

Spill(ing) Over The Edges — Accounts of Black Fugitive Women

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Gumbs, Alexis Pauline: *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2016.

Abstract:

Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Spill* is experimental and poetic in its rejection of the classic essay style. From different perspectives, *Spill* tells the story of black fugitive women and their struggle for independence. Different female narrative and lyrical voices from various backgrounds deal with anti-black violence and racism in their everyday lives. They go back to the enslavement of black people, tracing its effects to black women's lives nowadays. The book is dedicated to Hortense J. Spillers' *Black, White, and in Colour* and invites the reader to reread and rethink Spillers' work.

Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity, written by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, is a combination of poetry and Literary Criticism, as well as a contribution to Black Feminism. Gumbs, who describes herself as a queer Black Feminist, portrays scenes of the fugitivity of black women from different social backgrounds and of different ages. Gumbs' work is inspired by Hortense J. Spillers and her seminal *Black, White, and in Colour*. Each page in *Spill* has a footnote referring to one sentence or phrase from Spillers book — not to mention the resemblance of the title and Spillers name.

Spill is highly experimental in its form, style, and language. Most of the pages are left half blank and each chapter opens with a short extract from a dictionary describing lexical and semantic varieties of the word „spill/spil.“ The language Gumbs uses is a mixture of poetry and prose. Her use of mostly half-empty pages and disruptions through italics influence and direct the pace and rhythm with which the text can be understood. The language of *Spill* is infused with alliterations, anaphoras, epiphoras, parallelism, metaphors, and many more stylistic devices. Gumbs also includes meta-comments in her work, like the note at the beginning and two dedications, one to Harriet Tubman (p. 39) and one to Phillis Wheatley (p. 63) — both famous black women in the history of the United States. Tubman was an abolitionist who escaped slavery and Wheatley was the first published female African-American poet. There are uncountable ellipses, no capital letters after punctuations and very different lyrical

and narrative perspectives. These perspectives constantly change without obvious reason, yet are connected through the similar themes they address, which range from everyday life (like baking) to accounts of violence against women. There are only a few instances in which the female narrative perspective changes into a male one. The different voices — may they be that of a mother, daughter, sister, friend, or wife — are united in the desire to escape and free themselves from racism and gendered violence.

The endeavor of structuring the book — which has to remain an attempt — does injustice to the work of this extraordinary scholar. Put aside markers, pencils, and post-its. Put aside literary and cultural instruments for analyzing and structuring texts. *Spill* defies structuring and categorizations. The moment the reader realizes this fact is the moment in which *Spill* unfolds its beauty, its pain, its anger, its hope. These paradoxes, tensions, and contractions run through the book, which makes the reading process almost painful. Reading is hard work, but it is supposed to be that way:

because she was a cave. papyrus. she was inventing a language.
herself. she was lighting up the darkness. her skin. however
dull, the person who holds the tool can say *i am not an animal*.
can she? can say there is control. there is reason in what she
feels. cannot. say that and be heard. she is not. an animal. so
she brights it in the darkness. her skin. she spells it in the
tomb. her covered arms. her battered womb. she makes a place
to right her walls again. she tilts and wields it expertly. her
pain. the spell she scratches in her skin. her name. (p. 20)

In order to understand all the references Gumbs makes, the reader has to reread Spillers' work. In a footnote, Gumbs links the quote above to Spillers' phrase „hieroglyphics of the flesh“ (p. 207) from her essay „Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe.“ Here, Spillers argues that the tortures of enslavement and plantation slavery leave a physical imprint on the female and male body — „of altered human tissue“ (p. 207). She calls it „hieroglyphics of the flesh,“ because each body appears to hide these brutalities, as they are concealed by the colour of their skin. Gumbs takes up Spillers' argument about the pain and the disruptions caused by racial violence.

These disruptions are mirrored in Gumbs' language and her choice of words. In contrast to Spillers, she stresses very personal and emotional aspects in a more creative way than an essay could possibly achieve. The text creates the image of a number of individual voices who retell and reexamine their experiences with racism and gendered violence. *Spill* challenges the reader to go back to reread and

rethink Spillers' thoughts and arguments. At the same time each reference puts each page of the book into a specific context, which serves as a guide to understand the contexts of the different narrative and lyrical voices.

Throughout *Spill* the different female perspectives connect experiences from the past with those of the present. The historical event the book engages with the most is the enslavement of peoples and its aftermath for the following generations of black women in the U.S. and beyond. In doing so *Spill* highlights the gendered violence black women and women of colour had and still have to face. Here, Gumbs' voice as the author appears to mingle with narrative and lyrical personae. *Spill* incorporates a multitude of voices which are linked thematically through shared experiences and the remembrance of a shared history, while they are at the same time constantly disrupted through the book's language and appearance. The dialogue with Spillers' work highlights that despite gendered and racial violence the claim for freedom, independence, and resistance remains a driving force in the lives of fugitive black women and black feminist criticism.

Spill is aimed at a target audience involved with English and American Studies, particularly Black Studies and Black Feminism. The experimental nature of the book offers a new perspective on a diasporic history of black women in the U.S. and addresses fugitivity on a global scale. Gumbs creates a dialogue between herself and Spillers and simultaneously envisions new opportunities of relating Spillers to other black feminist thinkers. In doing so she imagines new forms of poetry and critical essay writing and opens up an alternative to conventional literary practices.

German Abstract:

Ein Blick über den Tellerrand — Erzählungen von vertriebenen Schwarzen Frauen

Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *Spill* widersetzt sich herrschenden Konventionen des Essay-Stils, indem es äußerst experimentelle und poetische Elemente einsetzt. Aus verschiedenen Perspektiven erzählt es die Geschichte schwarzer vertriebener Frauen und ihres Kampfes um Unabhängigkeit und Freiheit. Unterschiedliche weibliche narrative und lyrische Stimmen thematisieren Rassismus und Gewalt gegenüber schwarzen Frauen im Alltag. *Spill* folgt hierbei der Geschichte der Versklavung von Völkern aus Afrika bis zu den Auswirkungen dieser Geschichte auf den heutigen Alltag von schwarzen Frauen. Gumbs widmet ihr Buch in dieser Hinsicht Hortense J. Spillers' *Black, White, and in Colour*.

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