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Notes on the Vestibular

Kara Keeling (kkeeling@usc.edu)

Abstract: Responding to the topic of “concept-metaphor membra(I)nes”, the author offers a tentative reading on the concept of “the vestibular” as it is used in Hortense Spillers essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”. In differentiating between “the body” and “the flesh”, Spillers use of the term “vestibular” is argued to conceptualize an outside of, albeit close to, the cultural that, at the same time, can also be read as the spatiotemporal dimension of the cultural “unconscious”. Here, the concept of utopia and its marking of unknowable spatial and temporal dimensions is applied to “the vestibular”. In three theses, Spillers’ notion of “the vestibular” is discussed on the backdrop of the distinction of “flesh” and “the body”, empathy of “the flesh”, and an extension to the physiological vestibular system.

Keywords: Body, Space, Temporality, Flesh, Vestibular, Empathy

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Notes on the Vestibular¹

What I have to offer in response to the conference theme focused on the “concept-metaphor membra(I)nes” is three theses on the topic of “the vestibular.”

I have been thinking about “the vestibular” as I have been re-reading of the work of African American feminist critic and theorist, Hortense Spillers. The most well-known and discussed use of the term “vestibular” is in Spillers’ seminal 1987 essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” She uses some variation of the term three times in that essay as part of her effort to differentiate between “the body” and “the flesh”. In making these distinctions, I understand Spillers to be interested in accomplishing at least two things.

First, she uses it to open a space that is not (or not yet) cultural, but nonetheless *significant* insofar as it might still contain things that signify in some, perhaps presently indecipherable, way. For example, at one point in the essay, she uses the phrase “vestibular cultural formation” (1987, 74) and at another she refers to “the vestibule (or “pre-view”) of a colonized North America” (1987, 67). And, perhaps most clearly, she writes, “As Elaine Scarry describes the mechanisms of torture [Scarry 27–59], these lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate *a cultural vestibularity and the culture*, whose state apparatus, including judges, attorneys, ‘owners,’ ‘soul drivers,’ ‘overseers,’ and ‘men of God,’ apparently colludes with a protocol of ‘search and destroy.’ This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside.” (Spillers 1987, 67) Here, Spillers describes a “distance” between the vestibule of culture and the culture, and she attributes state formation and, implicitly other elements of the social and political organization of things to “culture.”

In the book “The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire”, Erica Edwards glosses this sense of Spillers’ use of “the vestibular” as follows: “For Spillers, cultural vestibularity is the place of the broken Black flesh that serves as the entry point into the settler-slave colony of North America.” (2021, 342) According to Edwards, then, Spillers demarcates between “the flesh” and “the body” to conceptualize an outside of, albeit a threshold to, the cultural. Spillers’ references to “frontiers” and to “distance” as well as Edwards’ characterization of it as a “place,” suggest “cultural vestibularity” has a spatial dimension.

¹ The author wishes to thank Jennifer Wild for comments on earlier drafts of this essay. All errors are my own.

I currently understand Spillers' specific interest here to be with how "the body" becomes a cultural text, gendered as it passes through the vestibule into culture.

The second thing Spillers accomplishes with this formulation is a bit more difficult to discern in the "Mama's Baby" essay, but it is clearer in a couple of her later essays; namely, she uses the notion of "the vestibule" or "the vestibular" or "vestibularity" to mark something like the "unconscious" of a culture. I think this is what "vestibular" marks in her 2007 essay "The Idea of Black Culture" when she writes referring to the influential Black scholar W.E.B. DuBois: "Dubois and the latter-day theoreticians need the specificity of context to articulate a generality of ontological procedure so that, most generously to ourselves, we can both have our cake and eat it, too. In that case, the philosopher's 'dis-alienation' may well constitute a kind of vestibular moment across which threshold 'de-se-dimentation' may do its work...." (2007, 25) Here, "vestibular" has a temporality – it is a "moment." My reading of the spatiotemporal dimensions of Spillers' notion of the vestibular is one of the ways I think my comments are in conversation with the concept-metaphor "membra(I)nes."

In what follows, I take the provocation of the concept-metaphor "membra(I)nes" as an opportunity to consider where and when new concepts, forms, and phenomena with the capacity to disrupt the present organization of things might be perceived. This where and when has often been conceptualized under the rubric of "utopia."

In my previous work, I have tended to avoid using the term "utopia," even as I have approached the concept with references to others, such as, for example, "a radical elsewhere" at the end of my book *The Witch's Flight*, or by engaging with work that embraces the concept, such as José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.² To address the possibilities raised by attending to "the vestibular," however, I think it makes sense to engage with the term in the way Jayna Brown uses it in the book *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* where Brown writes (in ways that resonate with my own thinking over time):

"... I take the concept of utopia into a no-place, into an elsewhere. We are still made of matter, but we are rocketed into another dimension. With black speculation as my methodology, I use the term utopia to signal the (im)possibilities for forms of subjectivity outside a recognizable ontological framework, and modes of existence conceived of in unfamiliar epistemes. These (im)possibilities open up where the human has

2 See Keeling, Kara (2007): *The Witch's Flight. The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; and Muñoz, José Esteban (2009): *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.

abandoned us and onto a much bigger universe, when we jump into the unknowable. I say the unknowable, not the unknown, for the condition of utopia is to accept that we, in our present state, cannot fully know anything. Utopia is a state of being and doing.” (Brown 2021, 6–7)

Carrying forward this understanding of “utopia” as involving (im)possibilities for forms outside of those we presently recognize while marking a space/time of the unknowable, I want to offer the following theses as a contribution to a consideration of “membra(I)nes.”

The first Thesis is one I provided elsewhere. I include it here with some revisions:

Thesis I. A distinction must be made between “flesh” and “the body.” Hortense J. Spillers wrote in 1987 as part of a theory of the gender dynamics that attended the system of chattel slavery in the Americas:

“I would make a distinction in this case between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies- some of them female - out of West African communities in concert with the African ‘middleman,’ we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard.” (Spillers 1987, 67)

For Spillers, the “flesh” is an aesthetic category that we might think of as “a primary narrative,” one that is fundamental to the enslavement of Africans in the Americas. If this is true, what kind of narrative is the “flesh”? What stories is “flesh” capable of telling? How might we describe its aesthetic form(s)?

Spillers posits “a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh.” The hieroglyphs are undecipherable, “hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color.” They are “vestibular” to culture, in the ‘pre-view’ of a colonized North America. The “flesh” tells tales of visceral violence that attended chattel slavery. In that context, “flesh” is a narrative genre unto itself.

In Spillers’ account, the genre’s origin is chattel slavery in North America. As an aesthetic form, it is “lexical,” and, therefore, fundamentally relational. “The body” can be read as a cultural text legible to those habituated to and disciplined by the various institutions of the culture in which the body appears to anchor a particular “subject-position.” Social, economic, and political systems

work in and through bodies they make legible according to the logics of those systems. Vestibular to culture, “flesh” expresses the unconscious innards of culture. Flesh is a lexicon of desire, pleasure, and other drives.³

Thesis II. In Arthur Jafa’s 2014 film “Dreams Are Colder Than Death”, Hortense Spillers states in a voice-over, “the flesh gives empathy” (07:59). The sense of “empathy” most relevant here stems from the translation into English of the German word *Einfühlung*.

In the “Introduction” to the book “Empathy: A History”, Susan Marie Lanzoni explains the word “empathy” first appeared in English “in 1908 as a translation of the German art historical term *Einfühlung*, or literally, ‘in-feeling.’ *Einfühlung* captured the aesthetic activity of transferring one’s own feeling into the forms and shapes of objects. This was empathy’s earliest meaning, one that has been covered over and for the most part forgotten” (2018, 2).

This early art historical sense of the term refers to a sensory-motor extension from an “imaginary bodily perspective” into the sensory and motor properties of an object. Spillers’ formulation is worth investigating in this context. She says the flesh gives empathy. Here, the flesh is the agent of and for empathy. It is not the form or object onto which another’s mind and feeling or self and bodily movements might be projected. “The flesh” is what makes it possible for imagination or experience to be extended to others and to objects. Perhaps one could argue that, to the extent “the flesh” is, following Spillers, “vestibular” to culture, it indexes present movements and felt senses, *some of which* might become entangled with other aesthetic phenomena and pass over the threshold into culture.

Thesis III: A consideration of Spillers’ concept of “the vestibular” in relation to culture might be extended to include the physiological vestibular system, which, some neuroscientists have argued, might constitute a sixth sense – sometimes referred to as “the movement sense.”

In “The Vestibular System: A Sixth Sense,” Goldberg et al. write, “Despite its relatively late discovery, the vestibular system plays an important, even vital role in behavior. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to consider the vestibular system together with other proprioceptive systems as forming a sixth sense.” (2012, 4) The vestibular system belongs to the body, whose anatomy can be studied, analyzed, and categorized according to the best science of the day. But it could be said it also registers perceptions recorded on the flesh, perceptions that are vestibular to the scientific accounting of them.

3 This thesis is a minor revision of a section I wrote entitled “Flesh” for “Finance Aesthetics: A Critical Glossary”, 2025.

Even though the peripheral receptors of the vestibular system are part of the inner ear, the system does not relate solely to sound and hearing; it is responsible for providing an organism with internal estimates of motion and spatial awareness. Goldberg, et al. point out, "Fibers from all five sense organs travel to the brain stem and terminate in the vestibular nuclei. ... Other inputs to the nuclei come from the visual and somatosensory systems. Even in secondary neurons, there are motor signals, indicating that the vestibular system is at the interface between sensory and motor systems." The vestibular system is part of a body. It facilitates communication between sensory input and motor functions. It governs the body's capacity for movement.

Much more could be said here about what becomes available to thought when the body's vestibular system is considered alongside a reading of Hortense Spillers' use of the concept of "the vestibular." As I mentioned above, Spillers uses the concept of "the vestibular" to locate the distinction between "flesh" and "the body" in a space and time on the threshold of culture. "The vestibular system," on the other hand, turns our attention to the capacity of sentient things to remain physically anchored in a "here" and "now" and/or, when that system is not functioning normally, to their incapacity to remain normatively anchored then and there.

Attending to the vestibular system turns our attention to the question of "the membrane." Considering "the membrane" as part of "the vestibular system" might open another series of questions about the temporality of "the flesh" (as different from that which inheres in what has entered "culture") and the role sensations play in the antechamber (or the vestibule) of culture.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the vestibule in the ear is, "The osseous cavity which forms the central portion of the labyrinth of the ear and is situated between the tympanum and the internal auditory canal, immediately behind the cochlea." The osseous vestibule of the ear contains the "membranous vestibule, which are membranous sacs."⁴ These membranous sacs are known as the otolith organs. The otolith organs respond to gravitational forces. (It is worth pointing out here that the name of "The Otolith Group," which was founded by the artists and theorists Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun in London in 2002, refers to these organs.) The otolith organs work to keep the body normatively anchored to the earth. In other words, they work to keep a body, and its flesh normatively anchored in a here and a now. Part of the vestibular system, they are fleshy membranes that collect and parse sensations into movement.

4 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "vestibule (n.), sense 2.a," September 2023.

Though I would have to do more research into the science of the vestibular system to say this with confidence, I suspect that not all sensations become movement. Not all sensations collected by these membranes become immediately useful to and for the body. We might consider how the perception of sound, for example, marks a “now” that itself is temporally vestibular to its work in distilling sound into aesthetic/cultural form, or into what we can discern and categorize as a certain genre of music, such as “Rhythm and Blues” or “Funk.” From this, we might also consider those sounds that, at present, might be perceived but cannot be distilled into a cultural form. In sound studies, these have been theorized most regularly as “noise.” It might then follow that even though certain sounds become part of discrete cultural productions, our perception of those sounds evades our present capacity to describe them precisely, even as they remain *significant*. (And here I am thinking also about my characterization of Spillers’ use of “the vestibular” earlier in this essay where I said, “she uses it to open a space that is not (or not yet) cultural, but nonetheless significant insofar as it might still contain things that signify in some, perhaps presently indecipherable, way.”)

Though my comments here are tentative, I think this framing helps me to grasp the conceptual problem of “the now” or “the contemporary” as a question of “the membrane” and its place in “the vestibular.” In the Preface to my 2019 book, “Queer Times, Black Futures”, I put it this way: “Every now harbors chaos and, therefore, a capacity for change.” (2019, ix) In the various senses of the term, I have discussed today, “the vestibular” is the spatiotemporality in which attempts are made, moment by moment, unceasingly, to govern chaos.

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