

“WHATCHA GONNA DO?”—REVISITING “MAMA’S BABY, PAPA’S MAYBE: AN AMERICAN GRAMMAR BOOK”

A CONVERSATION WITH HORTENSE SPILLERS, SAIDIYA HARTMAN, FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN,
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SE Thank you, Hortense, for making time to talk with us. Jennifer and I are really grateful that the three of you came out on a Saturday evening. Can we begin with Farah and Saidiya talking about how “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” has influenced your work, and then maybe Hortense can begin with discussing how you teach or talk about it.

FG There are times when I’ve specifically gone to the essay, knowing that there’s something in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” that will be helpful and useful to me, and then there are times later on I realize without even knowing it consciously, the article has informed and influenced things that I have done. I wrote this essay called “Textual Healing” and I started out by using your sources, by asking, where did she get that information?! How did she even know to go these particular sources? For so many of us, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” was the first time we even thought about some of the things that you cited. When I wrote that essay, which is really about what we call neoslave narratives now, trying to think about the history that these women writers were responding to, the frame that I was beginning to understand, that history was set up for me by “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” I was writing a review essay for *Signs* on black feminism in the academy, and as I began to talk about Hortense Spillers, I realized that the work of so many people of my generation has been formed in relationship to this essay. I was focusing on literary critics—Sharon Holland, Elizabeth Alexander, Fred Moten, Lindon Barrett, all of us—and I thought how I literally could not think of another essay, I don’t know—maybe “The Souls of Black Folk?”—I really couldn’t think of another essay that had that kind

of impact on a generation. The essay has profoundly informed my work and the work of the people with whom I consider myself in dialogue.

SH Indebtedness is the word that comes to mind that I would use to describe my relation to Hortense's work. That's how I would summarize it. I mean I am still struggling with the problematic terms that "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" has generated, I am still thinking through Hortense's prism. I do have a question about how feminism as a critique or a rubric explains or fails to explain your own critical intervention. It's interesting in that the first paragraph of the essay opens with all the names of the marked woman, but in the second paragraph it's the problem of the color line that explains the territory in which that naming takes place. I'd like to think about your own project's relationship to feminism. I think it has a critical relationship to that project but I don't think that your work can be encompassed by the feminist project.

HS You know, I have always been very interested and humbled by people's response to "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." What I was trying to do when I wrote that essay many years ago was to find a vocabulary that would make it possible, and not all by myself, to make a contribution to a larger project. I was looking for my generation of black women who were so active in other ways, to open a conversation with feminists. Because my idea about where we found ourselves in the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, was that we were really out of the conversation that we had, in some ways, historically initiated. In other words, the women's movement and the black movement have always been in tandem, but what I saw happening was black people being treated as a kind of raw material. That the history of black people was something you could use as a note of inspiration but it was never anything that had anything to do with you—you could never use it to explain something in theoretical terms. There was no discourse that it generated, in terms of the mainstream academy that gave it a kind of recognition. And so my idea was to try to generate a discourse, or a vocabulary that would not just make it desirable, but would necessitate that black women be in the conversation. And that is a theoretical conversation about any number of things but one of the things is certainly the feminist project. I had to write a piece called "Interstices . . ." for a feminist conference at Barnard College in 1982. I was supposed to talk about black women, the

sexuality of black women. And I thought, you know what, before I can get to the subject of the sexuality of black women I didn't see a vocabulary that would make it possible to entertain the sexuality of black women in any way that was other than traumatic. Before you could have a conversation about sexuality of black women you had to clear the static, clear the field of static.

And so "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" was really somewhere in there along with "Neither Nor," "Permanent Obliquity," and maybe one or two others. They all belong to that decade when we were searching for a vocabulary and didn't find one that was immediately available. The available discourses all seemed to come out of experiences that somehow, when they got to me, did a detour. [Laughter.] Or the language broke down. Or it could not speak in theoretical terms. There were always reasons why the academy couldn't address race and gender. And so my anxiety was finding a way to actually be in battle. To actually go to war with a whole repertoire of violent behavior that was always performed in a very genteel way. You know, people sitting around tables, sipping wine, eating cheese. They are just the nicest people in the world, [laughter] but they are carefully cloaking just an incredible hostility. And so the idea was to break from that barrier.

It always seems that we are recreating the wheel in that way. You know, there are all these earlier pioneers in the institutional works of the black intellectual. I mean all of that work has been done, but then what happens is that the forces that are really hostile to black life, to black people, are always operating. So that we are in a period of reaction now that is so strong, that if we are not careful the work we are doing now is going to have to be "rediscovered" at some point. You know, people are going to have to keep doing it, or rediscover it again, or reassert it because the forces of opposition are so forceful and so powerful and they're always pushing against us, they always want to enforce forgetfulness. They always want to do something that forgets the African presence or reabsorbs it, reappropriates it in another way. The need to confront psychological violence, epistemic violence, intellectual violence is really powerful. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" was about bolstering myself, living to fight another day—I became very good at being a marksman and ducking.

JM I read "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" as a historian of slavery, a

historian of early modern slavery, and like Farah and Saidiya, when I go back to the essay I am stunned to realize how much “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” generated my own work. Just trying to write a history of women in slavery, to claim that vocabulary, to see what happens when you say—OK, there are people there who this entire field has attempted to erase. I just want to put them back out there. There are people across the academy who are looking for that vocabulary, and that’s why the essay speaks so powerfully across so many fields and to such a wide variety of those of us who are working to confront the violence of the past and in our fields.

FG In many ways I think that the project of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” is successful because it did become work we didn’t have to do again. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” gave us a vocabulary. I was wondering if you remember what was the response of some of your peers to the essay when it appeared?

HS You know it was kind of astonishing. I think some of it was the venue in which it appeared, I mean it came out in *Diacritics*.

All [Laughter.] We remember . . .

HS You know, I knew that something weird or odd had happened because the people who were telling me that they had read the essay, or who were talking about the essay, were white men. And so I thought—uh, oh, is this good or bad—I don’t know what this means! And it was gay white men. The first people who responded to me in relationship to this essay—outside the community of African Americanists, or African American African Americanists—were gay white men. And I thought that was really pretty remarkable that they were interested in this.

SE That might be about the way that your essay intervenes in the patriarchal structure of family, an arena which queer studies, especially gay male studies, has to find a way to critique as well if the gay male subject can somehow have the authority of a “man” who does not produce this family in the way that a hetero man might.

I’d like to raise the question of anti-race race men, or cosmopolitanism—a sometimes well-meaning idea to deracinate the intellectual

or critique the discourses of race, which somehow, though, also reifies the discourse of gender, a masculinist superiority. Because you have to recognize the role of gender, of masculinity, in the construction of the cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitanism comes back to the idea of a civilized intellectual that is, of course, founded on the patriarchal family and the legacy of the patriarch. How have you engaged the conversation around cosmopolitanism?

HS Well, I guess I have, and I think another way to ask your question is to wonder if I have ever been attacked by scholars committed to cosmopolitanism? I have been trying to think of ways to get into that conversation and demolish it. What the conversation does is truncate half of the discussion and it chooses the straw man to argue against. But it seems to me that the worldling, the cosmopolitan, is always figured in these conversations as male. It seems to me that the notion of the cosmopolitan is a way to reclaim positions that have been given up; that the framing of the conversation is a way to reassert race as hegemonic male whiteness. It's reclaiming certain features of a very old argument.

SH What I understand your essay to be doing, in part, is questioning the purchase of gender as an analytic category. For me, part of the power of the essay is really about mobilizing black feminism and postcolonialism to do the work of interrogating the writing of the human. I guess I am thinking about two axes of what we're doing. One is the claiming of Hortense Spillers as a feminist foremother and also about the containment of the project under the rubric of "feminism"; and the second aspect concerns the larger ground clearing that is involved in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," which is why it begins in early modernity—it's not only about the specific names, which open the essay, but also the larger order of naming.

HS So, I think what you're suggesting is that the essay is attempting to look beyond the feminist project to a larger human project; is that right?

SH Yes, that's how I understand the essay.

HS I think that is what I was trying to do, at the same time that I wanted to point out what is problematic about black women stopping at the

gender question. Because the refusal of certain gender privileges to black women historically was a part of the problem. At the same time, that you have to sort of see that and get beyond it and get to something else, because you are trying to go through gender to get to something wider. And I think that's why men were in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." That is what I was trying to suggest about certain performances of maleness on the part of black men, and what I was hoping to suggest is that black men can't afford to appropriate the gender prerogatives of white men because they have a different kind of history; so you can't just simply be patriarchal. You have to really think about something else as you come to that option. If there is any such thing as a kind of symbiotic blend or melding between our human categories, in this case of the diasporic African, then this is the occasion for it. Men of the black diaspora are the only men who had the opportunity to understand something about the female that no other community had the opportunity to understand, and also vice versa. Virginia Woolf talked about the "incandescent intelligence" that Shakespeare supposedly had that was neither male nor female. I think I am probably not talking about a thing that is somehow male *and* female; but I think it is a kind of humanity that we seem very far from, and that I used to think black culture was on the verge of creating. I think I am less sure now that we're on the verge of creating that than I was growing up. When I was growing up, I thought I saw in black culture a kind of democratic form that I haven't seen quite like that since. It just seemed that that community automatically did something in relationship to being human that was really quite different. That people did whatever work was to be done, whether it was "men's work" or "women's work," if it needed to be done, people simply did it; to raise children, to maintain communities. As I see it now, success in black culture has brought us a lot closer to appropriating gender dynamics that I do not necessarily like. That a black man can be an entrepreneur and a capitalist and a black woman can be "feminine" and sit at home—we're getting much closer to those binaries, and I suppose any issue of *Ebony* will show you this. [Laughter.]

JM You used the phrase "African diasporic subject." One of the things you do so powerfully in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" is talk about the *space* of the middle passage, and that what happened there, was a violence that caused gender to evaporate. So then I think about that model

and all of the work that has been done subsequently around the organizing frame of the Black Atlantic, the rubric of “the Diaspora,” thinking about movement and about how a kind of diasporic racialized subject gets put into place as a result of the violence of the transatlantic slave trade. Like Saidiya, I don’t think this piece is contained by feminism. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” actually makes a very strong claim that dislodges gender as the originary space defining difference—and, rather, says that what defines difference, if you start with the transatlantic trade as the inaugural, is racialized violence. Is the work that’s done on the black Atlantic, the Diaspora, as a way to organize scholarship, as a way to organize departments, as a way to organize conversations, does that feel to you as a place that might push us forward? You said that you used to see black culture on the verge of creating something different, and then you see a retreat. Does thinking through the Diaspora, or the Black Atlantic, help?

HS No. [Laughter.] Actually what I think about the Black Atlantic is that it really is a very close funky little room with all the men in it—and they’re all speaking English. [Laughter.]

And that’s really what that is; it really is a way to, I think, escape the female again. In fact I am thinking that maybe the introduction of the global model, and the transculture, these are all ways, perhaps, to escape the messiness of gender. Gender as I was trying to mean it in those essays I produced in the late 1980s/early 1990s. In other words, gender as an issue for everybody and not just for women, or black women and black men. Maybe these terms—“Black Atlantic,” “Diasporic”—are covering terms. They simply redescribe some prior hegemonic sense of priority that I find troubling. In my new project, I would like to think about current forms of cultural production in cities of the Atlantic with critical black populations in relation to theories about black diasporic culture. I would like to take up the issue of the Black Atlantic to see how those theoretical interventions are operating in the actual Diaspora. I suspect that the way that the concept of the Black Atlantic is currently being configured is a way to circumvent gender rather than to further complicate it.

SE I’d like to ask you about how you see black feminism today?

HS I wonder where it is, actually. I think that the feminism as of the 1980s became curricular objects; in the same way that black studies did in relation to black liberation movements. I am very fascinated with that moment. Something happens on a dime, it happens imperceptibly. There is a movement in the normal day and by the afternoon there is a curricular object. All of a sudden, it would seem, the conversation changes, and it is so sudden it is institutionally traumatic, and for some individuals it is traumatic. You are talking about one day presenting fourteen demands to the provost's office and the next morning you are trying to identify the chairperson of the new department and the logistics involved—that's a very interesting moment. And I think it bears the conundrums of its past, so that there are feminists, and then there are feminists. In other words, there are women in this country today who legitimately wonder, what happened to their movement? But it went to the university. To the disciplines. With fund-raising imperatives, and hiring practices; and that's a different animal from the movement, from the polemics that come out of jail time and confronting the police. So what feminism has become is a curricular object that, in the living memory of at least one of its generations, has a very different source—a movement component. And the people entering the academy have so benefited from the movement that they don't see that they need it, they don't feel that they need to declare a feminist allegiance in that way. Indeed, many women are actively hostile to the idea of a feminist politics, they are actually hostile. And this isn't a smart position, because it will mean that we will have to fight those battles again, this will come back, because somehow we haven't figured out a way to carry historical memory, with feminists, or with women, who very quickly want to forget. The cost of Americanization, of equality, is to forget. In black culture a narrative of antagonism is inscribed in its memory. For others, the narrative of Americanization means that you have to forget the old country, the old land, the old pain, that you must forget it, that is the price that you pay. I think that is where we are with women today. The mainstream success coming off the women's movement, is like what Prof. Zillah Eisenstein calls the "decoy." In other words, if you want to advance the most retrogressive policies, you can advance them, you can sell the poison by way of the decoy. I feel that we have reached one of the most dangerous periods in American history, and it is borne on the back of the civil rights and feminist movements

that was spearheaded by black people and radical white people and that has now been co-opted by neofascist forces in this society. You can now sell it.

FG So that Condoleeza Rice can say, and only she would say, that the terrorists who killed the four little girls are “just like” the terrorists we are fighting now. Only she can say that.

HS Everything has been pulled inside out.

SH It’s interesting that you use the term “neofascism,” because to return to “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” in thinking about the temporality of slavery, I tend to think of you alongside of George Jackson. Because the essay isn’t only about the historical experience of slavery, but about what continues to live on from that experience. In that context I wonder about the future of a black radical feminism. Much attention, for example, has now gone into thinking about the prison state.

HS I have always thought that where the women’s movement was moving was towards a society that did justice towards everyone. So that for black feminism, radical feminism, to morph into a concern with prison reform or health care is appropriate. These and the other big issues of our time seem to me to be an appropriate extension of human rights. An opening up, along those stages, I guess, that come out of particular local movements, that lead to something bigger, broader, and finer than what we’ve had. Except that for a little while we’ve gone backwards, though I can’t imagine that we are going to stay here very long. But there’s forward momentum, and when people are in pain long enough they wake up to where they are. So I am thinking that we really make a mistake when we read those movements in their particularity ultimately, because I think that the start is particular, but that their thrust is and must always be outward, broader.

FG I had a final question; did you have any sense that “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” would stand out in the ways that it did?

HS No, no, I didn’t. But I try to think of what particular event generated that essay. I know that I started to think about that essay at the time that

I wrote about Ishmael Reed and Harriet Beecher Stowe. And I know that when I wrote “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” that I wrote it with a feeling of hopelessness. I was very emotional when I wrote it. I was on the verge of crying about what I was writing about. And I was trying to explain what seemed to me impossible to explain. Gloria T. Hull, Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith had come out with the collection *All the Blacks Are Men, All the Women Are White, but Some of Us Are Brave*, and that was the situation that I was trying to describe. Conceptually and theoretically. What was that like? I had an urge to find a category that respected history. I wrote it with a sense of urgency, with a need to tell something that had been told over and over again—I knew that none of it was new. But what was new was that I was trying to bring the language of a postmodern academy to a very old problem, a problem that historians had been writing about for at least fifty years at the time that I was writing this piece. 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. That’s your situation. But I am like the white elephant in the room. Though you can’t talk about the era of sound in the U.S. without talking about blues and black women. You can’t talk about the eras of slavery in the Americas without talking about black women, or black men without black women and how that changes the community—there is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women. But no one wants to address them. I felt that in 1986 and 1987 no one wanted to put a theoretical spin on this, I mean we really are invisible people. And I just kind of went nuts. And I am saying, I am here now, and I am doing it now, and you are not going to ignore me. And so all of those essays are saying—I am here now, “Whatcha gonna do?”

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