

Upgrade and Upstage: Injunctions Against Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, “Black Feminism,” and Hip Hop Studies at the Ledge (A Response to Forster)

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Oh, Baltimore
Man, it’s hard just to live
Oh, Baltimore
Man, it’s hard just to live, just to live

—Nina Simone

The game can’t go by just following the leaders
You gotta be better than the ones who precede you
Upgrade them, upstage them
Change the whole body shape and just update them, Pagans

—Pusha T

On April 25, 2015, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake addressed media questions regarding how she was directing her police department to handle the demonstrations against the police killing of Freddie Gray.

It’s a very delicate balancing act. Because while we try to make sure that they were protected from the cars and other things that were going on, we also gave those who wished to destroy space to do that as well. And we worked very hard to keep that balance and to put ourselves in the best position to de-escalate.¹

The media roundly criticized the Mayor’s comments as being permissive of violence, a misinterpretation she rejected and sought to clarify

afterwards. On the contrary, her comments, coupled with her use of the racial epithet “thug” to censure the rage of her own people, seek to quarantine the ethical force of black counter-violence, a compulsory move for any state agent.

What would we have liked the black female mayor of Baltimore to do differently? To unequivocally call for justice for Freddie Gray, as the State’s Attorney for Baltimore City, Marilyn Mosby, also a black woman, did in handing down the indictments of the six police officers involved in causing Gray’s death? In such circumstances—where black premature death is the foreseeable outcome of a process that begins with the racist act of looking (“racial profiling”), and the agents of death are prosecuted for mere “negligence” with respect to the “flesh” in their custody, and only thanks to mass uprising in the streets, while the primary act of black bodily seizure and dispossession generates nary a condemnation, let alone prosecution—“justice” remains structurally foreclosed. The only thing to be done, the only intervention available for black social movement in such a time as this, is precisely what the residents of Baltimore have been doing since Gray’s murder on April 19, 2015: strenuously rejecting the pervasively pathologizing lens wielded by the media and by Mayor Rawlings-Blake’s administration, including by the State’s Attorney and the police. During the first night of the uprising, whenever CNN and other media outlets put a microphone into the face of a local resident, the reporters received more of an unapologetic critique of white power than they knew what to do with. In the ensuing days of the uprising, as the *de facto* police state routinely in effect in black neighborhoods morphed into *de jure* martial law, young black residents took advantage of the nation’s momentary attention to explain why they refer to their city as “Bodonomore, Murderland.”²

The black community’s rejection of the discourse of black pathology recalls for us Assata Shakur’s well known passage from her prison cell at the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women in New Jersey, not far up the road from Baltimore, on November 2, 1979 as perhaps the ultimate revolutionary reframing of the terms of antiblack capture. While awaiting trial in 1973, Assata wrote to the black community in a statement published in the *The Black Scholar*: “They call us murderers but we do not control or enforce a system of racism and oppression that systematically murders Black and Third World people.” Assata’s unflinching political critique leads to a reconstruction to which all leaders of white nationalism, such as the present Mayor of Baltimore, ought to pay close heed: “Black revolutionaries do not drip from the moon. We are being created by our conditions.

Shaped by our oppression. We are being manufactured in droves in the ghetto streets, places like attica, san quentin, bedford hills, leavenworth, and sing sing . . . Many jobless Black veterans and welfare mothers are joining our ranks. Brothers and sisters from all walks of life, who are tired of suffering passively, make up the BLA.”³ Assata’s subversion of pathological blackness serves as a necessary bridge between the contemporary period of black self-possession and “thuggery” in Baltimore, and an earlier era of the black freedom movement, separated by two centuries or a mere two minutes: Frederick Douglass and Harriett Tubman, perhaps two of history’s most notorious “thugs” as far as white nationalism is concerned, both came up in the Baltimore vicinity during the slavocracy’s early nineteenth century.

We begin our response to Nicholas Forster’s critical reading of our essay “Hip Hop Studies in Black” with this injunction in order to restate the scales of coercion in which we levied our original intervention: to what is hip hop studies accountable if not to the protracted black struggle? Our response is part of a larger project of letting go of the Master Conception of Hip Hop Studies’ epistemological order, to borrow from Sylvia Wynter.⁴ It is an effort to work from what Amiri Baraka called “another landscape” so as to highlight the dangerous tendencies of the field.⁵ Hip hop culture and hip hop studies are increasingly disconnected, if they were ever joined. While hip hop scholars capably situate hip hop within the social milieu of post-industrial capitalism, poverty, and the varied layers of “hustlin,” little is done to draw the connection between hip hop and militant social movement as constituted through Black Arts, Black Aesthetics, and Black Studies—the conjoined sites of Black Power’s extension of the many centuries of black social movement. If the connection was made it would become apparent that hip hop studies has failed “to complete intellectually that emancipation” that Black Power envisioned, hip hop desired, and black communities suffer for daily.⁶ To put it differently, hip hop studies has failed its own by not taking seriously what the Universal Zulu Nation and KRS-One describe as the fifth element of hip hop: *knowledge*—or, as Eric B. and Rakim warned, “know the ledge” or risk self-destruction. With suicidal and nihilistic dispositions themselves byproducts of the slavocracy’s genocidal protocols—as George Rawick explained, *genocide in its final stages looks a lot like suicide*—hip hop studies is literally suffocating the very liberatory possibilities it is so fond of trumpeting in hip hop.⁷

Hip hop’s fifth element, and Rakim’s “ledge,” is the ontological distinction most commonly elided in hip hop studies to which we sought

to draw readers' attentions in "Hip Hop Studies in Black." We pointed to how ignoring ontology results from a betrayal of the original black studies movement and manifests as (1) an incorrect analysis of race and resistance, and (2) an overblown emphasis on political economy at the expense of the ontologic relations structuring black life. While Forster's response does not explicitly address itself to this fundamental issue of ontology, his stated concerns revolve around the implications of the prescriptive intervention that we elaborated: (1) that it comes "at the expense of black feminist voices" (Forster) and that certain "black feminisms" (our quotation marks) "would be hard-pressed to find room to make an intervention in the vision of the discipline that Saucier and Woods put forward" (Forster); (2) that it "indelicately subsumes hip hop pedagogy . . . into a branch of Hip Hop Studies" (Forster); and (3) that it minimizes "the broader role of individual performance and experience" (Forster).

In brief, each of these points of contention for Forster constitutes an objection to the structural analysis that we are advancing and that black studies first formulated. He is indeed correct that such a structural critique displaces the individual-level of analysis that he clearly favors, which is necessarily privileged in hip hop studies, and which subtends the appropriated terms of black studies that he implicitly references through Hazel Carby, Imani Perry, Alexander Wehlieye, and others.⁸ As Kwame Ture once explained: "I don't deal with the individual, I think it's a cop-out when people talk about the individual . . . For one thing, it will be seen that the black man's alienation is not an individual question, it is a question of socio-diagnostics. The Negro problem does not resolve itself into the problem of individual Negroes living among white men, but rather of Negroes as a class that is exploited, enslaved, and despised by the colonialist, capitalist society, which is only accidentally white."⁹ Terms such as "performance," "resistance," and "experience" register at the individual level, and as such, are racialized terms of the structurally empowered. The ritual invocation of such discourse in studies of black culture not only romanticizes the structural vulnerability and gratuitous violence of black existence, but it mystifies how "power" in the modern world is always and already a product of relations of force that require black people, black bodies, black culture, *blackness*, be infinitely open to the desires of non-blacks. Since the majority of hip hop studies is premised on the transubstantial efficacy of the performative, ontology must be left by the wayside (to flip Frantz Fanon) or performance analysis must be rigorously bracketed out as provisional and gratuitous, rather than instrumental and liberatory. For instance, in

the Hortense Spillers essay “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” that Forster cites approvingly, she makes the following observation about the black female vocalist: “Whatever luck or misfortune the Player has dealt to her, she is, *in the moment of performance*, the primary subject of her own invention” (emphasis added).¹⁰ The coherence of this sentence hinges upon the qualifier “in the moment,” without which the insight at stake is set adrift from the world as it is, into the abyss of a world we may desire but which does not exist.¹¹ “In the moment” points not to freedom in the sense of having the ability to deliberate, decide, and respond, which is to say, to have black power, but to a peculiar ontological position that is always the context for the present. In other words, performance is engaged with the synchronics of the now, rather than the diachronics of antiblackness, in the sense that synchronic registers a moment in time, while diachronic occurs across time: as in, the slavocracy is not instituted in one moment, one set of behaviors, or under one juridical-political arrangement, but rather is compulsively reconstituted in every moment across time. It *is* time, and there is no outside to the time of slavery.¹²

The relationship between hip hop pedagogy and hip hop studies is indeed awaiting further explication, as Forster notes. Ultimately, the distinction is immaterial to our analysis, however, for hip hop studies is so popular precisely because of its usefulness in the white nation’s neoliberal marketplace of ideas about black culture, a phenomenon to which we gesture throughout the essay. In other words, it does critical *pedagogical* labor for white nationalism. If hip hop studies was actually chipping away at the antiblack foundation of modern society, do we really think that elite educational and media institutions vested in the status quo would so richly reward and popularize such treatments of blackness? The academic entrepreneurship—or, in the terms that it applies to its objects of study, the academic “hustle”—of hip hop studies scholars does not destroy the authority that it ostensibly challenges, but extends its possibilities. Accordingly, we will continue to call out those scholars whose work trades on black pathology, no matter how muted, mystified, or submerged within a hip hop sensibility. All of Tricia Rose’s trailblazing work on rap music comes to naught when she deploys pathological blackness to reify the law’s transcendence over the scenes of black bodily capture from the fifteenth century onwards, which is precisely what happens when she criticizes hip hop for its “no-snitch” campaign. In such a moment, she is very much the police power against black self-possession, the Stephanie Rawlings-Blake of black studies—or, to evoke the conjoined forces of bell hooks and Spillers,

Rose and Rawlings-Blake are both “doing it for daddy”: “In other words, to know the seductions of the father and who, in fact, the father is might also help the subject to know wherein she occasionally speaks when she is least suspecting.”¹³ In this vein, hip hop studies would do well to heed Joy James’ observation regarding the elections of Barack Obama and Deval Patrick, that black “success” does not in any way displace the discourse of black pathology, but rather is made possible by it.¹⁴ In the “dead zone,” Obama rises not despite pathological blackness, but because of it; similarly, hip hop studies’ configuration of hip hop’s creativity, entrepreneurship, and resistant posturing is legible precisely because it is implicitly read in relation to the taken-for-granted pathos of blackness—no matter what the scholar or critic is actually saying. And by “it,” we refer to *both* the object of hip hop studies, black culture, *and* its subjects, the scholar-critic. This, again, is the time of slavery.

The conformity between hip hop studies and the police power brings us to the matter of “black feminism.” Forster employs Spillers to amplify his criticism that we have eclipsed “black feminist voices.” For Spillers, the “interstice” is the critical term of language that is present only in its absence. As with grammar itself, this “missing word” serves as both the condition of possibility for speech and the subject about which we talk routinely—and which shares, “in this case, a common border with another country of symbols—the iconographic.”¹⁵ For our argument about hip hop studies, the interstitial is blackness and its implicit pathologies—namely, we used Rose alongside Michelle Alexander and Paul Butler to highlight how hip hop studies conjoins arguments against mass incarceration and “excessive” policing in its reliance upon a taken-for-granted premise of black criminality. For Spillers’ argument in “Interstices” about feminism, the interstitial is also blackness and its implicit pathologies—as in, how feminism’s construction of “gender” and “sexuality” relies upon a prior and continued erasure of black women, naturalized as exotic, bestial, primitive, chaos personified, and lost in “the great black hole of meaning.”¹⁶

Spillers’ argument in “Interstices,” as in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” and other influential essays, is actually at odds with Forster’s discussion of “black feminism,” despite his reference to her work. Much of “black feminism” attempts to counter what it poses as the exclusionary practices of feminism by including black women within the privileges of gender. Spillers, however, formulates the problem not as one of exclusion, but rather in terms of *preclusion*.¹⁷ “Black feminism” is a structural impossibility, and as such, an onto-epistemic

contradiction—hence our use of the quotation marks around the phrase. The paradigmatic intervention somewhat loosely collected under the heading of “afro-pessimism” certainly does have an intellectual history behind it, but it is not the “black feminism” to which Forster refers. In addition to Spillers’ argument, throughout her scholarly corpus, that “black feminism” is an impossibility, there is also Sylvia Wynter’s prolific interventions across a range of critical essays deducing how blackness is not merely the antithesis of whiteness, but moreover as that position against which the human takes form it is also the negation of “manhood” and “womanhood,” or in feminism’s terms, of “gender” and “sex” themselves.¹⁸ Although Hartman openly credits the influence of Spillers but not Wynter on her work, the imprint of both can be seen when she observes regarding slavery: “Gender, if at all appropriate in this scenario, must be understood as indissociable from violence.”¹⁹

The framework that Spillers, Wynter, and Hartman employ does not come from “black feminism” *per se*, but rather emanates from how black militancy has grappled with the particular modalities of tyranny that converge on the black body.²⁰ The formulations emergent during the Black Power era are, again, particularly instructive. In her classic Black Arts Movement-era anthology *The Black Woman*, Toni Cade Bambara proposed dispensing of “black woman” and “black man” in favor of “blackhood.”²¹ Similarly, Black Liberation Army soldier Safiya Bukhari writes, “We had taken on the persona of sexist America, but with a Black hue. It was into this context that the Black Panther Party was born, declaring that we were revolutionaries and a revolutionary had no gender.”²² These are the standards of “black feminist” leadership and analysis pertinent to the study of black expressive culture.²³

In a recent post to his widely-read blog, *NewBlackMan (in Exile)*, hip hop scholar Mark Anthony Neal found political significance in the video for J. Cole’s song “G.O.M.D.” He describes the video in terms of “When ‘Thingness’ Stages the Terms of Their Freedom”:

If we are to think of chattel slavery as the attempt to reduce Black humanity to a “Thingness,” what happens when that Thingness (pre-citizen in the eyes of the law) stages the terms of its own freedom, using the very thingness (culture and commodities) that it created but can never own, because Thingness can’t own thingness, let alone itself?²⁴

For Neal, J. Cole and video director Lawrence Lamont stage this black resistance-as-criminality, and in so doing, remind us that hip hop has consistently re-staged “the terms of our resistance.” Neal’s comments are brief, so we will not subject them here to belabored analysis—other than to simply pose the counter-question: why does hip hop “stage the terms” of black freedom and not the ongoing suffering of captivity?

We reiterate our position that sentiments of resistance are always and already incomplete if uncoupled from the reality that such freedom moves can never extend beyond mere staging: hip hop studies’ emphasis on the performative dimension of oppression and resistance, at the expense of diligently analyzing power as a structure, does a disservice to the actual protracted work of building towards black liberation. Scholars presume that the dimension of individual experience is the primary level of accountability, but this has never been the case with black studies. The “truth” of slavery is not found in the experience of individual slaves. If hip hop studies were to let go of its Master Conception and get to “know the ledge” it would see “a performer possessed *by*, not in possession *of* blackness” (emphasis added).²⁵ To borrow from Frank B. Wilderson III, hip hop studies must face its intrinsic crisis of symbolic capacity, “for no symbols can represent what Black violence portends. No rational assessment of the objective conditions can soothe the nerves. This is what the phrase, ‘fear of a Black planet’ really means: the fear of no planet at all, the fear of living one’s life like a Black. A life in which there is no civic, no society, in which death is a synonym for sanctuary.”²⁶ Hip hop studies can only stand at the precipice and gaze into it; it cannot represent the space of beyond, which is precisely the original and longstanding danger of black studies not only to the white nationalist project, but to knowledge itself.²⁷ Continuing to formulate hip hop as “staging the terms” of black freedom is a form of “black anger management”²⁸—in short, it is merely Common and Mos Def paying homage to Assata, synchronically. As such, it enjoins the police power against black people in Baltimore’s streets in April 2015. Alternatively, if hip hop studies were to see the ongoing terms of the slavocracy reconstituted in every instance, diachronically, then hip hop studies might actually become dangerous to the violent structures of the world—in other words, it would be Tupac’s relationship to his step-aunt and godmother. He never attempted to represent this relationship lyrically for it exceeds symbolic capacity, but it signified the world’s effort to stamp out the promise of each successive generation of black youth, and was therefore the fire brimming in each and every word Tupac uttered.

Notes

1. <http://baltimore.cbslocal.com/2015/04/25/baltimore-mayor-gave-those-who-wished-to-destroy-space-to-do-that/>.
2. There is also: “Bodymore,” “Baltimorgue,” “Bulletmore,” and “Murderland.” The popular HBO series set in Baltimore, *The Wire*, is often credited with either popularizing (beyond Baltimore itself) or creating some of these terms. *The Wire* has become a franchise of meaning-making, with its creator David Simon now regarded as an expert on impoverished black communities, rather than an entrepreneurial agent of fungible black iconography, among other scandalous situations. The need to subject the truth-claims of this multidisciplinary and multimedia franchise to a severe ethical accounting similar to that we are calling for with respect to hip hop studies is long overdue. As Greg Thomas once asked regarding Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012): why hasn’t this stuff been questioned at all?
3. Assata Shakur’s statement is reproduced in Evelyn Williams, *Inadmissible Evidence: The Story of the African-American Trial Lawyer who Defended the Black Liberation Army* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.com, 2000), 86-88. Shakur spells the proper names of the white nationalist state in all lower-case letters.
4. Sylvia Wynter, “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues.” *Forum NHI: Knowledge for the 21st Century*, in *NHI Forum: Knowledge for the 21st Century’s* inaugural issue “*Knowledge on Trial*,” 1, no. 1 (1994): 42–73.
5. Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1963).
6. Sylvia Wynter, “On how we mistook the map for the territory, and re-imprisoned ourselves in our unbearable wrongness of being, of Désêtre,” in *Not only the master’s tools: African-American studies in theory and practice*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Gordon (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), 112–13.
7. See Greg Thomas, *Hip-Hop Revolution in the Flesh: Power, Knowledge, and Pleasure in Lil’ Kim’s Lyricism* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).
8. Yes, we are indeed indicating that Carby, Perry, Wehlieye et al. signify an appropriation of black studies’ decisive political challenge to the hegemonic Western order of knowledge. Although we do not have the space to lay out such a critique in these pages, we suggest that it is indispensable background for a cultural studies community such as *JPMS*. For a critical read on Carby, see Greg Thomas, *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power: Pan-African Embodiment and Erotic Schemes of Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). For a recent critical review of Wehlieye, see David Marriott, “Black Critical and Cultural

Theory,” *The Years Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, 22, 1 (2014): 21–40; and for a reading of Wehlieye and others that situates the work in relation to the black studies political project, see the forthcoming monograph “*Post-Racial*” is the New Antiblack: *Punishment and Disavowal in U.S. Race and Sex Politics* from Tryon P. Woods. Again, although these may seem like disciplinary debates bound to an obscure quarter of the academy, they impinge upon any and all discourse on black cultural expression.

9. Kwame Ture, *Stokely Speaks: From Black Power to Pan-Africanism* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2007), 77–78.

10. Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003),” 167.

11. See Lupe Fiasco, “All black everything.” *On Lasers, CD (Album)*, Atlantic (2011).

12. Although Forster cites affirmatively a different essay by one of us as evidence of his argument *against* an essay by both of us, this other essay in fact demonstrates this very point about how the structure of antiblackness lays down the limits of performance analysis in the study of black cultural expression. See Tryon P. Woods, “‘Beat It Like a Cop’: The Erotic Cultural Politics of Punishment in the Era of Post-Racialism,” *Social Text* 31.1, 114, (March 2013): 21–41. See, as well, Saidiya V. Hartman, “The Time of Slavery,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 101, no. 4, (Fall 2002): 757–777, and later, her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2008).

13. bell hooks, “Doing It For Daddy: Black Masculinity in the Mainstream,” in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 83–90; Spillers, “Interstices,” 167.

14. Joy James, “The Dead Zone: Stumbling at the Crossroads of Party Politics, Genocide, and Postracial Racism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 108, no. 3, (Summer 2009): 459–481.

15. Spillers, “Interstices,” 156.

16. Spillers, “Interstices,” 156.

17. See P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, “Ex Aqua: The Mediterranean Basin, Africans on the Move, and the Politics of Policing,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 141, (December 2014): 55–75.

18. See, for example, Sylvia Wynter, “One Love—Rhetoric or Reality? Aspects of Afro-Jamaicanism,” *Caribbean Studies* 12, no. 3 (1972): 64–97. For a

superb overview of Wynter's contributions on this score, see Greg Thomas, "The Body Politics of 'Man' and 'Woman' in an 'Antiblack' World: Sylvia Wynter on Empire's Humanism (A Critical Resource Guide), in *On Maroonage: Ethical Confrontations with Antiblackness*, eds. P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, (Trenton: Africa World Press, forthcoming).

19. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Seduction: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 86.

20. Of course, everything builds upon everything, and Spillers, Wynter, and Hartman would each readily acknowledge their debts to "black feminists" of all kinds, as do we. Our emphasis, however, reflects the need to underscore a submerged intellectual tradition.

21. Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2005).

22. Safiya Bukhari, *The War Before* (New York: Feminist Press, 2010), 54-55.

23. For a model along these lines, see Greg Thomas, *Hip-Hop Revolution in the Flesh: Power, Knowledge, and Pleasure in Lil' Kim's Lyricism* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

24. <http://newblackman.blogspot.com/2015/03/when-thingness-stages-terms-of-their.html>.

25. Nicholas Brady, "Bound 2 (You): A Black Study of Kanye West's Yeezus," *Out of Nowhere: The Cutting Edge of Black Theory*, July 6, 2013, <https://outofnowhereblog.wordpress.com/2013/07/06/bound-2-you-a-black-study-of-kanye-wests-yeezus/>.

26. Frank B. Wilderson, III, "The Black Liberation Army and the Paradox of Political Engagement," in *Postionality-Decoloniality-Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, eds. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker (Frankfurt, Germany: Campus Verlag, 2015), 201.

27. See P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, "What is the *Danger* in Black Studies and Can We Look At It Again (and Again)?," in *On Maroonage: Ethical Confrontations with Antiblackness*, eds. P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, (Trenton: Africa World Press, forthcoming).

28. Frank B. Wilderson, III, "'We're Trying to Destroy the World': Antiblackness and Police Violence After Ferguson—An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III," ill-will-editions.tumblr.com.