

2-3. Last week, in the session on archaeology, we observed how the disinterring of ruins created the positive terms for constructing a memory for the nation-state. Hortense Spillers' theorization of the "vestibular space" in the trans-Atlantic slave ship suggests that, for some populations at least, such positive terms of patrimony may have become irrevocable in their emergence into modernity. Expand on this concept. Can you think of any other examples of such vestibular spaces? Qualify.

The vestibule, the body, and the closet

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A site of institutional dislocation, Spillers describes the trans-Atlantic slave ship as a space of cultural deconstruction. The slave ships embodied the site of a massive industry intended for the dehumanization of the slave. This was achieved through the erasure of the identity of the individual through violent acts of detachment from all things familiar -- language, family, and comfort (spatial, cultural). Slavery in the United States would proliferate through an institutional system of control, produced in the form of social and legal codes necessary for the physical and emotional rule over the slave; a process described by Hortense Spillers as the transformation of "personality into property".

The slave-body became an object of commerce lacking an associative being. It was seen as mere flesh. In the case of female slaves, this distinction would be used to construct a social awareness of the body of white women, imbued with value, and seen as bodies in need of protection and preservation. Conversely, the body of black women would disempower that of black men, as they would lose their role as fathers in the deconstruction of normative kinship patterns. Thus, the construction of the body of the female slave as a "vestibular space" provided the space through which white women were protected, black men were castrated, and black women were (inversely) empowered within the constructs of a culture of slavery. It is through the body of the female slave that new discourses of identity (African-American, feminist) emerge in the form of counter-narratives within American history.

The term "vestibule", like threshold or doorway, implies passage through, or transition from, terms which can be associated with movement, both physical and cultural (as in the case of the Civil Rights Movement and other cultural/social revolutions). The term recalls sacrificial symbolism, by which one body provides the opportunity for another body to benefit. The body of the mother or the organ donor comes to mind as examples of corporeal vestibules. However, both the mother and the organ donor lack the symbiosis of the female slave, whose vestibularity provides benefits to one group at the expense of the other. This quality is not described by Hortense Spiller as a requisite attribute of "vestibular space" but it provides a complexity that allows the term a specificity within the article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe; An American Grammar Book".

Spillers' use of the architectural term the "vestibule" reminds me of the space of the "closet" described by Henry Urbach in his discussion of concealed gay identity. In his

article, "Closets, Clothes, disClosure," Urbach engages the idea of the closet as a space of storage hidden from sight, existing outside of the boundaries of the room. Urbach historicizes the emergence of the closet as a space intended for the concealment of excessive "material acquisition". In addition to this history, the relationship of the space between the closet and the room, the "threshold", is given great importance as a space of transition that allows both the concealment and display of the closet's interior. These theories serve as metaphors for gay identification, "closeted" behavior, and the coded language emerging from the need to keep the door closed, as it were. Like Spillers' vestibule, the closet presents the social constructs that control the formation of identity. And here the complexity/symbiosis emerges, as the closet requires/insists on the concealment of gay identity, but can only be constructed in the presence of that which is non-closeted or public.