

# RETHREADING THE FABRIC OF MYSTERY: THINKING MYTH, COUNTER-MYTH, AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY WITH HORTENSE SPILLERS

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## *Abstract*

Hortense Spillers asserts the imperative for black writers to reconfigure the languages they inherit. One way of doing so is to craft counter-myths against dominative mythologies. Spillers casts myth as an integration of form and concept which overdetermines the significance of what it is used to talk about. One crucial effect of America's racialising mythos has been to deny black women the ability to determine that significance. She then describes how this mythos is crafted through a double wounding that creates at least two 'interstices'—first between home and market, then between blackness and humanity—which are covered up by mythological terms. Finally, Spillers shows how counter-mythologies can be crafted by speaking from within these interstices to reconfigure the conditions of possibility governing meaningful speech, taking the 19th-century African-American preaching tradition as her example. The article concludes by reflecting on what it might mean to practice Christian theology as counter-mythology in light of Spillers' work through a reading of Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*.

*Keywords:* Hortense Spillers; Myth; Counter-Myth; Christian Theology; Edwidge Danticat.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In her extended introduction to the essays collected in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, Hortense Spillers writes that 'black writers, whatever their location and by whatever . . . allegiances they are compelled, must retool the language(s) that they inherit'.<sup>1</sup> This is the 'work of logological refashioning',<sup>2</sup> a critical reconfiguration not just of language's visible phenomena—the poisons of cliché,<sup>3</sup> for example—but also of the

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structures through which phenomena are made to mean, such as ‘the pulsating infestations that course through the grammars of “race”’.<sup>4</sup> Under conditions of anti-blackness, black writers must use language in ways that alter the conditions of possibility operative in their given worlds of meaning. Casting this in terms that Spillers uses elsewhere, the imperative is to make meaning, ‘but in a way that riddles sense’.<sup>5</sup>

This grammatical insurgency cannot be abstracted from the concrete hows of black life. At the same time, it is not marked by an affect of defensiveness, to use Jennifer Nash’s (admittedly controversial) term.<sup>6</sup> Ralph Ellison’s work of logological refashioning, for example,

harnessed ‘blackness’ to a symbolic program of philosophical ‘disobedience’ (a systematic skepticism and refusal) that would make the [critical posture of blackness] available to *anyone*, or more pointedly, *any* posture, that was willing to take on the formidable task of thinking as a willful act of imagination and invention.<sup>7</sup>

‘Blackness’ names something concrete, then, marking a ‘critical posture’ won and wrought from particular locations. It is emphatically not the case that just anyone can say what blackness is or claim it as (a) property, nor is it the case that anyone can take on this posture as a matter of course. But in Spillers’ rendering of Ellison, this specifies a challenge to other forms of thought to engage in *this particular* logological work. Any posture willing to take on this task can be challenged by the critical posture of blackness to pursue thinking in this light.

Hovering in the wings of this article is the question of whether Christian theology can participate in logologically refashioning a world whose colonising logics it helped craft.<sup>8</sup> But before broaching this question—as well as the work of scholars such as J. Kameron Carter and Amaryah Shae Armstrong, who show what it might be asking<sup>9</sup>—it is important to dwell with the intricacies of Spillers’ account. This article thus explores how the work of logological refashioning is articulated in Spillers’ wider corpus, focusing on a single aspect of her multifaceted project—her account of myth and counter-myth.<sup>10</sup> I begin by tracing this account of ‘myth’. I then explore Spillers’ rendering of how North America’s racialising mythos is made. Finally, I work through one way she articulates the development of counter-myth. I end by reflecting on what it means to pursue Christian theology as a practice of counter-mythology.

## II. MYTH

Spillers articulates one of the most fundamental aspects of myth while reflecting on the concept of ‘virility’. Tracing this concept in terms of white male access to women as property, she notes that it does not matter if ‘the principle of

virility is . . . fraught with chance'<sup>11</sup> as a matter of fact. It does not matter, that is, if 'virility' does not actually exist as its concept says it must. This is because 'we are talking about myth here, or those boundaries of discourse that fix and determine belief, practice, and desire'.<sup>12</sup> The ideal of virility is immunised from contingency because it frames the world of contingent things before it functions as an element in that world. It is a constitutive myth, 'fixing and determining' what its constituents can think to want. This bounding function sets the context for exploring myth in its particulars.

With this as a starting point, we can trace Spillers' sense of myth as elucidated in two early essays: 'Ellison's "Usable Past": Toward a Theory of Myth' and 'A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love: Three Women's Fiction'. Having noted that Ralph Ellison insists that 'black American experience is vulnerable to mythic dilation',<sup>13</sup> Spillers focuses the early sections of 'Ellison's "Usable Past"' on what precisely 'myth' means. This is made difficult by the fact that the term 'has achieved such flexibility that it is menaced by meaning everything and nothing in particular'.<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes' rendering of myth, however, has the advantage that it simultaneously frees us 'from certain inherited or monolithic notions of mythic form'<sup>15</sup> whilst also rendering this flexibility as part of the 'something' that myth can mean. This is because myth for Barthes is 'not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message'.<sup>16</sup> The meaning of a myth is defined by the character of the symbolism through which it is communicated, not the 'objective' features of what it communicates.

Spillers develops this by positing that 'mythic form is a kind of conceptual code, relying on the accretions of association that cling to the concept—"a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions"'.<sup>17</sup> Within this, myth itself emerges as an 'integrative paradigm of form and concept'<sup>18</sup> through which the resonances of the accretions that in-form this conceptual code are projected onto objects in ways that determine what those objects mean independently of any influence they might exert on their own expression.<sup>19</sup> 'Myth' thereby connotes an integration of form and concept in which the space between significance and enunciation collapses: the 'how' of enunciation, given form by the accretions of memory, utterly determines the significance. To say that black American experience is vulnerable to 'mythic dilation' is thus at least in part to say that various 'accretions of association' encode the representation of black experience and reality to such an extent that the meanings of this experience and this reality are overdetermined by how these modes of representation are fabricated.

This is a first aspect of myth; meaning is determined by the symbolism's form(ation). A second aspect is given in the relationship between archetype and H/history. Having already identified two 'orders of circularity'—patterns of repetition through which a narrator's speech both accrues meaning and has its

meanings unsettled<sup>20</sup>—in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Spillers notes a 'third order of circularity . . . imposed on the second'.<sup>21</sup> This is 'articulated through certain figures of archetype . . . and consists of commonly identifiable symbols of authority'.<sup>22</sup> The meaning of 'archetype' is then specified through Maud Bodkin's definition of archetypes as 'psychic residua inherited "in the structure of the brain, *a priori*, determinants of individual experience"'.<sup>23</sup> Archetype becomes an 'indispensable figure' for mythic studies through this determining function.<sup>24</sup>

'A Hateful Passion' illuminates *how* archetypes determine experience. Spillers here turns to Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* to clarify 'an analogy of the archetype from which [Toni Morrison's] *Sula* deviates'.<sup>25</sup> She argues that *Jubilee*'s narrative logic belies the structure and workings of 'the myth of the black American woman',<sup>26</sup> in the sense that within its 'axis of time, with its accent on the eternal order of things, women and men in destiny move consistent with the stars in heaven'.<sup>27</sup> Walker's characters, that is, act out an eternal order rather than a self-interpreting material history, channeling a kind of transcendental temporality through which contingent events are rendered as communicating a necessary meaning. This is a time that makes 'material' time possible.

The nature of this transcendental temporality is then explicated by reference to a concept of divine will. As Spillers writes:

My own interpretation of [*Jubilee*] is that it is not only historical, but also, and primarily, Historical . . . 'Historical', in this sense, is a metaphor for the unfolding of the Divine Will. This angle on reality is defined by Paul Tillich as *theonomy*. Human history is shot through with divine presence so that its being and time are consistent with a plan that elaborates and completes the Will of God. In this view of things, human doings are only illusions of counterfeit autonomy; in Walker's novel agents (or characters) are moving and are moved under the aegis of a Higher and Hidden Authority.<sup>28</sup>

*Jubilee*'s history is the working out of a divine History, its happenings like steps in a cosmic Rube-Goldberg Machine. The destiny of liberation, for example, is 'disclosed by the hero or the heroine as an already-fixed and named event',<sup>29</sup> such that Walker's agents can be recognised as 'types or valences, and the masks through which they speak might be assumed as well by any other name'.<sup>30</sup> In their details, they are fungible—and in this, they are rendered according to mythic archetypes which *a priori* determine the significance of these details.

This is not to say that History is independent of history. Indeed, there is a fundamental connection between concrete life under slavery and the meaning of History. To take one example, Spillers describes the 'nocturnal order'

pervading Walker's text as constituted by the features of life that white mastery would render invisible; features of 'life under the confines of the slave community, where movement is constantly under surveillance . . . illegal and informal pacts and alliances between slaves; and above all, the slave's terrible vulnerability to fluctuations of fate'.<sup>31</sup> These are concrete elements of history, and we cannot articulate the Historical working out of liberation apart from them. Nonetheless, the *significance* of these features is not self-grounded. The ground of that significance is instead projected into the realm of mythic History as an hypostasised darkness, fixing meaning by reference to a putatively eternal order. The nightmare that paralyzes Walker's protagonist Vry during an escape attempt, for example, 'works its way into the resonances of the novel's structure',<sup>32</sup> so that Walker is led to posit *Jubilee's* most fundamental narrative realities as 'a subterranean structure of God terms'.<sup>33</sup> This nightmare's features thus coagulate into a conceptual code as the elements of history are pressed into History. 'Form' is integrated with 'concept' and their unity lifted out of material time. *Jubilee's* History charts an ineluctable movement towards liberation, with this nocturnal order manifesting one dimension of a mythic battle between forces of good and evil, death and life, slavery and freedom.

Two functions of archetype can now be clarified against this backdrop. First, it limits the options available for representing black women. According to the terms entrenched as History, the black American woman can be of two types, the first ensnared by evil, the second an avatar for emancipation's historical actualisation. Black women are thus limited to two narratives, two modes of valuation—for insofar as black American women are subject to this mythic archetype, they can only be enslaved or liberated-liberating. As Spillers writes of Morrison's anti-archetypal a-heroine, for example, 'we would like to love Sula, or damn her, inasmuch as the myth of the black American woman allows only Manichean responses'.<sup>34</sup> Archetype does not merely constrict in terms of limited options, moreover. It also forecloses freedom of another kind entirely: the freedom to create new options by rewriting History, and so the freedom to dissolve the 'killing myths' by and through which black American women are apprehended.<sup>35</sup>

A second function of archetype is then discernible in the fact that options nonetheless proliferate for the dominant culture to the same extent that they are foreclosed to black women.<sup>36</sup> As Spillers writes in 'Interstices: A Drama of Small Words', for example, 'from the point of view of the dominant mythology, it seems that sexual experience among black people . . . is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes . . . a medium in which the individual is suspended'.<sup>37</sup> Filtered by myth, the determination of meaning is so concentrated in the dominant symbolism of black sexuality that the specificities of the individual covered by this symbolism do not impact the significance of what is said of them. The symbolism is then open to so many proliferating uses consistent with its basic

function—in this instance, to mark the bounds of sexuality and gender as the province of ‘femininity’—that it opens up potentially boundless possibilities for the dominative imagination. Black American women can thus be simultaneously invested with seemingly contradictory terms, at once hyper- and un-sexed.<sup>38</sup> If the first effect of archetype is to constrict the possibilities open to black American women, then, a second is to make them incalculably vulnerable to those who police the bounds.<sup>39</sup> The common thread is that whatever the possibilities of meaning are, black women cannot reconfigure them—they are always the ‘object’ of discourse, never its constituting subject. So it is that ‘this sort of symbol-making is analogous to an act of mugging that catches the agent not only off guard, but also, most effectively, in the dark’.<sup>40</sup>

So, Spillers articulates myth as an integration of form and concept which fixes the boundaries of discourse by being treated as an eternal structure of transcendental time. The archetypal figures imprinted into myth then pattern the options available to black American women as agents of history, whose freedom cannot consist of rewriting the myths that overdetermine their material significance. This has the dual effect of constricting possibilities for agency *and* making them vulnerable to infinite proliferations of abuse by the dominant culture.

### III. FABRICATING AMERICA’S RACIALISING MYTHOS

In light of this rendering of myth, Spillers goes on to articulate the need for ‘counter-myths’ which can be used to uproot this order of things—not just in terms of new possibilities, but in terms of the power to determine how things are made possible in the first place. Before we can explore how counter-myths are crafted, however, we must get clear about the specificities of America’s racialising mythos. This section thus explores how racialising myths have been fabricated in North America, focusing on two essays: ‘Interstices’ and ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’.

‘Mama’s Baby’ takes Daniel Moynihan’s *The Negro Family*—infamous for describing black American families as deficient because of their predominantly matriarchal structures—as its point of departure, interrogating the mythical currents concealed by Moynihan’s seemingly empirical claims. The primary vehicle of myth for Moynihan is the concept of ‘ethnicity’, which ‘freezes in meaning, takes on constancy, assumes the look and the affects of the eternal’.<sup>41</sup> Connecting to ‘Ellison’s “Usable Past”’, Spillers posits ‘that in its powerful stillness, “ethnicity” ... embodies ... a mode of memorial time, as Roland Barthes outlines the dynamics of myth’.<sup>42</sup> More specifically, the ‘dominant symbolic activity’ in Moynihan’s assertions remains

grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as

the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism showing itself in endless disguise.<sup>43</sup>

Moynihan’s report thus ‘borrows its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past, that come to surround and signify the captive’.<sup>44</sup> Its mythology replicates the violence of the slave-trade. ‘Mama’s Baby’ then uncovers the history of these metaphors, laying bare their originary and repeated violence.

I am going to focus on one central operation of this myth-making: the institution of interstices between culture and its ‘vestibules’. Spillers elucidates how this institution takes place towards the beginning of ‘Interstices’. To quote in full:

My own interpretation of the historical narrative concerning the lives of black American women [is that] their enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome. Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all, as the myth of the black woman would tend to convince us, nor, alone, the primary receptacle of a highly profitable generative act. She became instead the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and ‘other’. At this level of radical discontinuity in the ‘great chain of being’, black is vestibular to culture. In other words, the black person mirrored for the society around her what a human being was *not*.<sup>45</sup>

Spillers begins by marking the enslavement which relegates flesh to the marketplace. This is an act of wounding that consists of two distinct but tightly interwoven rendings. The first rendering is given in the brute fact of stealing people to be enslaved. This is ‘a *theft* of the *body*—a *willful* and violent . . . severing of the captive body from its motive will’.<sup>46</sup> The deepest weight of this theft, however, rests in the fact that it is not just a ‘body’ that is stolen. After all, ‘in a very real sense, the “body”, insofar as it is an analytical construct, does not exist at all’.<sup>47</sup> What is stolen is ‘flesh’, so that it can be rendered a ‘body’ through its scarifying incorporation into the marketplace.

Spillers sets the framework for this claim by introducing a distinction ‘between “body” and “flesh” and [imposing] that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions’.<sup>48</sup> ‘Flesh’ connotes the position of the free subject—the position of those first stolen from the coast of West Africa. The theft of these subjects is regarded as high crime ‘against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and males registered the wounding’.<sup>49</sup> To think the flesh in this theft is thus to think its ‘seared, divided, ripped-

apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard'.<sup>50</sup> Stolen, African-Americans are rendered as those who 'in the split between "homes" . . . inhabit the subject-position whose corporate body is shattered between worlds'.<sup>51</sup> Put otherwise, this first wounding is a rending of flesh from home within which free subjects are divided, shattered, ripped open.

The myth of 'ethnicity' repeated in Moynihan's report has its first 'order of circularity' in this initial wounding. The second wounding, made possible by this first, then scarifies stolen African flesh so that it can be distinguished from and positioned as 'vestibular' to a dominant 'humanity'. Continuing through the passage above, we see that against myth's own claims, which would cast black women as reduced to carnality or as *merely* mechanisms for monetary and biological reproduction, and even against a rendering of black womanhood as simple negation, the black woman becomes 'the principle point of passage between the human and the non-human world'. Functioning as the 'route' through which any distinction between human and 'other' must pass, that is, she is neither simply human nor simply non-human—she becomes humanity's ideological membrane, deployed as the border across which the great chain of being becomes 'discontinuous'.

To be used this way, however, the black woman must be pre-emptively rent from a 'humanity' to which she never belonged. This is the second rending, a process which has both a 'transcendental' and a visceral aspect, neither of which can be abstracted from the other. Regarding the former, the rending of black women from 'humanity' is a condition of possibility for humanity's self-assertion. As Spillers writes, for example, figures of colonising humanity like 'father' and 'daughter' are 'unstable in their respective identities',<sup>52</sup> and so they must 'make doubles' of themselves. This doubling is produced by the interaction of kinship and property relations in the context of enslavement. Spillers notes that kinship loses meaning for enslaved families in this interaction, 'since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations'.<sup>53</sup> The imposition of this vulnerability is then what ensures that 'the "family" as we practice and understand it "in the West"—the vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles, and entitlements . . .—becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community'.<sup>54</sup> The privilege of kinship is reserved for the dominant culture by rendering it contingent for those this culture enslaved. Humanity then likewise becomes the assured privilege of an 'originally' free subject-position through the denial of this 'original' freedom to enslaved peoples. Insofar as 'humans' are those who have these privileges *by right*, that is, the black woman is used to mirror what 'a human being was *not*' by being cast as the paradigmatic figure to whom these privileges must be 'granted'. Because she is a subject who must be 'granted' freedom, she is used as 'the route by which the dominant modes decided the



distinction between humanity and “other”. What is decided of black women decides the limits of this distinction.

The visceral aspect of this transcendental manoeuvre then consists in *how* this ‘doubling’ is accomplished—in *how* enslaved peoples are imprisoned in a position whereby their inhumanity dictates that ‘human’ rights must be granted to them. This is the violence through which the flesh is concealed ‘under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography’,<sup>55</sup> consisting of the ‘lacerations, soundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, and punctures [that] create the distance between what I would designate a cultural *vestibularity* and *culture*’.<sup>56</sup> Enacting a ‘semiosis of procedure’,<sup>57</sup> these violences constitute the writing of what Spillers calls ‘the hieroglyphics of the flesh’.<sup>58</sup> They code enslaved flesh as bodies which can only be ‘human’ secondarily, and so never claim the originary freedom of ‘humanity’ as its own. Torn from home, the flesh is thus forced into a captive subject position from which it can be deployed as ‘vestibular to culture’ (without, it is essential to note, ceasing to be *flesh*. The captive of slavery is still that ‘zero degree of social conceptualization’ which must, on some level, be known as *free* before it is anything else. The flesh cannot be finally obliterated).<sup>59</sup>

To recapitulate; a first moment of wounding both makes possible and is overlaid by a second—the rending of flesh from home makes it possible to mark enslaved peoples as ‘mirroring’ what the ‘human’ is not. This American myth-making now culminates in the weaving of archetypes to symbolically bind the black woman to this vestibular role. This brings us to one of the core arguments of ‘Interstices’—that ‘the black American female, whether whore or asexed, serves [as a means] for the symbolically empowered on the American scene [to assure their dominance] in fixing the frontier of “woman” with her own being’.<sup>60</sup> Given the constitutive link between gender and sexuality, that is, the black woman guarantees ‘womanhood’ because she is always originally suspect in her sexual propriety. She encompasses both poles of an imagined binary of intensities to such an extent that ‘if life as the black person . . . leads it is the imagined site of an illegitimate sexuality, then it is also, paradoxically enough, the affirmation of asexuality’.<sup>61</sup> The black woman can thus be fabricated as whatever patriarchal, white, and/or white feminist power needs her to be in order to shore up the boundaries of ‘woman’. And when she is named as such, she is subsumed by archetypal figures woven out of this ‘necessity’. So it is that Spillers is a marked woman, hailed as “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar”, “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother”, all of which ‘are markers so loaded with mythical repossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clear’.<sup>62</sup> The dynamics of initial wounding are filtered through the demands of ‘womanhood’ and concentrated into eternal figurations which re-inflict this wounding on new generations.

So, the inscription of the hieroglyphics of the flesh ‘creates the distance between a cultural *vestibularity* and *culture*’—a distance which has been inscribed onto the distances created by the expropriation of flesh from home to market. These two intersecting spaces constitute what Spillers terms ‘interstices’, spaces-between in which new realities are crafted (in this instance to death-dealing effect). And when the myth of ethnicity becomes operative, almost instantaneously with its moment of fabrication, these interstices are covered by its archetypal formations—the myth papers over the wounds, and the ‘interstitial’ goes ‘unmarked so that the mythic view remains undisturbed’.<sup>63</sup> According to the conditions of possibility for language entrenched by myth, the spaces cannot be spoken. Against the names that cover Spillers above, one crucial element of counter-mythology will be to articulate ‘the missing word—the interstice—both as that which allows us to speak about and that which enables us to speak at all’.<sup>64</sup>

Rendered in terms of Spillers’ overarching account of myth, then, we can see how a collection of practices—lacerating, scarifying, puncturing—and their effects both constitute and are integrated with the concept of who they wound, forming a myth through which this semiosis of procedure is inflicted again and again. Thinking back to Spillers’ claim that the Moynihan Report is ‘grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history . . . show movement’, it can be said that this history of wounding is pressed into History, as if its ‘truth’ were ‘eternal and self-generating, authored elsewhere, beyond the reach of human inquiry’.<sup>65</sup> Fabricated on earth and read into the heavens, the myth attempts its own closure by papering over the constitutive interstices engraved by the slave trade’s original violence, actively forgetting its own history.<sup>66</sup>

#### IV. COUNTER-MYTHOLOGY

It is now possible to explore Spillers’ account of how counter-myths are developed against the dominant culture. Spillers does not conceive of counter-myth as simply presenting alternatives to the options that myth allows, whilst leaving the initial myth itself untouched. After describing Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an attempt to break away from myth, for example, according to which ‘woman must break loose from the hold of biography as older generations impose it’,<sup>67</sup> she argues that Hurston opposes the myth of the black woman to the possibility of individual escape. In Spillers’ own words, Hurston ‘attempts to counterpose this timeless current with elements of psychic specificity’.<sup>68</sup> This leads to greater freedom for Janie, Hurston’s protagonist. But it leaves the myth untouched, the timeless current undisturbed: ‘in a mode of fictive assumptions similar to Margaret Walker’s’, Hurston ‘inherits a

fabric of mystery without rethreading it. That is one kind of strategic decision. There are others.<sup>69</sup>

In contrast to this, Spillers articulates counter-myth as directed towards rethreading this fabric of mystery. Counter-myth does not merely break away from myth, but unsettles the conditions of possibility within which it is first narrated. Toni Morrison's *Sula* exemplifies this strategy, with Sula herself manifesting 'a kind of countermythology [since she is] no longer bound by a rigid pattern of predictions, predilections, and anticipations'.<sup>70</sup> The mere *possibility* of her coherent existence unsettles the patterns that bind the reader's anticipations, such that even though—indeed, perhaps because—she is not an exemplar to be imitated, her narrative rewires the grounds of expectation by pointing to something not conceivable in the mythic paradigm. The counter-myth thus tries 'to establish a dialectical movement between the sub-perspectives, gaining a totally altered perspective in the process'.<sup>71</sup> It does not aim at already seen and conceptualised goals, but subversive ways of conceptualising, subversive ways of seeing; 'subversion itself—law breaking—is an aspect of liberation that women must confront from its various angles'.<sup>72</sup>

Within this, crafting counter-mythology involves 'the creation of sentences that could not be anticipated, that violate the rules within the sights of grammar',<sup>73</sup> such that the grammar itself is rewired. It involves 'breaking apart and rupturing violently' the 'laws of American behaviour that make such [enslaving] syntax possible', thereby introducing 'a new *semantic* field/fold more appropriate to [the African-American's] own historic movement'.<sup>74</sup> How, then, is this to be practiced? As with Hurston, it cannot consist solely of disavowal. Immanent critique (developing critical arguments out of myth's own premises) and unveiling are also limited on their own—since 'the American race saga clings to incoherence',<sup>75</sup> after all, demonstrating internal contradictions is not enough to force mythic reconfiguration. This is not to say that the 'symptoms' of myth, the points where its attempted closure fails,<sup>76</sup> should not be identified. 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' is itself 'a series of inquiries designed to unpack a relay of contradictions rather like inscriptions of the "social symptom"'.<sup>77</sup> As Spillers puts it, however, 'the stakes here [are] not simply naming the contradictions . . . but laying hold of an unformulated, which an investigator felt, despite . . . the massive archival maneuvers on the entire location of western Africity'.<sup>78</sup> She does not unpack symptoms because revealing contradictions dissolves the myth, that is. Rather, doing so allows her to craft hitherto unsayable ways of speaking, then crack that myth apart at its seams from the point of this unsayable—to rediscover 'that porosity of motives [driving slavery] whose direction and outcome could be reversed, in fact, demolished'.<sup>79</sup>

Pressing into the symptoms of racialising myth thus enables Spillers to locate spaces where words are *missing* and craft new conditions of language from inside that space. Whilst analysing 'the descriptive language of affirmative-action

advertisements',<sup>80</sup> for example, she notes that 'the collective and individual "I" falls into a cul-de-sac, into the great black hole of meaning, wherein there are only "women", and "minorities", "blacks" and "others"'.<sup>81</sup> These over-determining distinctions produce 'lexical gaps', between 'women' and 'others', 'grounded in the negative aspects of symbol making'.<sup>82</sup> And jumping into these gaps enables a crafting of that interstitial word, which both 'allows us to speak about and enables us to speak at all'. These are words which can be uttered in the space of wounding without speaking as wounded only, but as assertive flesh. The missing words frame language capable of returning and resisting the gaze of myth. For as Spillers puts it, 'the subject is certainly seen, but she also *sees*. [And] it is this return of the gaze that negotiates at every point a space for living . . . that we must willingly name the counter-power, the counter-mythology.'<sup>83</sup> At its most fundamental, counter-mythology is a mode of speaking in which those who have been spoken *about* claim the power to determine the conditions of possibility governing meaning in their lives. It is a seeing back, a speaking back.

This is one way counter-mythology can be practiced: by speaking a missing word that asserts a counter-power against the conditions of meaning through which it has hitherto been rendered. The next question is, what can this look like in practice? Spillers develops several strategies for enacting counter-mythology across her work.<sup>84</sup> I am going to focus on her engagement with the African-American preaching tradition in 'Moving on Down the Line', an essay exploring how 'the religious sentiment and the documents of homiletics that inscribe it bring into play the preeminent mode of discourse by which African-Americans envisioned a transcendent human possibility under captive conditions'.<sup>85</sup>

Spillers begins by noting that 'the African-American, long before the barred subject of Lacanian discourse brought it to our attention, becomes the hyphenated proper noun that belongs neither "here" nor "there"'.<sup>86</sup> 'African-American', that is, designates 'a *hyphenated* national identity divided in the first instance both from its situation and severed from the old one'.<sup>87</sup> In the terms articulated above, 'African-American' thus connotes the double wounding of the slave trade: the severing of flesh from home and of black from human. From the perspective of wounded flesh, however, the space marked by this hyphen cannot be seen the same way that the dominant culture sees 'slave' or 'ethnicity'; it cannot be seen as 'the essence of stillness . . . of an undynamic human state, fixed in time and space'.<sup>88</sup> On the contrary, 'the logic of the hyphen . . . rests in the movement between punctualities so that its elements are always coming and going in the "contact zone" of mutually incommensurable contents'.<sup>89</sup> Implicitly knowing that the dominant culture renders 'African' and 'American', 'black' and 'human' as incommensurate terms whilst also forcing their proximity, flesh also knows that the interstitial space between these

terms is dynamically charged. The interstice is thus a grammatological hadron collider in which the elements of discourse can be shattered and reconstituted. It is a space of creativity, in which the meaning of ‘community’ ‘becomes *potentiality*; an unfolding to be attended’.<sup>90</sup> This is the space from which the African–American sermon speaks.

Spillers then reads a selection of sermons, all by male preachers, as providing ‘a strategy of identity for persons forced to operate under a foreign code of culture; they offer an equipment . . . for hermeneutical play in which the subject gains competence in the interpretation and manipulation of systems of signs and their ground of interrelatedness’.<sup>91</sup> These sermons are read, that is, as logical tools with which black preachers can rewire the syntax given by the cultural ground of Christianity.<sup>92</sup>

A first structuring theme rewired is the narrative of the divine promise of freedom. In a formally similar fashion to Walker’s *Jubilee*, these sermons frame African–American history through the narrative logic of this promise. Within this, the temporality of enslavement is cast in terms of origin, displacement, and future. In a sermon of 1810, for example, William Miller hearkens back to ‘a great African past’ whilst simultaneously praising black people’s ‘improved state in the arts [compared] to the state of improvement and civilization in Africa’.<sup>93</sup> African–Americans come from a great civilisation—but though they cannot thank their oppressors, Miller holds that they must admit their improved status. Substantive critiques can be levelled against Miller here, not all of them anachronistic. But this is not Spillers’ purpose. Instead, she draws attention to how this temporality brings the situation of the black community into stark focus. She notes how, ‘situated in an abeyance of closure, Miller appears to speak out of both sides of his mouth, [a] double-speaking [that] precisely characterises African–American apprentice–culture and its latter-day manifestations’.<sup>94</sup> There *is* a contradiction between the need to affirm both respect for an African past and hope for an ‘American’ home, to hold together the “‘before” and “after” that link continental African culture and the current situation of African–Americans to the same spatiotemporal modality’.<sup>95</sup> Whatever the ‘rightness’ of this spoken contradiction, however, its speaking marks the situation of the sermon’s community. It signals that ‘the black person in the United States is already adrift between two vast continents, both in . . . body and brain’.<sup>96</sup> The ambivalence provoked does not therefore motivate rejecting the sermon. Rather, ‘hearing’ the sermon today means cognising in this contradiction a ‘break in the passage of syntagmatic movement from one more or less stable property to another’.<sup>97</sup> Unlike *Jubilee*, that is, which charts the move from enslavement to emancipation as a through line, there is a disjunction at the heart of these sermons’ time—one which brings the fractured nature of the collective into view, instead of shrouding it with History. This

appropriation of Christian narrative brings a 'lost, wounded subject into view'.<sup>98</sup>

With the sermons speaking from this space of wounding, Spillers now describes them as crafting a missing word from inside the interstice between a lost home and a home hoped for, enacting a 'movement between punctualities' of origin and end-point. The sermons' hermeneutical play then 'scatters' the present of this wounded subject through a proleptic invocation of 'good times coming'—anticipated promise diffracts the 'now' of movement so that it is not just an empty point of passage from past to future, but a ground from which to counteract the myths which have hitherto charted its temporal function. Spillers develops this by noting that 'there is only *one* sermonic conclusion, and that is the ultimate triumph over defeat and death that the Resurrection promises'.<sup>99</sup> Another parallel to *Jubilee* is visible here, insofar as the preachers see themselves as bearing witness to the working out of an ineluctable divine victory. Not only, however, is there a difference in the fact that those listening are being formed in a shared space by the preacher as avatars for this narrative (as Spillers notes, 'the sermon seeks to *inculcate* its words; to make them enter the hearer').<sup>100</sup> It is also the case that these hearers are being empowered by the divine promise to rewrite the 'History' currently deployed to interpret the meanings of their times.

Spillers makes this case most forcefully with regard to a collection of the Reverend J.W.E. Bowen's sermons. Bowen uses the promise of resurrection to interpret and explain both present and past. As Spillers writes, 'moving on down the line, Bowen anticipates the future as he comprehends past and present in a narrative sweep that explains the inexplicable'.<sup>101</sup> Proleptically interrupting the present and reinterpreting the past, 'these sermons *make it all right*'<sup>102</sup>—the promise of resurrection transvalues the present which has been forged by the slave-trade into a point of departure for overarching hope, without 'justifying' the fabrication of this present.

There is an ironic ambivalence, of course, in the fact that a Christian narrative is being deployed by African-Americans to make their present wounding *all right*.<sup>103</sup> Critique can again be levelled here. Continuing to read through ambivalence, however, Spillers notes that this irony brings into view something that must be confronted, instead of serving as a sign-post to seek another way. After all, she writes, 'isn't *that* the trouble, that we must become reconciled to death?'<sup>104</sup> Putting this another way, we can say that counter-mythology must reconcile with the need to speak life from inside a space made for death.

Spillers now crafts a systematic reading of how Bowen casts the proleptic interruption of the present by this future promise as providing the crucible from within which African-Americans can write their own history.<sup>105</sup> Mirroring Miller's historical narrative, Bowen sermonises what it might mean

for African-Americans—who have come from a place where ‘there reigned once “all the pomp and magnificence of oriental splendor”’<sup>106</sup> and been afflicted by the horrors of slavery—to make ‘a history worth reading.’<sup>107</sup> In so doing, he employs thematics which can be read as internalised anti-blackness, and Spillers does not soften this aspect of his preaching.<sup>108</sup> In a manner similar to Sula, however, in the sense that he confounds any desire to either love or damn his words, Bowen both augurs and embodies a moment in which an African-American collective produces its own conditions of meaning. Speaking from the interstice, that is, the collective begins to move beyond as well as within the space of wounding—in Spillers words, ‘as African-Americans read their own history in the United States, the *wounded, divided* flesh opens itself to a metaphorical rendering ... for the principle of self-determination’.<sup>109</sup>

Bowen’s sermons thus manifest one way the black community crafts its own principle in the space left by wounding. This principle then reaches down into the flesh itself, so that captive bodies can both be read and read themselves differently; ‘the *imprint* of words articulates with “inscriptions” made on the material body, so that an actual “reading” of captivity brings us to consider those changes in the very tissue-life of the organism’.<sup>110</sup> And insofar as this recasts the conditions of possibility imposed by the inscription of slavery, the collision of past, present, and future in black flesh further rewrites how that flesh can collectively move through time. In this rereading of captivity and its wounds, that is—in the movement between passage to and from home, between the spaces ‘humanity’ and ‘abjection’—the ‘interstitial narrative [crafted by Bowen] becomes ... the “invisible” line that the collective must manifest; must “practice”, must “write” into history as its own powerful tale of human freedom’.<sup>111</sup> Bowen crafts and speaks an interstitial word from inside a previously unspeakable space. And this new speech generates a new way of making history for African-Americans to move through; it makes possible an angled path to freedom, rising out of the horizontal and flattening determinations of chattel slavery.

The final stage of Spillers’ argument shows that this invisible line does not rise from a horizontal earth to chart a course to the heavens. It does not become History. Rather, the line returns to the flesh whose reflexive rewriting produced it. The ‘physical/material actuality’ on which this new ‘writing of the flesh’ has been inscribed—the realities of the black matter making itself mean anew—thus ‘throws mediation of the image [of this writing], even resistance, as the metaphor dissolves on the ground of its concatenation’.<sup>112</sup> In this sense, then:

the sermonic word does not soar; it does not leap, it never leaves the ground. It *scatters* instead through the cultural situation and, like the force of gravity, holds

us fast to moral means. Bound to this earth by the historical particularity of the body's wounding, the community comes face to face with the very limit of identity—the indomitable, irremediable otherness of death, metaphorized, in this instance, by the institution of slavery.<sup>113</sup>

The fact of death thus collides with the writing of history by black flesh in light of future promise. The grammar of slavery is scrambled in self-interference through the resistant speech of those enslaved. And precisely because present death is known with resurrection, this scattering does not re-inflict an eternal moment of wounding. Rather, the sermon replays 'not only *this* narrative, but its *outcome* on the other side of disaster, as Bowen's "good time coming" would have us believe'.<sup>114</sup> It is then this constant juxtaposition of the past and future, of the movement between *and* beyond the space of wounding, that the rhythm of the counter-myth is set. Unlike Walker's *History*, the narrative of the sermon, 'with both feet planted in the actual mess of human being',<sup>115</sup> diffracts both itself and the times out of which it is spoken.

To summarise, counter-myth must make its own meaning in ways that riddle the conditions of sense. One technique of counter-mythology can then be discerned in African-American preaching, in which the subversive deployment of a Christian story recreates the world of meaning as it institutes a temporality moving both between and beyond the interstitial space of wounding. This enables black collectives to craft their own technics of writing, thereby riddling the grammars of enslavement and the killing myths that repeat these grammars in the present, whilst also developing ways to express otherwise unintelligible principles of self-determination.

#### V. CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AS COUNTER-MYTHOLOGY?

Spillers casts myth as an integration of form and concept which is pressed into a transcendental temporality, generating archetypal figures that render black women as both constricted and unrestrictedly vulnerable. America's racialising mythos is then crafted through a twofold wounding which entrenches at least two overlaid interstices, between home and market, black and human. Finally, African-American preaching manifests one counter-mythological strategy for logologically refashioning Christian temporality—a way of speaking from inside interstitial space that rewrites the conditions of possibility under which black flesh makes meaning.

What would it mean for Christian theology to participate in the work of this logological refashioning, as described by Spillers? The fact that 'Moving on Down the Line' analyses a mode of theological speech does not itself answer this question. Miller and Bowen are doing Christian theological work, which suggests that Christian theological concepts can be deployed to counter-



mythological ends—but it does not follow from this that Christian theology is amenable to this deployment *because* it is Christian theology. Nor does it follow that the distinctive objects of theological discourse can serve as criteria for this deployment—as Spillers writes, ‘the test of belief . . . crucial to our purposes here has less to do with the Word of God, or words pertaining to God, than with the words and texts of human communities in their liberational and enslaving power’.<sup>116</sup> Those who think that meaning in Christian theology should be generated through its doctrinal claims about God, myself included, must take heed of this, especially since it asserts that Christian theology can be enslaving and ‘orthodox’ (which is a matter of historical record). Indeed, given that the enslaving ideologies of Western colonialism are generated within paradigmatic versions of Christian theology, anything counting itself ‘Christian’ may be *prima facie* suspect in this sense. It must also be emphasised that counter-mythology is an act of reclaiming power before it is anything else. If Christian theology is to be counter-mythological, it must therefore either constitute or aid in a concrete assertion of black power over the conditions of possibility that govern meaning in black life (and not, for example, a benevolent dispensation of something like this power).

To give two examples of what this can look like, J. Kameron Carter and Amaryah Shae Armstrong have developed compelling ways of thinking theologically through Spillers’ work. In light of how Christian theology has produced racialising European subjectivities, Carter draws attention to Spillers’ counter-mythology as ‘the articulation of a critically insurgent agency that cuts through theological protocols of racialization’.<sup>117</sup> This critical agency is blackness, understood as ‘a movement of the between . . . an interstitial drama on the outskirts of the order of purity’.<sup>118</sup> And it connotes ‘a subject position . . . that paratheologically operates in the passage as such, from the middle, or between all shores of stability. Such a mode of existence, far from being trapped in social death, is “mystical” and stateless with respect to the order of things.’<sup>119</sup> Spillers’ interstices, then, are the locus for a counter-mythological mode of subjectivity which practices a mystical, perhaps counter-theological, mode of ‘paratheological’ reasoning—neither entirely inside or outside ‘Theology’ as traditionally understood, but able to act upon and reconfigure constitutive theological principles.<sup>120</sup>

Armstrong, meanwhile, uses Spillers’ distinction between flesh and body to broach how Hagar makes the Apostle Paul’s universalism possible, thereby illuminating the supersession of Hager’s flesh by a universal body. More specifically, Spillers is deployed to show how ‘the black woman’s body [is invested] with the signifying role of the flesh in the story of Christian universality and political subjectivity’,<sup>121</sup> such that: ‘Paul and the slaveholding Christianity of modernity [are shown to be] invested in the body as a discursive production, which signifies the spiritual meaning that transcends the flesh.’<sup>122</sup> When placed

alongside Delores Williams' reading of Hagar in *Sisters in the Wilderness*, this analytic joins in Williams' work of recomposing 'the biblical narrative, generating a new sound through its naming of God from the flesh's fugitivity'.<sup>123</sup> In a similar but distinct sense to Carter, Armstrong shows how Spillers' thought can be used to mark where Christian theology's orthodoxies produce the modern racial calculus, then rewire what these orthodoxies take as their grounding presuppositions.

These are two ways in which Spillers' counter-mythology can shape theological thinking. I end by suggesting a third. A great many Christian doctrinal utterances attempt to articulate incommensurate realities together—whether it be the unity and triunity of God, the humanity and divinity of Christ, or the relationship between God and creation. One approach to this is to say that these realities should not be conceptualised as incommensurate. Another, however, is to say that insofar as Jesus is both human and divine, or God closer to creation than creation is to itself, then the articulation of these doctrines must presuppose a unity of incommensurables which does not eradicate their categorical difference. If this latter path is taken, a set of interstices is thus located at the heart of Christian dogmatics, whether they be the inarticulable distinctions between the persons of the Trinity and the Godhead or the ineradicable distinctions between Jesus' humanity and divinity.

There is no analogy between these interstices and the spaces named by Spillers. 'African-American' is not analogous to either 'God-Creature' or any other such construction. It might be possible, however, in line with Carter's sense of thinking 'in between', to think from inside both these disanalogous spaces together. If 'the logic of the hyphen' does indeed rest 'in the movement between punctualities so that its elements are always coming and going in the "contact zone" of mutually incommensurable contents',<sup>124</sup> that is, the hyphen between God-Creature as read from the critical posture of blackness might be a space in which the elements of America's racial mythos can be marked, made fluid, and disarticulated. Much as African-American preachers thought the space between the present and an ultimate redemption from inside the interstices of America's racialising mythos *and vice versa*, parsing myths through the tension that holds incommensurate theological concepts apart and together might disintegrate form from concept, thereby offering one way to rethread the fabrics of myth and mystery both in and from within the realm of theological reflection.

An example of this approach can be sketched through a theological reading of Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*. Danticat's text can be read as articulating two interstitial spaces together, the one between America and Haiti, the other within the Lutheran formation of 'at once sinner and justified'.<sup>125</sup> At the heart of the story is an unnamed Haitian-American barber who tells his daughter, Ka, that he had been a torturer in Haiti, a 'dew breaker', not a prisoner—

‘you see Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey’.<sup>126</sup> The final chapter reveals that he fled his work in 1967, fearing punishment for shooting an anti-government preacher slated for release after the preacher sliced his cheek open with a shard from a broken chair. While fleeing, he collides with the preacher’s sister-in-law, Anne, who assumes he is a prisoner escaping and begins to care for him. He tells Anne the truth when their daughter is born, many years after they have moved to New York and married.

Danticat’s story is rich in Egyptian, Christian, and Haitian mythology. Most pertinently, Ka is named for mythological reasons. “‘I call you Ka,’” her father tells her, “‘because in Egyptian world’ . . . a Ka is a double of the body . . .—the body’s companion through life and after life. It guides the body through the kingdom of the dead.’<sup>127</sup> This symbolism frames both her and her mother; ‘we, who are now his kas, his good angels, his masks against his own face’.<sup>128</sup> It overwrites how they have been understood, in this instance quite explicitly as the guarantors of safe passage between ‘the human and non-human world’, masking her father from himself. This symbolism is then further coded with Christian language of redemption. Ka is told by her mother, a devout Catholic who sees her husband’s transformation as a miracle,<sup>129</sup> that ‘you and me, we save him. When I meet him, it made him stop hurt the people. This how I see it. He is a seed thrown in rock. You, me, we make him take root.’<sup>130</sup> And at the close of the text, Anne thinks that she would have maybe told her daughter the ‘now useless cliché, one that she had been reciting to herself all these years, that atonement, reparation, was possible and available for everyone’.<sup>131</sup> Taken together, these words evoke a Christian mythos in which human flesh enacts a Divine History of reconciliation, within which Ka and Anne—in line with Delores Williams’ critiques of surrogacy in Christian theology—are archetypal avatars of the dew breaker’s salvation.<sup>132</sup>

Danticat rethreads these inherited myths in the overlaid interstitial spaces between Haiti and America, justification and sin. The text’s juxtaposition of America and Haiti situates its interconnected chapters in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and US neo-colonialism, intensifying the paradoxical fact that, for the dew breaker, the former is a place of escape without belonging, the latter a home to which he cannot return.<sup>133</sup> This juxtaposition then weaves through the tension between his ‘justification’—he is transformed, a patient, calm, and loving father who no longer hurts anyone, a ‘miracle’, in his wife’s eyes<sup>134</sup>—and the violence for which he is responsible, the effects of which reverberate throughout the text’s present day.<sup>135</sup> This articulation of justification and violence together can be read as a heightened instance of what it means to be *simul justus et peccator*, a state which the scar left by his wife’s brother constantly reminds the dew breaker of; it was ‘a brand that [he] would carry for the rest of his life. Every time he looked in the mirror, he would have to confront this mark and remember him. Whenever people asked what

happened to his face, he would have to tell a lie, a lie that would further remind him of the truth.<sup>136</sup> The fact of constant deception, meanwhile—only broken with Ka when his shame cannot bear the idea of her selling a statue she has sculpted of him—suggests that his transformation is at least not a matter of desert, since its possibility would have been foreclosed were the truth known. The tension of it all is expressed by another character, Claude, who has returned to Haiti from America after having killed his father; ‘I’m the luckiest fucker alive. I’ve done something really bad that makes me want to live my life like a fucking angel now.’<sup>137</sup>

Situated in the distance between American and Haiti, then, *The Dew Breaker* can be read as articulating incommensurable realities of sin and justification together. Two things now emerge—one, a logological scrambling of Christian logics of justification, the other an unspoken and unspeakable feeling. Danticat illuminates the fact that if the dew breaker is indeed *simul justus et peccator*, this is not because of a Divine Logic inscribed in the heavens. It is because of harm he has done and love he has been shown under conditions of deception. The text makes clear, however, that this love is not a heavenly principle which codes the earthly actions of wife and daughter—it is a product of *their* activity, its meaning grounded in who and how they are. Justification here is not a myth. It is an exchange enacted between flesh and flesh.

When the conditions of deception are lifted, meanwhile, the problem of this meaning is returned to the flesh that produced it, suggesting that the cliché of atonement’s universal availability is not useless because it is false, but because if it is true then *this* is the problem that Ka and her mother face. For Anne, after her daughter learns the truth there is ‘no way to escape this dread anymore, this pendulum between regret and forgiveness, this fright that the most important relationships of her life were always on the verge of being severed or lost, that the people closest to her were always disappearing’.<sup>138</sup> There is no way to escape the fact that her brother is lost to her because of the husband she fears to lose, that she risks losing her daughter as well—and that all this follows from how she has chosen to love. Ka, meanwhile, realises the truth of who she has been made to be, a mask against her father’s own face. And the question that she asks her mother over the phone—‘how do you love him?’<sup>139</sup>—goes unanswered; she hangs up while her mother is speaking about how their love has saved him. She simply reflects, on hearing her father say: ‘I’m still your father. I would never do these things now,’ that ‘maybe his past offered more choices than being either hunter or prey’;<sup>140</sup> and so that her present may offer more choices than condemnation or sympathy.

What is left is not a resolution but a provocation, the responses to which cannot be automatically read out of myth. Should those who have killed, who still haunt living memories, be able now to live as angels? What does one do with the fact that love has transformed someone who has only received love

because of deceit? And how are these questions inflected by their being asked in the space between Haiti and America/the West, the history of the former ineluctably shaken by the colonial and new-colonial designs of the latter such that each character inhabits a 'subject-position whose corporate body is shattered between worlds'? Danticat's narrative does not inscribe what Ka and Anne are to do, or should *want* to do, in light of such questions. There is no 'movement consistent with the stars in heaven' according to which the unwritten futures of their stories can be traced; their options cannot be circumscribed according to a prefabricated archetype of what black women should do. There is only the material reality of their shared lives and loves and desires, out of which any meaningful concepts of grace or guilt or justice must be rewritten and reworked, within which the conditions of possibility for these concepts' meaningfulness and their patterns of formation must be reconfigured. Just as in the sermons of Spillers' preachers, that is, the movement of salvation is not and cannot be the outworking of a transcendental myth. And if God is active here, it is not in the sense of *theonomy* articulated above. Ka and Anne's agential possibilities within this movement are instead grounded in their own meaning-making activity, as they come face to face with another limit of identity; the irremediable otherness not merely of death, but of someone beloved having inflicted death on others.

Danticat also names the space between guilt and justification as a space of unnamed feeling. When Christian theology too easily proclaims concepts like the value of forgiveness or the sufficiency of grace, it can paper over what it is like to feel within these phenomena. This feeling is expressed by Dany, one the dew breaker's lodgers. Dany's parents were killed and his aunt maimed in a fire started by the dew breaker. Having recognised the man responsible for his parents' death, Dany returns to Haiti to tell his aunt that he's found him. Her response is to introduce him to Claude. The next night, she dies in her sleep. At the wake, Dany aggressively rejects Claude's compassion. When he later apologises, Claude tells him: 'I understand . . . I'd be a real asshole if I got pissed off at you for anything you did or said to me at a time like this. You're in pain, man. I get that.'<sup>141</sup> Dany responds: 'I don't know if I'd call it pain . . . There's no word yet for it. No one has thought of a word yet.'<sup>142</sup>

There is a feeling here. It may be that this feeling cannot be described in abstraction from the narrative, let alone named within that narrative's folds. But in naming it as unnamed, Danticat speaks a missing word that marks what it is like to exist within the space between sin and justification. And in speaking it as missing, Danticat names a reality that is lost when Christian theologians rush too quickly to resolution, whether in terms of damnation or salvation. This is a reality which must be lingered with and dwelt within.<sup>143</sup> For lingering with the unnameable brings the realisation that the next steps cannot known

beforehand; theological meaning must be slowly and unpredictably remade through a speaking of this missing word.

I have sketched a reading of Danticat's text, not given a substantiated argument. This sketch is also incomplete—its next development would be an attempt to constructively articulate these incommensurable elements of justification and sin together according to reworked conditions of possibility for theological significance. Any logological refashioning of how Christian languages of salvation are formed must, after all, become real in the reader's life and thinking. My hope, however, is that this sketch shows one way to pursue theology as counter-mythology in light of Spillers' work—by dissolving theological myths which have been pressed into History, then retooling inherited languages according to the movements of the living flesh in whose power the decision for love alone can rest.

A qualification must be added, on the basis that Christian theological distinctions such as those between 'God' and 'creature', 'justified' and 'sinner', may themselves be constituent parts of America's racialising calculus. After all, if, as Armstrong argues, the claim that 'the *real* meaning of human flesh . . . comes from God and lies with the spirit, of which the body is a sign'<sup>144</sup> is one of that calculus' driving logics, then a distinction between God and flesh rests in the beating heart of American mythology, functioning as a way to abstract the meaning of blackness into the realm of myth. Nonetheless, if distinctions like this are first unsettled and reworked from the in-between of Spillers' interstices, they might still be able to serve as sites for counter-mythology, auxiliary resources in the insurgency through which black women claim power over their own meanings. Challenged by the critical posture of blackness, that is, Christian theology might rethread its own myths of spirit, flesh, and body, crafting liberatory sentences which cannot be anticipated and coming to a closer understanding of its God enfleshed.

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## REFERENCES

- 1 Hortense Spillers, 'Peter's Pans: Eating in Diaspora', *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 1–64, p. 4. I am a white male writer, and so am closer to an eavesdropper than an addressee of Spillers' imperative. I attempt to be conscious of this positionality throughout this article, as well as the ease with which any attempt to write about Spillers from this position can become its own assertion of mythological power. It is also worth noting that I write 'black' and 'blackness' in lower case, and 'African-American' with the hyphen, to conform to Spillers' usage.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Hortense Spillers, 'Black, White, and in Color, or Learning How to Paint: Toward an Intramural Protocol of Reading', *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 277–300, p. 291. Though it is beyond the scope of this article, Spillers' approach can be brought into critical conversation with Audre Lorde's 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' (in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), pp. 100–3). A conversation along these lines may explore what it is that determines what a given tool *is*, and where its meaning resides.
- 6 C.f. Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 3.
- 7 Spillers, 'Peter's Pans', p. 5. Italics in original. The square brackets replace 'the former' in the original citation, though I am not certain that 'critical posture of blackness' is the correct substitution. The words before the quote run: 'by revising and correcting "blackness" into a *critical* posture, into a preeminent site of the "multicultural", long before the latter defined a new politics and polemic ... [Ellison's program] would make the former available to *anyone*, or more pointedly, *any* posture'. I am reading 'former' as referring to 'blackness' and 'latter' to multicultural. It seems plausible, however, that what is made 'available' to 'anyone' is not blackness *per se*, but blackness as this critical posture. The former reading risks rendering 'availability' here akin to the 'availability' crafted by the slave economy, as if it were a property that could be taken on, which runs counter to the emphasis on specificity throughout Spillers' work. Reading it as 'the critical posture of blackness' renders her claim an invitation to a way of seeing, speaking, and thinking which emerges from a concrete ground and can inform and rewrite thought from other grounds as well, without distorting the citation itself.
- 8 That 'Christian theology' gave rise to colonialism and racialisation has been compellingly argued. (C.f. Sylvia Wynter's 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation—An Argument', *The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003) 257–337; Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); and Spillers' own 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 203–29.) The question of whether it can participate in reconfiguring this world most specifically relates to Christian theology as practiced from the perspective of whiteness. It does include, however, questions of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Queer Theologies as well. There are

- at least three risks here. Firstly, it is easy in this framing to overrepresent white theology as Christian theology, rendering other approaches as accidental variations or insubstantial regarding what ‘counts’ as Christian theology. Secondly, treating ‘Christian theology’ as constituted by this diversity risks eliding the substantial differences between ‘magisterial’ white theology and those theologies which deny its hegemony. Thirdly, directing this question *solely* to white Christian theology leaves unasked the critical question of whether non-hegemonic ways of doing Christian theology thereby function apart from the colonising logics which drive Christian conquest. It must at least be allowed at the outset, however, that colonising anti-blackness is not just an aberration produced by white Christianity, but might be coded into the logic of Christianity itself—even those forms of Christianity with explicitly decolonial aspirations. The best way I can think to pose the question here is thus to ask it of anything that calls itself Christian theology, but without assuming that it must therefore be asked in the same way of all such forms of thought.
- <sup>9</sup> C.f. also, Ashon Crawley, *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
- <sup>10</sup> For a recent deployment of Spillers’ concept of myth, c.f. R.A. Judy, *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiesis in Black* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), pp. 180–90.
- <sup>11</sup> Hortense Spillers, ‘Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor’, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 251–76, p. 309.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.
- <sup>13</sup> Hortense Spillers, ‘Ellison’s “Usable Past”’: Toward a Theory of Myth’, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 65–80, p. 67.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>19</sup> Spillers here appeals to Barthes’ analysis of a colonial soldier in French propaganda, where ‘the visual image becomes a code of French imperial procedure and the biographical/historical implications of its subjects. It is a mode of shorthand in that the mythological signifier conceals as much as it reveals’ (*Ibid.*, p. 68). In this instance, certain associations have become so impressed in the image that it expresses the ‘mythologized’ significance of those associations. C.f. Roland Barthes, ‘Myth Today’, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), pp. 217–74.
- <sup>20</sup> The first of these relates to sensory recall, the second to the circulation taking places in the narrator’s own memorialisation. C.f. Spillers, ‘Ellison’s “Usable Past”’, p. 73.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Hortense Spillers, ‘A Hateful Passion, A Lost Love: Three Women’s Fiction’, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 93–118, p. 98.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- <sup>35</sup> This term is Spillers’. C.f. ‘We know how myths work—through the



- impoverishment of history—and Firestone’s chapter is, for the black woman, an exemplary killing myth’ (Hortense Spillers, ‘Interstices: a Small Drama of Words’, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 152–75, p. 164).
- <sup>36</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has recently articulated this phenomenon in terms of ‘plasticity’. C.f. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), p. 10.
- <sup>37</sup> Spillers, ‘Interstices’, p. 164.
- <sup>38</sup> C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 174: ‘The unsexed black female and the supersexed black female embody the very same vice, cast the very same shadow, since both are an exaggeration of the uses to which sex might be put.’ Regarding ‘the image of the “whore” and the “female eunuch”, for example.’ Spillers further writes that ‘the image/icon acquires mystical attribution doing overtime, divested of specific reference and dispersed over time and space ... The reified image can [thus] be imposed at any moment on any individual “I”’ (*Ibid.*, p. 164). The ‘I’, that is, is always vulnerable to the vagaries of this imposition. Elsewhere, she notes that “‘ethnicity” perceived as mythical time enables a writer to perform a variety of conceptual moves, all at once. Under its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor’ (Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’, p. 205).
- <sup>39</sup> As Spillers further articulates this, ‘the prerogatives of sexuality are refused [the black woman] because the concept of sexuality originates in, stays with, the dominative mode of culture and its elaborate strategies of thought and expression’ (Spillers, ‘Interstices’, p. 157). ‘Myth’ does not just fix the boundaries of discourse as if by nature—it does so because it is *used* to do this, and so how the boundaries are fixed depends on the wielders of myth as well as its qualities as a tool.
- <sup>40</sup> Spillers, ‘Interstices’, p. 174.
- <sup>41</sup> Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’, p. 205.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- <sup>47</sup> Spillers, ‘Peter’s Pans’, p. 21.
- <sup>48</sup> Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’, p. 206.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206. This reading is significantly different to the influential account put forward by Frank B. Wilderson, who, reading Spillers, describes slavery as reconfiguring ‘the African body into Black flesh’ (Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 18).
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- <sup>51</sup> Hortense Spillers, ‘Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon’, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 251–76, p. 275.
- <sup>52</sup> Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’, p. 206.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- <sup>57</sup> Spillers, ‘Peter’s Pans’, p. 21.
- <sup>58</sup> Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’, p. 207.
- <sup>59</sup> In a similar vein, it is important to note that the semiosis operative here does not make reality in any irrevocable sense. Spillers inveighs against discourses within which ‘the black woman is reified into the status of non-being’ (‘Interstices’, p. 155), refusing to assign more power to white culture than it can rightly claim. Against the assertion that ‘as long as the white man [read white person] is still in

power, he has the privilege to define the black community as he chooses', for example, she writes that it 'proffers a dose of "necessity" that we might as well refuse, since it gives the white male unlimited power' (*Ibid.*, p. 163). This approach is important for considering the relationship of Spillers' work to its recent deployment in Afropessimism, though it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the nuances of this subject.

60 Spillers, 'Interstices', p. 165.  
 61 *Ibid.*  
 62 Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p. 203.  
 63 Spillers, 'Peter's Pans', p. 14.  
 64 Spillers, 'Interstices', p. 156. I think there is a double-sense here, insofar as (a) the grafting of the interstice is what enables to myth to be spoken, and (b) speaking 'the missing word' is what enables the speaking of a counter-myth within the dynamics of this space.  
 65 Spillers, 'Hateful Passion, A Lost Love', p. 103.  
 66 C.f. 'Interstices', p. 174, cited above, where Spillers argues that the image of 'whore' and 'female eunuch' has 'been invested with semiological and ideological values whose origins are concealed by the image itself'.  
 67 Spillers, 'A Hateful Passion', p. 107.  
 68 *Ibid.*, p. 108.  
 69 *Ibid.*, p. 109.  
 70 *Ibid.*, p. 118.  
 71 *Ibid.*, p. 117.  
 72 *Ibid.*, p. 118.  
 73 Spillers, 'Peter's Pans', p. 7.  
 74 Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p. 226.  
 75 Spillers, 'Peter's Pans', p. 27.  
 76 C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 18: 'The foregoing passage from Althusser might be read as a gloss on the Marxian symptom ... The "critique of ideology", or the "symptomatic reading" "consists in detecting a point of breakdown heterogeneous to a given ideological field and at the same time necessary for that field

to achieve its closure".' The symptom is thus the point which the myth requires for its closure but which must at the same time be rendered heterogeneous, distinguished from, that which is properly coded into the myth—just as the black woman stands to the myths of (white) femininity.

77 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

78 *Ibid.*

79 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

80 Spillers, 'Interstices', p. 156.

81 *Ibid.*

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

84 'Ellison's "Usable Past"', for example, analyses how the narrative repetition of *Invisible Man* introduces an 'ironic mode', expressed in 'an irretrievable distrust of one's own image thrown back against the mirror of language' (Spillers, 'Ellison's "Usable Past"', p. 78). It thus proffers a strategy for learning to disbelieve what the symbolic structures of language say you must be, 'a countermyth against the founders of "Sambo", the damaged humanity of an acquisitive culture, its wealth transformed into the visible evidence of status' (*Ibid.*, p. 79). Taking black female vocalists and the speaking subjects of John Gwaltney's *Drysolingo* as its focal points, 'Interstices' explores one way of gaining power in the world of symbol-making in terms of first-, second-, and third- orders of naming—the first of which expresses 'the experience of a community ... in subject identity' ('Interstices', p. 168) (an expression suppressed by dominant culture); the second of which interprets these first-order terms; the third of which uses these tools 'to discover, layer by layer, this symptoms of culture that engender this order of things' (*Ibid.*, p. 173). Taken together, this strategy provides language for encountering the Burkean Pentad of 'agent, agency, act, scene, and purpose' in black women 'in ways that the dominant mode certainly forbids' (*Ibid.*, p.

- 173), asserting not just a different symbol, but a different mode of symbol-making.
- 85 Spillers, 'Moving on Down the Line', p. 252.
- 86 *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- 87 *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- 88 Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p. 224.
- 89 Spillers, 'Peter's Pans', p. 11.
- 90 Spillers, 'Moving on Down the Line', p. 258.
- 91 *Ibid.*
- 92 C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 262. Though the sermons that Spillers reads are all by male preachers, the fact of her reading them itself enacts a logological reworking of any assumption of patriarchal authority in this matter.
- 93 *Ibid.*, p. 260.
- 94 *Ibid.*, p. 261.
- 95 *Ibid.*, p. 260.
- 96 *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- 97 *Ibid.*
- 98 *Ibid.*, p. 265.
- 99 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 100 *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- 101 *Ibid.*, p. 265.
- 102 *Ibid.*
- 103 C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 265: 'Is it not at least ironic, if not devastating, that the Christian witness, insinuating itself throughout the colonial experience and parallel to the captivity and enslavement of Africans in the New World, not only attracted the religious loyalties of much of that captive population, but also described the primary discourse of its radically altered historic situation?'
- 104 *Ibid.*, p. 265.
- 105 This is specifically 'history', not 'History'. Spillers does not use the upper-case H in this essay, and it seems to me that this accords with the distinction posited in 'A Hateful Passion'. For though African-Americans are here crafting their own transcendental temporality, and doing so in light of a divine promise, Spillers casts this as taking place on the ground, not projected into heaven. They are rewriting 'History', then, but in a way that transmutes it into 'history' at the same time.
- 106 *Ibid.*, p. 270.
- 107 *Ibid.*, p. 273.
- 108 C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 273, where Bowen looks forward to 'when the race shall have been purged in the furnace of afflictions, and its virtues shall sparkle like burnished silver; when it shall reveal the elements of character that God can trust; and when it shall have divested itself of the filthy rags of that black civilization, whose noxious stench is an offense in the nostrils of God and of good men'.
- 109 *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- 110 *Ibid.*
- 111 *Ibid.*, p. 273.
- 112 *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- 113 *Ibid.*
- 114 *Ibid.*
- 115 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 116 *Ibid.*
- 117 J. Kameron Carter, 'Paratheological Blackness', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.4 (2013) 589–611, p. 594.
- 118 *Ibid.*, p. 590.
- 119 *Ibid.*, p. 595.
- 120 For a non-theological deployment of what it means to think within interstitial spaces, c.f. Tiffany Lethabo King, 'In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes', PhD diss. (University of Maryland, 2013).
- 121 Amaryah Shae Armstrong, 'Of Flesh and Spirit: Race, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference in the Turn to Paul', *Journal for Cultural and Religious Studies* 16.2 (2017) 126–41, p. 134.
- 122 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- 123 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 124 Spillers, 'Peter's Pans', p. 11.
- 125 Danticat does not use the terms 'sin' or 'justification'. Her engagement with Christian theology, however, invites reflection through these concepts—not as a means of over-writing *The Dew Breaker's* narratives according to predetermined Christian concepts, but thinking within

these narratives in a way that troubles and reframes them. It should also be noted that Danticat's text consists entirely of black perspectives, without positioning them in relation to white interlocutors. The critical posture of blackness thus emerges in a somewhat different form than when explicitly engaged in speaking back to whiteness.

<sup>126</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *The Dew Breaker* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 16.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13. To give further examples, the volunteer militia to which Ka's father belonged is named after a figure of Haitian folklore, as if to give the impression that they are acting out a supernaturally ordained law etched into public consciousness (*Ibid.*, p. 184), and to further legitimate human governance by divine logics, the Haitian presidential palace mandates that Christian preachers stick to the script of 'the more you suffer on earth, the more glorious your heavenly reward' (*Ibid.*, p. 157).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>132</sup> C.f. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), pp. 54–74.

<sup>133</sup> C.f. Danticat, *Dew Breaker*, pp. 24, 27. Ka relates how her father had 'left his country and moved to a place where everything from the climate to the language was so unlike his own, a place where he never quite seemed to fit in, never appeared to belong' (*Ibid.*, p. 27), and in

reimagining his nightmares wonders 'maybe he dreams of dipping his hands in the sand on a beach in his own country and finding that what he comes up with is a fistful of blood' (*Ibid.*, p. 24). For a thorough analysis of the significance of this distance, c.f. Jennifer E. Henton, 'Danticat's The Dew Breaker, Haiti, and Symbolic Migration', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 12.2 (2010).

<sup>134</sup> Danticat, *Dew Breaker*, p. 61.

<sup>135</sup> One chapter involves a bridal seamstress who cannot help but see the dew breaker on every street she moves to. 'You never look at anyone the way you do someone like this,' she tells a young reporter. 'No one will ever have that much of your attention. No matter how much he'd changed, I would know him anywhere' (*Ibid.*, p. 113). Another is narrated by one of the family's lodgers, who recognises the quiet New York barber as the man responsible for his parents' death by fire.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> The value of lingering with unresolved and unresolvable realities, rather than rushing towards an unearned resolution, has been a constant emphasis of Linn Tonstad's in conversation.

<sup>144</sup> Armstrong, 'Of Flesh and Spirit', p. 138.