

# Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge

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## Living in the Absence of a Body: The (Sus)Stain of Black Female (W)holeness

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...with a black candidate already stained by the figurations of blackness as sexual aggressiveness, or rapaciousness or impotence, the stain need only be proved reasonably doubted, which is to say, if he is black how can you tell if that really is a stain? Which is also to say, blackness is itself a stain, and therefore unstainable. Which is also to say, if he is black and about to ascend to the Supreme Court bench, if the bench is to become stain free, this newest judge must be bleached, race-free, as his speeches and opinions illustrated. Allegations of sexual misconduct re-raced him, which in this administration, meant, re-stained him, dirtied him. Therefore the "dirt" that clung to him following those allegations, "dirt" he spoke of repeatedly, must be shown to have originated elsewhere. In this case the search for the racial stain turned on Anita Hill. Her character. Her motives. Not his.<sup>[1]</sup>  
—Toni Morrison, "Friday on the Potomac"

I.

[1] Toni Morrison's introductory essay, "Friday on the Potomac," in the collection *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power*, recounts the emotional tensions surrounding the confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. In a provocative turn, Morrison links the 1991 Senate hearings with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and a reading of Crusoe's man Friday. The essay draws a parallel between Friday in Defoe's text, and Thomas. Forced to learn his master's language, Friday becomes estranged from his own language and identity in the process, and Clarence Thomas, she argues, finds himself at a similar impasse. But even more than the interpretive force of Morrison's immediate parallel, what interests me is her analysis of the complex imbrication of racism and sexism from which the themes of blackness and gender were publicized and laid bare. As we wait for the new Anita Hill biopic to debut on HBO in April 2016, apropos Morrison's argument, we are compelled to recall the visual image of Anita Hill on television in 1991, and how her image made blackness and gender the subject of widespread media attention by placing these themes at the forefront of American life. Morrison explains that the selection process "whitened" Thomas and the testimony of Hill "re-stained" him. This essay is invested in the materiality of Morrison's metaphorical stain, not simply in its capacity to reduce Thomas' acceptability as a candidate for the Supreme Court bench in the eyes of the public, but Anita Hill's capacity to stain, and how the black feminine as a figurative stain prefigures a metaphysical problem that explicitly touches on the epistemological and ontological implications of race and gender, and their socio-historical

imbrication in American political life.

[2] As the epigraph above betrays, the racial disavowal Clarence Thomas enjoyed was itself the effect of a curious displacement. Morrison reveals how Thomas' obsequious performance of masculinity, and his amenability to the public and to the legal confirmation process, was not only enabled by the sexual displacement of race (specifically blackness) onto the image of Anita Hill. This displacement of race onto the black woman constitutes the black woman as such. In other words, black femininity becomes the bearer of the burden of the racial mark, and of blackness. I understand race and blackness not to be mutually exclusive, but I also conceive of race as a world historical idea and a cultural fiction, engineered and deployed in the interest of imperialism, colonialism, New World slavery, and repeatedly signified through the "reciprocal articulation of the institution of modern slavery and its aftermath."<sup>[2]</sup> The concept of race signals a "practice of distinction among humans that has come to be placed under the heading of an idea."<sup>[3]</sup> I think of blackness as fluid and coextensive with a history of collective resistance to the colonial idea and imperial concept of race, and I critically consider the transformative, resistive potential of blackness to the violent conception of the raced body.

[3] This essay explores the relation between blackness and gender by way of two tropes: the stain and the black (w)hole. Morrison's discussion of Anita Hill affords us a certain insight into what Denise Ferreira da Silva has described as the "sociohistorical logic of exclusion that makes the racial and gender such a suitable pair [but] also hinders our understanding of how gender and race work together to institute a particular kind of subaltern subject."<sup>[4]</sup> Black femininity becomes the particularly vexed "subaltern" figure through which we might think and conceptualize the epistemic injustice and violence that constitute and limit our thinking about both blackness and gender.

[4] Returning to the epigraph, I want to touch briefly on Morrison's metaphor of the stain here in order to argue for the centrality of black femininity in reimagining the stakes of black embodiment. Thinking about the materiality of the stain, I imagine a growing inkblot that saturates a white page. A black stain that saturates the page and blots out the text also gathers the energies of the text into its invisible vortex, and in so doing performs a fundamental transgression, bleeding into the zones of the text and page, ink and paper, vision and invisibility. The televised image of Anita Hill is a stain upon American consciousness. Consider Morrison's skepticism concerning the pragmatic, "interrogatory discourse" about what took place, and her urgent appeal that what "was at stake was history." The black woman, imagined as the material event of the stain, signals the stakes of a specifically violent embodied history – the black woman bleeds over and thereby violates and contaminates the edge or boundary between the contemporary moment and a persistent history of black subjection. The stain is itself a kind of textual and material "transaction," to invoke Christina Sharpe's phrasing, which locates "the violence, often sexual, by which one is 'made a subject and subjected by others.'"<sup>[5]</sup>

[5] However, while the image of Anita Hill compounds an image of black femininity as the bearer of these subjections, at the same time the black woman signals a disruption of the logic of that violently signifying history. As the black woman on our television screens, Anita Hill circulates and signifies the burden of

racial difference. But considering the force of Morrison's metaphor, the function of the material stain is both more and less than the function of an image. In addition to its "re-racing" or blackening effect, yet another disturbing aspect of the stain is its ability to disperse itself and absorb the space around it. We discover that the stain, in its material absorption, is also consuming, in the sense of being alluring and seductive. Much like the trope of the black (w)hole that Evelyn Hammonds deploys in her essay, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," considering the restrictive *and* imaginative possibilities of the black woman as stain, redirects us to the black feminine both as an originary site for the capitalist exploitation and expropriation of the black body, and potentially as a site of irreducible corporeal difference. Can we think of a black stain as both an expression of the black woman's residual and trace effects in the event of her absence, and also an expression of her irresolvable presence? The material metaphor of the stain has massive implications for questions of abstraction and form, and their relationship to both blackness and gender, or more precisely, the gendering of blackness. Can we theorize the uncanny instantiation of the black woman's figure as a fleshing out of form? Additionally, can we think about the stain's alluring double edge, its spread, as an asignifying disruption of the general economy of the image?

[6] Exploring the implications of the fraught representationality of the black woman as stain a bit further, requires that we move through a black feminist discourse that has taken up the questions of visibility and invisibility in order to think the problem of political representation, particularly as that problem animates the televised event of the hearings and the visual reconstruction of that event. Black feminist discourse has frequently acknowledged the 'interlocking oppressions' of gender, race and class. Occupying the position of the laborer, the cost-free caregiver, the sexual object, historically she has been the interstitial figure that capital polices. But the necessary explications of her many roles are all bound up with, and subtended by a more complex imbrication of race and sex.



*Anita Hill testifying before Congress in 1991 at the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearing. (Photo: Greg Gibson/ AP)*



*Kerry Washington as Anita Hill in the HBO biopic, Confirmation, set to debut April 16, 2016.*

[7] This problematic is clearly expressed in Angela Davis's account of the black woman as simultaneously "annulled" from the category of woman, "released from the myth of femininity," but then violently coerced into taking up the gendering function from which she has been barred.<sup>[6]</sup> Black femininity has circulated as both discursively empty and materially full, and this has direct implications for the way in which historically, the black woman has been biopolitically constructed, pathologized and held captive by slavery and capital, and excluded from the realm of symbolic power.

[8] The black woman is the figure that crystallizes the arrangement between capital and the event of captivity. Evelyn Hammonds argues that this has everything to do with the way black female sexuality has been enshrouded in "silence, erasure and invisibility."<sup>[7]</sup> In this way the black feminine anticipates Deleuze and Guattari's deployment of the concept of the *black hole*, to describe the 'grotesque disfigurements' of capital that this special issue addresses. However, both the position of racial blackness and the role of black gendering remain to be theorized with respect to the general theoretical transmutation of *black hole* to *black (w)hole*. In this instance I would invoke the centrality of the black/slave body's legacy as expressive of a logic of fungibility (Saidiya Hartman's term), within what Cedric Robinson termed *racial capitalism*, to the general disfiguration of capital.<sup>[8]</sup> Additionally, racial sexual difference, or the violent racing of sexual difference, has produced its own coerced forms of black gendering that are the product of ungendering,<sup>[9]</sup> and black fungibility cannot be understood without accounting for the violent (un)gendering reduction of race to the racial body, and vice versa. The two processes are mutually constitutive, as the gendered trope of the black (w)hole Hammonds elaborates is delimited by the regimes of "accumulation and fungibility" (Frank Wilderson's terms) that constitute the horizon of social negation for blackness.

[9] However, it is precisely because of the radically irreducible quality of the black feminine's status as stain, as black (w)hole, that the black feminine re-imagines the terms of black embodiment (accumulation and fungibility), beyond the semiotic regimes of capital that require and demand the violent foreclosure and redress of black bodily subjectivity. We need only think of Saidiya Hartman's detailed historical and theoretical study of the marketplace and the coffee as paradigmatic settings for the exchange of black bodies. Hartman illustrates the positionality of black bodies in these settings and their enmeshment with the violent social dialectics, as definitive of these acute scenes of subjection: "This theater of the marketplace wed festivity and the exchange of captive bodies...The stimulating effects of intoxicants, the simulation of good times, and the to-and-fro of half-naked bodies on display all acted to incite the flow of capital."<sup>[10]</sup> While we immediately recognize black bodies on display in the service of capital in this illustration, the point I want to underscore is precisely the core tension of this essay. That is, the paradoxical nature of black embodiment, and how the evacuated and overfull status of the black body, is conditioned by determinate practices of racial gendering. How does the black body, in the afterlife of captivity, become the black hole of capital? How does the black woman's body, regulated as both the site of biopolitical reproduction and a source of generative labor and work, assume the representationality of the hole, but also allegorize it? What kind of deconstructive and augmentative work does the '(w)' of black (w)hole do?

[10] In identifying the proximity between Deleuze and Guattari's *black hole* and Hammonds' *black (w)hole*, I also want to mark the conceptual distance between these terms, a conceptual distance that depends upon the violent historical interdiction of blackness from and inscription into the social order. For Frank Wilderson, "the ontological claim of the Afro- pessimists that Blackness is both that outside which makes it possible for White and non-White positions to exist and simultaneously contest existence."<sup>[11]</sup> This is an assertion I would want to hold onto in order to think about the antistrophic structure of black femininity, as a fold of that outside. *Black (w)holeness* is an augmentation as well as a subtraction from the black hole; black (w)holeness accomplishes a redoubling of the black hole in its supplementary abstraction from any concept of origin, space, and time. My claim is that the negative space blackness is constantly imagined and re-imagined as, demands an interrogation of the *gendered* ontology of the negative space blackness is imagined to activate and occupy.

[11] Michele Wallace's theoretical elaboration of the black woman as a site of/for negation becomes particularly useful. Wallace offers us a critique of Houston Baker's discussion of black maternity and how it operates in the fiction of Richard Wright in her essay, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity." She focuses on the trope of the black hole that appears in Baker's chapter on Wright in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Calling for a counter-hegemonic redeployment of that trope, her argument hinges on the semantic shift between black hole and black w/hole.<sup>[12]</sup> The black w/hole potentially speaks to both the aesthetic limitations placed upon black women writers and the irreducible expressivity that emerges from a distinctly black feminist aesthetic. Baker's insistence that black wholeness is a consolidating trope that evidences Wright's discursive "mastery," in Wallace's view, effects a willful erasure of black feminist/female literary contributions. She argues that, instead of succumbing (as Baker does) to a phallogentric discourse that tethers black literary production to a "white male cultural hegemony,"<sup>[13]</sup> the forms of literary experimentation that emerge from what Baker calls a "discursive order reduced to zero"<sup>[14]</sup> is all bound up with this singular black female literary economy.

[12] Wallace draws on a compelling quote from Barbara Johnson: "black female discourse represents the lower case 'x' of a radical negation" – she is "both invisible and ubiquitous."<sup>[15]</sup> Her desire to reclaim the trope of black wholeness for a black feminist literature and literary criticism seems largely incontrovertible. The collective enterprise Wallace refers to as "black feminist creativity" is informed and structured by this zero degree point of reduction. This non-discursive content of black feminist literature does not secure the hegemonic foreclosure of a female imaginary, but accomplishes the undoing of a phallogentric ordering of discourse. Rather than dismiss Baker's argument, I return to it because it implies precisely this by measuring the impact of the black woman at the crucial intersection of the material and the metaphorical. Referencing *Black Boy*, Baker argues that Richard Wright "seeks a difference that will fulfill desire." The point that Wallace seems to miss is that the metaphorical province of black femininity as gathering w/hole *is* the expressive difference that drives Wright's autobiographical fulfillment. Here is Baker:

The experience that is at issue is squeezed to an unimaginably dense point in *Black Boy*.



In the autobiography, the mother's suffering absence becomes a figure gathering to itself all lineaments of a black "blues life."...The mother's suffering...becomes "a symbol... gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and endless suffering."<sup>[16]</sup>

[13] In this passage Baker explains that the maternal becomes the "unimaginably dense point" through which key literary elements, "vision and feeling," for example, are compressed. Baker demonstrates how the gathering energy of black maternity and black femininity become the emotional ground for a vernacular imagination, "a black blues life," that underwrites the expressive totality of black political consciousness. Baker's argument is a variation of Hortense Spillers' dialectic of "mother and mother-dispossessed," itself a symptomatic expression of a long history of violent ungendering and the distinct social topology that emerges from that ungendering. In black literature we are confronted by an impossible figure of black womanhood that insistently embodies this maternal disjunction.<sup>[17]</sup> Though different in their points of perspective, taken together, Wallace, Baker, and Spillers' contentions amount to the observation that the figure of black femininity that emerges on the other side of the historical *transaction* (to borrow from Christina Sharpe once again), evidences a differently gendered Afrodiasporic cultural text that reflects maternal dispersion in and as negation.

A black feminist literary imagination and literary apparatus mediates Spillers' dialectic of mother and mother-dispossessed, animating the trope of black (w)holeness. More specifically Baker and Wallace's dialogue opens up the possibility of exploring the role of black femininity in the elaboration of a black vernacular aesthetic that offers new corporeal possibilities for black bodily existence. Could it be that the black feminine figure that emerges in the aftermath of slavery, but who remains tethered to an extended history of subjection and maternal dispossession, loses the very corporeality that lends substance, presence and viability to black female stereotypes? I want to turn to an example from black women's literature that demonstrates the performative potentiality of black w/holeness as an expression of the empty fulfillment or fulfilled emptiness of black female dispossession, and how all of this relates to an idea of the vernacular as an expression of the uniquely aesthetic compression of the maternal, the material and the metaphorical.

[14] Toni Cade Bambara's short story, "My Man Bovanne," offers us a maternal protagonist, a woman named Hazel, situated precisely at this maternal disjuncture. As the excessive figure at the heart of a narrative that satirizes black political nationalism, Hazel emblemizes black femininity as a destabilizing, vernacular force. Hazel engages in a performance (in Bambara's narrative she literally dances) that offers new possibilities of freedom from racial and gendered norms. But it is by being excessive with her body, by being and signifying too much, that Hazel also breaks the rules of social and political propriety and manages at once to infiltrate and escape the political setting she is placed in.

[15] Bambara offers us an image of the black woman as the one that is violently interdicted from the social order. But as the one who cannot be imagined or desired, she nevertheless gathers and absorbs the affective energies of the text, and in this way, always already saturates the field of desire. Hazel's performance accomplishes a foundational connection between an ontology of black (w)holeness - her

body links us back to the historical accumulation and fungibility of the black body, precisely in order to re-animate that fungible excess (an excess that in this story is all bound up with the corporeality of black femininity) – at the same time that her performance shifts us toward a future ontology of black embodiment that is performative.

[16] I take 'performative' here to mean the excessive deployment of the body in the interest of moving and acting beyond the body's frame, in a way that explicitly invokes the black body's historical inscription as an object. Such analysis would "celebrate the resistance of the object" and "trouble the assumption...that...acts and movements in the world easily lend themselves to ...the empirical, epistemological desire at the heart of spectatorship" or a given readership.<sup>[18]</sup>

[17] And Bambara's Hazel compels such an analysis because she troubles the conceptual divides between performance and lived experience. Like the morphing and expanding stain opened by Anita Hill and many before her, Bambara conveys how the black woman as fungible object redeploys the excessiveness of her sex and physicality, and bleeds over the boundaries between art and life, theory and praxis. Hazel initiates a performance that further complicates the epistemological distinctions between black vernacular life and black political futurity. My speculative reading of Bambara's text provides less of a literary historical analysis; instead I focus on the excavative corporeal work the author's black female protagonist performs. This performative turning out of the infinitely expropriable, fungible black female body, produces a narrative that is at once painfully funny and difficult to read or accept. But Hazel sheds further light on the figurative troping of black female (w)holeness as an invaluable and resistive aesthetic for expanding black performative life.

## II

[18] The events in "My Man Bovanne" take place during a consciousness-raising gathering, held by a black political organization in the black community of a New York City neighborhood. Task and Elo, Hazel's two children have dragged her to the rally to support her niece's cousin, Nisi, who as Hazel says is "runnin for somethin with this Black party somethin or other behind her." Bambara gives us a set piece of sorts: she conveys a generational black consciousness entirely removed from a black vernacular tradition, whose aesthetic qualities Bambara invests in her black maternal protagonist. In this story, Hazel negotiates the affective arrangement of a set of Black Nationalist desires and the discourse of Black power. To be clear, my aim is not to critique the rich traditions of Black Nationalism, Black Power or black political organizing, but to focus on Hazel as the embodiment of the particular problem of black (w)holeness, as the point of compression where black vernacular life and Black political life meet, and where nothing and everything can happen.

[19] Turning to the story, at the rally, Hazel is thoroughly disinterested in the political planning taking place and chooses instead to dance with a blind man named Bovanne who everyone ignores. Dancing with Bovanne becomes a major source of embarrassment for her children, who castigate their mother for behavior they regard as indecent. Hazel, however, who cannot relate to the lofty political ambitions of her children, sees her dancing as nothing scandalous at all. Hazel is 'mother and mother dispossessed'



precisely because she is affectively, socially, and economically removed from the political lives and desires of her children. The emotional rift between Hazel and her children is reflected in Bambara's sketch of an essential generational difference, which she conveys through her characters' varying attitudes, positions and orientations to the changing face of black politics. Mary Helen Washington argued that Bambara approaches the image of the black woman in literature through the mother-child conflict, which, in contrast to the conflicts between black men and black women, has gone largely unexamined as a central antagonism in black literature by women. Washington asserts: "Though her children are grown she is still young and hearty enough to wear her dresses short, talk to the old gentlemen, taste a little liquor, and when she wants to get sharp, she *will* wear herself a wig. The trouble is her kids done got revolutionary, and are ashamed of her earthly ways. According to them, she needs to cornrow her hair, wear the long African style dress, and show the proper amount of decorum for her age."<sup>[19]</sup>

[20] But Hazel's emotional resistance to this exclusive political scene only partly hinges on the ideological and generational difference between herself and her children. Hazel's resistance is also the effect of her own performance of "diva citizenship." To draw from Lauren Berlant's formulation, "diva citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege."

[20] Hazel thwarts the "dominant story" of young black revolutionaries born to political consciousness who celebrate their estrangement from their roots. She stands in for everything they attempt to transcend: a history of labor, struggle, and organizing in the south, but also its regional politics and violent oppressions. And yet Hazel is meant to bear the burden of these contrasting ideologies, as the contradictory socio-poetics of the north and the south are projected onto her. Hazel at one point in the story exclaims, "I ain't never been souther than Brooklyn Battery..." and at another point her children tell her to "take them countrified rags" off her head "and be cool." Hazel is enmeshed in a dialectical struggle between the rural south and urban north, of country life and cool urban political expression, cultural differences her children purport to have seamlessly transcended.

[21] In a particularly heart-wrenching but at the same time comic moment, Hazel faces her children's refusal and dismissal of her sexuality directly when she is told that she is dancing "like one of them sex starved ladies getting on in years and not too discriminating." "Like one of *them* sex starved ladies." In a single turn of phrase, Bambara signals the shameful paradoxes that have historically attended black femininity - undesirable yet lascivious, visually unappealing and unreadable, yet sexually omnipresent. Appearing now as stripped, evacuated and overfull, Hazel is the "unimaginably dense point" into which all of these thematics are "squeezed" (to re-invoke Baker). Specifically, Hazel stands in as a point of convergence for Black Power discourse, Black Nationalist discourse, and Black Aesthetic critics: "on behalf of blacks who may disagree with the politics these groups espouse...Mama Hazel represents the African-American artist grappling with the reality of Black Aesthetic criticism."<sup>[21]</sup> Her body is the culminating or "zero degree point of reduction" for the desires of her children and their aspirational black politics, but also an expanding black literary hermeneutics.

[22] Hazel's 'dramatic coup' contests the terms of political inscription with her body, itself debased,

degraded and reduced to an object of derision and condescension. And she contests her interpellation into this political space, through performance. The other subject of this story is Hazel's performance, specifically her dancing, which her children regard as lewd and unseemly, but could also be taken as an example of what Daphne Brooks calls *eccentric performance*. In the setting of the political rally, we get the sense that Hazel is "off-center." She makes her subjugated body move more freely by engaging in an "empowering oddness."<sup>[22]</sup> So much of Bambara's descriptive power is devoted to describing the pleasure and joy Hazel experiences dancing with the blind man, Bovanne. Consider the visceral closeness she describes:

I press up close to dance with Bovanne and he blind and I'm hummin and he hummin chest to chest like talkin. Not jammin my breasts into the man. Wasn't bout tits. Was bout vibrations. And he dug it and asked what color the dress I had on and how my hair was fixed, and how I was doin without a man, not nosy but nice-like, and who was at this affair...<sup>[23]</sup>

[23] What shows up as spectacle for Hazel's children, is the uncomfortable intertwining of their mother's bodily excess, her fleshiness, and Bovanne's blindness. The intertwining of black femininity's deformed sensuality with blindness's incapacity is a grotesque coupling that the children just cannot bear. And it is not so much Hazel's excessive presence that is the problem for the young revolutionaries, but something far more subtle, complex, and contradictory that disturbs the text's humorous surface. Bambara introduces us to another difficulty: Hazel's body is undesirable, unreadable, but also not writable, and so Bambara must appeal to a vernacular aesthetic that reflects and gives shape to the distinct problem that attends black femininity. It is not that Hazel is so ubiquitous/invisible that we cannot see her, but that Mama Hazel stands in for the potentiality of everything we cannot see.

[24] Bambara is offering us a speculative optics, an alternative visuality, a haptically dense scene composed around the communion of Hazel and Bovanne, around bodily touch and vibration, that reworks our assumptions regarding the symmetrical correlation of sight with visibility and blindness with invisibility. Bambara is invested in what happens at the limits of the visible and of sight, in a way that queries the logical opening of invisibility to sight, as she invokes the absorptive logic of black (w)holeness. Desire, representation, and fungibility reach their expressive limits in Bambara's black female comic hero. The painful humor of "My Man Bovanne" ties these excesses of black femininity to the theme of visibility. Hazel's body, completely fungible, is too much to represent, to desire and to see. Bambara demonstrates how the vanishing presence of the black maternal body circumscribes the limits of what counts as visible-able in the first place. She complicates this phenomenology of vision even further by introducing the element of Bovanne's blindness, which is refracted through the metaphysical problem of Hazel's excessive presence.

[25] Indeed, what makes "My Man Bovanne" at once so painfully funny and revelatory is our discovery of Hazel's performative possibility – the way she works out and turns out her body to constitute a re-working of the black woman's body on, out, and over the apparatuses of capture and display that have historically scripted black embodiment. (We might here think of television as one such technical apparatus of capture that paradoxically engineers the transformative power of the black feminine in the

image of Anita Hill.) Returning to Hazel: we are told she dances like a sex-crazed, sex-deprived "bitch in heat," as one of her children accuses. And her son Task chastises: "You've been tattooed on the man for four records straight and slow draggin even on the fast numbers." A vision of black dance forms and black dance circles structures the ineffable rhythm of Bambara's language and black vernacular speech. That thing Hazel does with her partner, what she calls "Touch talkin," prefigures what we call contact improvisation: feeling another dancer as the condition for movement improvisation. And in the dizzying movement from rhythm to skin to flesh, the text initiates an unavoidable intimacy between two presumably undesirable bodies, and in so doing, signals a tying together of different texts and traditions, and a collective return to the vernacular. Here is Bambara alluding to the unifying capacity of black literature in 1970, in *The Black Woman Anthology*:

What characterizes the current movement of the 60s is a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other. Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, chauvinism: America or imperialism...Our energies now seem to be invested in and are in turn derived from a determination to touch and to unify. What typifies the current spirit is an embrace, an embrace of the community and a hard-headed attempt to get basic with each other.<sup>[24]</sup>

[26] Hazel's insistent yet tragicomic occupation of the dance floor with her blind partner Bovanne directs us to this 'unifying energy' and to forms of relationality that may be said to constitute a black feminist future vision as well as an imaginary ecology. That ecology abounds in the interplay between the irreducible sensuality of black vernacular life and black political consciousness. Hazel and Bovanne's dancing negotiates that interplay. But Hazel also opens a scene that takes on accent, color, and shape not only because of the way she chooses to move, but the way that her movement brings a noise. We are cued in to listen to a "*hummin vibration*" that expands upon blindness' "*hummin jones*." Hazel and Bovanne, together like the whirr of a machine, dance on and into one another; their fleshy intimacy lends black performance a certain depth, strangeness, and imaginative force.

[27] But it is Hazel who dances out of her body, only briefly to reclaim it with a difference. Think of the way Hazel moves across and synthesizes the textual and the material in the same way as the gathering force of the stain of Anita Hill's image. We might say that Hazel is a *dancing machine*: She gets down, *does her thing right on the scene*, and in doing so, performs a deconstruction of the presumed divide between the scene of politics, of vernacular life, and our television screens; between the scenes of popular and radical black performance, and our so-called anthropocene. Hazel *synthesizes* "color, vibes design" as she cuts up and gets down, and attempts to, in Bambara's words, "get basic." Through Hazel we can imagine "...a feminist ...building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space, stories," a feminist speaking in tongues, as Donna Haraway would have it. Mama Hazel and Donna Haraway share the same dream: "Though...bound in the spiral *dance*, [Hazel] would rather be a cyborg than a goddess."<sup>[25]</sup> Perhaps it is the 'cyborg' that moves retrospectively closer to Michael, Jermaine, Tito, Randy, and Jackie's sparkling ode to the synthesizing power of Hazel's anticipatory figuration of the machinic black feminine only two years after Hazel and Bambara in 1974:

*Dancing, dancing, dancing She's a dancing machine Ah babe Move it baby Automatic Systematic Full of color self contained Tuned and gentle to your vibes Captivating Stimulating She said you sexy lady Filled with space age design She's moving She's grooving dancing until the music stop now Yea Rythmatic acrobatic She's a dynamite attraction At the drop of a coin she comes alive Yeah She knows what she's doing She super bad now She's geared to blow your mind Dancing, dancing, dancing She's a dancing machine Ah babe Do it baby Dancing, dancing, dancing She's a dancing machine Ah babe Move it baby She's a dance, dance, dance, dance, dancing machine Watch her get down, watch her get down As she do, do, do her thing Right on the scene She's a dance, dance, dance, dance, dancing machine Watch her get down, watch her get down As she do, do, do her thing Right on the scene Come on babe Come on babe Babe Babe Shake it baby Shake it babe Babe Babe Babe Dance Dance Dance Dance I like it I like I love you She's a dance, dance, dance, dance, dancing machine Watch her get down, watch her get down As she do, do, do her thing Right on the scene She's a dance, dance, dance, dance, dancing machine Watch her get down, watch her get down*

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## Notes

1. Toni Morrison, "Friday on the Potomac," in *Race-in Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and The Construction of Social Reality*, xviii.
2. Nahum Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, 12.
3. Ibid.
4. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Towards a Global Idea of Race*, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2007. xxx.
5. Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-slavery Subjects*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, 3.
6. See Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Massachusetts Review*, 13 (1972).
7. Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. 6.2-3 (1994).
8. See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
9. See Hortense Spillers "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, 17:2, (1987).
10. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, 37-38.
11. Frank Wilderson, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structures of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 16.
12. It should be noted that 'black w/whole' is Wallace's punctuation. These varying modes of punctuation suggest something interesting about the performative function of the black woman who is imagined as occupying this impossible figure of the black w/whole, or (w)hole.
13. Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*, New York: Verso, 2008, 218.
14. Houston Baker, *Blues Ideology and African American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 151.
15. Wallace, 216.

16. Baker, 146.
17. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, 17:2, (1987), 80.
18. Sarah Jane Cervenak, *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.
19. Mary Helen Washington, "Their Fiction Becomes out Reality" in *Black World/Negro Digest*, special issue on Black Women Image Makers, Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1974, 16.
20. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 223.
21. Bertram D. Ashe, *From Within the Frame: Story-telling in African American Fiction*, New York: Routledge, 2002, 87. I am grateful to Ashe for the vernacular contrast I read into Bambara's story, as well as his distinction between the North and South's contrasting socio-poetics.
22. Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 6.
23. Toni Cade Bambara, *Gorilla, My Love*. NY, New York: Random House, 1972.
24. Toni Cade Bambara quoted in Bertram D. Ashe, *From Within the Frame*, 7.
25. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1991, 181. (emphasis added)

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