

Article

For a Psychoanalysis of the Flesh

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Abstract: This essay takes the notion of “flesh” as the point of departure for exploring the viability and contemporary relevance of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty has called an “ontological psychoanalysis”. Primary interlocutors will be Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* and Hortense Spillers’s essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”.

Keywords: Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Jacques Lacan; Hortense J. Spillers; Octavia Butler

1. The *And* of Psychoanalysis

I write this essay amidst a profound crisis of care, a crisis marked not only by the global COVID-19 pandemic but also by a resurgence of far-right politics, the curtailing of reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights, and an overall intensification of racism (see [The Care Collective et al. 2020](#)). What I hope to find, in the spacings and interferences between literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, is room for thinking our interdependence—our entanglement—with fixing the forms or modes that such interdependence might take. The notion of *flesh*, as it has emerged in a number of recent and less recent texts, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible* to Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”, and R.A. Judy’s *Sentient Flesh*, leads us in this direction. It does so to the very extent that it calls us to reimagine the relation between thought and embodiment, and to question the distinction between subject and object, human and animal, animate and inanimate. I turn to the notion of flesh not as a passepartout answer but, rather, as a question that engages with the thickness of the world, its past and future histories, its potential for engendering non-hierarchical forms of differentiation. In fact, the current (recurrent) crisis makes me listen more carefully to what several feminists—Black feminists like Spillers at the forefront—have been saying for a long time, that a novel theory and practice of care can develop only by envisioning another symbolic order, an order in which relationality is not regulated from above or outside, that is, not submitted to a transcendental term, be it the value form or the Name-of-the-Father.¹ The notion of flesh can help us configure this other symbolic order from *within* the sensible world or, rather, from within a world in which the division between the sensible and the intelligible is being undone.

The choice to focus on the work of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, literary critic Hortense Spillers, and novelist Octavia Butler already expresses a preference for zones of disciplinary indetermination. Merleau-Ponty is a philosopher who drew extensively on literature and the arts; Spillers is a literary critic who has actively confronted the blind spots of both critical theory and psychoanalysis; Octavia Butler is a novelist whose power of imagination has redefined the boundaries of our embodied being. Indeed, the impetus to interrogate the notion of flesh arises from the complex affective and spatiotemporal displacement that I experienced in reading *Kindred*, a novel in which the protagonist’s family anamnesis unfolds as a science fiction journey back to the antebellum South. If Butler’s novel receives direct attention only toward the end, it is because it takes time to lay down the extent of the challenge it poses to Western notions of thought and embodiment and, for reasons I will soon explain, this laying out is best accomplished through turns and returns, rather than a progressive explanation. But it all begins (again) with the opening statement



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of *Kindred*'s African American protagonist, "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm". Trapped in a plaster wall and, for a few moments, indiscernible from it, this arm writes a journey through American history that demands a new theorization of corporeal and socio-symbolic relationalities. In my account, Butler's journey is anticipated and enriched by Spillers's unique psychoanalytic reading of African American slave narratives, so that it is difficult to tell where psychoanalysis ends and literature begins (and vice versa).

The notion of flesh has rarely been mobilized in relation to psychoanalysis and any discussion of its import in this respect needs to start with a detailed rereading of Merleau-Ponty and Spillers.² On the one hand, it is Merleau-Ponty who first proposes the elaboration of an "*ontological psychoanalysis*", that is, an interpretation of psychoanalysis as a "philosophy of the flesh." (Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 267, 270). On the other, it is Spillers who first writes of the flesh to foreground race as psychoanalysis's epistemic blind spot and upset any account of domesticity and inheritance that ignores the "ungendering" endured by Black women during the Middle Passage and in the plantation system (Spillers 1987, pp. 72, 78). By taking the flesh as a "primary narrative", Spillers radically upsets the priority that traditional psychoanalysis confers to the Oedipal symbolic order and its ahistorical status (Spillers 1987, p. 67). At the same time, Spillers gives Merleau-Ponty's novel notion of flesh the weight of historically situated experiences and, while preserving its visionary force, understands it as a potential for differentiation that breaks out of and exceeds those experiences. In its openness and indefinite generativity, the flesh finds itself most vulnerable to power's techniques of discipline and control but also holds the potential to derail them from within.

In this essay, I will first address the problem of theorizing the flesh in a manner that does not preemptively invalidate its potential. To this end, I will highlight the relationship existing between the symbolic order posited by psychoanalysis and the optics that subtends its articulation. Thought and vision have been imbricated in Western culture since Plato, so a theory of vision is always already operative, even when one is thinking in terms of structural relations that allegedly exclude the senses.³ In its different iterations, the flesh poses a profound challenge to a symbolic order that, as in the case of Lacanian psychoanalysis, relies on "geometrical optics" and its apparatus of rays, lines, and points (see Lacan 1998). By turning the visible upon itself, I will then claim, the flesh at once disrupts the order of geometrical perspective and breaks into the order of white, patriarchal inheritance, allowing for the retrieval and reinvention of those gender and racial relationalities upon whose exclusion the latter is founded. This endeavor, however, demands that we follow the flesh in its meanderings and inhabit the intervals, the disjunctive conjunctions that inform its texture. In other words, that we redefine our methodologies.

Introducing the volume *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Shoshana Felman highlights that the conjunction "and" has traditionally served the purpose of "*subordination*", rather than coordination, positioning psychoanalysis as the subject and literature as the object of inquiry. The task she and the contributors to the volume undertake is then to "*displace* this function", that is, "to reinvent the 'and'" (Felman 1982, p. 5), but this reinvention can be radical only to the extent that it affirms the "and" as an operator not of direct, external coordination but of mutual "*implication*"—of enfolding.⁴ What interests me the most, as I approach a zone of indetermination, is that Felman reinterprets the "and" in this way after calling for a reversal of perspective that would not simply amount to a trading of positions between dominant and subaltern terms. In other words, she performs the advocated reversal by turning away from perspective itself, by leaving aside, at least momentarily, its apparatus of lines, rays, and points and entering the most ambiguous domain of folds. This turn to a different research *architecture* is even more decisive in Spillers's "*All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother*": Psychoanalysis and Race". Here, Spillers foregrounds the insufficiency of a "view" that does not question the structure of the field where the encounter between race and psychoanalysis occurs (Spillers 1996, p. 75).⁵ A strategy of "*interior intersubjectivity*", she proposes, would instead retrieve—reinvent—the relation between the psychic and the sociopolitical by means of "torque-like"

operations, “rotations of certainty” troubling the line of the universal ([Spillers 1996](#), p. 84). For psychoanalysis to matter to the “African American lifeworld”, she claims, sociality and historicity have to be folded into the psychoanalytic field or, rather, psychoanalysis itself has to reemerge as a “fold/field” of the lifeworld (see [Spillers 1996](#), p. 86; [Spillers 1987](#), p. 79).

I approach the question of literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis with a similar preference for the intertwined and the convoluted. I am even tempted to insert a surplus conjunction, an “and” that is not quite needed, so that it would read as the question of literature *and* philosophy *and* psychoanalysis. This odd, ungrammatical insertion makes the question dilate and expand horizontally, while also twisting internally, reducing the hold of the triangulation and disturbing its optics. But, in treating the conjunction “and” as one of implication, I want to insist on the divergence it also guarantees. This is an issue of pressing concern, as the texts I address emerge in the context of multifaceted traditions and histories, from French phenomenology at the time of the Algerian War to Black radical critique in Raegan’s and (post-)Trump’s America.⁶ If it is impossible to see independently of a point of view, the “and” of implication provides us with a “viewpoint” that is less a point, so to speak, than a fold—mobile rather than fixed, extended rather than punctual.

2. Elemental Flesh

This affirmation of the *and* is not a declaration of utter suppleness or plasticity. It is, however, a response to the strictures that Jacques Lacan imposes on the visual field in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. By distinguishing between the eye and the gaze with the (conceptual) aid of triangulated diagrams, Lacan situates the entire drama of the subject—its emergence, dissolution, recrudescence—within the grid provided by a Renaissance perspective. Let us recall the diagram of the eye and the gaze, composed as it is of two inverted and superimposed triangles. If switching from the position of the “eye” to that of the “picture” (as it is “photo-graphed” by the gaze)—or vice versa—appears relatively simple, this mobility is doubly deceiving: first, because it remains confined within the parameters of an unquestioned artificial system; second, because positionality cannot quite be reduced to a point in any case—because it comes with a weight and, at once, an indeterminacy for which geometrical optics cannot account.⁷

In fact, Lacan’s diagram of the eye and the gaze, composed as it is of two inverted and superimposed triangles, finds inspiration in the intertwining of the flesh—the reversibility of the seer and the seen—that Merleau-Ponty describes in the last chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible*. But, in Merleau-Ponty’s work, the flesh names a principle of differentiation that exceeds the spatiotemporal mappings made possible by a “surveying thought” (*pensée de survol*) and the positing of a “frontal” relation between subject and world. Neither mind nor matter, the “flesh of the world” is interrogated here as an ultimate notion: an element in the sense that water, air, earth, and fire were elements for the pre-Socratic philosophers—not things in themselves but “rhizomata”, the root of all things. The flesh inaugurates a new, indirect ontology, not by remapping the sensible world on behalf of a dis-appearing subject, but by reconceiving of its depth in the intertwining of the visible and the invisible. Such an interweaving is impossible to survey and thus also to present in an overview.

Indeed, as an ultimate notion, the flesh defies the very grammar by which it is articulated, coiling over itself in the reversibility of the seer and the seen, while also breaking up, turning away in a process of “incessant escaping”.⁸ To attend to the flesh’s paradoxical chiasm, Merleau-Ponty speaks of “two circles, or two vortexes, or two spheres” ([Merleau-Ponty 1968](#), p. 138); and, when he speaks of “rays” (“of past, of world”), he wrestles to redefine them within the elemental ontology of the flesh ([Merleau-Ponty 1968](#), p. 240). Merleau-Ponty also carefully avoids conflating the seer with the subject and the seen with the object. Conversely, in *Seminar XI*, Lacan visualizes only those interlacings that he can also straighten out, conforming to the rules of perspective, as he sets out to investigate “the institution of the subject in the visible” ([Lacan 1998](#), p. 106). As a result, this institution is structurally constrained from the start: if the schema of the two triangles provides a

much-needed recalibration of the subject's seeing power, it also reduces the visible tout court to a domain of capture: "in this matter of the visible, everything is a trap" (Lacan 1998, p. 93).

One would be pressed to find an equivalent for the flesh in Lacanian psychoanalysis (the Symbolic? the Imaginary? the Real?), as the flesh names at once a "never-finished differentiation" and the "common stuff of which all the structures are made" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 153, 200). By thinking (with) the flesh, Francoise Dastur highlights, Merleau-Ponty is attempting to "conceive the openness of being", a productivity or generativity that is not exhausted by any existing "crystallization" (Dastur 2000, pp. 29, 33). Even "the symbolic system, the pattern, would be a social thing", Merleau-Ponty noted in his courses on Institution and Passivity (1954–1955), while criticizing the "masculinism" of Claude Levi-Strauss's absolute spectator (*kosmotheoros*) (Merleau-Ponty 2010, p. 74). By positioning himself outside of time, the latter ends up positing the contingent as necessary, the historical as structural. "Since the dawn of historical time", writes Lacan, apropos of the "*name of the father*" and its symbolic function (Lacan 2006, p. 230). On the other hand, for Merleau-Ponty, "the essences of kinship are styles of existence", modulations of the flesh rather than strictures; they are in and of time (Merleau-Ponty 2010, pp. 74–75). In the "Working Notes", the flesh will in fact come to name a chiasm that is not only of perception but also of time: past and present are "each enveloping-enveloped—and that itself is the flesh"—the interlacing of dimensions that are neither autonomous nor coincident (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 268). That is, there is no coincidence between past and present, as there is no fusion between the seer and the seen, the touching and the touched: what at once separates and brings these dimensions together is an irreducible fissure or divergence (*écart*).

3. Flesh, Body, Capture

As a "general thing" and the "intertwining (*entrelacs*) of space and time", the flesh of the world does not coincide with the flesh of the body, nor can it be considered as an extension of it; indeed, it cannot even be likened to a differentiation of the animate as a privileged category of being (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 117; See also Dastur 2000). It is in the context of this indirect ontology, whose development is marked by the encounter with Marcel Proust's and Paul Cezanne's oeuvres, that Merleau-Ponty points to an "*ontological psychoanalysis*" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 270)—to psychoanalysis as a "philosophy of the flesh" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 267). "Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother", he writes in the "Working Notes", and again, "a philosophy of the flesh is the condition without which psychoanalysis remains anthropology" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 267). Once the model of consciousness (of intentionality) is abandoned, both the unconscious and the ego emerge as "*differentiations*" of the flesh, rather than positivities, as "*lace-works*" with "*no hierarchy* of orders or layers or planes", beyond perspective's regulation of both thought and perception (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 270).⁹

Feminist philosophers have repeatedly returned to the notion of flesh, whether to propose a critique of its (ultimately metaphysical) appropriation of female attributes or an expanded interpretation of its capacity to undo metaphysical binaries (mind/body, male/female, human/animal, animate/inanimate) (see, for instance, Irigaray 1993; Butler 2005; Grosz 1993). In *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye brings up Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the flesh in relation to Spillers's groundbreaking 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", which activates the "flesh" as a multivalent, irreducibly divided term but does not reference *The Visible and the Invisible*. By explicitly connecting the two thinkers, Weheliye displaces the recurring conflation of flesh with abjection and rediscovers what, in Spillers's work, is about potentiality and generativity (Wheliye 2014).¹⁰ At the same time, Weheliye confronts Merleau-Ponty's ontology, and the openness of being that it affirms, with the weight of historically situated experiences, or, better, he indicates that Spillers has already done so through her theory and practice of reading. If I ultimately disagree with Weheliye's claim that the flesh is "both the cornerstone and potential ruin of the world of Man"—that

it both consolidates and threatens metaphysics—it is because this interpretation prevents us from seeing the extent to which the flesh has been part of Western thought, not as a foundation, but as its constitutive outside, at once foreclosed and exploited (Weheliye 2014, p. 44).¹¹

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”, Spillers reclaims the flesh, its history and its potential for “female empowerment”, (Spillers 1987, p. 80), by forging an itinerary that cuts across (and refolds) varied disciplinary fields, including phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and literary criticism. The point of departure, in what will become a demand for another symbolic order, is the infamous “Moynihan Report” (United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research 1965). Published in 1965, this study singles out the alleged “matriarchal structure” of the “Negro Family” as the main culprit of the delayed “progress of the group as a whole” (Spillers 1987, p. 65; United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research 1965, p. 29). While exposing it as a racist and misogynist fantasy, Spillers focuses on the pure present-ness of this ethnographic formation, as if “ethnicity” itself had undergone the resignification that Roland Barthes posits in the construction of myth (Spillers 1987, p. 66) and entered a time out of time.

It is in this context that Spillers proposes the distinction between “body” and “flesh” as one that marks the distance between different symbolic orders or, rather, different ways of conceiving of the symbolic in relation to embodiment and its abstract twin, positionality. The instability of the term *flesh* is such (even in the space of a few lines) that the paragraph must be quoted in its entirety:

But I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the “body”, there is the “flesh”, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman”, we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard (Spillers 1987, p. 67).

In the cargo ship and, later, on the plantation, what is torn apart is not the body or the psyche but a common texture—a fleshly being—as it is submitted to discipline with the aim of extracting enslaved bodies. However, if the flesh implicitly comes to name the very fabric of being, Spillers is careful to never leave historicity behind, through the detailed attention she pays to historical studies and narratives written by enslaved Africans and their descendants (Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Linda Brent) (see Equiano 1969; Douglass 1968; Brent 1973). The systematic, calculated violence through which bodies are produced is applied to a commonality that is not unformed or simply there as pure potential for differentiation. The flesh has a history.

In his interview with Fred Moten, R.A. Judy underscores precisely the “unoriginary” status of the flesh, which he interprets as “para-semiosis”, that is, as “the activity of signification that is always multiple in its movements, multi-linear” and that does not subside even after the implementation of the “myth of the body” (Moten and Judy 2020). If Western modernity disciplines the flesh into separate, individual bodies—to be exchanged, exploited, and consumed—the flesh “coming out of Africa is not a *tabula rasa*” (Moten and Judy 2020). Judy, who wants to avoid the pitfalls of ontology, underscores that the flesh is always already “written upon”, though in ways that are other than those through which the subject/object dichotomy is imposed. Indeed, we can see these pitfalls resurfacing in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, especially in its description of the flesh as “brute or wild being” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 102, 170, 200). I have argued elsewhere for an “anachronistic” interpretation of the flesh, one that responds to and, in turn, reaches beyond Jacques Derrida’s critique of lived experience, so as to trouble any conflation of the flesh with full presence (Torlasco 2013). I see now that this reinterpretation would need

to confront the ideological weight of terms such as “wild” or “brute” and the mythology that has precipitated their adoption. Without referring to Merleau-Ponty, Judy points toward this kind of cultural analysis when he deploys Barthes’s theory of myth to retrace Spillers’s argument as one that exposes how the flesh is turned into “captive body” and then “Negro”.¹² As para-semiosis, the flesh is not unique to African communities and the communities of the African diaspora, and yet it is the “imposition of Negro embodiment” that “brings it into stark relief—and in a remarkably singular way—para-semiosis as species-activity” (Moten and Judy 2020). If the Negro constitutes a historically specific (singular) embodiment of “sentient flesh”, it also foregrounds that the flesh’s “potentiality-of-being” can manifest itself in other embodiments.

4. Flesh and Kinship: The Touch of the Mother

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”, Spillers is keenly aware of the flesh’s prior differentiation and, at the same time, of a potential that cannot be exhausted by any actual formation, past or present, including that of the patriarchal family in the West. Her engagement with the flesh, then, marks a turning around, a re-viewing of the protocols of differentiation through which the symbolic order has been theorized. Spillers is explicit in this respect when she states, “the symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an ‘American grammar’, begins at the ‘beginning’, which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation” (Spillers 1987, p. 68). In other words, it is not “since the dawn of historical time” that (by means of a seamless line of inheritance) the “name of the father” has played its symbolic function, at least not in American life. The Transatlantic Slave Trade, a durational rather than punctual event, has violently effected the conditions under which the language of kinship is not only spoken but also articulated in its fundamental grammar.¹³ To learn (about) this other grammar, which is more than the token of a type, one needs to start from the flesh.

Having been made “captive”, the flesh undergoes a violent process of “ungendering”, a loss of differentiation that affects gender relationalities together with kinship ties, societal values, and proper names. The slave ship in the Middle Passage constitutes the first and crucial site of this “unmaking” by darkness and terror. There, Spiller maintains, “one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as *quantities*” and are made to subsist as smaller or larger amounts of space. (Spillers 1987, p. 72) But it is also there that the logic of racial capitalism lashes back against itself, precipitating “a wild and unclaimed richness of possibility”, that is, producing a zone of gender undifferentiation that will work against the (white) patriarchal order. The costs of this dissolution “by accounting” are beyond measure and will continue to devastate the flesh in the plantation system, where the Black woman becomes “the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human” (Spillers 2003, p. 155). According to the legal doctrine of the *partus sequitur ventrem*, her children take over the status of personal chattel, to be sold and relocated at will, cast outside any official line of inheritance, if not as property.

This knot of property and kinship dismantles the tenets of conventional domesticity, disarticulating the triangulated structure of the Oedipal family. On the plantation, the father is at once missing and double, present through the figures of “the African father’s *banished* name and body and the captor father’s mocking presence”. On the other hand, “the female stands there *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed”, as she is systematically disavowed, made “illegal” vis-à-vis her progeny, vanquished at the same time that she is violently coerced to reproduce the labor force (Spillers 1987, p. 80). Hers is less a position in a system of kinship than a place where the very possibility of kinship is put under the constant threat of erasure. Yet—in the torquing of the flesh—the Black mother also comes to hold the potential to institute a sociality in excess of the patriarchal order, one that displaces “the *vertical transfer*” of name, money, and privilege from father to son (Spillers 1987, p. 74). Of the African-American male, barred from any paternal inheritance, Spillers writes that he “has been touched...by the *mother*” and needs to reclaim *her* heritage, to say “‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within”, which goes well beyond “the traditional symbolics of female gender”

(Spillers 1987, p. 80). But, if the male child occupies a particular place in this unorthodox genealogy, the latter also includes all children born into the “condition” of the enslaved mother, as they too cannot be named after the father nor inherit from him.

What comes into relief, then, are the traces of another symbolic activity, if not of another symbolic order altogether, one that articulates itself according to the “touch of the mother” rather than the “name of the father”. I will underscore that this shift in the constitution of kinship and social ties does not simply substitute one figure for the other. On the contrary, it troubles substitution altogether and its reliance on a principle of valuation according to a third, external term (money or the Father). The touch of the mother affirms a mode of being and thinking that privileges displacement over substitution, contiguity over similarity, metonymy over metaphor, in other words, a mode of symbolic production that wrestles with (if not outright rejects) the paternal metaphor without, for this reason, being doomed to nonsense or psychosis.¹⁴ Spillers points toward this reconfiguration when she claims, in relation to the Black mother, that the task is to “make space for this different social subject” so that a whole new narrative of “female empowerment” could ensue from “actually claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to ‘name’) which her culture imposes in blindness” (Spillers 1987, p. 80).¹⁵ While placing emphasis on the social subject, Spillers is also asking us to envision a system (of naming and valuation) that, made by and in the flesh, operates according to an immanent rather than a transcendental principle, a system in which it is the touch of the mother that has the power to name.

Spillers’s project is obviously not Merleau-Ponty’s and I would not want to reconcile them. I will propose nonetheless that we consider Spillers’s intervention as (also) a way of conducting a psychoanalysis of the flesh. As she retraces the symbolic order of American slavery and its aftermath, Spillers attends to a commonality of being that comprises not only language and kinship structures but also the senses and the sensible. The lacerations accomplished through the “calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet” are part and parcel of this grammar—of its making—as are the wounds inflicted by systematic sexual assault and rape (Spillers 1987, p. 67). The flesh always bears the marks of concrete, historically situated experiences to such an extent that even its potential cannot be envisioned independently of them. Indeed, the flesh troubles any order of simple causality between what grounds and what is grounded.

This intrusion of historicity marks the end of ethnicity as mythical time. However, to say that the flesh has a history does not mean to take for granted that this history can be measured or accounted for by chronology. The flesh is a “spatializing-temporalizing vortex”, writes Merleau-Ponty in the “Working Notes” to *The Visible and the Invisible*. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 244). In this respect, then, I would rather say that the flesh has a duration, to make room for differentiations that exceed the opposition of succession and simultaneity and their reliance on a spatial model of time. When Merleau-Ponty writes of the “flesh of time” and of time as the chiasm of dimensions that are neither autonomous nor coincident (past and present as “each enveloping-envolved”), he sets a psychoanalysis of the flesh on the trail of a time that is neither progressive nor static but, rather, vortex-like. It is in this sense, in the sense of their non-coincidence, that the past and present of the flesh are “coeval”.¹⁶

5. “What We Had Was Something New, Something That Didn’t Even Have a Name”

In the reading I propose, performing a psychoanalysis of the flesh entails attending to (indeed, entering) a disorder that pertains to both kinship and time. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Baby”, Spillers’s theorization of the flesh is all along imbricated with the reading of historical documents and slave narratives. Indeed, Spillers turns to the autobiographical narrative of Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs as the example of a “counter-narrative to notions of the domestic” that can emerge only when considering the vicissitudes of captive flesh (Spillers 1987, p. 72). A memoir that also reads as a psychoanalytic case study, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, stages a “psychodrama” (Spillers 1987, p. 76) in which the “master’s” Black mistress and his white wife are entangled in ways that complicate both

the straightforward opposition between captive and free subject and the proclamation of a fundamental womanhood.¹⁷ If this entanglement of libidinal relations necessarily unfolds in excess of chronology (as in the nocturnal, nightmarish scenes on which Spillers focuses), the conventions of the genre limit the exploration of its temporal complexity. This is not the case in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, a precursor to the neo-slave narratives of Toni Morrison and Sherley Ann Williams and, at the same time, an idiosyncratic time travel narrative (see [Yaszek 2003](#); [Smith 2007](#)). A one-off in Butler's oeuvre, *Kindred* cuts across science fiction, gothic literature, and the figuration of dreams, all the while adopting an almost documentary style, so that the uncanny becomes indistinguishable from the everyday. I turn to it at this juncture because, I maintain, it gives (extra-)ordinary narrative visibility to a memory that—neither individual nor collective—persists instead as the memory of the flesh.

"I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm" is the first line in the Prologue ([Butler 2004](#), p. 9). Butler's "grim fantasy" begins and ends with a collapse: the crushing of the protagonist's left arm and, for a few moments, a collapse of the distinction between human flesh and plaster, animate and inanimate matter.¹⁸ This is the price that Dana, a young African-American writer, has to pay in order to come back to the (relative) safety of her living room, to the house in 1976 Los Angeles, from which she has been forcibly displaced, dislocated in space and time, by a force that will remain mysterious throughout the novel. When the transport (which is, in fact, an abduction) occurs, Dana is overwhelmed by an array of physical symptoms, from sickness to dizziness and loss of consciousness. The first enforced trip occurs the day of her birthday, June 9, while the last takes place on Independence Day, July 4, but we have no reason to believe that, in its entirety, her journey in time took place only once or, rather, that this one time was not already a repetition. The place to which she is transported is a plantation in antebellum Maryland; there, as her absences from Los Angeles grow longer, she becomes part of the enslaved community, developing complex bonds of affection, trust, mistrust, enmity, and complicity.¹⁹

"What we had was something new, something that didn't even have a name" ([Butler 2004](#), p. 29), writes Dana about her relationship with Rufus, the plantation owner's son, whom she discovers to be a distant ancestor of hers. Rufus is able to summon Dana from the past, to call her back to the plantation whenever his life is seriously threatened. Conversely, Dana is able to return to the future when she finds herself in mortal danger. The resulting trips are of varying duration, with the caveat that a few minutes or hours in 1976 Los Angeles last days or months in the antebellum South. So, Rufus has time to grow older and more brutal, while Dana has time to experience injuries and terror she had only read about. But the "we" ("what we had was something new, something that didn't even have a name") could also refer to the relationship between Dana and Alice, a free Black woman who is enslaved after aiding her fugitive husband. She too is one of Dana's ancestors and the two women share an uncanny resemblance. Eventually, Dana submits to Rufus's blackmail and manipulates Alice into becoming his "mistress", as if one could consent to rape. Dana's role in this planned sexual assault is even more terrifying in view of the ties they have developed: "he was like a younger brother to me. Alice was like a sister. It was so hard to watch him hurting her—to know that he had to go on hurting her if my family was to exist at all" ([Butler 2004](#), p. 180). In fact, their child, to be named Hagar, will initiate Dana's family line. Alice will later commit suicide and Dana will kill Rufus when he attempts to rape her, refusing to succumb to the violence she had accepted and facilitated for Alice.

As Dana is transported back home one last time, her left arm remains trapped in the wall, merging with it in "the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped" ([Butler 2004](#), p. 261). This maimed arm has been read as a symbol of the afterlife of slavery, the mark of a trauma that endures in the present, affecting psyche and body alike. In Ruth Salvaggio's words, the injured arm is but "a kind of birthmark", the sign of a "disfigured heritage" ([Salvaggio 1986](#), p. 33).²⁰ In *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*, Alys Weinbaum pushes this interpretation further, suggesting that "Dana is maimed not only by slavery but also by her recursive ensnarement in neoliberalism", by a set of reproductive imperatives that inform her actions

in both past and present (Weinbaum 2019, p. 134). Let me pause on Weinbaum's reading as it contrasts with mine to the very extent that it bypasses the torque-like operations of the flesh on behalf of a straightforward account. Weinbaum reads Dana's manipulation of Alice as the determination to guarantee the survival of her own family line at all costs and, as such, the expression of a lack of communal consciousness. A creature of neoliberalism, Dana labors to repress Alice's insurgent drives, including her intention to commit suicide as the ultimate act of rebellion. Moreover, Weinbaum claims, Dana is mostly unaware of the political implications of her own scheming. In regard to the latter point, the dialogue gives ample evidence of the contrary, which, however, does not make things less complicated and painful. As to Dana's commitment to her family line, Weinbaum fails to notice that this "line" is, in fact, not a line: "What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!" writes Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The affirmation of this tangled heritage constitutes an act not only of submission but also of defiance. I too might have wanted the two women to conspire together or attempt an escape, like Weinbaum suggests, but matters of life and death can hardly be willed from afterwards.²¹ Butler says as much in her 1997 interview, when she remembers the words of a young Black man her age, who "felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well" (Rowell and Butler 1997, p. 51).

One could also read Dana's mangled arm, made as it is of animate and inanimate matter, as the impossible figure of the Lacanian Real, a pound of flesh-and-plaster caught in between the loss of figuration and what resists figuration altogether—the "hard kernel" that the Real is posited to be, "pure and simple", "undifferentiated", "without fissure".²² On the other hand, the reading I propose connects Dana's wounded arm to her literal and figural entanglement in the flesh of time, a reading for which I have no bibliographical antecedent to offer. What I suggest is that this limb, on the verge of pulverization, constitutes both a text and a writing implement, a record and a tool for remembering *in the flesh* the "potential to 'name'" that Spillers claims for the Black female subject.²³ That is, I suggest that this arm testifies not only to the torments of the flesh but also to the potential for other forms of differentiation—for other modes of being—that can break out of the flesh's tortuous history. However, if the project of female empowerment for which Spillers advocates is a task for the future, the "monstruous" potential that it mobilizes does not belong to a future that simply comes after the past. Rather, it emerges from the depths of what can be called a futural past—from the flesh of time as a "spatializing-temporalizing vortex" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 244). In this respect, Butler's adoption of a time travel plot is more than a genre convention: it exposes a coiling of time that (while "unrealistic") distinguishes the flesh as a communal fabric of being. Similarly, the family "line" that the protagonist is set to preserve is less a line than a mesh of extended kinship relations—a mesh out of which a different socio-symbolic subject will have emerged.

In its entanglement of kinship and property relations, the American grammar is not just a variation of the symbolic order; indeed, the latter loses its integrity once the "view" is displaced, twisted, and turned upon itself. A psychoanalysis of the flesh would enable us to see "these 'threads cable-strong' of an incestuous, interracial genealogy [that] uncover slavery in the United States as one of the richest displays of psychoanalytic dimensions of culture before the science of European psychoanalysis takes hold" (Spillers 1987, p. 77). At the same time, a psychoanalysis of the flesh would attend to and care for novel modes of being, of relationalities that, inaugurated by the touch of the mother, would emerge and endure in the openness of being—which does not mean without struggle. For glimpses of this other community, we could turn to Butler again (Butler 2016, 2019) and to the unsentimentally "hyper-empathic" protagonist of *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, who embraces and pursues change (becoming rather than progress), in a future when the new presidential candidate promises to "make America great again".

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Notes

- ¹ For a critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis, see ([Irigaray 1985](#); [Muraro 2018a](#); [Spillers 1996](#)).
- ² Here, I distinguish my approach from Kaja Silverman's turn to the flesh in *Flesh of My Flesh* as the latter grounds ontological kinship in similarity and ignores the profound challenges that both Merleau-Ponty and Spillers pose to analogical thought within and beyond psychoanalysis. On the other hand, the texts that substantially address the encounter between Merleau-Ponty and Spillers' elaborations of flesh and/or the question of a radical psychonalysis of the flesh are quite few. I will reference them in *passim*. For an interdisciplinary approach to Merleau-Ponty, see ([Weiss 2008](#)).
- ³ For a critical account of vision through Western culture, see ([Brennan and Jay 1996](#)).
- ⁴ Felman explains that implication "means 'being folded within' (Latin: im-plicare = in + fold)", and that "it indicates, between the two terms, a spatial relation of *interiority*" ([Felman 1982](#), p. 9).
- ⁵ "Freud could not 'see' his own connection to the 'race'/culture orbit, or could not theorize it", Spillers claims, "because the place of their elision marked the vantage point from which he spoke" ([Spillers 1996](#), p. 89). Lacan does not fare much better, as his theory is criticized for having "no eyes for the grammar and politics of power", at least not beyond the metaphorical domain ([Spillers 1996](#), p. 89).
- ⁶ In "Black writing, White Reading" Elizabeth Abel discusses the danger of mobilizing texts by Black feminists in order to "to alter, or prefigure, but ultimately reconfirm" what white feminism or poststructuralism were claiming ([Abel 1993](#), p. 496), all the while marginalizing the texts' embeddedness in Black political struggle.
- ⁷ [Lacan \(1998](#), p. 106). On Merleau-Ponty's critique of perspective see also "Eye and Mind" wherein he claims that "every theory of pairing is a metaphysics" ([Merleau-Ponty 1964](#)).
- ⁸ ([Merleau-Ponty 1968](#), p. 148). See also ([Butler 2005](#)). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, the reversibility of the seer and the seen is also the reversibility of the toucher and the touched. On the other hand, in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Jacques Derrida insists on keeping touch and vision apart. By not doing so, he claims, Merleau-Ponty perpetuates the tendency to privilege "confusion, coincidence, reflection, originarity, primordial presence" over rupture, discontinuity, distance ([Derrida 2005](#), p. 205).
- ⁹ For a reading that directly addresses Merleau-Ponty's notes on a psychoanalysis of the flesh, see ([Olkowski 1982–1983](#)). For a reinterpretation of psychoanalysis that turns to a notion of flesh without engaging with either *The Visible and the Invisible* or Spillers's work, see ([Silverman 2009](#)).
- ¹⁰ Weheliye engages with Spillers's flesh in context of his critique of Agamben's bare life. On readings of flesh that exclusively focus on expressions like "reduction to flesh", see part two of Fred Moten's interview with R.A. Judy ([Moten and Judy 2020](#)). Critical of posthumanism, Weheliye conceives of a theory and praxis of the flesh as a path toward "new genres of the human" ([Weheliye 2014](#), p. 45).
- ¹¹ More specifically, Weheliye reads the flesh as "the ether of Man", borrowing the term "ether" from Derrida and his critique of consciousness as self-presence. On the other hand, Derrida found in Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh and its privileging of vision the pitfalls of specularity, consciousness, immediacy but also acknowledged the merits of Dastur's reading of the flesh as dehiscence (see [Derrida 2005](#)).
- ¹² See ([Judy 2020](#)). Wary of ontology, Judy does not refer to Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh and instead presents his own theory of para-semiosis as "nonontological" ([Judy 2020](#), p. 21). However, he finds inspiration in Merleau-Ponty's critique of Western thought as one that surveys or looks "from above" (*pensée de survol*) and posits the world and consciousness as separate beings (see *Introduction to Judy 2020*). What most strongly distinguishes the two thinkers is Judy's direct identification of "sentient flesh" with the human as "species".
- ¹³ Apropos of the African Oedipus, Spillers writes that "the riddle of origin that the Oedipus is supposed to constitute, first, as a crisis, then as a resolution of order and degree, was essentially cancelled by the Atlantic trade" ([Spillers 1996](#), p. 139).
- ¹⁴ See Muraro's critique of Lacan in *To Knit or to Crochet: A Political-Linguistic Tale on the Enmity Between Metaphor and Metonymy* ([Muraro 2018b](#)).
- ¹⁵ This potentiality radically differentiates itself from the white cultural fantasy of the Black matriarchate, which Spillers finds operative in the infamous Moynihan Report (see [Spillers 1987](#), pp. 65–66).
- ¹⁶ I borrow the term from Saidiya Hartman's assertion, "we are coeval with the dead", in "The Time of Slavery" ([Hartman 2002](#), p. 759).
- ¹⁷ For Spillers, it is the ungendering of captive flesh that allows for these nocturnal encounters in the midst of a heterosexual economy: "we might suggest that the ungendered female—in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential—might be invaded/raided by another woman or man" ([Spillers 1987](#), p. 77).
- ¹⁸ See Butler's interview with Charles H. Rowell ([Rowell and Butler 1997](#)).

- 19 As a character and narrator, Dana has been both praised and criticized for the determination with which she wills her own past futurity. See (Weinbaum 2019).
- 20 (Salvaggio 1986, p. 33). On Dana’s injured arm as the materialization of past trauma, see also (Rushdy 2001, pp. 107–8; Balfour 2005, pp. 178–79).
- 21 On the labor for and of survival in the context of slavery, see Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves”: “not all people have survived enslavement: hence [the black slave woman’s] survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance. Survival, moreover, was the prerequisite of all higher levels of struggle” (Davis 1981, p. 7).
- 22 (Borch-Jacobsen 1991, p. 192, cited in Spillers 1996, p. 117). In my suggestion on the vicissitudes of figuration, I borrow from Lee Edelman’s reading of Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* when he speaks of the rock under Leonard’s feet as being “lifeless rock endowed with human form” (Edelman 2004, p. 70).
- 23 Here, I draw on Spillers’s own words, when she writes that “this materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered’—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations” (Spillers 1987, p. 68).

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