Calling Forth History's Mocking Doubles

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Hortense Spillers ends "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" with a provocative suggestion: "Actually claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name') . . . 'Sapphire' might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment." In this article, I knead the material, representational, and performative powers operating through conceptually separate and yet deeply entangled contested terrains: (1) the "real," or the scene of "actual mutilation," whose high crimes against the flesh coincide with (2) the construction of the "symbolic." Through Baradian performativity, I read Spillers's theorization on the name as an event wherein proprietary relationships, which necessarily oscillate between material/signification binaries, are called forth in historical terrain in the moment of racial address. Paying close attention to her grammar, the first half of this article tracks Spillers's movement through an undercurrent of American historical mythology that, as she demonstrates, misnames the black mother. The rest of this article then takes up to what extent certain "mocking doubles"—minstrel and/or monstrous tropes resuscitated but not redeemed or even necessarily renamed—might agitate their way toward new texts for female empowerment and the cultivation of the black mother's power to "name."

This essay intervenes in feminist philosophical debates concerned with the relationship between materiality ("matters" of fact) and signification ("meanings" of fact, meanings of matter, and meanings that matter) as pertaining to *agency* in public life, by bringing Karen Barad's "Posthumanist Performativity" (Barad 2003) into conversation with Hortense Spillers's "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe': An American Grammar Book" (Spillers 1987). The two primary questions I raise concern how to think about the *performative* relationship between materiality and signification, and whether these liminal performances successfully reclaim and re-form power as opposed to reproducing or reinscribing it. I argue that reading Barad alongside Spillers enables us to understand the indistinguishable co-formation of materiality and meaning. This indistinguishability burns hotter and more urgently for subjects who cannot be but are named by a reigning symbolic order. In posing my reading of Spillers in relation to

Hypatia vol. 32, no. 3 (Summer 2017) © by Hypatia, Inc.

https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12334 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Barad, I remain critical of Barad's claim that language has been granted too much power.

Barad's assertion, "language has been granted too much power" (Barad 2003, 801), historicizes and politicizes the already contested terrains of discourse and signification in feminist praxis. Barad's esteemed essay "Posthumanist Performativity" uncovers a deep problem in the respective theoretical "turns"—linguistic, semiotic, interpretive, cultural—of the late twentieth–early twenty-first centuries. Accounting for difference and power, such musings on materiality, signification, and the relationship among them appear "symptomatic of the extent to which matters of 'fact' (so to speak) *have been replaced with* matters of signification (no scare quotes here)" (801). Barad's essay surveys the limitations of predominant "representationalist" discursive practices that "believe in the power of words to represent preexisting things." Barad's counter-"performative" approach contests the "unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve" (802).

Where representationalism focuses on the "correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?)," performative alternatives shift to "matters of practices/doings/actions" as they inform "important questions of ontology, materiality, and agency" (Barad 2003, 802). The ethical concern transfers between one of "accurate" to one of *actional* representation. What do our representations *do* in the world? How do they, as "acting" symbols, claim and possess *material* forms?

Barad, remarkably, is the first physicist to attend to *performativity* as a liminal *process* between materiality (natural, organic life "of" physical properties) and signification (the "representational," the inorganic, the "social construct," the *meaning* of the natural) in science studies. But Barad is not the first queer theorist to identify the "essentialist" problems of representationalist paradigms, nor the first to herald performativity as a *mode* wherein agents act out, re-present, "play" with, and subvert prescripted behavior. Substantiating this intervention into feminist science studies, Barad summons renowned and oft-cited Judith Butler and Michel Foucault as foundations for this "alternative" approach. In my essay, I emphatically echo Barad's endorsement of performativity, but build on it by tracing a genealogy radically different from the one "Posthumanist Performativity" draws.

Arriving at a similar politic, Spillers's 1987 essay, "'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe': An American Grammar Book" is a sophisticated analysis on the subject of subjects. In fact, the essay's form is so in meta-conversation with its arguments that we must read it as both political theory and performance piece.[1] I flag moments where Spillers's rhetoric artfully performs its thesis for readers. As those who've engaged Spillers's language before know, the brilliance and complexity of her theoretical mode is precisely in how it effortlessly performs a variety of theoretical grammars simultaneously. I narrow my focus to two of Spillers's points, and consider how attention to her intervention from 1987 necessarily reframes how the field of feminist studies can and should respond to Barad's 2003 charge that theorists and scientists alike have yet to, and *must*, "make matter matter."

https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12334 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Sapphire" in Feminist Thought

For Spillers, intersectional feminists, and critical race theorists, delimiting the "matter" of race and gender is part and parcel of deconstructing the power of such identities' significations. *Being* a black woman in the post-slavery United States, for instance, as opposed to "joining the ranks of gendered femaleness" under a white liberal nationalist guise, continuously "places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender" (Spillers 1987, 80). The "traditional" symbolics here are, of course, the "universal" white, American, "free," never physically held captive or enslaved, yet sexually vulnerable and fragile "female" historical subject. Contextually, Spillers theorizes precisely how *material conditions* of black and indigenous enslavement in the United States constitute racialized gender borders that cannot be dismantled in their retroactive transgressions.

Importantly, Spillers is not defending a separatist approach to black feminist politics. I read Spillers's call to black women *not* to join the [white] ranks of "gendered femaleness" in the same tone that I read Richa Nagar's understanding of the risks and "muddiness" of forging alliances across transnational or otherwise uneven feminist divides. As Nagar explains, in risky feminist journeying,

> these journeys of the "I" and the "we" … the possibilities of alliances are inseparable from a deep commitment to critique that is grounded in the historical, geographical, and political contingencies of a given struggle. These are journeys enabled by trust with the ever-present possibility of distrust and epistemic violence; journeys of hope that must continuously recognize hopelessness and fears; and journeys that insist on crossing borders even as each person on the journey learns of borders that they cannot cross. (Nagar 2014, 5)

The institution of chattel slavery, and I would add the institutions(s) of American settler-imperial colonialism, only two of the US's "dirty open secrets," institute radically different genealogies, ontologies, materialities, and significations for white women than for women of color. "Living histories" of enslavement (Isoke 2013)—the "constantly constituting" dynamic life of "research subjects," objectified and killed into "data sets" for academic voyeurs—also endure repeated sexual and reproductive exploitation, dispossession, and disenfranchisement. For Spillers, such ongoing and still healing *abuses of the flesh* always already cast the colonized woman of color *outside* the "common" symbolics of gendered femaleness, drafted in the universal "we" by white anglo-feminists.

Responding to Barad's charge, then, I argue it is *too soon* to divest from rigorous critical engagements with the powers of signification and discourse over materiality; too soon to distinguish the immense power that signification (combined with government-military-carceral industrial complexes that target with impunity black and brown peoples) reigns in US political life. The fact is, it is almost always through power, force, and violence that human ideologies come to "matter" in the world. Perhaps what is needed epistemologically is a reconfiguration of the matter/signification

https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12334 Published online by Cambridge University Press

divide altogether, to refocus attention on those sites where we witness language, culture, and history *as* matter, as *mattering*. We must, as Barad proposes, approach such questions with keen sensibilities to the *performative* and co-constitutive relationship between materiality and signification. But if it's through (human and nonhuman) performances that materiality becomes signification and vice versa, where do we read *political agency* in performance?

Grappling with this question brings me to Spillers's conclusion, "Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name'), which her culture imposes in blindness, 'Sapphire' might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment" (Spillers 1987, 80). Who is "Sapphire"? Whence does she come? To whom does she refer, to whom does she belong? Upon clarifying Sapphire's historicity, *who* does "Sapphire"—a figural trope that finds its roots in minstrel companies emerging during American chattel slavery—*signify* in Spillers's "American Grammar Book"? Finally, how do we read such racialized grammars *performatively*?

In 1996, bell hooks presented a radical black female spectator's critique of feminist film studies and theories of cinematic gaze.[2] hooks recounts in *Reel to Real*,

> Remembering my past in relation to screen images of black womanhood, I wrote a short essay, "Do you remember Sapphire?" which explored both the negation of black female representation in cinema and television and our rejection of these images. Identifying the character of "Sapphire" from *Amos 'n' Andy* as the screen representation of black femaleness I first saw in childhood, I wrote (in 1992): "She was even then backdrop, foil. She was bitch—nag. She was there to soften images of black men, to make them seem vulnerable, easygoing, funny, and unthreatening to a white audience. She was there as man in drag, as castrating bitch, as someone to be lied to, someone to be tricked, someone the white and black audience could hate. Scapegoated on all sides. *She was not us*. We laughed with the black men, with the white people. We laughed at this black woman who was not us. And we did not even long to be there on the screen. How could we long to be there when our image, visually constructed, was so ugly. We did not long to be there. We did not long for her. We did not want our construction to be this hated black female thing—foil, backdrop. Her black female image was not the body of desire. There was nothing to see. She was not us." Grown black women had a different response to Sapphire; they identified with her frustrations and her woes. They resented the way she was mocked. They resented the way these screen images could assault black womanhood, could name us bitches, nags. And in opposition they claimed Sapphire as their own, as the symbol of that angry part of themselves white folks and black men could not even begin to understand. (hooks 1996, 120)

How does one account for the radical gap, as hooks measures, between Sapphire's public life on the screen and her intimate interpellations by black women who watched her, empathized with her?

https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12334 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Imperative to assessing this question, particularly as a nonblack scholar, requires sustained recognition of the discursive technologies of power the state, in particular, wields via language, words "made matter" through the *legislation and exercise of the rule of law*, and *social and economic policy*, over its (black female) subjects. Like performance, *policy* inhabits a liminality between materiality and signification, as we will witness in Spillers's deconstruction of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous "report" on the black family and its subsequently influenced policies that targeted "nonnormative" familial arrangements. As Spillers gestures, it's in the realm of *policy* where the black mother is misnamed, turned into "Sapphire," with *reel and real* implications for black women.

Spillers is clearly aware of the material powers that the language (or signification) of the state casts on its subjects. So how, in Spillers's vision, might a mocking, if menacing and monstrous *performative invocation* of "Sapphire" re-vision and signify "a radically different text for a female empowerment"? Ultimately, my essay closely reads one example stemming from the Black Arts Movement to address what is at stake between the political and the material, the representational and the "actual," in performative praxis. Rearticulated in Baradian terms, I pose the following to feminist theorists, in light of Spillers's call to black mothers to *claim* Sapphire's monstrosity: what exactly is the scope of performative agency when actors "act out" substitutions of the signification (hegemonic representation) for the signified (the "person behind the mask") and vice versa? To what extent can social and historical actors *perform differently* such that agentive-material power over the contested terrains of signification are *subversively reclaimed*?

What's in a Name?

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.
>
> —Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"

Barad's "Posthumanist Performativity" is most concerned with disrupting the nature/culture binary, especially in scientific representations as it perseveres in Western science studies and discourses. Yet engaging Barad in cultural and performance studies, feminist philosophy, and political theory offers an important lesson that reinvigorates older philosophical inquiries into the relationship between *thing* ("materiality") and signification ("*thing*" represented). Leaving representationalist ethics behind,

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Barad encourages a "materialist, naturalist, and posthumanist" *performativity* to "allow matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming" (Barad 2003, 801). However, before we excitedly take up Barad's call to action, we should pause around an absence lingering throughout the essay.

Namely, we must note that in Barad's fierce assertion—that language (signification) has been granted too much power to determine our ontological "facts"—she curiously does not account for the variations in power granted to different parts, forms, and modes of *speech*, or spoken signification. Out of its disciplinary context, Barad's assertion reads as slightly jarring to the ears of thinkers like me who believe and defend the belief that, analogous to the meteorological phenomenon of lightning "and" thunder, materiality and signification are not two distinct "things" but rather two distinct *effects* that erupt from the same source. In other words, Barad's problematizing of the nature/culture binary, although crucial for science studies, also operates in the essay to conflate nature with materiality and culture with language. This being so, Barad perhaps inadvertently reinforces what I understand as a false integrity that stabilizes the epistemic divisions between nature/language and materiality/culture. In this formulation, how does one responsibly address *the name*?

Names, unlike other parts of language, operate in our ordinary grammars as nouns (persons, places, things), proper nouns (*of* a person, place, or thing), adjectives (descriptive properties), and verbs (*to* name, to address). In the lines that follow the epigraph to this section, Spillers identifies the names listed in quotations as those "by which [she is] called in the public place" (Spillers 1987, 65). Yet in the first line, Spillers foreshadows a split between them and *her* name (italics here to emphasize *possessive object* of speech). If how she *is known* and *is called* in public is distinct from her name, then the difference between a name and its "name," in quotation marks, does not manifest in misrepresentation but in the *event of misaddress*. Attention to misaddress throws into sharp relief the politics of naming that constitutes any "public," never a neutral conjuring of collective self-sovereignties, but always a charged zone that itself traffics in the oppressive regimes of normative visibility and hegemonic normativity. "*That order*," both historical record and contested political terrain, "with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile" (67).

Racial Misaddress in the Colonial Grammar Book: Materialist Implications

What are the material implications of nominative power? Spillers illustrates part of her answer with a reading of Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (Equiano 1789/2004). Robert Reid-Pharr introduces the autobiography as an autoethnography that "details the efforts, the frustrations, and the concessions of not simply a slave, a sailor, or even a freedman but also, and importantly, the modern (black) intellectual, the subject caught most deeply in the paradoxical reality that the same society that represses him also provides him with the very tools by which

https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12334 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to resist that oppression" (Equiano 1789/2004, xx). Spillers forecasts Reid-Pharr's observation and demonstrates the "paradoxical reality" Equiano faces in her close reading.

Approaching Equiano's narrative as *historical record*, Spillers reads his initial captivity as a geopolitical site through which we witness the inaugural moments of transatlantic human trafficking and mass enslavement of African and indigenous peoples. As evidenced in Equiano's recounting, Spillers reads a *proprietary logic of naming* whereby "The captivating[3] party does not only 'earn' the right to dispose of the captive body as it sees fit, but gains, consequently, the right to name and 'name' it" (Spillers 1987, 69). The distinction that Spillers asserts, here—between name and "name"—supposes a difference between the thing and its "name." Equiano, for example, was renamed by his "master" each time he was "transferred," that is, trafficked, economically and physically, between slaveholders. Throughout his narrative, Olaudah vanishes into Jacob when he is forced to the West Indies, called Michael on the slave ship, and renamed Gustavus Vassa upon arriving in colonial Virginia.

Spillers's reading moves us to ask: what makes a name, a proper noun, *proper*? *Whose property are our names*? Or, articulated in Baradian performative terms, what are the "intra-actions" between materiality "and" signification that establish orders of *naming* as technologies of racial-political and proprietary-economic power?

In the iconic episode from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* when the white boy encounters Fanon's black body on *la rue publique*, he cries aloud, "Maman, look, a Negro; I'm scared!" "I wanted to kill myself laughing, but laughter had become out of the question" (Fanon 1952/2008, 91). In this moment, Fanon *feels* the "historical-material schema" generated and secured in the French empire to collapse into a "racial-epidermal" one. The white boy's enunciated distress operates as a generative speech act that *performs* this transfer from racism as a material superstructure based on dispossession and exploitation into an affective governance. "[L]egends, stories, history, and above all, *historicity*" are mapped onto Fanon's flesh (284). The "myth of the Negro," the colonizer's invention, wields material symbolism over public space wherein Fanon is not just denied recognition but his body, by no agency of his own, "secretes a race" (92).

The line of address detailed in *Black Skin, White Masks* is slightly distinct from and yet exceptionally resonant with Spillers's reading of Equiano's autobiography. As Equiano is transferred *as property* between captors, each captor also procures the power to give him a new "name." The invocation of each "name" stands in as a contractual speech act that names the legal relationship between a captor and his slave as a paternal-proprietary one. About this proprietary power of address behind the name, Spillers writes, "The problem before us is deceptively simple: the terms enclosed in quotation marks … isolate overdetermined nominative properties" (Spillers 1987, 65). A "name," in quotation marks, is not equal to but is a "nominative property" *of* a name. Olaudah *is* the narrator's name, but "Gustavas Vassa" is called forth into material signification and performative circulation by his captor.

For the white boy to call Fanon "the Negro" is *not*, as in Equiano's narrative, an invocation of *literal* ownership. However, both "Gustavas Vassa" and "the Negro!"

https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12334 Published online by Cambridge University Press

perform uncannily similar interpellative powers. Spillers explains, "Embedded in bizarre axiological ground, they ["name"s] demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are *markers* so loaded with mythical *prepossession* that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean" (Spillers 1987, 65). Thus, proprietary address mustn't necessarily articulate literal ownership in order to incarnate the property of a person "being property of" and "being for" the other.

Notably, Spillers's use of the term "markers" is not incidental. It refers overtly to the "names" and their "overdetermined" hermeneutics. The *embeddedness* in "bizarre axiological ground" involves a captivity of signification. But I wonder whether Spillers is also attempting to highlight the *textual* function of the quotation mark. Quotation marks in writing isolate an incidence of speech. Importantly, their use communicates a distance between that being-named and the speaker's proprietary relation to it. As a practice of *citation*, quotation marks draw out the tacit contours around a space of negative speech: "These" "are" "not" "my" "words." So though "Sapphire," "Earth Mother," "Aunty," or "Black Woman at the Podium" might all be names by which Spillers is called—in the public place, in history, in "bizarre axiological ground"—they crucially do not *belong* to her. They are not *her* names. Instead, they remain the *property* of an "American grammar" and its "national treasury of rhetorical wealth" (Spillers 1987, 65). However, in "acting out" their roles, Spillers retrieves a radically different proprietary power over them, and thereby restores some co-authorship and co-ownership over their public lives.[4]

Attention to Spillers's rhetorical use of quotation marks throughout "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" reveals two things. First, Spillers's meditation on the name as enclosed in quotation marks disrupts the signification–material binary. "Names"—"these social and cultural subjects"—"*make doubles*" (Spillers 1987, 67). To capture a subject (dual meanings of "subject") with quotation marks is to, in "some" sense, *double* it in history and to "make it matter" in discursive terrains.

> But who are these doubles?
> Are they *alive*?

They are alive in the sense that they "live"—they *act* in places of discourse, history, performance, fantasy, imagination, and abstraction. But their grip on meaning also coerces "the real" to appear like them. Every utterance that speaks of (and believes in) the double as if it were real in effect calls it into the real. So quotation marks represent not just history's doubles, but the powers over memory, meaning, and materiality that come to memorialize them. It is difficult to put a finger exactly on the difference between this and "this." But we might posit at least that the difference between them is not one of guaranteed different essences but *performs* a *difference* in proprietary address.

Second, as we read (between the lines) throughout Spillers's rhetorical style, to swarm a particular figure with quotation marks performs an agentive act of *disownership*. "These are not my words" (scare quotes here). In Spillers's use, the "signifying property *plus*," or the supra-linguistic communications embedded in texts, also wields an *expropriative power*. To be able to "name" and therefore to own, in material life

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and signification, is noticeably inverted in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Where the interpellative effects of naming, on the part of the captor (signifier), dispossess the named subject of her sovereignty, Spillers's use of naming stylizes this dispossession *strategically*. She reformulates this American grammatical function—the power to name, the power to cite, the power to address and dispossess—in service of rendering extant a new symbolic space, that of the "*mocking presence*" (Spillers 1987, 80).

Spillers's Mocking Grammar: On Misnaming the Black mother

Let's read for this *exproprietary mocking grammar* in Spillers's deconstruction of Moynihan's *The Negro Family* (Moynihan 1965). Framing itself, in Roderick Ferguson's words, as a "document interested in advancing the aims of civil rights," the Moynihan report in actuality targeted "African American familial arrangements and their non-heteronormative disfigurements" as the primary incubator of "objective differences that prevented black achievement" (Ferguson 2004, 119). The report, or "report" (Spillers 1987), spawned a discourse on "black matriarchy" run rampant through communities of color, which "justified and promoted the regulatory practices of the state" (Ferguson 2004, 111). Ferguson argues that ideologically this authoritative discourse "established the moral grammar and the political practices" that would "undermine the [material] well-being of black poor and working-class families" (124).

Moynihan's figure of the black matriarch, or we might call her a false historical double, is not merely a racist stereotype, the creative invention of his *mis*reading of the legacy of transatlantic slavery on black families in the United States, but also a "grave miscalculation." Spillers couples her analysis of hegemonic nominative representation with the actual "*theft of the body*" (Spillers 1987, 60). This "dehumanized naming," according to Spillers, *manifests in the same moment that African men and women were enslaved, held captive, transformed into "'cargo' that bled"* (70). Slaves' bodies were not only dehumanized in transit, but de-gendered. Spillers explains that, enduring the Middle Passage, "we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a *territory* of cultural and political maneuver" (60). Where the slave vessel traces a "counter-narrative to notions of the domestic," Spillers directs our attention to this "different cultural text" to allow for radical "representational potentialities" (85). According to Moynihan, former conditions of slavery forestalled the development of a black, male-headed household. Further, to correct such abnormality, Moynihan argues that black families should retrace their genealogies in the father's bloodline, as opposed to the mother's. The "Negro family" could be read by Moynihan only as a mutation of the white, nuclear, heteropatriarchal arrangement.

This sequence—the social death of the black father that supposedly informed the black matriarchal family under post-slavery, followed by his discovery and reinsertion on the basis of liberal black male equality, enfranchisement, and heteropaternalist state recognition—is written in signification and *in the blood*. Spillers assesses the grave miscalculation of power that the "report" ascribes to the black mother:

https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12334 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> [T]he dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchalist value where it does not belong; actually *misnames* the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because "motherhood" is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance. (Spillers 1987, 80)

Under slavery, black mothers shared no parental right (or rite) over their children. Even if they did, this genealogical mode is cast as "illegitimate"; matriarchy is a bastardized form of cultural inheritance.

Still, Spillers leaves us with a curious reading of Moynihan's "black matriarchy"—one that reflects the actual genealogy of black motherhood in and through slavery, and simultaneously "make[s] a place for this different social subject" in feminist thought (Spillers 1987, 80). Though female "dominance," "strength," and motherhood are "to be interpreted by later generations … as a 'pathology,'" Spillers maintains that African American women should embrace "the *insurgent* ground as female social subject" by "*claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name'), which her culture imposes in blindness, 'Sapphire' might rewrite, after all, a radically different text for a female empowerment" (80).

If the subversive invocation of "Sapphire" is akin, as I argue, to Spillers's notion of the "mocking double," to what extent might this mocking double agitate her way toward a new text for female empowerment? How could a minstrel monster become both the source of white supremacy's "names" for the black woman and also a strategy of performed political reclamation, redress, and subversion?

Authenticity, Imitation, and Counterfeit: Racial Signification as Contested Terrain

Minstrelsy, in early American productions of white racist performance, posed a different kind of "theft of the body" for the black mother. Eric Lott illustrates in *Love and Theft* how the claim to racial authenticity made by early minstrels in the theatrical staging of "blackness" was therefore a precarious one (Lott 1993). Insofar as donning blackface on the minstrel stage—where white *and* black men "blacked up" with burnt cork paste to caricature "black behavior"—implied that blackness *could* be painted on.

However, darkening the skin was not enough to convince an audience that a performer had truly possessed and inhabited racial difference; it merely stole and performed black embodiment in service of rendering extant the white American, working-class culture in its negation (Lott 1993). These productions had to be propped with exaggerated dialects, gestures, and stylizations of the minstrel to communicate an "authentic" representation of black embodiment. Representing blackness meant *making intelligible a difference* between the actor *underneath* the racial codes painted on the body *through performance*.

https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12334 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Insofar as "Sapphire" emerges from minstrel signification, we must discern rigorously how exactly Spillers conceives that reclaiming such "insurgent grounds" could rewrite the script of female empowerment. Could such rewritings only continually animate history's racist doubles across the public sphere?

Understanding minstrelsy as a racial development project of the early American political order reveals it to be "a principle site of struggle in and over the culture of black people" (Lott 1993, 6). But for Rob Nowatzki, this slippage between black characters and blackface caricatures "betokens the performative and counterfeit nature of minstrelsy's representation of black people" (Nowatzki 2006, 371). In his archival evidence, Lott finds, "often, in the minds of many, blackface singers and dancers became, simply, 'negroes' . . . several accounts of white theatergoers mis[took] blackface performers for blacks" (Lott 1996, 8). Nowatzki elaborates, "The arrival of black performers on the minstrel stage made the issues of counterfeit and authenticity in minstrelsy even more complex than before. It also confused some audiences about the racial identities of the performers" (Nowatzki 2010, 38).

Minstrelsy necessarily trod the line between performance and authenticity: "performing" hybridity while at the same time claiming authentic representation. Douglass Jones asserts that early minstrelsy was as much about the production and mockery of "blackness" as it was an elaborate *theatricality of white negation* (Jones 2013). This oscillation, or misnaming of the racial identity of the person "behind the mask," was complicated further by the arrival of black minstrels and black entertainment troupes. Although the theatrical form was condemned by ex-slave activist Frederick Douglass, Nowatzki explains that others saw minstrelsy as a viable opportunity to reappropriate the form's claim to authentic blackness. Martin Delaney was able to "appropriate its popular melodies, exploit the antislavery elements of some songs, and reverse the proslavery bent of others" in his political writings (Nowatzki 2010, 38).

The entrance of the black minstrel thus performed a crisis of embodiment in such racial performance: what happens to the racial unconscious when the black performer acts out that which the white minstrel has scripted as "blackness"? Under the stage name "Master Juba," William Henry Lane became the most famous of black American minstrel entertainers. But part of his success owed to the fact, as Paul Gilmore records, that he performed as if he were a white man in blackface. In order to appear "real"—and gain commercial success—Lane had to perform the blackness "that he supposedly embodied naturally" (Gilmore 2001, 49). As Lane became increasingly popular, audiences came to know his "true" racial identity.

Later in his career, Lane appeared on stage without "blacking up." But even without the minstrel makeup, Gilmore maintains that "the type of imitation and repetition staged by the minstrel show rendered Lane's race simultaneously a mask and his essential identity" (Gilmore 2001, 50). Lane interrogated the "authenticity" of black identity by appearing as "counterfeit," yet simultaneously pried open minstrel performance as a site for blackness's essential redress. Karen Sotiropoulos's *Staging Race* investigates such *experiences* of counterfeit, and how working "on the popular stage made African American performers hyperconscious of the veil, of that 'peculiar sensation' that Du Bois had described" (Sotiropoulos 2008, 2). She elaborates,

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> African Americans were hyperconscious of how much their self-presentation on stage would be read through stereotype and how a modern sensibility required distancing oneself from pervasive black imagery . . . . Black entertainers consciously used racist stereotypes in their performances in part to distance themselves from these images, since it was abundantly clear (at least to themselves and their black audiences) that they were *performing* these roles. (9)

The duplicity described here in the moment of racial performance, when a subject racialized as black is made public as both the vehicle of performance and the already racialized object of the audience's gaze, is not far from the names by which Spillers tells us she is called in public. Double consciousness, the experience of oneself through the fleshy "veil" or epistemic registers of an-other, seems intimately related to, if not stolen by, minstrel makeup. The racialized ontological experience of embodied otherness marks a politics of "naming" sustained in the iterated performance and "masking up" of difference. Even so, white eyes continue to gaze upon the minstrel in the same fashion that they surveil black subjects.

Belief, the Human, and the "Other"

Butler's early work on gender performance is a useful analog to think through a Spillersian and Baradian performative phenomenology of race. In 1988, Butler wrote in *Theatre Journal* that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time," as well as "a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, *come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief*" (Butler 1988, 520). Gendered subjectivity translates to the body phenomenologically—performed on and in our motility—through a "*stylized repetition of acts*" and "stylization of the body" (519). Because these acts are "internally discontinuous," therefore arbitrarily linked, Butler locates in this liminal arbitrariness the possibility for "a different sort of repeating" (520). Crucially, to perform gender in the mode of *dis*belief is, for Butler, to come to consciousness about how "the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated" (528).

Let's pause around the *mode* of *belief* in performance. In "Skepticism and the Problem of Others," Stanley Cavell struggles through "skeptical epistemology," or the paranoid anxieties that sideline how one comes to *know* the ontological status of another. Addressing slavery, he writes, "It is sometimes said that slaveowners do not see or treat their slaves as human beings, but rather, say, as livestock; some slaveowners themselves have been known to say so . . . But does one really believe such assertions?" (Cavell 1979, 371). If we can assume that the existence of chattel slavery under a purportedly liberal-democratic constitution was contingent on the insistence on the *inhumanity* of those it enslaved, to what extent did slaveholders and enslaved persons actually *believe* this?

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Cavell continues, "My feeling is that they [the assertions] cannot really be meant . . . there comes a time when the institution of slavery cannot be justified on any ground other than the sheer denial of the slave's humanity" (Cavell 1979, 372–73). What Cavell intuits is the blatant "split mind" of the colonizer (hooks 2009). That is, a mind where "democratic" figures like Thomas Jefferson can still be revered despite his widely known and widely ignored intimate participation in the racial and sexual violences of American slavery. Cavell concludes, "What he really means is not that slaves are not human beings, but that some human beings are slaves . . .. He need not claim that all such persons ought to be in slavery, merely that it is all right if some are" (Cavell 1979, 375). If we concede the possibility that "the slaveowner regards the slave as a *kind* of human being," then the basis of the institution of chattel slavery, despite its liberal ideological undercurrent, is predicated on "nothing more than some indefinite claim of difference, some inexpressible ground of exclusion of others from existence in our realm of justice" (378).

In Katherine McKittrick's edited volume *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, Wynter and McKittrick turn to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to theorize the Western logics that insist on the human as a combination of a "first set of instructions" (genetic) and a "second set of instructions" (nongenetic) that organize all human behavior (McKittrick 2014, 27). For Wynter, the Fanonian subject reforms this model into a *hybridity of humanness*. Reading Fanon, "what you begin to recognize is the central role that our discursive formations, aesthetic fields, and systems of knowledge must play in the performative enactment of all such genres of being hybridly human" (31).

If inherent ambivalences in racial performance introduce *disbelief* into the "authenticity" of race-representation, when and how—in light of Spillers's call to reclaim "Sapphire"'s insurgent grounds—does performativity *make* a radical, agentive signification?

To Make Mocking Doubles, or Claiming the Monstrosity of "Sapphire" in Feminist Theory

Despite the violence inherent in "Sapphire"'s invocation, something remains to be *reclaimed* of this monstrosity. That is, where Moynihan and those like him *misname* the power of the black woman and mother, what might it mean to reclaim this power as the location *for*, not *of*, feminist critique and female empowerment?

With respect to *disbelief* in performance, I turn to the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and its appropriation of the minstrel form as a site for social and political critique. BAM focuses significant attention on performance theory in order to problematize black legibility and to plumb the depths of white anxieties/fantasies about black people. To this end, blackface became what Mike Sell calls an "insurgent mode of performativity" for black actors that interrogated the situatedness of being visibly black "in a racist society of spectacle" (Sell 2013, 144). But Sell importantly observes the movement's continual return to questions of recognition and authenticity about

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"the politics of form and context that emerge any time an African American body is *represented as Black*" (148).

Sell ends his essay wondering, "is there any way to extricate revolutionary Blackness from the totalitarian system of blackface racism?" (Sell 2013, 159). Saidiya Hartman similarly posits without answering this question in *Scenes of Subjection*,

> The dominative performance of blackness thwarts efforts to reassess agency because it has so masterfully simulated black "will" only in order to reanchor subordination. How does one discern "enabling conditions" when the very constitution of the subject renders him socially dead or subversively redeploy an identity determined by violent domination, dishonor, and natal alienation? In this case, does redemption rather than repetition become the privileged figure of the performative? (Hartman 1997, 49)

To rephrase Sell's and Hartman's concerns, what is achieved through different repeating if one seeks only restoration or redemption to the same denigrated categories of the prevailing order? What is *materially* restored to the activist who, in her infelicitous uptake of "Sapphire"'s tropes, finds at the end of her performance she is still only *Sapphire* (no scare quotes) to a whiteface audience?

From Miss to Monster: Hester, La Negrita

Never shoulda had him.
Never shoulda had none of em.
Never was nothing but a pain to me:
5 Mistakes!
No, don't say that.
-nnnnnnnn-
Kids? Where you gone?
Never shoulda haddem.

No:
I shoulda had a hundred
a hundred
I shoulda had a hundred-thousand
A hundred-thousand a whole *army* full I shoulda!
I shoulda.
One right after the other! Spitting em out with no years in between!
—Suzan-Lori Parks, *In the Blood*

So far, I've attempted to situate "Sapphire" as an American trope of black femaleness informed by minstrelsy's counterfeited representations of black mothers *and* black mothers' subversive performances. Although Spillers redresses Sapphire's "power to

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name," performative invocations of her still threaten to signify orders that pathologize black maternal power. Still, we should embrace in Spillers's call a focus on what such invocations will *perform*, and like Barad, forego what they "represent." We must read "Sapphire" for her "signifying property *plus*," and *claim* this excessive monstrosity.

Christina Sharpe defines the "monstrous" as

> subjectivities constituted from transatlantic slavery onward and connected, then as now, by the everyday mundane horrors that aren't acknowledged to be horrors … *monstrous intimacies*, … known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous. (Sharpe 2010, 2–3)

About black artist Kara Walker's silhouette tableaus and their critics,[5] Sharpe offers a productive access point into the questions that Spillers compels us to ask about "Sapphire." Sharpe begins with Walker's voice:

> What I discovered was that possessing a black body through which history and fiction coexist was the stuff performances are made of … how could I turn this feeling that I had become a blank space into which people projected their fantasies into something concrete? What about the possibility that I might reflect those fantasies back into the projector's unsuspecting eyes, and cause them to want to face the shame of (our) collective psyche? (Sharpe 2010, 153)

In lieu of my unpacking, let's turn to Sharpe's: "The link that Walker insists on between past and present, seen in the traumatic registers of post-slavery subjectivity … does not mean that she attempts a naïve collapse of their spatiotemporal distance in her world. Rather her works are allegories for the present" (158). In response to critics who misread Walker's work as reducing the black body to white stereotype and caricature, Sharpe emphasizes how black silhouettes "engage in actions that one can describe and not name" and move us "a step toward throwing into relief against what they conceal" (175).

To name one example wherein "Sapphire"'s subversive redeployment is mobilized in script and on stage, I turn to Suzan-Lori Parks's play *In the Blood* (Parks 2001), whose main character, Hester, I read as Sapphire's mocking double. A direct reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* Parks stylistically rewrites Hester into a poor, homeless, black/Latina unmarried mother of five. Parks's play performs social commentary on the positionality of mothers of color and their navigations of heteropatriarchal, white-supremacist power. How do we *read* for "Sapphire"'s performative subversions, rather than name them?

In the final scenes, Hester murders her eldest child, Jabber. Hester's act is a monstrous reclamation of insurgent grounds, of the maternal biopower to make live, let die, and *to kill*. Cheryl Black suggests that Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection is a useful lens through which to read motherhood and murder in *In the Blood* (Black 2012, 33). Hester's "outcast status … is related to her gender and sexual conduct,

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exacerbated by poverty, illiteracy, and race" (36). The first scene opens with a stark juxtaposition of Hester's mothering and the simultaneous assault on her as a mother: the stage directions read, "Home under the bridge. The word 'SLUT' scrawled on a wall" (Parks 2001, 1.9).

Hester asks Jabber to read the message aloud. Although it's clear to the audience that Jabber knows the word, he refuses to tell Hester under the guise that he is "too slow" (Parks 2001, 1.9). The moments leading to Jabber's murder recall this first scene: Hester ends a physical altercation with Reverend D., her youngest son's father. As Reverend D. leaves the stage, he calls Hester a slut. Presumably triggered from the first episode, Jabber chants "SLUT" repeatedly at Hester. The stage directions situate a dramatic break. Here, Parks's words both describe and conduct the scene of violence: "Hester beats Jabbers body / again and again and again … Jabber is dead and bloody … Hester stands there alone—wet with her son's blood" (8.106). Hester traces a red "A" on the ground.

Hester cradles Jabber's bloody corpse, "a profoundly abject image," wherein the body represents "'the most sickening of wastes, a border that has encroached upon everything … death infecting life'" (Black 2012, 42, quoting Kristeva). In this abjection, Hester *represents* Rod Ferguson's "nonheteronormative deviant" (Ferguson 2004). Verna Foster explicates, "rage is not directed at the child … but at what he represents, what society has made of the child or will do to the child" (Foster 2007, 75).[6] Hester's character at once conforms to and subverts the "Sapphire" trope. A homeless, unmarried, poor but stubbornly independent mother of color, an angry "welfare queen," denigrated and ridiculed for having *too many* children, and nevertheless claiming and performing resistance until the final page. By taking Jabber's life into her own hands, Hester's monstrous reclamation performs the maternal power to kill, beating heteropatriarchy to death.

Final "Matters": Performing Signification Anew

The terrains of signification are as contested as any other geopolitical site of power's intersection with lived experiences of difference and hierarchy. When Barad said that "Language has been granted too much power," perhaps a consideration of to what extent imperial languages of the state "represent," in Spillers's words, "for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation" (Spillers 1987, 67), was missing.

As illustrated above through my readings of Barad, Spillers, and Parks, performativity is an "intra-active" relationship between materiality and signification. In Parks's *In the Blood*, we witness "Sapphire"'s *significant* reclamation from a hegemonic order that misnames the black mother as "SLUT" under highway overpasses. Repeated misaddress compels Hester to murder one of her own children in the final moments of the play. But rather than read this scene as mere summoning and reenacting of stereotypical minstrel scripts for the black mother, I read Hester's violence as a subversively rhetorical act, to murder the misnomer/misnamer.

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Engaging theoretically and ethically with the co-constitutive relationship between materiality and signification needs a reading practice that identifies how materiality *performs* signification, and vice versa. How does performing subversive signification re-write and re-form our texts and "matters" for female empowerment? In light of this still burning question, it is too soon to discount language's power. Instead, following Spillers, I propose we *claim this power—to perform signification anew, and "to matter" differently*.

Notes

1. Thank you to my interlocutors Naimah Petigny and Zenzele Isoke for articulating together how scholars must read Spillers as literary theorist and scholar-activist-artist.

2. Thank you, Harshit Rathi, for introducing bell hooks's cinematic theory to me.

3. An attentive copy-editor pointed out to me that the grammatically appropriate phrasing here should be "capturing party." Which begs the question: on what grounds might Spillers have chosen "captivating party" to signify in its place? Alexis Pauline Gumbs's reading of Spillers in *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (2016) suggests that Spillers theorizes in the mode of poetics. Alongside Gumbs's reading, I understand Spillers's use of "captivating" against "capturing" to signal a power relationship which extends beyond the flesh. Recall Spillers's distinction between captured flesh versus captured bodies. Perhaps captivity, as opposed to capture, entails also the temporal, spiritual, linguistic, and cultural components to enslavement beyond just "bound flesh." The capturing parties of the long 19th century at once had to capture and captivate in order to successfully colonize.

4. Thank you, Richa Nagar, for this point. See Nagar's definition of *coauthorship* Nagar 2014.

5. Harkening explicitly to the mammy figure, Walker's art has spawned controversy among art critics. See Reinhardt 2003.

6. The actor who performs the role of Jabber *is the same actor* who performs the role of Chili, Jabber's father. To the audience in this moment, Hester, or "Sapphire," appears to murder both Jabber and Chili.

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