute and the only Black woman in that room that they thought I was *rigid*. Over coffee one Sunday morning in Brooklyn, we discussed the matter: rigidity (understood as both overpreparedness and the refusal to capitulate) is a classic critique lobbed at female professors. We are implicitly pressured in academia to assume the male ideal, to constantly espouse one's brilliance in an act of aristocratic indifference. I therefore interpret this secondhand feedback to mean they wanted me to be an expert who both speaks extemporaneously in response to any question while also *explaining* the work. In asking me to unpack Black and Spillers through Plato, Irigaray, and Derrida, they wanted me to situate "Mama's Baby" within a strict disciplinary framework that both Spillers and Christian critique. What was not well received was what I did, an action Griffin claims is so sorely lacking in academia (and yet so necessary): open up this Black feminist text for creative speculation in conversation with the contemporary conceptual art of another Black female creator. "Mama's Baby" is a classic, yes (albeit one the committee was unfamiliar with, they told me, much to my dismay, given not only its fame but its influence on other fields, including psychoanalysis). But this was not a classical approach. And it fell flat.

In a 2007 *Callaloo* interview about the state of Black studies, Spillers noted we are fast approaching a time when more white Americans will begin to be scholars of Black studies, a development she welcomes (Leonard 2007, 1056). But to listen, not lecture, is especially important as a white scholar of Black texts. To develop my teaching practice in a way that does justice to the texts I teach and to the students I engage, I need to continuously learn from and adopt a Black feminist pedagogical approach that "aims to develop a mindset of intellectual inclusion and expansion that stands in contradiction to the Western intellectual tradition of exclusivity and chauvinism" (Omolade 1993, 31).

A Black feminist approach to Black studies demands of us who teach it an interrogation of power. It demands we destabilize our/my white hand on the Black text and its legitimizing or delegitimizing weight. Integral to my research is a critique of how Black texts are framed and engaged by critics, myself and others, both white and Black. How do I introduce Black texts, classic and canonical, contemporary and paraliterary into the classroom? What conversations do I curate into which these texts then enter? What is my intention, and from what position do I read and teach this work? How am I actively working to dismantle white supremacist, patriarchal, curricular, and pedagogical legacies?

As is evidenced from the three copies of "Mama's Baby" I keep in my filing cabinet and my ever-evolving lesson plan, these are dynamic rather than static questions. One thing I know for sure is I failed to speak the language of those evaluating me in that unsuccessful teaching demonstration. But what I never

want to lose sight of is the fact that I failed to speak it *on purpose*. To use their theoretical language, to use their preferred Western philosophical tradition to read “Mama’s Baby” and “My Bodies” would be an erasure and dismissal of the very projects Spillers and Black are engaged in. Spillers gives voice to this problem that her essay responds to: “there was no discourse that [Black history] generated, in terms of the mainstream academy that gave it a kind of recognition. And so my idea was to try to generate a discourse, or a vocabulary that would not just make it desirable, but would necessitate that black women be in the conversation” (Spillers et al. 2007, 301). Spillers was inventing a language, a framework to give voice to the specificity of Black female history and embodiment from the standpoint of Black women themselves. So too is Hannah Black (2014). To ignore their respective projects and the works’ necessity by turning to the philosophical tradition (*can you speak to how Black is referencing Plato’s cave in this video?*) is to refuse to engage closely with the work on its own terms. Further, to refuse to engage closely with the work through a Black feminist pedagogical approach is to deny the many learning strategies such work offers, not the least of which is a “critique of traditional education, its curricula, and pedagogical practice” (Henry 2005, 89). Without meeting the work on its own terms, one risks reinscribing the very same hopelessness that motivated Spillers to write “Mama’s Baby” or that drove Barbara Christian to compose “The Race for Theory” in the first place. This is something we in academia cannot afford.

“That the history of black people was something you could use as a note of inspiration but it was never anything that had anything to do with you—you could never use it to explain something in theoretical terms” was the problem these thinkers gave voice to (Spillers et al. 2007, 300). It is a problem repeated and compounded in classrooms and proxy classrooms all the time. As a white, female professor teaching this work through a Black feminist pedagogical framework, it is my responsibility to consciously, actively dismantle this belief that Black history has “nothing to do” with white people, that Black feminism has nothing to teach white women (and all women, all people), has nothing to offer in the way of a critical analytic. It is my responsibility to ensure that Black women are not only *in* the conversation amidst my curricular offerings, but are *generating* and *shaping* that conversation. As such, the conversations in both my African American literature and Black Feminisms classes are solely informed by Black writers’, thinkers’, and artists’ diverse theories, analyses, and creative endeavors. These cultural productions, in different genres and mediums, spanning time and geography, critique and build upon one another to offer a wildly and profoundly diverse vision of not only Black peoples’ history and lives, but the past, present, and future of humanity.

Rather than shallowly engaging classic Black feminist texts as if they were ancillaries or addendums to a Western philosophical tradition, static relics of a bygone era, or merely foundations to be challenged or ancestors to revere, I remain committed to this lesson plan and the critique it invites. It situates

Black feminist work squarely where, according to the white power structure still undergirding academia, it does not belong. And it engages that work on its own terms within an ever-expanding Black feminist genealogy. “To conduct an oppositional or transformational feminist pedagogy, one has to present an analysis of institutional and societal power, and structure the processes in nontraditional way” (Henry 2005, 98). With this call to action in mind, let us pair these classic texts with unexpected, contemporary interlocuters as “only a creative Black feminist perspective will allow the field to expand” (Hull et al. 1982, xxi).⁴ In so doing, let us catch ourselves and our students by surprise, without rote narratives or supposed expertise to fall back on. Let us hear what we have failed to listen to and constantly discover these classics anew. Let us allow ourselves to learn, in real time among our students, perhaps with that same wonder and openness they might feel (that we once felt, and feel again), together. We all have multiple, marked copies of essays foundational to our development as thinkers and educators. But some of us destroy the evidence, and teach others to destroy the evidence of their winding paths through texts.

Kirin Wachter-Grene is an assistant professor of liberal arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a PhD in English and a focus on African American literature and gender and sexuality studies. Dr. Wachter-Grene was the 2017–18 visiting scholar at the Leather Archives and Museum where she researched Black women’s historical involvement with leather, kink, and fetish. She is guest-editor of “At the Limits of Desire,” a special issue of *The Black Scholar* in honor of the journal’s fiftieth anniversary. Her work is published in *African American Review*, *The Black Scholar*, *Callaloo*, and *Sixty Inches from Center* and is forthcoming in *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*. Currently, she is working on her manuscript titled “Into the Scorpion Garden: Samuel R. Delany and Transgressive African American Literature.”

Notes

1. Farah Jasmine Griffin (Spillers et al. 2007, 299–300) states “I realized that the work of so many people of my generation has been formed in relationship to this essay. I was focusing on literary critics Sharon Holland, Elizabeth Alexander, Fred Moten, Lindon Barrett, all of us and I thought how I literally could not think of another essay, I don’t know maybe *The Souls of Black Folk*? I really couldn’t think of another essay that had that kind of impact on a generation.” Refer to Griffin (2007) for an extended analysis of the depth and reach of Spillers’s influence.

2. However, it is worth pointing out the irony here that Spillers is interested in “disrupt[ing] the governing conception of humanity as synonymous with western Man” as Alexander Weheliye argues (2014, 5). Saidiya Hartman also points to this theoretical aim in Spillers’ work (Spillers et al., 2007).

3. Alexander Weheliye (2014, 9) explains, “The nearly simultaneous eruptions of ethnic studies and post-structuralism in the American university system have been

noted by critics such as Hortense Spillers . . . yet these important convergences hardly register on the radar of mainstream debates. That is to say that the challenges posed to the smooth operations of western Man since the 1960s by continental thought and minority discourse, though historically, conceptually, institutionally, and politically relational, tend to be segregated, because minority discourses seemingly cannot inhabit the space of proper theoretical reflection.”

4. A creative approach to black feminist studies is essential not only for expanding and developing the field, but for countering white scholarly and pedagogical narrowness. Annette Henry (2005, 90) points out, “White, privileged feminists tend to not characterize Black feminisms as diverse, emerging, and plural.”

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