Braised Cucumbers, Maps, and Surprises: Materialist Narratology and Political Theology in the Work of Hortense J. Spillers

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> Still, the relationship between space/place, and as we are concerned with it here, topography/place, remains the problematic encounter that both exceeds the map and remains representable by it.
> —Hortense J. Spillers, "Topographical Topics, Faulknerian Space"
>
> Just wash away. The whole bloody show!
> —Paule Marshall, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*

To exceed the map while being reliant on its representation—to be bound to a representational limit and then at once traverse it: this is a key

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interpretive protocol from Hortense J. Spillers's critical and creative practice. It is a procedure for dialectical interpretation as a warm-up for protracted political struggle. By way of criticism, it practices the crucial and tricky balancing act calibrating scales of revolution and reform. Spillers's work is constantly attuned to the here and now on which she aims her sights—be that the current atavistic, retrograde conjuncture, a Paule Marshall novel, a sequence of Gwendolyn Brooks's poems, or an accounting of an episode in Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse. Yet, simultaneously, her scholarship pushes past the given to imagine someone, something, someplace else. Spillers's work in its expository arc moves toward and away from various givens. Hers is the insurgent expository labor unique to the *surprise*. Such expository movement and countermovement is on display in her simultaneous mobilization and questioning of tradition. Her work constitutes a unique synthesis of narratology and political theology concretized by way of surgically precise and original close readings of literary texts attuned to both historical specificity and historical becoming. The scholarship is materialist in that it grounds frameworks and concepts from narrative theory and exegetical study that are often understood as ahistorical, by way of her close attention to the actuality of individual texts (how they formally work) and the interpretive, improvisational creativities of living communities (that which such work refracts, reorders, and mediates).

Such pivots are on display in Spillers's thrilling 1983 lecture notes on *Moby-Dick* at Haverford College. Spillers (1983b) generates seventy-eight index cards, constituting what she calls a "miniature *Moby-Dick*" tracing Ishmael's steps. For Spillers, propaedeutic as a series of preparations is as interesting as the execution and actualization. Miniaturization as a mapping procedure pertaining to scale allows for the proliferation of critical insights. Here is one of three major themes extrapolated from this miniaturization procedure:

> If I wanted to state a subject for this book it would be based on this sentence: "All things are full of Jove," or "God is everywhere." But what I believe Melville substitutes for those primary and powerful sentences is the following: "All things are full of man, and man is full of meaning." That would be my own understanding of the subject of this book. Even though we are talking about whales in this book and even though we are talking very specifically about a particular whale and how that whale comes to stand for the primordial instance, everything we can imagine about the infinite, the untouchable, the ineffable and the ungraspable, everywhere we look in this universe

> of the ocean world there is mankind, there is specifically, man. There is a way that Melville is doing that, and we are going to talk about some those strategies this morning. (Spillers 1983b: 2)

Here is an example, in Spillers, of what critic E. San Juan Jr. (1994) calls a mass-line:

> The novel opens and closes with configurations of the custodian, who is, as you know, perhaps one of the most important people in the life of any institution. The custodian is the keeper of the keys, the custodian is one who knows the building, who knows the architecture in the function of its kitchen and its bowels. In this particular instance the figure of the custodian, however, is the keeper of the word, or the keeper of the record. (Spillers 1983b: 3)

The custodian as "keeper of the keys" models both the pedagogic role Spillers occupies and the cartographic knowledge Spillers's miniaturization aspires—a sense of scaffolding, architectural fashioning, and complex causality. All are components of this custodial toolbox. The custodian is both pedagogue proxy and epistemological and cartographic ideal. Spillers frames the "republic of Nantucket" as a kind of heuristic, a totality with limits—

> a federation of world males operating under a hierarchy and given over to a common industry, whaling itself. So the enterprise of whaling gathers together the sons of God in a single household within the isolated and interior spaces of the *Pequod*, like all ships, a woman. However, this ship is an exquisite pagan mistress, as we recall in its description in the chapter entitled "The Ship," and which female delivers her sons, at last, into the terrible arms of the sea. (5)

Such a "miniature *Moby-Dick*" makes clear for Spillers what she calls the "nominative thievery" enacted by Melville and how "analogy is the primary working strategy of the novel" (8). An immersive dive into *Moby-Dick* brings forth a rigorous sidebar explicating the work of vehicle and tenor as parts of metaphor in general and as specifically employed in Melville. As in Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of religious alienation, Spillers repositions, resubstitutes, and centers man for Jove and God. Yet, unlike Feuerbach, Spillers consistently refuses to short-circuit—to hastily shift focus from God to something else. Spillers lingers with the particularities, centering human creativity without bypassing the insurgent theoretical-critical work of the sacred and otherworldly. Spillers takes the time to read for things that she

can use. Spillers's work mirrors that of Melville's (or Ralph Ellison's or Gayl Jones's) in their unwillingness and refusal to forget. As she notes in her teaching lectures, "Melville's is a secularistic humanism that still remembers the verbal motor behavior of an older American religious community—both the old faith of the fathers and the new faith of an American democratic future unfolding" (6–7). "Verbal motor behavior" is, among other things, a formalist strategy—the precise kind of aesthetic mnemonic patterning that Spillers's analytic consistently elaborates and interprets.

Concluding a lecture at the Gorky Institute of World Literature entitled "Artists and Models: Writing Literary History," Spillers (1991) encourages a literary historiography as "an attitude toward history and literature that can await a content." Carefully attuned to and anticipating various contents, Spillers's analytic awaits a radical futurity simultaneously counterbalanced by the *actuality* of this bleak and beautiful world (what Brecht [1975: 225] names as resolve to "engender / Approval of a world so many-sided; delight in / The contradictions of so bloodstained a life"). The work models a discipline for living fully in the world by way of honing a critical reading and writing praxis at the intersections of Black studies, women's studies, and literary studies. Spillers mines the rich tapestry of Afro-American letters and insurgent political struggle, wrangling together resources to imagine and fashion another world. Hers is a project propelled forward by the underappreciated virtue of paying attention. It is the profound acknowledgment that what we imagine and name as multiverse is already *here* as opposed to *elsewhere*.

Consider Spillers's ([1996] 2003: 377) characteristically brilliant formulation pertaining to Jean Toomer's revered experimental collection of vignettes:

> Among Du Bois's generation of thinkers, poet Jean Toomer comes as close as anyone within this repertory of writings to the coherent laying out of a paradigm of the imaginary (*Cane*, 1922) even though, in a very real sense, we could say that the artwork, in its intelligent "muteness," is already a "translation" that requires a didactic rereading back into its eventuality from concatenations on the real object—in other words, the "message" of art is hardly transparent, or to be read like the palms of the hands.

Toomer's narrative radicalism requires interpretation to fully bring forth its richness. It demands work. *Cane*'s "muteness" demands close reading and anticipates Erich Auerbach's (2003) "Odysseus' Scar"—in its delineation

between Homeric and *Pentateuch* narrative strategies—whereas sparse narrative detail corresponds with an abundance of interpretive possibilities. "The coherent laying out of the paradigm of the imaginary" coheres in the act of critical reading. I'm interested in the elegant retroactive procedure outlined here by Spillers and enabled by Toomer's powerful craft. This "rereading back" anticipates and authorizes the narrative problem of endings and surprise.

In a rediscovered three-by-six-inch Memphis hotel room notebook is one of Spillers's exacting declaratives, hovering between corrective and lament: "We want the answers before the performance."[1] Such precision resonated with a reoccurring theme of cherished morning conversations over omelets: the dismay that lately a vast amount of literary scholarship does not *surprise*. The trifecta of desire-performance-answers indexes an array of conceptual problems about telos and the foreknowledge of narrative endings. To know how the story concludes before taking part in its unfolding is foolish idealism—and, more importantly, highly suspect method. It is bad thinking and bad politics. Such problems of endings are indeed many, spanning multiple divisions of knowledge. For philosophy: a persistent stubborn insistence on seeing Hegelian dialectics as a question of synthesis as opposed to the in-motion, open-ended generative engine of contradiction. For theories of poetic composition: Goethe's ([1797] 1905) insistence in a letter to Schiller pertaining to Homer's *Odyssey* that "yea must know the outcome of a good poem," or Pierre Macherey's (1978) related discussion in his *A Theory of Literary Production* of Edgar Allan Poe in "The Philosophy of Composition." Poe parodically insists upon poets knowing the end of their text from the genesis of its composition. Every word, every line, every stanza, every syllabic, every mobilization of negative space brings you closer to the logic of the work's unfolding, as Poe's parodic staging of one answer to the question of endings mockingly asserts. Inaugural framing decisions between the writer and her novel constitute another variation on ends as beginning—for example, the first line of Toni Morrison's (1998: 1) *Paradise*: "They shoot the white girl first."[2] Morrison's novel stages the tensions between inside and outside—the relationship between men of the small all-Black town of Ruby, Oklahoma (population 360), and a shunned and barely tolerated convent community—shelter to an assemblage of

1. I wrote this down during a session in Memphis of the Caribbean Philosophical Association Summer School where Spillers and I taught.
2. For more on Morrison, see Spillers 1983a.

women whose individual stories Morrison elaborates in chapters named after them. The convent women and the town engage in a tense mediation, bartering canned foods and engaging in transactional exchanges that temporarily mitigate and keep at a distance an explosive violence. Beginning with such culminating violence in such a stark first-sentence apotheosis, Morrison clears room for an etiology of overlapping, interdependent (whether they know or it or not) communities. The horrific ending as beginning propels the narrative forward instead of foreclosing it as fate. It is a constellation evoking and displacing the problem of telos and narrative enacted via Morrison's expert storytelling and formalist mastery.[3] It is unlocked by patient careful reading. Spillers works through such problems by way of her unique mobilization of Erich Auerbach's *figura*—a problem always close by in her solely original analytic.

Surprise resounds but cannot be conflated with the ongoing narrative problem of *endings*—what critic Frank Kermode (1968) famously calls *The Sense of an Ending*. The virtue of surprise is in the relinquishing of a priori expectations and ossified preexisting categories. Hegel's (1977: 52) preface to his 1807 *Phenomenology of Sprit* notes how "in modern times . . . the individual finds the abstract form ready-made: the exertion of grasping it and appropriating it is rather more the unmediated production of the inward and the cut-off generation of the general than the emergence of the general out of the concrete and multiplicity of existence." For Hegel, when it comes to matters of critique, the building of concepts (*Begriff* in German) is primary, generated from the work itself. *Begriff* (as concept) is etymologically related to *begriefen* (to understand as grasping in hand). To grasp steadfast *actuality* with strong hands—such is the work of the concept and aspiration of a truly radical criticism—the strong hands of the custodial "keeper of the keys." Here is the synthesis of abstract thinking and actuality—grasping the concept is holding on tight to an abstraction and using it to get busy with the important task of changing the world. It is a question of resisting the appeal of the *ready-made* in scholarly inquiry. This is an urgent takeaway from a careful lingering on Spillers's archive. There is forceful analytical and expository freshness going with *surprise*—not just surprise as the contingent logic of performance and artistic composition but also as both repeat affect and aggregate effect of immersion in the body of work that is Afro-American literature at the intersections of feminist studies and critical theory. In Lorraine Hansberry's ([1965] 1995: 256) *The Sign in Sidney*

3. For a brilliant meditation on fatalism, freedom, contingency, and the problem of telos, see Ruda 2016.

Brustein's Window, Mavis—the reactionary sister-in-law who is not all that she seems—tells her leftist sister and brother-in-law: "The *things* you *think* you have to talk about." Spillers in her work's expository unfolding never conforms to such expectations and obligation. In her self-understanding, expository surprise is both a core political stance and fighting tactic. Expository surprise (as an element and enactment of *style*) helps her preempt and foil racist invasion: "The stylistic elements of the idiomatic were (and remain) for me a political choice, inasmuch as I have wanted, as a critico-theoretical practitioner, to surprise the most blatant of the racist presumptions that invade every field of discourse" (Spillers 2003c: 7)

I recently prepared to teach two seminars on her work—one undergraduate on Spillers and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and interdisciplinarity; the other a graduate seminar on Spillers, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Amiri Baraka and the politics of literary form. Visiting the Spillers archive housed in the John Hay Library in Providence to prepare for such endeavors, every annotation, essay, transcript, recipe, diaristic jotting, or occasional list becomes a most convincing and most pressing, privileged framework—ideal candidates for inquiry. Fifty pieces in succession generate minimally fifty points of analytic and expository departure. The Spillers archive contains enough scholarly material for a lifetime of study, recipes to try out, and an ever so charming volume—*A Book of Days for the Literary Year* (Jones [1927] 1984). The book repurposes a sacred ritualistic tool—"a book of days"—as an itinerary and collection of anecdotes on literary history. Successive acts of reading proliferate the richest topics of inquiry at such critical mass, so that the whole selective endeavor became something else—a pristine example of what we used to call dialectical *leaps* transforming quantitative into qualitative (see Lenin 1964: 113, 222; James [1948] 1980). In the Spillers archive, each of her endeavors become a most astonishing *terraforming* agent.

Attention to maps and the lingering with the constellation of representations such maps access and deny in Spillers's work starts a conversation about how she calibrates materialism and idealism, myth and history, abstraction and actuality in ways both radically unique to her and to the intersecting fields and bodies of work she studies.[4] Hers is a particular

4. *Constellation* in the way Walter Benjamin (2003b: 34–35) understands it:

> Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be criteria with which to

type of materialist synthesis of narrative theory as a variation on the theme of political theology.[5] Consider this provocative bit of angelology:

> The principle according to which the government of the world will cease with the Last Judgment has only one important exception in Christian theology. It is the case of hell. In Question 89, Thomas Aquinas asks himself whether the demons will execute the sentence

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judge the existence of ideas. The significance of phenomena for ideas is confined to their conceptual elements. Whereas phenomena determine the scope and content of the concepts which encompass them, by their existence, by what they have in common, and by their differences, their relationship to ideas is the opposite of this inasmuch as the idea, the objective interpretation of phenomena—or rather their elements—determines their relationship to each other. Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements' being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed; so that those elements which it is the function of the concept to elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes.

I'm interested in the distance Benjamin's simile imposes separating phenomena from the ideas that purport to explain them. It is a beautifully written and poignant figure for criticism that helps sidestep the pitfalls of explaining a truly inimitable work. Crafting constellations puts a formidable body of criticism to work. More aptly, it puts a body of work in play rather than risk diminishing its force by way of explanation.

5. "Political Theology" in Carl Schmitt's (1985: 36) sense famously understands "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state" as "secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver." This is in service of Schmitt's discussion of sovereignty. Such an analytic has been mobilized for the left most brilliantly as of late in the work of scholar and translator Adam Kotsko (2017, 2018). Such work is different from but related to the interesting compliments I clumsily name under the umbrella "liberation theory" outside its immediate point of South American origin and feminist biblical interpretation. This includes work by James Cone, José Carlos Mariátegui La Chira, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edgar Rivera Colon, and Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez and work by Mary Daly, Phyllis Trible, and Barbara Johnson by way of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. To my mind, Spillers's work is a related but particularly unique branch of such knowledges. Spillers accesses categories, methodologies, and critical apparatus that skew toward a theologically inflected universal/transhistoricism (*Figura*, myth-criticism, Eucharist, archetype criticism, Northrop Frye's analytic genre categories) in order to push closer to the actuality of world and text. Transcendent categories become actual by way of Spillers's critical repertoire. So-called theological tools bring you closer to the fleshy actuality of specific literary texts and the materiality of the world in which such texts are in play. This is the major point of my discussion of her work, and this is the move I keep returning to present in a vast array of Spillers's scholarship.

> of the damned ("Utrum daemones exequentur sententiam iudicis in damnatos"). Against the opinion of those who held that, with the Judgment, all function of government and ministry will cease, Aquinas instead claims that the demons will carry out their judicial function as executors of the infernal punishment for all eternity. In the same way as he had argued that the angels would lay down their ministries but would eternally maintain their order and other hierarchies, so now he writes that "so, too, will order be observed in punishments, men being punished by demons, lest the Divine order, whereby the angels are placed between the human nature and the Divine, be entirely set aside" (*Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, q. 89, a. 4). In other words, hell is that place in which the divine government of the world survives for all eternity, even if only in a penitentiary form. And while the angels in paradise will abandon every form of government and will no longer be ministers but only assistants, despite conserving the empty form of their hierarchies, the demons, meanwhile, will be the indefectible ministers and eternal executioners of divine justice.
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> However, this means that, from the perspective of Christian theology, the idea of eternal government (which is the paradigm of modern politics) is truly infernal. (Agamben 2011: 163–64)

In this formulation by way of Aquinas and Agamben, political concepts are not derived from their religious counterparts following Schmitt's lead. Instead, celestial time and space cohere and conform to worldly bureaucratic banality. However, for Spillers, the theological-conceptual takes on the worldly duties of political struggle, bringing us as readers closer to the actuality of objects under analysis. The proliferation of theoretical and critical frames in Spillers gets you closer to the specificity of objects under study. Spillers's work is focused on the intersections of cartography, political theology, and narrative theory. Hers is *ruthless criticism* as Black radical and feminist world-building.

Braised Cucumbers and Eggs; Myth and Maize

In the conclusion to his narrative study *The American Shore*, on "originary assumptions" and the "origin of languages" (what the author calls "exotexts"), Samuel R. Delany cites G. Spencer-Brown's explanation, in *Laws of Form*, of mathematical communication as "not descriptive, but

injunctive." Such injunction is akin to cookery and the recipe: "It may be helpful at this stage to realize that the primary form of mathematical communication is not descriptive, but injunctive. In this respect, it is comparable with practical art forms like cookery, in which the taste of a cake, although literally indescribable, can be conveyed to a reader in the form of a set of injunctions called a recipe" (quoted in Delany [1978] 2014: 204). Dwelling in the Spillers archive is a photocopied page from a recipe book entry listing plans of action for "Goat Cheese Gougères, Roast Goose with Sour Grapes, Buttermilk Cornbread, Braised Cucumbers, '$700 Tomato Salad' [Expensive!], and Suzanne's Lemon Souffle Pudding." Neatly highlighted in yellow are further instruction promoting abundance over austerity (encouraging you to double the cornbread recipe to achieve "genuine Southern style farm cornbread, which you will be attempted to eat right away") and instructions to fashion cucumbers neatly into julienne strips. Adding a protein to the menu, consider this narrative opening: the infinitely rich, critical excursus on eggs from Spillers's (2003c: 1) introduction to her collection of essays *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*:[6]

> When I think on the stunning alimentation of an egg, I come face to face with one of the miracles of human existence; after all, I started out that way (and so did you) and grew and grew. . . . A deep appreciation for the simple elegance of beginnings, or *appreciation* of any kind, for that matter, does not belong to the postmodern's repertoire of gestures, but inasmuch as I am not one, I invite you to consider this: the brilliant food that makes "omelettes, and cake and custard and soufflés and poaching and frying and boiling and baking" was manipulated by someone, either silly or perspicacious, who wondering what would happen if he or she "slowly trickled oil on to egg yoks and then go ahead and tried" out the mother of mayonnaise. One commentator even goes so far as to suggest an angelic authorship for that recipe of the supplement—the left-over whites and their translation into the exquisite delicacy of meringue. Said to be "frightfully good" with anchovies, an egg can assume so many different shapes and contexts that we might think of the stuff as a form of

6. The title of this essay collection is an allusion to the 1976 Jean-Jacques Annaud anti-militaristic film about the French invasion of the German colony of Kamerun during World War I.

> mimicry. An egg, for instance, that one wants half-scrambled and half-up at once must be prepared in a very hot pan, with a spit of bacon fat, and if the pan is smoking, the egg will yield a "flash in the plan," anywhere from five to ten seconds over a gas-burning flame. But the miracle of the egg is its total usefulness.

Note the astonishing expository arc and cluster of problems itemized here. The passage begins with subjective astonishment and intention, moving from the actuality of an egg sizzling in the pan to the genesis of all human life as one aspect of the methodological problem of beginnings (which, as Edward W. Said [1975] reminds us, are never simple). Universalism moves over, making room for method. Spillers embraces the expression of appreciation—despite its lack of belongingness vis-à-vis postmodernist postures of disattachment and attendant waning of affect—different from but related to poststructuralist suspicion vis-à-vis the subject. Qualifying eggs and anchovies as "frightfully good" (offset in quotations by design) instantiates a polyvocality to the passage, performing the very enthusiastic affect it insists on not demurring from. "Inasmuch as I am not one" constitutes an ambiguous denial. Does it disidentify as *postmodern* or *egg*? To my ear, this also recalls the first line in the following Lucile Clifton's (1987b: 58) poem pushing past pastoral idealization, recentering the human—that which systems of property and domination labor to impoverish: "being property once myself / i have a feeling for it, / that's why I can talk / about environment. / what wants to be a tree, / ought to be he can be it. / same thing for other things. same thing for men." Thirteen years ago in the very pages of this journal, I explored Amiri Baraka's insistence that "we ain't never been that, ain't never been that at all" (Glick 2010). Clifton's sarcastic qualification and Spillers's invocation, by way of their shared stylistic savvy, underscore the problem of naming and identification. Both poem and passage trouble the correlation between names and who or what they purport to identify: "We ain't never been that—never at all." In her critical introduction to Mrs. A. E. Johnson's 1890 temperance novel *Clarence and Corrinne; or, God's Way*, Spillers (1988a) highlights the limits of a highly prescriptive sense of what a "post-modernist reading protocol" can or cannot accomplish. A literary genre classification that does not quite hit its mark underscores the need to "read again." Careful reading protocols that consider the utility of categories brings the attentive reader close to *both* history and literary form:

> Even though Clarence and Corinne does not answer any of the expectations of a post-modernist reading protocol, it is a type of story

> that we must learn to read again for precisely that reason. Neither ambiguity nor the trap of the subtext seems at all relevant to this tale whose moral is outright. In fact, a critic or reviewer is anxious to get the *right* pitch here, because literary analysis appears to be too much effort or not enough. In trying to adjust my own reading of this text, I now understand more fully why its illustrations and the story it tells being on a vague sense of *déjà vu*. Having spent my childhood, in part, "practicing" language and reading in the Baptist Sunday school system of Memphis, I recognize the ways and means of this tale at a level of readerly response that precedes the critical. In a real sense, Johnson's story is touched by the anonymous, its authorship somewhat beside the point, for we could easily encounter it and stories like it in the preacher's exemplum, the reformer's plea, and the journalist's zeal to situate a new, urbanized American in the quickened sociologies of the wayward city. This narrative offers an extended exhortation to a new social order, now urged to bind up the wounds of its battered women, its broken children. In that way—astonishingly—the United States of a full century ago appears less foreign than we are disposed to imagine. (Spillers 1988a: xxxvi–xxvii)

Returning to "Peter's Pans," Spillers stages an interplay toggling between singular and multiple culminating in announcing the egg as "total usefulness." What kind of utility is on display here? Such utilitarian abundance is less Jeremy Bentham and more Bertolt Brecht in that it has something to do with narrative and attentive reading-poetic praxis. Consider Brecht on Kafka and the Chinese philosophical "parable of usefulness" from the 1934 Svendborg *Conversations with Brecht*:

> "I don't accept Kafka, you know." And he goes on to speak about a Chinese philosopher's parable of "the tribulations of usefulness." In a wood there are many kinds of tree-trunk. From the thickest they make ship's timbers; from those which are less thick but still quite sturdy, they make boxes and coffin-lids; the thinnest of all are made into whipping-rods; but of the stunted ones they make nothing at all: these escape the tribulations of usefulness. "You've got to look around in Kafka's writings as you might in such a wood. Then you'll find useful things. The images are good, of course. But the rest is pure mystification. It's nonsense. You have to ignore it. Depth doesn't get you anywhere at all. Depth is a separate dimension, it's just depth—and there's nothing whatsoever to be seen in it." (Benjamin 2003a: 109–10)

In the same essay, Spillers (1988a) glosses her chapter discussing how Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* mobilizes myth in relation to the filing of Afro-American letters under the disciplinary umbrella of sociology.[7] Spillers charts in four points how Ellison turns toward the nineteenth century (Herman Melville and Mark Twain's "imaginative economy") to uniquely mobilize myth:

> (1) Following a line of American fictions that had rendered "black" an item of sociological data or the subject of exotic assumptions, or yet, the gagline of white mischief, at best, its ambiguous "bi-play," *Invisible Man* addresses the issue as an exposition of modern consciousness. (2) Frustrating the tendency to perceive a coterminous relationship between the symbolic boundaries of black and the physical, genetic manifestation named black, *Invisible Man* recalls *Moby Dick* that stands Manichean orientation on its head. (3) Insisting that black American experience is vulnerable to mythic dilation, Ellison constructs a coherent system of signs that brings into play the entire repertory of American cultural traits. In order to do this, Ellison places the unnamed "agonist" on an historical line that reaches back through the generations and extends forward into the frontiers of the future. Thus, (4) the work withdraws from the modernist inclination to isolate issues of craft from ethical considerations. For Ellison, language does speak, and it clarifies selective experience under the auspices of certain figures-of-thought, unexpectedly applied to received opinions. (Spillers 2003b: 67)

Spillers mines Northrop Frye and Roland Barthes on myth, positing Ellison as an alternative to their formulations. Evoking Frye's definition of myth as "the union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication," Spillers hones in on myth as a "term . . . [that] has achieved such flexibility that it is menaced by meaning everything and nothing in particular" (67) Spillers pushes back against Frye's conception signaling Barthes's understanding of myth as "type of speech" as both a reprieve and a temporary out: "What I find most suggestive in Barthes's argument is the distinction he enforces between the form of myth and the concept it borrows from particular his-

7. When I began college at Rutgers in 1993 the college bookstore shelved Afro-American literature in sociology. By the time I completed undergraduate, literary works by Black writers were moved to Africana studies, and when I completed graduate work such works were incorporated into the largest categorization in the store—"Literature." For another stellar Spillers essay on *Invisible Man* (and Alice Walker) pertaining to staging the problematic of incest, see Spillers (1989) 1991.

torical order. We could say, following his lead, that mythic form is a kind of conceptual code, relying on the accretions of association that clings to the concept" (68). And, on Ellison:

> In Ellison's case, I would suggest that myth becomes a tactic for explanation and that the novel may be considered a discourse on the biographical uses of history. The preeminent element of form, *Invisible Man*'s narrative unfolds through a complicated scheme of conceptual images that refer to particular historical order, but the order itself localizes in the metaphysical/personal issues of the narrative, which is then empowered to reveal both the envisioned structure of history and its fluid continuity. It seems to me that the themes of diachrony and synchrony properly apply here in that *Invisible Man* embodies the diachronous, spatial, continuing subject of particular historical depth or memory. In history, the individual is the key to both procedures, for he can arrest time, as the form of the novel does, and examines its related details in leisurely detachment, but he cannot escape it, either personally or historically, and is, therefore, detached only in a kind of suspended, temporary judgment. (69)

Spillers's prioritization of the "individual" here—the interplay of diachrony and synchrony and how the individual disattaches from and realigns with an inescapable historicity relate to her consistent probing and expanding upon understandings of alienation. Spillers, by way of Ellison, adds another modality to the list of "uses and disadvantages for history"[8] *as* life: Ellison's "biographical use of history." This intersects with the ever-generative and razor-precise essay "Formalism Comes to Harlem." The latter takes on a critical divide in Afro-American literary studies staging literature as social knowledge versus *formalist* (read here as theoretical-critical) approaches to literary study. Spillers names to reject as mutually exclusive two alleged competing camps. She tasks Langston Hughes's character and organic intellectual Jesse B. Semple, in all his discursive and philosophical-theoretical savvy, with traversing and rejecting such divide. In a forthcoming essay for a monograph entitled *Black Art and Aesthetics: Relationalities, Interiorities, and Reckonings*, I discuss Spillers's "formalism"—its use of the term "one-eyed" in relationship to Adorno's discussion of Homer's cyclops and questions of agricultural labor and abundance and relate this to the procedure of *worrying the line* (to evoke a term from Cheryl Wall

8. I'm alluding to and adding onto to Nietzsche 1983.

[2005]) of aesthetic and literary traditions. Adorno asserts that the hostility directed toward the cyclops's lifeworlds has everything to do with the fact that they do not till their own land. Sustenance is provided for them—autogenerated from the land by godly fiat. For Spillers, "formalism" and "Harlem" constitute two poles of a false choice. Her analytic contrasts the narrative strategies mobilized in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* with William Gaddis's *The Corrections* (a work that Tony Tanner [(1971) 1979: 393] signals as "inaugurating a new period of American fiction in which the theme of fictions/recognitions has come to occupy the forefront of the American writer's consciousness"). Spillers (1982: 59) itemizes Gaddis's tendency to make anonymous characters, his "repetition of idiomatic gestures and the infinite regression of figurative and scenic details." Gaddis's episodic structure and characters exist "as an extension of rhetorical choices" (59). The aggregate effect of Gaddis's narrative choices and stylistics is a profound alienation. This is in contrast to *Invisible Man* and *Song of Solomon*'s experiment with "words as acts of reciprocity"—and "the power of language to disclose being" (61). Echoing her argument about Jean Toomer's *Cane*, social categories become unmuted, literature as social knowledge kicks into action only via careful attention to writerly form and narrative construction. Gaddis and Morrison, in their contrast, become a united front against the trappings of a false epistemological choice. Form or social knowledge, by way of a little help from Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison, to become both form *and* social knowledge.

Consider the following excursus on maize's frequent transatlantic travels and nominative intrigue. This is from Ivan Van Sertima's (1976: 249) *They Came before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*—a work cited in Spillers's "Peter's Pans":

> Recordings of maize in Southern Africa by Europeans are all post–fifteenth century, but they are well before the movement of the Europeans as settlers into that area. They found maize already growing there when they arrived. Reports in the sixteenth century attest to the pre-European presence of maize in Southern Africa. Accounts of a shipwreck on the South African coast in 1554, and of a murdered priest at Zimbabwe (now Rhodesia) in 1561, both tell of a cereal in terms that leave little doubt as to its identity as maize. A survivor of the wreck of the *Esperanca* in 1554, Manoel Perestrello, not only uses the term *milho zaburro* for the grain offered by the Africans at the mouth of the Pescaria River, but the priest who was murdered,

> Father Gonzalo del Silviera, was noted in a Portuguese account for his daily consumption of "roasted grain cooked with herbs," a detail that distinguishes maize from African sorghum. This is so because Indian corn (maize), unlike kaffir corn (African sorghum), is "roasted on the heads in the embers and eaten parched in hot ashes" or "cooked with herbs served as a vegetable relish," which is still the practice among the Bantu today.[9]

At the scanning station at the Spillers archive in the Rare Manuscripts Room at John Hay Library, I dropped and caught face down a typescript from Spillers's "Peter's Pan" containing a stand-alone biographic citation of Van Sertima's monograph. Such recognition at once provoked a quick fleeting sadness. Ivan was my beloved undergraduate mentor and thesis adviser for a work examining Marcus Garvey's symbolic configuration of Zion and its relationship to actual Palestinian liberation struggles. The last time I saw him before he died—infirm but still towering and aware—he smiled and waved in recognition. I was on the track and he was opposite, aboard a departing Union Square train. He was also my undergraduate *Invisible Man* teacher. This was the one class he taught not pertaining to African antiquity or transatlantic pre-Columbus Africanist travels, a callback to his initial field of literary studies. The last time I saw him we went with his first cousin, Guyanese writer Jan Carew, to a book release event for Cheryl Wall's anthology on Toni Cade Bambara (Holmes and Wall 2008). A year later I sat with Cheryl Wall for his funeral service at Riverside Church. Ivan taught *Invisible Man* as an exercise in close reading. There were no secondary texts. We spent every class section parsing every chapter word for word. It was a thematic but also a semiotic approach to Ellison's work, even though not named as such. In one of his impassioned majestic rants in characteristic Guyanese lilt, he forcefully delineated *Invisible Man* from what he decried as the limited naturalism in long novelistic works by Richard Wright: "This is not *Black Boy* . . ." My sense here is that Ivan, while decrying what he perceived as the limits in Richard Wright, was expressing affectively what Spillers theorizes in prescient detail as *Invisible Man's* penchant to generate, mobilize, and allude to aspects of myth as "particular historical depth or memory." Again, note the synthesis of the mythos and historio-

9. It is little known that Van Sertima's first scholarly monograph was in literary studies; see Van Sertima 1968. Van Sertima's editor for *They Came Before Columbus* was Toni Morrison.

graphic on full display. What Spillers (1983b: 6) says about *Moby-Dick*, Ivan emphasized over and over again about *Invisible Man*: "*Moby-Dick* is the big book to be read and the big book read the mystery of creation, the divine and the human. We are not merely fancy when we say that we read the novel and the novel 'reads' experience and the experience 'reads' us." You do not read such massive, generative tomes. Such massive, generative tomes read you. Or, stated otherwise by Spillers: "Trapped in a harpoon line, we are impaled on the back of the very thing we would pulverize and exploit" (1) This variation on myth simultaneously ups the ante and side-steps dead-end critical judgments opposing *the given* of realism and naturalism with a speculative *otherwise* characteristic of mythos and abstraction. Mythic procedure gets you closer to the historiographic by way of and as a byproduct of its narrative technique and imaginative ken. This is a fundamentally dialectical move. Frye's classifications and delineations, his mobilization of myths, genres, and modes (just like Jungian archetypes) often run the risk of floating away.[10] An imperviousness to history is built into their critical and theoretical schema. Yet these are some of the key tools that help clarify the ins and out of the literary. They help to clarify what is the proper object of study and attendant technical tools constituting literary studies. In her analysis of Marshall's *Chosen Place, Timeless People*, Spillers (1985: 161) put to work, for example, the [Kenneth] Burkean definition of irony: "the getting in motion of all the competing subperspectives of a particular picture, finds an exact translation here. The novel has, then, no 'good guys' or bad ones, though it does not confront and contrast two radically disparate mimetic conditions. If there is an 'enemy' here, it is the American capitalist machinery, indicted, or what it has also done to its own children." By way of a deeply immersive study of *Invisible Man*, Spillers pushes back against Brecht's assertion that depth is surely not *just* depth. Spillers accesses myth by way of paying attention to literary form, thereby brokering a tentative truce between history and myth. Such rapprochement materializes by way of attentive close reading and critical immersion in her object under study. This is a particular virtue of the formal and epistemological accomplishment unique to the traditions of Afro-American letters that Spillers goes

10. For a dialectical critique and mobilization of Frye's toolbox, see the still unsurpassed McKeon (1987) 2002: 10. McKeon writes his own variation on "grounding" ahistorical critical tools: "Archetypalist interpretation, which purports to 'stand back' from the particular displacement so as to close the gap between it and the obscured locus of meaning, in fact amounts to the allegorizing imposition of imaginary meanings onto real ones."

to work on. Methodologically astute and dialectically deft, such traditions reach for the stars, bringing them back down to history. Afro-American letters reconcile heavens and ground. The flight from realism toward myth makes a more exacting realism—Ellison's *Invisible Man* begins where it ends—*under*ground.

Faulknerian Topographies

Professor Spillers also has a lot to say about mapping the cosmos. In her essay "Topographical Topics: Faulknerian Space," the problem of mapping a system takes second place to the challenges of understanding our world:

> One of the most difficult concepts to grasp, perhaps we never really get it, is the space-time continuum itself, starting with the least accessible calculus of location—the solar system, within its "nine planets, 10,000 known asteroids, and countless comets revolv[ing] around a central star." . . . But light years closer to home than the seven bands of Saturn, or the companion star of Supernova 1993 . . . , the entire aspect of the risen world—that link of structure on structure, crossing one roadway after another, in an endless array of things and commodities—strikes the child mind in us as an incredible unfathomable—how *did* the world get here, and how don't its present arrangements seem sacrosanct, somehow, impressed with the divine seal of permanence?" (Spillers 2004: 535; brackets in the original)

"Topographical Topics" concerns itself with "space-as-cognizable-object," the way in which narrative allows you to reverse time. Literary fiction can be read speculatively in its "embeddedness in place" (536) as a homonymic recall to the Hegelian sense of concept as grasping in hand: "Because it is rather like human habitation as performance and process, fiction seems to hand over the body of the world as immediately graspable substance" (536). For Spillers, the capacity of ("fictional") space—Faulkner's "strongly topographic imagination" is to "resoundingly 'announce' the human" (536). The modern novel makes up and enacts a "shattering":

> Shattering the allegorical homology between *place* and *personae*, the modern novel broaches "reality," whose specialized analytical properties divide the human scene into disciplinary "regions" that require space to stand apart from speaking subject: modernist Faulkner seems to renegotiate the old spirit in a new way by gen-

> erating a fictional discourse that "speaks" place through character and character through place, except that his enormous gifts tend to conceal how he does it. There is a clue to the method, however, in the strategies of Faulknerian space insofar as they yield a saturation of layered elements, as his narrators often obey no clear distinction in their attitude between "now" and "then," "here" and "there." (535)

Analysis (LYSIS—λύσις), as Plato (2005), Frantz Fanon (2008), and Fred Moten (2013) patiently teach us, constitutes, among other things, a tearing apart, a decomposition, a loosening—often accompanied by a dialectical counter-formalization: the giving of adequate and effective expository form to explanation. Conceptually naming and calling out the inability to surprise related to analysis as a tearing asunder are bound up in another philosophical tradition—the Hegelian critique of *the ready-made*. Critical excursuses, tangents, a string of associations and unexpected allusions—all take *ready-mades* to war.

In "Topographical Topics" Spillers (2004: 548) enacts her "link of structure on structure, crossing one roadway after another" by way of layering meditative bursts of related yet discrete critical paradigms and theories of knowledge. She maps Faulkner's "deictic point, located at the crossroads, on the boundary." Maps proliferate maps as Spillers transitions from the cosmos to Freud; Laplanche and Pontalis's topography of the unconscious—the underdeveloped "Rome" of the psyche (538)—to echoes of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in Freud's corpus; to Hegel's evocation of the *Parmenides*; to Foucault's genealogical shift in the *Birth of the Clinic*, whereby, in Foucault's words, "a grammar of signs has replaced a botany of symptom" (543); and Jonathan Bishop's exhilarating mapping of the Eucharist. Spillers writes:

> As far as I can tell, there is no "psyche" in the *Critique*, to say nothing of a "psychical apparatus," while the philosopher elaborates a "soul," a "rational psychology," and an "organon" of a "transcendental philosophy" that articulates an ontology, an epistemology, and a cosmology. What is most interesting for our purposes here, however, is that Kant opens his organon with *space* and *time* as the *a priori* determinants of experience that commences with cognition. In the introduction to the *Critique*, Kant looks far ahead to the hoped for destination, and that is a solution, or systematic response, to the "real problem of pure reason"... the "unavoidable problems of pure reason" are as basic and, consequently, as critical as one might

> imagine and adhere, *mutatis mutandis*, to human progression like the human form itself—God, freedom, and immortality. . . . But the scene of the big picture traces back elsewhere and builds "architectonically" to the pure air of Reason. (540)

Venezuelan writer Ludovico Silva's recently translated 1975 *El estilo literario de Marx* (*Marx's Literary Style*) builds on the insights of philologists Damaso Alonso and Carlos Bousono's *Six Stages in Spanish Literary Expression*. Specifically, their theorizing of *correlation* (form and content primary among many): "according to which many poems both classical and modern contain a structure of metaphoric correlations that first names a set of objects, then names a set of metaphorical correspondences to these objects, and that finally brings them all together—the objects and their correspondences—in [a] final synthetic phrase" (Silva 2023: 35).[11] Alonso and Bousono aid Silva to frame Marx's literary style not just as an expression of his critical insights (his dialectical method) but also as a staging of such insights (his expository presentation). This is the sort of dueling perspectives carefully traced by the Althusserians (see Spillers [(1994) 2003: 451–52] on the *Reading Capital* group). Marx's style is not related to his content—it *is* his content. It is what Silva theorizes as Marx's chiastic structure—his "dialectic of expression" and "expression of the dialectic." Chiasmus is both method and expository logic. To develop this argument, Silva offers a gloss of the Kantian "architectonic." In response to Kant's "Architectonic of Pure Reason," its theorization of *die Kunst der Systeme* (the art of systems), the need for the idea to find its schema—what Kant calls "an essential manifoldness and order of the parts determined *a priori* from the principle of the end"—Silva (2023) writes:

> *The art of constructing a system*! What is scientific in our understanding is so because it possesses a systematic, architectonic unity in which all its parts correspond to one another and in which none is true without respect to the whole. Today, structuralism refers to this as "the logical precedence of the whole to parts," but in Kant the a priori was logico-transcendental, not merely logical. If we set aside the "transcendental" implications, we are left with a perfectly valid methodological scheme.

Spillers's dance of correspondence has its own moves. Faulkner, as it turns out, supplies hand-wrought maps. As Spillers (2004: 548–49) notes,

11. For an impressive, staged, synthetic engagement between Kant and Marx, see Karatani 2005.

> The maps that supplement *Absalom, Absalom!*, extratextually, not without humor, and sketchily hand-drawn by the author himself, telescope the locations of his fiction that we know as the interior movement of agents. . . . The interarticulation of the spatio-temporal juncture in Faulkner, where event running along a temporal sequence cuts across the bias of location or a social "field," might in fact do more to enhance our understanding of geography as a living agent than the official study of geography itself.

Again, maps proliferate maps an architectonic expansion and layering of systems upon systems enacted by Spillers's critical acumen and close attention. Spillers's proliferation of theoretical frame upon theoretical frame brings you closer to Faulkner's work, not further away. To repeat, Spillers's critical procedure, her cartographic proliferations get you closer to the object under discussion—despite and even because of their penchant for transcendence.

Tradition

Related to this overall procedure, this double movement of transcendent proliferation and grounded actualization, consider the split semantic valence of *tradition* underscored by the following juxtaposition. The first is from Giorgio Agamben's (2015: 26–27) study *Pilate and Jesus*:

> Through the whole narrative of the trial—and not only in John—a verbal from returns so obsessively that its repetition cannot be by chance: *paredōken* ("he handed over," Vulgate: *tradidit*), in the plural *paredōkan* ("they handed over," Vulgate: *tradiderunt*). One could say that the event that is in question in the passion of Jesus is nothing other than a "handing over," a "tradition" in the proper sense of the term. . . .
>
> Karl Barth was the one who noted that the "handing over" in truth had a theological significance. To the earthly "tradition" of Jesus there in fact corresponds at each point a preceding heavenly tradition, which Paul expresses in these terms: "God did not withhold his own Son, but handed him over (*paredōken*) for all of us" (Romans 8:32).

And, again, from Spillers's (2003c: 3) "Peter's Pans" on the transition of Black studies (and then, similarly, women's studies) from insurgent mass demand to curricular object:

> Suddenly a curricular object, "Black Studies" was the name in the morning of a set of impulses that had been called the "movement" only the night before. It is not customary that a studies protocol discloses either its provenance or its whereabouts. By the time it reaches us, it has already acquired the sanction of repetition, the authority of repression, and the blessings of time and mimesis so that, effectually, such a protocol now belongs to the smooth natural order of the cultural. In the astonishing instance of "Black Studies" (and shortly thereafter, "Women's Studies" on a similar basis), this new "cognizable object," with its conceptual "home" in "Negro History," among other confluential elements and as curricular matter, lost its mystical qualities. Now it no longer seemed, like hot water, to come from God, but rather, like the art of plumbing, a gamble predicated on the laws of gravity and the soundness of an underground circuit of conductors—so many liquid volumes of pressure poised in piping only a thumb's thickness away from a great little flood. (Nothing mysterious here and a far distance from the glamour of unruffled "tradition.")

Traversing this "far distance," the dueling, dialectically interdependent semantic work of Tradition in its theological etymological inheritance functions akin to Freud's sense of "primal words" from his review of philologist Karl Abel. Primal words expressing antithetical meanings as such they relate for Freud (1963: 44–50) to the distorted washing machine for the unconscious that is dream-work. Spillers occupies this dual posture—the handing over as betrayal—always attuned to how insurgent knowledge becomes institutionally captured and sold back to its inheritors in domesticated, distorted form. However, what Spillers refuses to allow to be forgotten is that the prefiguring of such cooptation is the fight, the protracted struggle to bring submerged knowledges (at least from the vantage point of the academy) to the fore. Spillers's cognitive mapping prods and prompts disciplines to show *both* their "provenance" and "whereabouts." Criticism and local and international freedom struggles are all the better for her efforts. Spillers (1991: 2) in "Artists and Models" interrogates a variation of American literary history as "this elegant story of uninterrupted sameness." Spillers diagnoses "this telos of literary aim" as "fundamentally 'progressivist' in demonstrating both continuity and disjuncture between a British and an American literary American literary protocol." She flags "sporadic allusions to Melville's writings disseminated by Ralph Ellison's narrator of the Pro-

logue of *Invisible Man*" as a corrective to such "uninterrupted sameness." "Artists and Models" theorizes its own dueling sense of tradition: "Even though I have deep respect for the historical subject—both what you study in school and the social beings who study it—I remain a skeptic of 'tradition' because it seems to me another way of asserting the powers of the status quo—what we receive from those whom we respect and the aura of exchange and transmission that surrounds the passing on of heritage" (22). For Spillers, "the only 'tradition' that matters is the one we salvage every day from that which not only flatters, but that that criticizes as well." Tradition is both a handing over as dissemination and a handing over as critical betrayal, interpretation as theft. Echoing the etymological inheritance that links Hermes, the cattle thief, to hermeneutics as the science of interpretation: interpretation can be understood as theft (see Brown [1947] 1969). As Genet ([1986] 2003: 70) as ultimate thief stresses in his *Un captif amoureux*: "Anyone who has not experienced the ecstasy of betrayal knows nothing about ecstasy at all."

"The Specific Genius of *Figura*": Traversing Lucille Clifton's Time-Space Continuum

Erich Auerbach's (1984: 28–29) essay "Figura," from his *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, draws conceptual vigor from Tertullian, the African Berger Christian author from Carthage:

> In his polemic *Adversus Marcionem* (3, 16) Tertullian speaks of Oshea, son of Nun, whom Moses (according to Num. 13:16) names Jehoshua (Joshua): . . .
>
> For the first time he is called Jesus. . . . This, then, we first observe, was a figure of things to come. For inasmuch as Jesus Christ was to introduce a new people, that is to say us, who are born in the wilderness of this world, into the promised land flowing with milk and honey, that is to say, into the possession of eternal life, than which nothing is sweeter; and that, too, was not to come through Moses, that is to say, through the discipline of the Law, but through Jesus, that is, through the grace of the gospel, our circumcision being performed by a knife of stone, that is to say, by Christ's precepts—for Christ is a rock; therefore a great man, who was prepared as a type of this sacrament, was even consecrated in figure with the Lord's name, and was called Jesus.

For Auerbach, "The naming of Joshua-Jesus is a phenomenal prophecy or prefiguration of the future Saviour; *figura* is something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical. The relation between the two events is revealed by an accord or similarity" (29). Whereas "Tertullian expressly denied that the literal and historical validity of the Old Testament was diminished by figural interpretation. He was definitely hostile to spiritualism and refused to consider the Old Testament as mere allegory; according to him, it had real, literal meaning throughout, and even when there was figural prophecy, the figure had just as much historical reality as what it prophesied" (30).

Spillers ([1970] 1974: 175–76), in her 1970 Brandeis University doctoral dissertation, entitled "Features of Style: Martin Luther King and the Sermon," extends *figura* past the purview of Tertullian and the church fathers:

> The "figural imagination," taking its cue from the figura as a system of interpretation, defines that worldview which prevailed in Western communities until its "overthrow" in the Enlightenment. It locates a structure of sensibility which seeks to discover in human and historical events a divine motivation. Using the figura as paradigm, the figural imagination/sensibility throws forth a world that is not only "picturesque," but is also dramatic in its anticipation of the Infinite Order, the "end" of human history. We argue that a significant aspect of the black preacher's legacy, hammered out in a colonial wilderness, is an openness to the "figural sensibility" The preacher reads human and historical events as allegories—as symbols of divine reality. The "symptom" is disguised in Franklin by expository language, but the chant, the semi-musical word, is its betrayal in the sermon climax where linear and expository features disintegrate in a rhythmical and passional motion.

"Figural sensibility" as both tradition and betrayal become in Spillers's attentive analytic both worldly and otherworldly framework. Like Auerbach's (2001: 154) Dante Alighieri, Spillers accesses by way of critical reading and, more importantly, produces her own "metaphors [that] are not parallel but concordant; they are intended not to ornament but to make clear; taken from the concrete, they lead to the concrete." *Figura* unlocks Homer Barbee's rhetorical temporal flight in a speech from *Invisible Man*. Spillers (2003b) very rightly attributes Barbee's speech as modeled after Booker T. Washington. Barbee's evocation of the "barren land after Emancipation" is theorized as a variation of a sort of worldly *figura*:

> The suspension of predication in the narrative, its protracted modifiers, its unrelieved nominality and apposition, are built on a principle of composition that anticipates the climactic moment of speech, and its internal agitation of feeling induces an enthusiastic response to the world. The mode of *anacoluthon*, where the predicate is essentially dissolved or forgotten in the stream of modifiers, seems appropriate to oral speech, or dramatic utterance, when the speaker pursues an exact identity between himself and the words he chooses. The lexis of the passage replicates both a generalized poetic diction and the prose of King James; Barbee selects it as a manner of one mode of figurative perception to another, Barbee's speech demonstrates that a universe of figurative relationships and equivalences may be described. The ground of the metaphors actually shifts from Judaea to the American South and from Christ to the Founder. This transfer of images from their original ground of reference to a space quite distant from it points to the specific genius of figura as a mode of historical narrative and explanation. But the key to the figurative mode is not only the way of its utterance, but also the particular world view that generates it. Essentially religious, the figurative mind perceives human history in a direct correlation with destiny: Men in their time move in a way consistent with the stars of heaven. (Spillers 2003b: 75)

How did we get here? Spillers activates *figura* applying it to Ellison's *Invisible Man*'s character Homer Barbee's evocation by way of his stylistics: *anacoluthon* as an absent grammatical sequence. The "religious mind" conflates human history with divine destiny, yet such conflation is accessed by language, by grammar, by the worldly ways in which people talk and writers write. Spillers simultaneously secularizes *figura*, all the while refusing to deny its religious (inner and outer) workings. Such a balancing act, such dexterity, is both honed by and honed in on a certain kind of profound generational wisdom of struggle—a Black radical clarity that by necessity and prerogative of revolutionary struggle forces you to be always of a two. Not solely the double consciousness as theorized so elegantly by Dr. Du Bois but also the proper and perpetual calibrating of reform and revolution, the analysis of one's object and analysis of the categories of one's analysis as perpetual rigor. A political survival prerogative *spills* over into one's singularly unique literary criticism. The lifelong cultivation of a singularly unique literary criticism sharpens collective transformative radical politi-

cal prerogatives and projects. In both its African Amazigh origins and its twentieth-century Afro-American literary inheritance, *figura* is *both* sacred and speculative. It is divine providence—a machinery used to collapse time, place, and condition. *Figura* is operative in the here and elsewhere, the *Ici et ailleurs* of Lucille Clifton's (1987a: 152) infamous poetic meditation on duel-culling:

> at last we killed the roaches
> mama and me. she sprayed,
> i swept the ceiling and they fell
> dying onto our shoulders, in our hair
> covering us with red. the tribe was broken,
> the cooking pots were ours again
> and we were glad, such cleanliness was grace
> when I was twelve. only for a few nights,
> and then not much, my dreams were blood
> my hands were blades and it was murder murder
> all over the place.

What if Clifton's poem is read as an extension of this particular applied *figura-poetics* that Spillers's work so consistently clarifies? It allows the child persona in Clifton to enact a kind of dream-work that collapses time and place, victims and victors, the quotidian culling of kitchen-pests with the genocidal history of settler colonial violence. Clifton's *figura*-variant stages an impossible figural worm-hole conflating murder with murder—icky anxiety-ridden housekeeping with tragedy-laden genocidal Indian wars.

Wrapping up her 1983 essay "From the Poets in the Kitchen," Paule Marshall (1983: 11–12) writes:

> They were preceded in my life by another set of giants whom I always acknowledge before all others: the group of women around the table long ago. They taught me my first lessons in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen.

Marshall refashions the kitchen table as a wordshop—a laboratory of form, a training ground for the rhythmically attentive ear. In a breathtakingly smart graphic mapping (take some time and just stare at it; see fig. 1) of Marshall's epic novel *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Spillers maps the novel

as a series of outward expanding circles—the innermost as "Circle of Ontology," followed by the "Circle of Ritual," followed by the "Circle of History," and finally, the largest as the "Circle of Myth." The center and centering ontological circle are qualified as making up "the individual in the comprehension of the surround" (Spillers 1985: 153). Spillers elaborates on her prioritization of the "circle of ontology:"

> I think it is correct to say that the work is agent-centered, as the diagram suggests that the "circle of ontology," or the point at which we locate character, becomes the comprehensive ring on a interlocking sequence of changes. This locus designates the nuclear, or fundamental, unit of more encompassing relationships that open out, in turn, into the realm of the timeless, here represented by the "circle of myth." Between outermost and innermost is poised the world of human history, and the realm of history is figuratively repeated in the daily activities of the community through its ritualistic and symbolic play. The agent, at the relatively still point of a multiple impingement, embodies the resolution of the metaphors of experience that surround her or him. Ontogeny here repeats phylogeny: the individual both makes and is made by the collective history, as we also imagine that this subtle shimmering and shadings of meanings continuously obverts. In other words, the individual agent is both the origin *and* end of a complex figurative progression. The characters embody, therefore, a noble synecdochic purpose because they are the part that speaks for the whole, just as the whole is configured in their partialness. (154)

This passage says it all. The center, the locus of vitality and creative impulse is human existence branching out to ritual, history, and myth. Myth, for Marshall and Spillers, in its largesse encompasses all (it subsumes rather than evades history). But before it can get too big for its britches—myth gets centered by the ontological—the grounded, day-to-day existence strivings of the people of Marshall's creation—the Caribbean island community of Bournehills. *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* stages, among other things, the interrelationship between industry and leisure in a Caribbean island context. There is an echo in the work, the trace of the Cadbury chocolate company's late nineteenth-century Quaker experiment in a planned worker-community organized around a synthesis of labor and sport/leisure: Cadbury's worker town and model village of Bournville on the south side of Birmingham, England. The Cadbury family

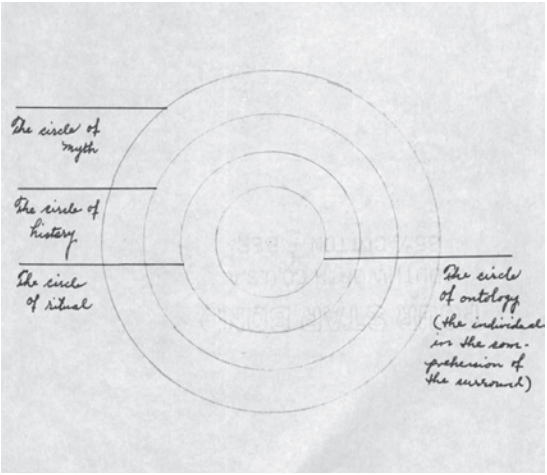

Figure 1 Drawing by Hortense J. Spillers. Feminist Theory Archive, John Hay Library, Brown University. Courtesy of Hortense J. Spillers.

planned Bournville as a chocolate industry town, wherein the company not only built infrastructure for the worker's sport and leisure (such as rugby and soccer pitches and swimming pools) but also instituted mandatory sport and recreation for its workers, engaging such infrastructure as a condition of employment. Marshall's fictional Caribbean island Bournehills suffers in infrastructure and appears at first glance devoid of institutions that promote sport and leisure and the time to avail oneself as such. Yet it is also a Caribbean island brimming with history, insurgent sociality, and narrative scale. The development corporation prospecting the island from afar sees Bournehills only as a slate to realize their craven commercial designs. Marshall extends the already titan size scale of her novel to evoke the geographical placeholder doublet (Bournville/Bournehills) as a way to talk about the centrality of Caribbean slavery and the world chocolate economy, discourses on racialist hierarchy and skin complexion, and twentieth-century dilemmas of development and strategic planning's relationship to history. Marshall's Bournville/Bournehills doublet raises the possibility of composite genre in Marshall's work. *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* could be thought as part Caribbean ghost story, part Caribbean modern epic of development. Paule Marshall's work upends and shakes up possibilities of configuring scale in the New World novel. It is yet another unique time/place/condition mash-up characteristic of this variant of *figura*-logic and tactic. Spillers's mapping of its circles of meaning expertly illustrates how the demanding work of her scholarly career so brilliantly cares for, collates, and houses the epistemological and aesthetic-narrative resources attending to all. Joshua-

Jesus—יְהוֹשֻׁעַ as both him and salvation in these two examples get repurposed as kitchen table poetics workshops, mother and child—moving time, place, and space—here and elsewhere.

"Not the Alienation I Mean"

This is my alienation—there are others like it—but this one is mine. I consider a handwritten draft of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" found in the Spillers archive. There is a fascinating difference in how the handwritten text and published essay versions mobilize the work of Roland Barthes in service of the righteous labor of bucking back at Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan for blaming Black women for everything! The essay dialogues with Barthes's *Mythologies*, while the talk engages *The Pleasure of the Text* and signals *Writing Degree Zero*. Ensconced within a penetrating meditation on Barthes's "last degree of alienation," resonating with what Spillers lauds in "Formalism Comes to Harlem" as the writerly antidote to alienation found in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, is a most exacting, aphoristically forceful variant of the critical procedure I've attempted to examine here:

> There is no easy way in which Barthes's "last degree of alienation" is acceptable regarding one's own, or one's community's own, relationship to other subjects and structures of human attention. But this is precisely the state of things, it seems to me. As stating a proposition as it remains, we cannot regard the alienation as anything new, unexpected, particularly shameful, or likely to go away anytime soon. One could say that there is for the social subjects everywhere only alienation—in the sense that the "person is not one or is even nothing—that I am an/other, or a simple echo chamber, a house of mirrors . . . the instantiation of the unconscious can be considered as the culminating point of the discovery of the other in oneself."
>
> But this is not the "alienation" that I mean. I mean "alienation" as a completely exteriorized scene of social and cultural exchange among cultural subjects, one category of them (in the plurality) commanding the primary apparati of cultural production; the other, also in the plurality not only consuming its products, but also strategically captivated and manipulated by them. Though there may be significant breaks and gaps in this symbolic configuration, the exceptional has not yet altered the fundamental ground of operation upon

> which the dominating subject replicates dominance as both means and enabling postulate and outcome. Though the social subjects of "domination" and "dominated" may placate, or switch masks, the facts of these positionalities appear absolutely inexorable. I would identify Barthes's "last degree of alienation," then, as no particular property of the dominated but as a shared scene of exchanges onto which the agents of domination are also choreographed. Alienation between historical subjects, exteriorized and made foreign to one another, designates the fundamental human and social ground against which our subjectivity is revealed. *The question in specific application to the matters at hand is not whether or not we experience the "last degree of alienation." But, rather, how the instruments of alienation might be exploited in its antithetical resources, toward a recapitulation of dominance or an ironic disclosure of dominance as the abdication to ahistorical force*—the insurgent (part crossed out) position—and everything about the career of black women's community would place them in the insurgent position—seeks the moment of power's female in captivity. (Spillers 1988b; emphasis mine; underlining and ellipsis in original)

To exploit the instruments of alienation in all "its antithetical resources"—this is a variation on the theme of a unique materialist political theology that reads Afro-American literature as hedge against "the abdication to historical force." It also anticipates, instantiates, and makes room for radical futurities, the yet to be determined. In correspondence about a philosopher's engagement with my work on Malcolm X's enlistment of *Hamlet* and Spinoza, wherein he incorrectly theorizes the X—a naming practice specific to the Nation of Islam—as signifying Malcolm's break with the Nation, Spillers writes that the *X* is "one of the most brilliant things [the Nation] ever did. . . . It stages all that absence as it lays claims to all the infinite tomorrows" (pers. comm., November 25, 2018). I've yet to find a more succinct formula for revolutionary tragic temporality and contingent, open-ended, insurgent possibility—the finite in the infinite and the infinite in the finite. Such a line of inquiry is also taken up in "The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight," wherein Spillers ([1989] 1991: 130) writes that "the notorious X, adopted by illiterate persons as the signatory mark and by literate black Muslims in the twentieth-century United States as the slash mark against a first offensive, comes to stand for the blank drawn by Father's 'gun.'" Among the disciplines, Malcolm X ([1963] 1982) famously lauds history as "best qualified to

reward our research." In Spillers's revolutionary analytic, the *X* in Malcolm's name signals and symbolizes patience that can "await a content."

Jesse B. Semple and the Jesuit Scheiner's "Nonsense"

The enlistment, in "Formalism Comes to Harlem," of Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Semple as epistemological model and spy concludes with the evocation and dismissal of the judgment of "nonsense." Expository unfolding weds Semple's delineating between the philosophical-grammarian import of *re-* versus *be-* with problems of aesthetic expression, linguistic variation, and artistic sublimation to the sadism of repressive agents of the state to tell the following jazz genre naming origin story:

> "Re-Bop certainly sounds like scat to me," [straight man] insisted.
>
> "No," said Simple, "Daddy-o, you are wrong. Besides, it was not *Re*-Bop. It is *Be*-Bop."
>
> "What's the difference," [straight man] asked, "between *Re* and *Be*?"
>
> "A lot," said Simple. "Re-Bop was an imitation like most of the white boys play. Be-Bop is the real thing like the colored boys play . . . From the police beating Negroes' heads . . . Every time a cop hits a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, 'BOP! BOP! . . . BE-BOP! . . . MOP! . . . BOP!" . . . That's where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro's head into them horns and saxophones and piano keys play it. Do you call that nonsense?" (Spillers 1982: 63; brackets present in original).[12]

In a student paper for a course in "Victorian Phantasy," Spillers (1969) probes the complexities entailed in clarifying "toward a definition of nonsense," utilizing close attention to Edward Lear's limericks accompanying illustrations as her point of speculative departure:

> First, one must begin with a picture, preferably ones like Lear's illustrations. This will require the writer to have at first hand, consciously before him, the stuff of dreams. He must imagine that things like old men tearing their hair out or young persons with long, gnarled noses can be made explicit. Then he must get himself near to the world

12. See also Hughes 1961.

> of children, where rocking chairs become real horses and tin soldiers talk and shoot each other down and closet doors become the doors of houses. He must listen there awhile, capturing, if he can, the rhythms of this world. When he returns to his drawing board, he realizes several things: 1) The structure must be simple; 2) Things must be explicit and picturesque; 3) No moral comment will be allowed; terrible and frightening things, if talked about, must not draw attention to themselves; 5) There must be no double entendre, irony, or other complicated business; 6) Play must be created and sustained in sounds and "feet-patting" rhythms (no snide blank verse, if verse). 7) Familiar things will be talked about, but pictured in new ways; 8) Emotions will not be played with, for emotions are incongruous to Nonsense and are uncontrollable objects of play. (No love, no pity, no anger); 9) The upshot must be humor through alliteration, exaggeration, and the matching sound to sense; 10) Dangerous and final forces (like death and madness) must also be treated as play—when the young girl is about to be burned by the old woman, a cat must be near at hand. These specifics might draw enough distinctions between Nonsense and other types of humor.[13]

Spillers's *terraforming* analytic, at play in this early university exercise and persisting throughout the mature work, approaches aesthetic forms and problems, establishes criteria, and tries out the viabilities of insights and attributes, bringing one closer to the complexities and actualities of multiple interdependent worlds—both real and imagined. Galvano Della Volpe (1980) inaugurates his Marxian study of symbolic logic citing one snarky Galileo as epigraph: "This fellow [the Jesuit Scheiner] goes about thinking up, one by one, things that would be required to serve his purposes, instead of adjusting his purposes step by step to things as they are." In a dialogue on the impact of "Mama's Baby," Spillers generates yet another aphoristically forceful explosion: "The cost of Americanization, of equality, is to forget. In black culture a narrative of antagonism is inscribed in its memory" (Spillers et al. 2007: 306). Paule Marshall's ([1969] 1992: 3) character Merle knows something about this. Marshall's novel begins with her frustrated protagonist lamenting the trace of a "washed-out road as though she would will it into place again, conjure it back. And she might have possessed the dark

13. For a rich and provocative discussion of Kant, nonsense, and the poetics of Norman Pritchard, listen to Fred Moten's (2007) lecture at Kelly Writers House. See also a monograph discussed by Moten, Menninghaus 1999.

powers of art to do so." At the same time there is the affective rage of negation, the stated desire to "just wash away. The whole bloody show!" The road washes away. Yet the trace remains. Narrative and criticism exist to make such remainders clear.

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