

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT:
Conversation with HORTENSE SPILLERS

Interview took place at Hortense’s home in Nashville Tennessee. Slight sound of trains in the distance, we sat in her living room, Arjuna perched on an armchair, Denise on a laptop in Vancouver, while Hortense sat on a comfy red couch which had some kind of golden vine pattern on it. There were books behind her, a large tv, and it started to rain.

keywords: Slavery. Intimacy. Touch. Proximity.
Intergenerational scars & healing. The Blues. Kinship.

HORTENSE: I see...

DENISE: I didn’t stay back because of the dog.
I stayed back because of Mark.

HORTENSE: Because of Mark, I see, yeah, yeah, yeah.
Can you see us?

DENISE: I can see you. I can see.... Eh, now I can see more of Arjuna.

ARJUNA: Hey!

DENISE: I can see you. Can you hear me?

ARJUNA: Yeah. I think what we’ll do is, we’ll put the laptop on the table.
I’ve got all the equipment set up, so...

HORTENSE: Can that cord reach?

ARJUNA: It should be able to reach, why don't I put...

HORTENSE: Put that cord there, and then get that...
Yeah, exactly...the other side, the first one there. Yeah, there we go.

ARJUNA: And it's on. Can you see, Denise?

DENISE: Yes, I can see.

ARJUNA: And you can hear okay?

DENISE: I can hear okay.

HORTENSE: Ok, alright.

DENISE: I can hear better.

ARJUNA: If you sit comfortable, Hortense.

HORTENSE: Hmm?

ARJUNA: If you sit comfortably, I am going to focus on you.

(Landline phone rings in background, no one answers it)

ARJUNA: Great.

HORTENSE: OK.

ARJUNA: Everything is recording and ready to go

DENISE: We're all ready to go? Let me move here.
OK. Hi Hortense! Thank you so much for being part of this project

HORTENSE: Oh, I'm happy to do it!

DENISE: I wish I could be there, but I'll try to do my best from here.

As I mentioned in my email from yesterday, the film is doing a few things. But crucial thing that we are doing is to speculate on the [? 02.31 sensuality / centrality] of the visual, in modern thought—philosophy and [? 02.34-02.27] in aspects of modern knowledge and existence. And then [?] the relationship with light, with subjectivity, with the notion [?] of subjectivity. And then I make reference to Lacan's mirrored or the general notion of transparency in philosophy.

And then, of course, we are interested in a shift from the optic to the haptic; from a notion of subjectivity to a notion of sensibility which returns the consideration to the senses, the body and existence.

One of the things we were hoping we could do was to have you responding to this kind of mood from within your thought and your work. In particular, on touch and intimacy. So, we just want to hear you speculate a bit and then I may or may not ask questions....

HORTENSE: Yeah....

ARJUNA: It would also be good to mostly focus on speculation but to give a kind of overview of the way intimacy and touch has this violent...

history, and the two sides of it; the restorative side of touch and the violent side, maybe?

HORTENSE: I was thinking about the questions you were raising, I suppose, in a naive sense. Naive in this way; I have been trying to account for what kind of pictures or images go through my head when I think ‘intimacy.’ And I was thinking that there is some kind of correlation between...the filmic world; contemporary film, and how we think about history.

I guess you could say, in a sense, history has become a film in our mind that is... constantly unfolding. My thoughts about this have been kind of rambling and incoherent but I've landed on my response to *12 Years a Slave*, which is both a motion picture and a historical event having to do with a real-life person; that is the filmmaker's attempt to make a story out of Solomon Northup's life, right?

I'm remembering that when I saw that film—fairly recently, maybe four or five years ago— it took me a while to see the film, because I kept thinking about how difficult it was going to be to watch the film. And so, I decided, since I knew this work—I mean, it's not a work that was ever really lost, uh, the filmmaker thought it was, but it really wasn't (*laughs*) a lost story at all.

What happens in the film, I think I'm saying is, in my mind, in some naive way, it is the way history actually unfolded, right? And I think that is what I mean by this ‘real’ [?]. One of the scenes that sticks with me has to do with the lead female character who gets a beating

in one scene and that is juxtaposed with, uh, her owner in bed with her the night before...or the night after...

(cellphone rings close by, iPhone 'Radiate' ringtone)

Excuse me. I think I better put this off.

(soft rustling)

And that particular image... um...long after intimacy had become, for me, critical or paradoxical or problematic, I left that film with that particular takeaway.

So that for me, intimacy is not intimacy anymore. That has become a problem for me in the last few years since I have been dealing with the question of slavery. *Because* if intimacy is what we think it is, in the Hollywood sense of intimacy, then there is no way that you could get a woman who could be beaten after having slept with the person who is beating her before. So, that is a kind of intimacy *without* intimacy. I mean, it's a kind of proximity without intimacy.

And if that's the case, then it seems to me that throws the entire question of how you arrive at intimacy into some kind of dilemma. And it's not *just* the lack enslaved people and their white owners... because if *that* becomes problematic then it seems to me that you can't... I don't think you can really have intimacy in the white family—I mean, in the slave holding families—if intimacy has been rendered an impossibility under those conditions.

But you can get proximity. You can get people sitting next to each other. You can get people sleeping with each other. You can get people involved in sexual congress, and not have intimacy. So, that has become for me a kind of... it has become paradoxical ground. That is all tied up with the question of touch.

For me, touch really begins not with my understanding of touch that I get from my family—which is touching in a loving way—but it is touching as violation, which is what enslavement did.

That was one of my first thoughts about the trauma of slavery; that it gives people access to you in ways that nobody has requested your permission to have, right? So, in that sense, touch is violation. But it is the same word that we use for erotic contact, for healing, um, for... satisfying, for pleasure, for making whole; it is the very same word.

So, that whole family of terms; touch, intimacy, proximity. What does love mean? What does it mean to be kin in a family, related? All of those terms have now taken on a kind of crisis proportion for me, precisely because of slavery and colonial relations. And... people being involved in unequal or uneven human relations.

Yeah.

[0:12:14]

ARJUNA: Can you explain a little how the repercussions of that beating and sleeping within the same... has repercussions in the master's family? How it is not just the master/slave process...?

HORTENSE: Well, I am thinking that... the ‘moral Jiu Jitsu,’ the moral twisting into pretzels that the owners had to go through to rationalise that kind of treatment of other human beings—and some people have seriously argued that the enslaved were not human beings for those people who owned them—I'm not sure I believe that anymore. I think I used it to believe it but I don't think I believe it anymore.

So, for me, the question is a placeholder. You can't... I just... It's an impossible question! I mean, what do you do if you're confronted with another human being? I don't think you can very well declare that the person is not human. I don't know what you can do, but I don't think you can declare that, right? So, that is another thing that has become problematic for me.

But what I am saying is that there was so much distortion involved in those relationships that I don't trust that the master class could *then* form what you would call ‘an intimate and loving relations’ with other white people; their children, their wives. So, it seems to me that if you are lying to yourself about one set of critical relations, you are of necessity lying to yourself about another set of relations. That is the way I read it.

It seems to me the slave relations was twisted *universally*. In other words, wherever slavery touched down, I do not believe that it is then easy to talk about love relations. That is my idea about it. I don't know what you would want to call those relations, but I'm not sure that you could—that I would want to—call them love relations.

There is the official family, yes. There are marriages, yes. They are very often marriages of convenience because what they are

designed to do is designate who the proper heirs are. And so that means you've got to have a test for purity. And that is where the whole segregation/race thing figures into the picture genetically.

So, I am thinking..... that the slave relations becomes a universal relations. And that you really cannot limit it to the enslaved and their owners. You now have to also talk about people who are ostensibly free, or people who were thought to be free. That is sort of where I come out on the question of intimacy.

Intimacy is now a very complicated subject. And I have decided that...ok, I have jumped all the way—ha!—to the contemporary period. And I have decided that maybe one the reasons why this democracy is in trouble is that slave relations have morphed into human relations. And human relations have morphed into contemporary relations. And you have slave relations in a different guise, in a different discourse, in different costumes. You don't call it that anymore—you might call it abuse.

I am wondering if the whole society really did not escape? So that abuse became the order of the day. So that, um, you get abuse now in the form of a federal government, a presidency, that are not responsive to people. And not enough people are alert to it, or awake to it, because it follows a pattern of abuse that the society has been used to for helluva lot longer than we've been led to believe it is, right? Those are some of my thoughts about those questions.

To my mind, you can isolate slavery studies, but you are isolating it only on paper. I don't think you can actually isolate it where people live. Nor do I think it comes and goes after a couple of centuries. I

think those kinds of relationships are always working themselves out, reworking themselves, we are [?] always repeating hierarchy. And I think it is difficult to destroy or amend precisely because it is the steady state; it's normal. Or it is what people are used to. And that is abuse. Deep psychological abuse.

[0:19:39]

DENISE: I have, I think, three things that I would like you to speak to, to elaborate from what you said.

One is; what is intimacy? Can you give us a description of your definition of that?

And then the other is more of a comment, because as you are speaking it reminded me of a passage in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* where you have that rhetorical question about whether the markings of torture would pass to the future generations?

HORTENSE: Mhm, yeah.

DENISE: One could respond to your question saying, 'Oh yes, of course it is about how the trauma...' —which would be a bad response, and I am not saying that is the response— about how the trauma affects Black people.

But now you are suggesting, you are saying, that one cannot just speak of how slavery has impacted Black populations, but actually, the whole of the post-colonial and post slavery context, such as Brazil.

So, two things: intimacy, if you could just talk more about it and then comment on my reaction to...

(*crosstalking*)

HORTENSE: ...to what I'm saying, yeah

DENISE: ...to the argument in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe* now extended as a whole critique of...I don't think it is only the West because the whole modern capitalist global space is dependent on slavery. It would not have existed the way it does without slavery.

HORTENSE: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah...

Intimacy...

You know, I'm wondering if ... to be intimate is to... is to... *live with*. Right? Even if you are talking about someone who is 1,000 miles away, or someone who is on the other side of the planet. If you are in touch with that person in some deeply spiritual way, I would say that is intimacy. And that it may or may not be, um...erotic. It may or may not involve some kind of intra-special relation. I think people can be intimate with their pets, or people can be intimate with their understanding of the ecological systems that hold the planet up.

I think to be intimate with something is to feel for it, to feel with it, to not want to want to harm it. I think that...people who start fires in the United States, for instance, have a certain kind of relationship to the plant world that lacks intimacy. That is what I would say. Because if

you can set those fires...I mean, I understand that that was the case with the Amazon fires, earlier; some of the fires were set by people? So that would be an example.

Or people who facilitate the spilling of oil and how that destroys animal life and plant life. Those are all instances of what I would call, if push came to shove, and you forced me—like you're doing Denise (*smile in voice*)—to say what it is; I would say that those are all violations of intimacy that start at the level of the species.

I don't do it to you, because I wouldn't want it done to me and vice versa. It starts there! But I think it's the kind of feeling that can be expanded and stretched across several ways of being. I guess it starts in the family, but it certainly goes well beyond the family and the community and the nation.

I mean, people who live on the other side of the world, most of whom we don't know, we don't ever come in contact with... but, when there is a tsunami in Japan, I feel that in Nashville, right? So, I think that's what...I think that's what—I think that's what intimacy is. It is a way of living in the world that starts with empathy. And you know how things feel because you are touchable, right? (*rubs hands together*) The surface, the porous surfaces of the skin, and so forth. I think it starts biologically and it assumes a number of other shapes.

So that's one thing. It is the capacity to... be in the world *with other* and not exploit it, or harm it, or hurt it, or need to destroy it in order to test or prove your own...self, your own being. And how the slave economy...

DENISE: [? 27.22]

HORTENSE: Were you gonna say something?

DENISE: Oh, wow! I was...

HORTENSE: Please!

DENISE: I was going to start to say and ask—but I was going to leave it to later. I was going to ask you if it is a feeling? Is it a feeling, intimacy?

HORTENSE: Yes. I think it's a feeling. I think it's a feeling umm, *everywhere*. This is what I mean.

Technology is taking this away from us, maybe it's giving us some other things, but it is taking this particular thing away from us.

When I write, I write long-hand. Everything that I have ever written that was important for me, *unless* it is a letter or an email or just a note I am sending off the top of my head—everything I've ever written starts long-hand. I am intimate with the process in the sense that I can actually feel it, I can feel the end of a sentence in my bones. I can feel the agitation to work out the puzzle of a sentence or an idea in my body, I can actually feel that.

And when I solve it, I can feel that too. I mean, it's an agitation that I feel it everywhere. So, on that analogy, I would say that intimacy is not only a feeling; that it might be *feeling*, period.

It might be that, um (*tuts*)...Well, I know I'm in the world because I'm surrounded, and every move that I make attests to it, right? And so,

that's what I think intimacy allows. Or that is the way I think feeling allows intimacy. It is a kind of awareness of your connection to other... to other—just *other*.

[0:30:21]

DENISE: Ok, thank you. Fantastic [?]

And then my other, was more like your reaction to my commentary as you are talking, about the ways in which the white owners' family and the whole of the white society being obviously affected by the total violence of slavery?

HORTENSE: Yes.

DENISE: And then there is that sentence, that is a question, of whether or not the markings of torture and slavery had passed from generation to generation. You don't need to respond to that, it just brought it to me...

HORTENSE: Yeah, I think...

DENISE: [indistinct]

HORTENSE: Well, I think (*coughs*)...I think I believe that those scars do pass from one generation to the other. I mean, clearly not the scars themselves but, umm, what do you wanna call it? Impressions, or intimations; I think those things do pass from one generation to another even if it is nothing more than some kind of awareness.

So, if the enslaved communities bear the scars, I think the ones that were doing the enslaving bear witness, also/even though I think it would obviously be in a way that is different from the ways enslaved communities bear those scars.

But I will say this. I was giving a talk on touch at a midwestern university a little over a year ago—as a matter of fact, Denise, I was in Vancouver at the time and travelled back to the states because it was a speaking engagement that I had concocted before I got to town, so I came back for that engagement. And I remember saying to an audience that I am no longer convinced that a society that tolerated the enslavement of— let's just call them 'my children,'—that a society that tolerated the enslavement of my children cares about its own children; that I no longer believe that. And that, um, I believe that my society does not care about children at all; Black ones, white ones, you name them. I don't believe that this society cares, because if it did care we wouldn't be in a crisis about climate. We wouldn't be in a crisis about various forms of literacy. We wouldn't be in a crisis about sexual abuse—it's everywhere in this society. We wouldn't be in a crisis about children disappearing. I mean, this is a society that hates products of my body, but then also products of its own.

Somebody in the audience heard that, a lady in the audience whom I hadn't seen in a number of years, came up to me and, um, she actually had tears in her eyes because she thought I was telling the truth about what I was saying; that it is a society that does not care about its children, *period*. And I have just started believing that in the last decade.

For a lot of my life, I was thinking that's not the way it worked, but I am no longer sure about that. My hunch is that the legacies of slavery— whether people know it or not, understand it not, accept it or not—but the legacies of slavery are really universal. They stretch across the landscape and affect different historical actors in different ways. But everybody has been... Do I want to say scarred? I don't know if I want to say scarred...affected by it in some way.

[0:36:11]

ARJUNA: Something I have been thinking about is this legacy, this everyone being affected, but I also think, let's call it intergenerational violence, intergenerational suffering, we don't know what the word is...But also healing must also be intergenerational. I think maybe the blues is an example of intergenerational healing. I am wondering what else might be...?

HORTENSE: Yes, I think that's right...

The new sense of family—relatively new sense of family— is another instance of healing. For instance, I have lost all my nuclear family. But I have an extended family. And every year I take a trip somewhere with some of the members of that extended family. We are not blood kin but we are chosen kin. And I think that would certainly be an example of how (*deep inhale*) this whole thing of loving people, being intimate with people, can travel across time and between people who are not connected to each other. And maybe from one generation to the next!

I mean, it's a kind of model of how to live in the world. And I think that is probably one of the few things that would explain how we keep, how we keep living. We keep, we keep living because...healing is possible in the world. Forgiveness is possible, love is possible in the world. As impossible as those things seem, they are possible. And I think they get us from place to place, despite the viciousness and all the rest of it—yeah, there is a lot of that. And certainly, I guess, blues philosophy teaches that, right?

I think of the blues as the poor man's philosophy anyway. If you listen to blues productions, they teach you a lot about the world, its ironies, its rewards, its disappointments, its joys, its sorrows. I mean, everything is there in Blues. So, it is really quite a form.

It is a way to live in the world, it is a way to think about the world. It is a way that one produces in the world. Because it's not just the things that blues produces, it's the traditions that grow out of it, discursive traditions, I think maybe radical Black traditions; poetry, prose, all that stuff, I think that is where Black critique comes from. A lot of that comes out of those traditions. So yeah, that is really important.

Did you do any recording in Mississippi, or Memphis?

[0:40:54]

ARJUNA: Not of the blues, just of environment.
I went to the Mississippi and wanted to hear what it...

HORTENSE: What it sounds like, yes...

ARJUNA: What the river sounds like and what the birds sound like. And I also wanted to see, like Friars Point, to see what the landscape and the environment looked like.

HORTENSE: Right.

ARJUNA: What it sounded like and how that might... you know, the swamp; these very extreme temperatures, like minus degrees. And then, like here, it is very desolate, very bleak, but also very fertile. I guess it is one of the most fertile soils in the world?

HORTENSE: Yes.

ARJUNA: I was just trying to see the environment that helped inspire blues music.

HORTENSE: Mhm.

ARJUNA: I was thinking a bit about the blue notes as a push of one note and another note, a push of one note touching another note; two notes being bent until they touch is a type of touch which is not violent. Whereas the lyrics are talking about heartbreak, talking about separation...and then in the invention of the form, a different kind of touch.

HORTENSE: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Um...

I suddenly thought of a particular period in my life when I was writing my dissertation in the 1970s. I remember Aretha Franklin's *Amazing*

Grace. You know that documentary is out, about the recording of that album?

ARJUNA: (*quiet indistinct acknowledgement*)

HORTENSE: Yes. I bought the album contemporaneous with Aretha recording it. It must have been recorded in maybe 1972? It is truly an amazing album. But one of the things that I think is most amazing about this— Now, I hope you all get to see the documentary sometimes. She is recording in Los Angeles in a Baptist church, with a choir as backup, and that becomes the album. It is church music. But then it is also...it's not church music! I mean, it is also music that you can play anywhere in the world and, umm...you don't have to be in a church.

One of the songs on the album, this LP, is called 'I'm climbing high mountains trying to get home'. Now, I grew up with that song in the Baptist church in Memphis, Tennessee, where I come from. So, I heard that song a lot of my life. And here is Aretha, who is singing it on this album. But it occurs to me, that the backup to the song, which is a fabulous backup—it's the choir, it's C.L. Franklin at the piano, it's a whole rhythm section of a band, saxophones and all... it is a magnificent song! But you have to think about it in order to realise that it is the most paradoxical, ironical songs, that has ever been written. 'I'm climbing high mountains trying to get home', is something that you could end up *dancing* to. 'I'm coming up on the rough side of the mountain.'

So, the words to the song sound nothing like you're jumping and dancing and you could take it out in the streets right now, and dance to this music! A lot of Black life is like that.

It seems to me that, that particular understanding, which is paradoxical, that you can talk about the darkest moments of your life, I mean, because it's nothing cheerful about the story that the song is telling. That really helped me write chapters of a dissertation on the Black sermon. So, I take that as a lesson of what the blues is; that it takes contradiction and it mounts it, right? It mounts it by drawing the contradiction out, by pulling it out, singing about it, writing about it, testifying about it. And that is...a real lesson, I think, that you can do quite a few things with.

[0:47:04]

DENISE: Beautiful. Thank you so much.
Do you have any other questions, Arjuna?

ARJUNA: I have a few, but how are you feeling?
How is, how are you...?

HORTENSE: I'm good.

ARJUNA: Feel good?

HORTENSE: Yeah!

DENISE: We've been talking for a long [?] 40 minutes. But you're ok? [?]

ARJUNA: Maybe I'd ask one or two more? One more maybe?

HORTENSE: Sure!

ARJUNA: I was thinking about touch, and sight. Well, I was thinking about the senses, and that sight is the only one which is only active. Hearing is receptive, you can't focus where you are hearing your hearing, Sight is active, very deliberate. And touch is both. With your hands, touching your back is receptive.

I was thinking that touch has maybe been subservient to sight? Maybe? It has been subservient to sight? I am wondering what happens if sight is subservient to touch? Not even in a hierarchy, what happens if we think of touch as a receptive sense as opposed to a predatory sense. Which our eyes, the biological placement of our eyes, is the predatory placement of the [? Human [?] 48.14-48.18]

HORTENSE: Yeah, I gotcha. I am really on that wavelength, because my idea about this is that an appreciation for touch or the contact of surfaces is one of the missing healing features of our world now. And there is so little in our world that permits contact, right? We become these cellular/singular [?] units that are no longer dependent on other people. We are quite... independent. In western democracies that is supposed to be some kind of achievement, you know? That I can live next door to people and never learn their names because I have a car, I have a cell phone, I've got a laptop, I've got a computer upstairs, I've got one in my office, I've got this and that, so what do I need with other people?

If I want to go shopping, I can shop online. If I am in a wreck and I need to file an insurance claim, a friend of mine was telling me this morning you no longer have to call an agent, you can just go online and file the claim! So now, what in the hell do we need each other for? If I have a question that I ask somebody in my institution they send me a link (*outraged*)! Rather than call me up or drive by the house, they send me a link.

What I am saying is you can live your life quite alone. You can live your life quite in solitude and without touch. And I am saying, I think that has made us sick. I think that accounts for a lot of, um... I can't think of another word for it 'mame-ing-ness'? Being mamed, twisted, not well, indifferent, can't hear, can't see things. I think that is because we're missing. We are missing the touch. The touch that heals.

So, I'm thinking that touch may be one of the things that we have to rediscover about being in the world, about living in the world. Because it certainly did take a backseat to sight.

According to cultural histories about touch, it was considered sort of a sense associated with the lower classes and in some cases with the inferior races, whereas eyesight was associated with the upper classes, with the superior races. So, there is a correlation between the senses and what at one time was thought about the world and the sensual. Maybe just rediscovering the sensual is something that we are talking about, right? That our world is losing touch with, and a sense of...you know, people who cross the street and they are hooked up to the ear-pods, if you have a question, they can't hear it, if a car is coming, they can't hear that either, so they just walk out in

front of cars because they are on their cell phones, or whatever it is.
So yeah, the whole sensuality; the concept of the sensual.

ARJUNA: I think that's good. Do you have anything else Denise?

DENISE: No, no. It is wonderful.
Thank you so much, it's wonderful, it's beautiful.

HORTENSE: Oh, thank you so much, keep me posted about this.
This is lovely, I enjoyed it thank you.

ARJUNA: Thank you so much.

DENISE: Thank you! I'm so sorry I'm missing out on this, but anyway I'm not
gonna think about it, what we can't change.

(Hortense laughs)

DENISE: Do you have any questions about the film or anything?

HORTENSE: No. Just keep me posted about when you think it will come out.
I will be on the lookout for it.

DENISE: We will.

Transcript by Collective Text
(Sabrina Henry & Emilia Beatriz with the artists)