



Spill

scenes of
black feminist
fugitivity

alexis pauline gumbs

spill

**SCENES OF
BLACK FEMINIST
FUGITIVITY**

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

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TO BLACK WOMEN
who make and break narrative

/ / /

after and with
Black White and In Color
by Hortense Spillers

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spill

spil/

verb

Origin

*Old English spillan,
“kill, destroy, waste,
shed (blood)”;
of unknown origin.*

A NOTE

And so I was trying to ask the question again, ask it anew,
as if it had not been asked before, because the language
of the historian was not telling me what I needed to know.

Which is, what is it like in the interstitial spaces where
you fall between everyone who has a name, a category,
a sponsor, an agenda, spokespersons, people looking out
for them—but you don't have anybody.

— HORTENSE SPILLERS

This writing started to spill out one day when I was listening
to Hortense Spillers speak at the Feminist Theory workshop at
Duke University. I had been reading and writing about Spillers
for years, but something became clear that day about my re-
lationship to her work. What kept me coming back to her essays
over and over again was not only what she said (though what
she says about race, gender, capitalism, and literature is enough
to come back for forever); it was also *how* she said it. Again and
again, there were phrases in her work that did far more than
make her point. They made worlds. They invited affect. They
brought to mind nameless women in unknown places who were
laughing and looking sideways at each other and a world that
couldn't understand them.

I started this experiment thinking that I could take specific phrases from particular essays in *Black, White, and in Color* out of context, and then I realized that I could never take them out of context. Or that context couldn't take them at all. Which is to say that when I turned these phrases, doors opened and everyone came through. All the black women writers Spillers wrote about and didn't write about. All the characters those black women writers acknowledged and ignored. All the people living novelistic lives without arcs or arks to save them. As usual, the project took over and offered scene after scene out of time and invited voices and settings that I can't claim to have invented. It is either that I was craving these scenes and these voices or they were craving me and we met up at the hot spot called *Black, White, and in Color*.

This space, which is a temporary space, which we must leave, for the sake of future travelers and our own necks, is a sacred dedicated space. Libation for the named and the nameless. This is for black women who made and broke narrative. The quiet, the quarrelling, the queer. This is where. This is what. This is how.

spill (v) 1. cause or allow (liquid) to flow over the edge of its container, especially unintentionally.

“You’ll spill that coffee if you’re not careful.”

SYNONYMS: *knock over, tip over, upset, overturn*

the ground shakes with us
the gathering women
grows rich grows brown grows deep
the gathered hands women
grown brown grown women
the sure determined feet
the ground grows everything we eat
the graceful stomping women heading home
ungrateful women populating poems
the ground has everything it needs
we have never been alone

the sky sings for us
the rainmaking women the rage-taking women
the blood
the sky so open so nose wide open
can't refuse the shape of our lungs
can't bear to remain above
the sky sees the shoulders that shrug off hate
and celebrate and hug
the sky slows the rhythm by falling out
and down and done and drug
the sky begins to know itself
we breathe it in as love

the water waits for us
the wide-eyed women the walking women the worst
the water washes the war wrung women
the wailers the whistle the first

the water waists of the undrowned women
the hope floats women the strong
the water knows us
the whole-note women
the half-step harmony song

the fire frees us
the fast-ass women the fall-in-love women the freaks
the fire is full of the all-out women
the walk-out women the sweet
the fire is finding the love-lost women
the worth-it women the ones
fire is blazing the brash blues women
the black-eyed women
the wiry women with guns
the fire is becoming the sun

our work here is not done

spill

How She Knew

spill (v) 2. (of liquid) flow over the edge of its container.
“Some of the wine spilled onto the floor.”

SYNONYMS: overflow, flow, pour, run, slop, slosh, splash

she lit a candle for Tuesday. she lit a candle for sweat. she lit a candle when you woke up and the sheets were wet. she lit a candle for lovers. she lit a candle for friends. she lit a candle for maybe and for sometimes and for depends. she poured some water for cooling. she poured some water for sleep. she drank some water for the things she said she would do and forgot that week. she offered food to the corners and to the mourners and the ghosts. she planted grass for the exiles and the stateless and the hosts. she chanted peace to the pilgrims and the playmates and the pimps. she chewed on glass for the mothers and never even winced. she prostrated before the teacups and the teachers and the books.

and it is still it is still it is still

it is still just as bad as it looks.¹

let the bathtub overflow with hot water and quilt pieces. let
the grit of everyday settle to sandbar. let the soap get lost in
love letters. soak out their lying blue blood. let the salt of the
tears she was saving and the sweat she used up scour her skin
like the tough love of black teachers. let porcelain become slate
against her back.

she doesn't care.

let it seep into her hair with the whispered blood of moontime.
let her hold her breath for now, submerge for evidence, eureka.
let her sink into the sum of wet mosaic over brown. immersed
in the material of what? what now?²

the same crunch the same stem the same sweet green wetness
again.

her heart is a pot full of greens to chew and swallow all the
nourishment she knows.

she used to salt it. overcook it. contaminate it with swine. she
used to leave it on the stove all day and forget it half the time.
she even cut it with molasses once and washed it down with
wine. why isn't love red like it should be. her growing heart.
ain't flesh and muscle like it could be.

just all that deep bright green.³

she thought she heard dogs barking. she knew she heard crows.
she sensed a plague of locusts crowding her windows. she
remembered how fast and choking ivy could grow. she expected
poison sweets from the neighbors and toxic rain from above.
anticipated anthrax in her laundry. awaited everything but
love.

in her ears violence was biblical. in her eyelids lightning was
fate. in her heart staying here one more moment was a fatal
mistake. but attack in its historic signature requires all strings
attached. so she continued baking the cookies. (convinced it
would be her last batch.)⁴

there is a crawling part of every day. the part that doesn't leave the ground, slides under all the affirmations, bills paid, slips unshown, good girl status tentatively unshattered. there is part of the breathing that doesn't need that either, somewhere at the base of the lungs. steamship fuel that pushes on her day, the part of her that doesn't know how to walk with the full sensation of the particles on the floor, the dredge in the river, the dust of what happens in fake human heaven, the sense to want something else.⁵

*whoever thought of an upside-down cake? her fingertips graze the
razor can edge. the swimming pool pineapples float in sweet.
and the weight of the cake will crush them, she thinks. will grow
dense fill the pan and crush them, she knows. like the heavier
heaviness of days. she absently slices her finger, adding red into
the yellow, and cries. and what did they ever do? it hurts. and
what did they ever do?*⁶

was that her baby's skin? what water did. what waste. what fire
did. what thrown-away machine. could not be. this could not
be the smooth the kissed the cherished the Vaseline skin she
would scald her life off for. was this the sweetest face she had
sacrificed sleep and sense for? was this the child she brought
here? and why?

she did not cry. she did not touch. it was too much. the texture
of her loss.⁷

it's the center of her forehead. like someone stole the light and brought it back so bright it makes her dizzy. makes her skull grow cracked and break. makes her heartbeat halo heaven hardly breathe.

like the sun sought her out and shaped a laser just to clean out every decision she made. when she closes her eyes the walls of her brain are infrared and pulsing. someone is sounding the alarm. beating the bell of her brain. and all she can hear is *no*.⁸

it was a mirror. she thought it was a mirror. it had always been a mirror. but every now and then something wasn't right. something was in the mirror that wasn't back here. was that a book? a mug of tea? a paintbrush? how did they get there into her sight but out of her reach? and that woman. almost the same but eyes on fire, smile almost inviting. what *is* she doing with my only face?⁹

the photograph blurs black and white in her hand. the edges are marked with the date like evidence. the image looks like outer space the splotches like a gerbil astronaut. she wonders has anyone been to the moon or to the inner reaches of a black woman's womb. it could all be a trick of paper and eye, a race to see who fakes it best.

the printout shines, bending her sweaty hands, reflecting her fingernails, grooving into a slight indent. she needs a piece of string. a miniature clothesline to hang this thing. a mobile to turn it around. a terrestrial angle must be found. she feels like she's floating away. and wonders if that's how she got this way. being blurry and captured and small.

she turns the image upside down, holds it up to the ceiling, drops it down on the ground and tries to walk down the hall. her hands on her neck, she stands there until she falls and curls her knees into her chest. is this the result of doing her best. is this the leak of her love. or is this the self she is thinking of when she cannot sleep at night. the tiny unstill life in black and white. blurred glimpse of a dark held world. the technician had looked for phallic signs and failed. so he said *it's a girl*.¹⁰

the first time i thought of you, you were swimming, towards you, through me. first time i thought i was drowning in a world that needed you in it or it would disappear. first time i knew you existed the rest of the history of the world popped like a bubble unready unworthy and my body wanted only future, only you. the first time i felt you move we were deep underwater under something built to keep us under and i couldn't see anything but I understood there was something above everything. above everything despite everything I would find fresh air and breathe again. above everything despite everything I would free you. my best idea yet.¹¹

could they open her legs into scream, cut her belly open and reach. can they do whatever they want to do to bring the baby through the breach through the gap of what she knows and what the kid is here to teach. does she matter? is it money at her middle is it mystery or mud. is it meaning or mistake. is it proof of passed-down blood? are her birthing hips a blessing her bewildered brain a dud. what is she doing here? is she waterwreck or witness is she push or hush or thud. when the universe is opened will she last?¹²

was she dipped in paint. split open like achilles. where was she weak? she looked at her body and saw only pores, only wet spaces, vessel, opening. she was whole. was she. born or made. was she possible? she looked at her fingertips for a seam. pinched her skin in case it was all a dream. was she real? the new female being, first of her kind, couldn't believe herself.¹³

NOTES

All notes in the text refer to Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). The epigraph to “Appendix: A Note” is from “Whatcha Gonna Do?: Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’: A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelley Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 35, nos. 1/2 (Spring–Summer 2007): 299–309.

/ / /

HOW SHE KNEW

- 1 **unalterable badness** “A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love,” 95.
- 2 **immersed in the material** “A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love,” 100.
- 3 **new world callaloo, return over and over again** Introduction, 2.
- 4 **attack in its historic signature** Preface, xvii.
- 5 **on the prowl for new religions** “Formalism Comes to Harlem,” 85.
- 6 **It’s something one makes against the force of his or her intuition** “Formalism Comes to Harlem,” 82.
- 7 **altered human tissue** “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 207.

- 8 **a symptom of the inevitable** “Formalism Comes to Harlem,” 87;
analogously terrible weight “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 203.
- 9 **a new dimension of being** “A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love,” 93.
- 10 **new female being** “A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love,” 93.
- 11 **quirkiness of conception** Introduction, 2.
- 12 **begins at the “beginning” which is really a rupture** “Mama’s
 Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 209.
- 13 **new female being (2.0)** “A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love,” 93.

HOW SHE SPELLED IT

- 1 **vision-in-dream-brought-on-by-other-power** “Ellison’s
 ‘Usable Past,’” 72.
- 2 **hieroglyphics of the flesh** “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 207.
- 3 **necessary critical fable** “A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love,” 481n3.
- 4 **Sticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will
 most certainly kill us.** “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 207 (em-
 phasis in the original).
- 5 **a past too much to evoke all at once** Introduction, 33.
- 6 **put the question on the table** Introduction, 47.
- 7 **meanings of womanhood which statements of public policy
 are rhetorically bound to repress** “A Hateful Passion, a Lost
 Love,” 111.
- 8 **The question splinters down to the central rib** Introduction,
 40.
- 9 **profound changes in aesthetic surface** “Ellison’s ‘Usable Past,’”
 65.
- 10 **this fragmented legacy—these shards of broken desire**
 Introduction, 40.
- 11 **symbol smasher** “A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love,” 93.
- 12 **Not everybody knows my name** “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,”
 203.

HOW SHE LEFT

- 1 **It tells far less than it shows** “Ellison’s ‘Usable Past,’” 68.
- 2 **whatever arises freely, spontaneously in the human being’s**