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Black (W)holes: A Problem for Feminist Thought

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A Black Hole (Sagittarius A)

Black feminist theorists are themselves
engaged in a process of fighting to
reclaim the body—the maimed immoral
black female body.
—Hammonds

In May of 2022, NASA released the sonification of a black hole. Apparently, the "gentle giant" at the center of our "home" galaxy (the Milky Way) is a black hole named "Sagittarius A." It is massive and its gravitational pull is so intense, it will not let light escape. In an interview with Melissa Harris-Perry for "The Takeaway," Professor Chanda Prescod-Weinstein calls the new discovery of sound from a black hole "spiritually significant" and notes that it "allows us to study more closely how black holes pull matter into them" ("Listening"). Information from this discovery is scientifically relevant to our understanding of galaxy and star formations. Apparently, the image of Sagittarius A is "highly variable" with hourly changes, so taking a photo of her? is difficult. Prescod-Weinstein reminds us that seeing a black hole is like "squeezing four million suns into one."

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Since the publication of Evelynn Hammonds's rejoinder to the evolving discussion of (white) queer studies, scholars across a range of interdisciplinary homes (Black feminist, queer, feminist, and American studies) have struggled to think about Black female sexuality and how it matters to discussions of history, home, and for lack of a better word, homosexuality. In the 1990s, our focus in lesbian and gay studies without the "Q" or the "T" changed, and queer theory emerged to open up the alphabet cluster to other possibilities. Two scholars are among the most pivotal for this essay on the importance of Hammonds's work in "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality"—they would be Hammonds, of course, and Biddy Martin, "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias"—as each takes up their own sense of the intersection between feminism and what was then lesbian and gay studies, across two journal publications, *difference*s and *Diacritics*, where some of our most well-known theoretically sophisticated feminist and/or queer theorists hammered out a direction for discourse at the edge of the twenty-first century.

Let me be clear here. While Judith Butler's "Against Proper Objects" (in the same volume that Hammonds's essay appears) proposed a way forward for our discursive endeavors by unburdening us of the proper object of feminist inquiry, it is very clear across both field-shaping journals that, save a few exceptions like Hammonds and Hortense Spillers ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," for example), the citational flows in these early days of queer theory's genesis are narrowly arranged and geared toward phenotypically white bodies.

The central debate across the pages of these intellectual pillars of feminist theoretical praxis concerned the proposed split between gender and sexuality suggested by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* and the extent to which such a split represented the abandonment of feminism by an emerging queer theory/queer studies cohort—or more pointedly, the relegating of gender to feminism as a rather moribund construct, while sexuality entailed more *play* and therefore a more autonomous *masculine* posture. One could think of this curious problem for feminism in several ways. On the one hand, the theoretical perambulations of the field saw themselves as dynamically unattached to the moorings of the historical, or even opposed to such a thing altogether. In this configuration, blackness is mired in history, sullied with it even, and is altogether another property belonging to some other inquiry. Keep that over there. On the other hand, with no historically grounded (and Spillers would say mutilated and held captive) body with which to work, sexuality is freed for its proliferating

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proclivities. In many respects, what might be missing in a contemporary Black feminist response to this moment of crisis in feminism is the place of several French feminisms that worry the edges of this new remaking of feminism unencumbered. It is Hélène Cixous's implementation of Jacques Lacan's jouissance that produces a transhistorical female experience and untethers her from the kind of historical subject that Simone de Beauvoir scripted for feminist inquiry. Being in our sexuality meant being unmade by history, where a properly ordered gender resides. And finally, the tertiary concern or hidden concern for a feminism wanting to be "ungendered" was never about the intermural play of sexuality/gender in Black feminist study. For the most part and in my view, this is how psychoanalytic paradigms become so important to Black feminist work on the imaginary by scholars like Spillers and Claudia Tate. Black feminists had to wrestle with psychoanalysis in order to find the Black body that somehow gets lost in the interstice where Lacan meets Freud and French feminisms meet a burgeoning field of decidedly American feminist inquiry. It is no wonder that critics are returning to the psychoanalytic again for insights about how symbolic structures shape the plinths of living.

In their response to Sedgwick and, to be accurate, the remnants of Gayle Rubin's call for gender to be separable from sex, since reading sex/gender produces inaccuracies across the spectrum of possible theoretical work, theorists from Australia to the United States put forth possible scaffoldings for these newer paradigms. While mostly white queer and feminist studies scholars concerned themselves with the sticky matter of sex/gender/sexuality, Hammonds, commenting on her reading of *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, noted, "I never open a book about lesbians or gays with the expectation that I will find some essay that will address the concerns of my life" (127). This is a very important moment because while the mostly white-identified critics in the pages of *difference*s and *Diacritics* staged the debate in the assumed opposition between lesbian/gay and queer, Hammonds was reminding them that what subtends lesbian/gay or makes the category visible as lesbian/gay and/or sex/gender was still racially produced and such production still awaited, at least in 1994, its theory. Addressing this paucity of theorizing, Hammonds offers, "White feminists must refigure (white) female sexualities so that they are not theoretically dependent upon an absent yet-ever-present pathologized black female sexuality" (131). What produces a conundrum for me here is the extent to which this presence/absence paradigm is an *active* disinterest in "white feminist" thought. In other words, what if there is no thought at all but a simple one: not giving

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a shit? With Biddy Martin's work in *Diacritics* being the exception. Drawing upon the paradigmatic placement of Black feminist (female?) being as a *concern* quite possibly produces a normalized reaction formation that exists alongside a much more pernicious one: that the Black body hadn't even been a concern for white feminists completely obsessed with making their own experience *the* experience. The most cogent display of what I am speaking to here is in Butler's "Against Proper Objects," which in many ways is their response to trenchant critiques of their arguments in both *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Returning to the "Black (W)holes" essay, in the same paragraph Hammonds then proposes that "Black feminist theorists must reclaim sexuality through the creation of a *counternarrative* that can reconstitute a present black female subjectivity" (131; my emphasis). I want to push back on this penchant in feminist theorizing for producing an oppositional force; I want to note here that the oppositional force that Black feminism creates as a *counternarrative* is the kind of political work that Black feminism must in fact eschew. I will hopefully perform this task of debunking *counternarrative* as I travel through this essay.

In many ways, Hammonds's essay moves through Black feminist work (Crenshaw; duCille; Higginbotham; Hine; Morrison; Spillers; Williams) to chart the problematic trope of both silence *and* difference in our theories and histories of Black women in particular (earlier she called for Black feminists to examine "power relations" "among different groups of black women" [131]). Her crucial point here is that "this silence about sexuality is enacted individually and collectively by black women and by black feminist theorists writing about black women" (133). It is a stunning and important observation, and when Hammonds moves through tropes of invisibility and silence *produced* by Black feminist thought, she lands on "social change" (135) and its relationship to such tropes and finds that the greater danger to Black feminist theorizing is its heteronormativity. The work of Black queer study, then, is not to provide a counternarrative, though there is that earlier moment in Hammonds's piece, but to fuel a rigorous critique of Black (feminist) study itself, as the vectors of difference provide insight for some of the more myopic tendencies within the field. Hammonds ultimately believes that "[a] focus on black lesbian sexualities [. . .] implies that another discourse—other than silence—can be produced" (137). While this is not proposed as *counternarrative*, I do want to note that our critical *method* most often relies upon positing one thing in opposition to another, which might therefore change the discursive flow.[1] At this point (1994) in Black feminist theorizing, we have yet to think beyond binaries.[2] The black

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(w)hole therefore functions as both a materiality and a psychic life. It is the *thing* that a kind of feminist theorizing eschews (because the drag of race pulls feminism's objective force off course) and perhaps fears; *she* presents a constant problem for feminist thought.

It is apparent, at this juncture in her essay, that Hammonds has two concerns. The first is to access lesbian/gay and an emerging queer studies' always already broken relationship to race. The second is to attempt to articulate the failure of theorizing Black female sexuality in Black feminist thought, which must reconcile the fractured relationship between homo- and heterosexualities. It is here that Hammonds wades into her work as "a student of physics" (138). Taking her use of the term "black hole" from Michele Wallace's invocation of it in *Invisibility Blues* (1990), Hammonds observes that, at least at the time of the writing of her piece, a black hole could not be seen optically and therefore remained discernable only from the "energy and distortion" around or near it (139). While we could not see the thing itself, we would notice its effects and we would notice them as *disruption*. It seems, in these ending reflections, that Hammonds wants to step away from Black female queerness as an oppositional force to Black female heterosexuality. The terrain gets very muddy in this moment, and it is difficult to ascertain Hammonds's ultimate *object*; is it the "polymorphous erotic" that the Clarke epigraph to the last section posits for Black feminism's sexual imaginary (qtd. in Hammonds 139) or something else? In addition, she worries that Black women, especially in the thick of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, would remain the "'other' of the other [. . .] regardless of their sexual identities or practices" (140). As if anticipating the scrutiny of future generations and readers who might be puzzled by the reliance on *sight*, Hammonds puts pressure on her own analysis and its reliance upon vision, upon being *seen*. She understands the inadequacies of vision (at least human-centered vision) and posits two directions that we might move in. The first is, following Haraway, moving toward "how [black women] see themselves in a different landscape" and the second is moving beyond "identities" to the "discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency" (141).

It would take years for the promise of Hammonds's pivotal essay to find its rejoinder in the work of physicist Prescod-Weinstein, whose interventions in the field of feminist science range from a *Signs* essay, "Making Black Women Scientists under White Empiricism: The Racialization of Epistemology in Physics" (2020), to a trade publication, *The Disordered Cosmos* (2021). Given Hammonds's attempt to clear space in 1994 so that Black female sexuality can be seen (though not understood) in queer feminist theorizing

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and her use of physics to ground that vision, it is no surprise that Prescod-Weinstein observes that "Black epistemic agents are considered incompetent to bring a lifetime of knowledge gathering about race and racism to bear on their everyday experiences" ("Making" 430). Taking the elite world of physics to task in "Making Black Women Scientists," Prescod-Weinstein finds that the grounding in objectivity that (the) scientific method so relies upon requires a particular body (white and male) to solve for *x*; Black bodies do not own their own epistemic truth or those "discursive and material terrains" that Hammonds spoke to almost a decade before. Such a thing would be an oxymoron. Prescod-Weinstein uses Joseph D. Martin's work on how different subfields of physics are valued, and he finds that "advances in particle physics [are treated as] major intellectual achievements, while advances in condensed matter are regarded as mere material, technological achievements" (424). In essence, the *practical* end of the study of physics is less valued than its more *theoretical* end, which is also considered to be invested in more universal truths. This divide in intellectual work carries on *in and through* Black Thought and has been the one place where it mirrors its "white" counterparts in the exercise of proper objects and epistemological prestige. In this discourse in science, white male subjects are "considered competent to self-evaluate" (430) because they are not perceived as being hampered by the sticky matter (mysterious and elusive until now) of that ever present black (w)hole, always already *female*.

Both Hammonds and Prescod-Weinstein tend to understand racism as a phenomenon where bad actors for the most part line up neatly in their black and white parts in the critical and professional worlds they respectively engage. At one point, both Hammonds and Prescod-Weinstein break this alignment. For Hammonds, it comes at the end of her piece, where she notes, "At this point, then, I cannot cast blame for a lack of attention to Black lesbian sexuality solely on white feminist theorists" (136). She makes this claim in reference to the work of Teresa de Lauretis, who contends that homosexuality might be, in Hammonds's redaction, "discursively dependent upon more established forms [like heterosexuality]" and so the interplay between straight and queer might be intraracial/cultural, rather than extra-cultural (qtd. on 136). For Prescod-Weinstein, "Black men's limited access to patriarchy gives them an in with white supremacist patriarchy that Black women cannot access, while white women's access to whiteness gives them an in with white supremacist patriarchy that Black women cannot access. *Naturally, these dynamics follow individuals into their professional spaces*" (434; my emphasis).

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The *naturalness* of the combined experience of sexual and racial prejudice brings forward the sticky matter of sex and race in a profound way in their work, and I would like to focus on this as a problem for our theorizing that we have yet to untangle in our own professional and critical travels. First, it appears that our [black feminist] understandings of what race is and how racism works are ultimately confused. We tend to understand the experience of sexism/racism, at least *institutionally*, as an *objective* science, one in which there are players on the board who act according to known stereotype. This is a naked truth of what *power* is in human relations bound up in ontological proofs as proximities to the category of the "human." But we tend to understand our lived experiences with racism and sexism in a *community* of players who are cross-cast and therefore do not line up very well into their respective racial *parts*; where the pull to *hegemony* produces a series of alignments with white supremacy that signal the presence of a phenomenon whose embodiments are variously represented and thoroughly *subjective*.

Given my institutional experiences across seven universities during my thirty years in this profession, I can honestly say that white supremacy is alive and well in higher education and it is an equal opportunity employer when it comes to enlisting bodies to quell dissent, silence difference, or stave off an imagined collapse of prevailing order. If I had to write a memoir about my time in academia, I am dead sure that the writing of it alone would kill me before the book was done. It was and is not so much the recall of truly awful experiences, but the recall of the times when I searched around the room and could find no other ethical person or friend to step forward. Black. Nonbinary. Female. Easy. To. Hate. Period. Fullstop. If I had a nickel for every time I tell just one of my institutional stories and someone (Black and female) responds with shock—"I had no idea you would be or were treated like that"—I'd have retired years ago. Given all that we know and write about as Black feminist theorists, how can we still be shocked? My point? I know at a brutally intimate level just how Black female sexuality is seen and responded to, at least in critical and institutional spaces. What kind of theory can hold onto an experience that makes its mark differently? How is our theorizing about Black female experience in institutional spaces still hampered by a thoroughgoing politics of respectability? Black female sexuality, at least institutionally, can be seen stuck in between a sexism that must be called out and a racism that must be endured. How can a woman wearing a man's suit be sexually harassed by a Black male colleague? Seeing *that* takes time and no small amount of theoretical enterprise. We have

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yet to do *any* of that work because our penchant is for the ontological proof rather than the ethical commitment that might yield different responses and results to the central questions that Black feminist inquiry might engage.[3] This is another black (w)hole that opens up in Hammonds's thought and one of her most important, though somewhat buried, observations.

In the world of physics where both Hammonds and Prescod-Weinstein ground their thinking, elementary particles coexist, creating worlds from various frictional formations that don't necessarily want or need to cancel one another out; a hole is a mighty force made up of tinier mighty forces that exist in *collective*. As noted earlier, Hammonds credits Michele Wallace's work in *Invisibility Blues* for bringing her the concept of the black (w)hole as "a trope that can be used to describe the invisibility of black creativity in general and black female creativity specifically" (qtd. in Hammonds 138). But the resounding question here is whether or not Black women are visible and/or legible to themselves and, in addition, whether this question is a problem for thought? Or, what kind of theorizing can we do, do we do, when the effort at legibility, visibility, or epistemic value is not centered in jurisprudence (intersectionality's beginnings) or institutional terrains?

In fact, between 1987 ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe") and 1994 ("Black (W)holes"), two of our most important feminist thinkers attempted to clear the ground for a Black women's *sexuality* that could be legible to us as matter separable from nomenclature and consequential to our theorizing. It has taken decades for this Black feminist work to be of consequence to our theorizing and that in and of itself is infuriating. The opening of Hammonds's essay asks what if a body of work fails to capture "the ways in which [one is] queer" and yet still continues to be the functional discourse through which we know what *queer* is and does (126)? What I want to offer here is that the very contestation that queer theory was attempting to address in 1994 was steeped in its own failure to *see*, and so Hammonds's essay and its critique is spot on: that traditional lesbian and gay studies is dependent upon "the construction of the sexualities of whites, historically and contemporaneously" (128). While Hammonds puts her finger on what lesbian and gay studies cannot see, she also points to something more unsettling: *what does it mean to have a sexuality* (*something called "lesbian" and "gay"*) in the first place? How indeed do we arrive at a *sexuality*? And what happens to and for queer study when its beginnings set the bodies of nonwhite others *outside* the theater of critical concern and consequence? In addition, and most importantly for the contributions of Spillers and Hammonds, what does it mean to labor

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in a field (figuratively and literally) under constant and reoccurring erasure? And, to move backward in my own thinking here to the first discussion of sex/gender/sexuality, what if this erasure is not concerted, but *thoughtless*, pun intended? For my work, both in this essay and elsewhere, the questions that Hammonds asks throughout her remarkable essay on the unfathomable "Black (W)hole" pinpoint not a political problem (though the exclusion of "us" would be considered as a political one for the better part of a decade), but a theoretical one, or a problem for queer thought. The construction of bodies outside of queerness proliferated popular theoretical paradigms like queer of color critique as an interventionist strategy—one that for all of its rigor and charm still produced itself in opposition to a vacant space masquerading as an impenetrable brick wall. There was simply *no* there, there. There is no "queer theory," no talk of sexuality without the imprint of centuries of *commerce* in bodies that mattered.

This is precisely why Prescod-Weinstein, almost thirty years later, has to clear the same kind of ground in her evaluation of logocentrism in physics. And yet, for all of the work to make physics *undone*, to shake its foundational logic, Prescod-Weinstein makes the following concluding observation: "Physics is a useful laboratory for testing the capacity of a feminist theory like strong objectivity to eliminate white empiricism because physics is widely seen as a near-pure exemplification of the Western world's empirical supremacy: nothing captures the world so accurately or in such great detail as physics" ("Making" 439–40). Physics as a tool for the production of knowledge is both something to be admired and something to caution against, as it can impact the "actual outcomes of what we come to know" (440). I am intrigued by that last part, "what we come to know," and how the production of knowledge in a landscape where all knowledge or knowing is not, in fact, equal or commensurate also limits what can be seen. The black (w)hole in Hammonds's time presented an apt metaphor for what could *not* be seen or known to us, and so the enormity of its problem for scientific inquiry was held in its very being. With sight and sound now available, the metaphor of the black hole as unobservable disturbance is less tenable, and perhaps that's a good thing. What would it be to read disturbance rather than presence? This is perhaps why the words (altogether) *Black* and *female* and *queer* pose such a stubborn problem for any kind of thought for gender, race, or sexuality: they are the collective signifiers for a sign that does not yet cohere.

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I want to shift my observations of Hammonds's contributions to sexuality studies to a consideration of one writer's contemplation of and fascination with physics and its "elementary particles."

Elementary Particles or "Memory Is a Polaroid"

> To return to physics, theoretically you can't attain the speed of light. Reality in some ways is like that. We can do all sorts of things to approach it, but we can never actually attain it.
> —Kenan

Early in her account of what makes the Universe tick, or what its ticks might be, Prescod-Weinstein begins with quarks, one of the three categories of elementary particles, "the fundamental building blocks of matter" (*Disordered* 12). In her quest to figure out what we are made of, this physicist notes that although she works at the intersection of "astrophysics and particle physics," it is the latter "that continues to teach me over and over again that the universe is always more bizarre, more wonderfully queer than we think" (13). But what arrests my eye on this page is the use of the phrase "elementary particles." I have seen it before and put to good use by my friend, the late Randall Kenan (1963–2020). When asked by Marianne Gingher to reflect upon what North Carolina means to writers, in a collection of essays by the same title, Kenan, ever enigmatic and an erstwhile lover of physics, contributed the following: "Chinquapin: Elementary Particles."[4] When he was inducted into the North Carolina Writers Hall of Fame, I had the distinct honor of introducing him and reading from this essay. It is all the more poignant now because he is gone and has become, perhaps—since matter never dies, and in the case of our black (w)hole, never escapes, either—an elementary particle.

In Prescod-Weinstein's project, she constantly reminds us that her love of physics is a frustratingly fascinating one, where there are more questions than answers, always. How to love something that you can only understand through its parts, rather than its (w)hole, ever elusive? Kenan's contemplation begins with the stuff of matter itself, comingling and coming out of the ether in a small, small town in North Carolina about twenty miles from the edge of the Atlantic. His tale has two sections. The first section, "There, There," is a catalog of sorts, and the second, "Struck by Lightning,"

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lands in the temporal and visceral presence of place. We see the work ahead in two registers: first hemispheric, and then from the ground up. He writes:

> *The Kenan Family Farm; Chinquapin; Duplin County; North Carolina; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God.*
>
> *34.8 degrees N latitude. -77.82 degrees W longitude. 39 feet above sea level.*
>
> *The Northeast Cape Fear River. Creeks and brooks like lacework across the land, defining fields and forests. The northernmost edge of the Angola Swamp—home of Venus Flytraps.*
>
> *Longleaf Pines and Oak and Sassafras. Maple, Sweetgum, Cedar. Laurel, Magnolia, Myrtle. Shortleaf Pine, Pitch Pine, Pond Pine, Eastern White Pine, Loblolly Pine. Sycamore. Cottonwood. Chokeberry. Hemlock. Elm. Pecan and Walnut trees. (157)*

Kenan goes on to recount wildlife and churches, hogs and tobacco. It is a writer's homage to *place* and it is a roadmap for how we understand its elementary particles, for how we approach its mattering in the world. When Kenan finishes chronicling all of the elements of place, we are left with the distinct impression that there is no other *place* that can quite compare. The North Cack has it all—for him, *matter* is not out there, but in here, a "there, there" that compares favorably, perhaps even offers refuge for those weary from the abstract modernist wanderings (think Sarah Jane Cervenak's brilliant work) in the nothingness of a California that Gertrude Stein wrote about. In this first section we learn quickly that the catalog of what matters most is a snapshot—"Memory Is a Polaroid" (156)—a kind of photo-intimacy that in its immediacy chronicles and captures both the event itself and our instant pleasure at its creation. The 1970s is arguably one of the most pivotal decades in the movement of Black life across the great expanse that is the United States. The decade captures the violence that visited communities of the African descended, as government policy and juridical forms of white aggression attempted to flatten Black neighborhoods like Overtown in Miami, FL, or Hayti in Durham, NC, or the South Bronx in New York.[5] Kenan's exquisite catalog is also a piece of detailed ethnography, though not human-centered, that challenges us to lay the memory of a place—a polaroid—beside the other histories of place that the African descended are

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generally known for inhabiting. Rarely do we think through rural spaces, especially in the catalog of queer life.[6]

While most critics have argued over Kenan as a Southern writer, and a gay [Southern] writer, few seem to venture beyond these details of place (in which he was so steeped, to be honest)—and personhood. For Kenan, his own journey as a writer of stories that feature sexuality and gender is articulated by this sense of him as a Southern gay writer. He notes that "to write about same sex love, about the South, about blackfolk [*sic*], leads certain people to want to put me in this category or that category—which I find reductive and simple-minded" ("Interview" 142).

Like James Baldwin before him, Kenan often focuses on the women in his life and the order of things that shape their being: the order of things that matter to them most.[7] I want to argue here that in the wake of Hammonds's insightful use of physics and its critical landscape to contour our very ability to visualize or see the materiality of Black women's sexual lives in particular, it makes sense that Kenan would turn to *elementary particles*—the stuff of matter that *makes* gender matter—to set forth both place and presence.[8] Toward the end of his exhaustive inventory of Duplin county's plant and animal bounty, Kenan rests upon the following:

> *My mother's garden: snap beans (Kentucky Wonders), pole beans, butterbeans, field peas, okra, cabbage, collards, mustard, Irish potatoes, carrots (sweet, sweet, sweet like candy; best straight from the earth—the dirt is good for you!), beefsteak tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, garlic, cayenne pepper, bell pepper, sweet corn, beets. Watermelon. (Begonias, wandering jew, dahlias, zinnias, geraniums, roses, sunflowers/black-eyed susans, snap dragons, azaleas . . .). (159)*

Given that Kenan is a writer's writer, I have no doubt that in some small measure, he was taking stock of Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) and saying to us that he, for one, a Southern son amid the gardens and joy and elemental particles of Black women mattering the world, had landed, right there. For there is *comfort* in a "there, there" that serves as easy invocation and place making and is not just an allusion to some trope, unsettled and vacuous. The alliteration is not lost on readers from the region, and turns an oft-cited modernist quip (a place of erasure) into something more familiar; something like home. His mother's garden is boundless, it exceeds the confines of paper; it runs off the page; it feels like, to remember Prescod-Weinstein's interview with Harris-Perry, "squeezing four million

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suns into one," as the sun figures prominently through photosynthesis in the making of the material life that surrounds a young Kenan ensconced in such verdant terrain. While Kenan's genre-defying short story doesn't settle upon the black hole as its particular focus, the *capacity* of place in "There, There" sets itself up to encompass and approach the breath and scope of a black hole as an unfathomable collection of particulate matter *that can be enumerated.*

Kenan's is an odd kind of brief bildungsroman, and the things that you must know to grow up in this place called the "South" are not the usual suspects; their matter places the human where it belongs, as part of but not separate from the natural world.[9] This relationship of human being to the natural world is articulated by Kenan across his work, most notably in the novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, where its main character, Horace, before committing suicide, participates in necromancy and all kinds of material and elementary experimentation with particulate matter in order to parse his relevancy in a human-crafted world that has no real place for him as a young gay person.[10] One could make the argument that Black women figure prominently in our stories of this region called the South, and in this regard the trope of the black hole matters most for Hammonds and later Prescod-Weinstein because it gestures toward that which cannot be known but is still necessary for understanding, if not living entirely. Black women carry the negative drag of the enslaved with them, providing a maker of that which we cannot as a nation simply get over. In terms of that "global sign" called "race" that Hammonds reminds us of early on in "Black (W)holes," it took feminism a long time to acknowledge the *substance* of race and its "metalanguage[s]."[11] What to make of the Black female body's persistence in pulling a newly autonomous queer theory back down to earth? The black (w)hole swallows and is swallowed; she is the entity, maybe a negative neutrino, if we follow Prescod-Weinstein, that both makes and falls victim to her own demise. My interest here is to think through Kenan's short story and perhaps assess the *regional* drag of a Black feminism that has its parts—north and south, east and west. What is the matter of that black (w)hole and where does it practice its living? I want to track this theory of place as it's scripted in Kenan's "Elementary Particles," as t/his mother's garden turns itself toward another mother altogether—one who is, at least for Kenan's young narrator, harder to like; one whose energy is not suited to the desires of the awestruck and star-gazing persona of the first part of this tale of Chinquapin, North Carolina.

The narrator's "mother's garden" is fecund and speaks of bounty properly managed. Kenan's mother and her garden become a kind

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of opposing page to the second half of Kenan's homage to what matters most in North Carolina. The second telling is more narratively driven and told in the first person, rather than in the third person omniscient, broken only by the use of the term "my" toward the end of the catalog of animal, mineral, and vegetable. "Struck by Lightning" is a story about the author's time "putting in" a cousin's tobacco harvest as an eleven-year-old and being struck by lightning. But it begins with "Her [Miss Ella]: there was something about her that rubbed me the wrong way" (159), and so yields first to discord rather than the harmonies created by the recitation of elementary particles in the first telling. He continues, "Maybe it was the way she looked at me. Maybe it was the dip of snuff that never, ever, never left that place between her bottom lip and her gums; the way she spat the brown juice like a laser beam with enough accuracy and force to bisect a horsefly in midflight" (159). It is a dislike borne from the young Kenan's sense that he wanted Miss Ella to like him and "once I sensed I was beyond any sort of such affection, I retaliated by disliking her more" (160). The difference between them is laced through with the *fact* of poverty in rural county life. Again, Kenan writes: "Their family was the poorest of the poor, which was mighty poor indeed in Duplin County. Tobacco season was the only time, truly, when they could augment government cheese and garden food with more store-bought food, when everyone could get day wages and the light bill would get paid" (160). Kenan's recounting tells of a time when Duplin County was tobacco and hog farms, privately held. Now Duplin is the home of hogs owned by the company store—Smithfield Foods—where pigs are raised and slaughtered at a facility that kills 32,000 pigs a day all day, every day for 365 days a year.

The mother's garden of the first part of the essay is juxtaposed to that Dirty South, forged by misbehaving women and yes, poverty. Moreover, what gives Miss Ella substance, besides the accuracy of her frizzle, is her children, six in number and described by Kenan's narrator with dispatch: "one was a grade ahead of me in school, one was a grade behind me. One was out of school. One was a lap baby. Her daughter Trisha, my age, never had a good word to say about me, and teased me without mercy. Her older daughter, Anne, looked upon me as if I had escaped from the pound" ("Chinquapin" 160). The quantity and quality of Miss Ella's children are remarked upon through repetition: the use of the word "one" denotes any number of several, and the quality of relation between the narrator and Miss Ella's children is reiterated through disapprobation.

Black (w)holes and elementary particles. This is a different mother's garden, its fecundity marked by human issue holding the trace of

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bloody passage, rather than the more benign catalog of plants secured in the ground, of vegetation or flowers poised to return that smile on your face. It is the stark contrast between the two stories that compels my reading here—the contrast first provided by *gender*: who is Kenan, a male author, to inherit the torch of Black (feminist) concern for women's bodies? The second set of contrasts is brought by affect—the gentle work of love and care replaced by the harsh reality of bodies in *thick* relation, the air filled, as Kenan reminds us, with "sweat and dirt and black tar hands and tractor fumes and mosquitoes and snakes and plump, neon-green tobacco worms" (162). Gone is the surety of *lists* or the imagined arc of a woman's hand putting a plant in the soil. The elemental particles have shifted and become mired in *flesh*.

The tension between bodies, young and old, male and female, straight and queer, is equalized by the positive ions of the lightning strike. Huddled in the "dark and wet" as a storm kicks up, Kenan recalls what it felt like to be *altogether* struck:

> *And the tell-tale tingle of electricity running through my being's fiber. Does sinew and muscle know it is being shot through with an abundance of electrons? [. . .] How does the soul respond to electricity? Do androids ever dream of tobacco? I remember the pause before everyone hollered. Screamed. Shouted. I remember all of us hauling ourselves up, running ourselves to the trucks and cars. I remember fleeing in the rain and dark. I remember sitting in the car, everyone talking at once. [. . .] The lightning had hit the oak; the energy flowing down into the earth, through us. We had been made, briefly, part of a circuit. I remember a soaked Miss Ella [. . .] breathing heavily as were we all. (163)*

In the conversations in the aftermath of the strike, there is recognition of and an appeal to a higher power, and the makeshift tarp erected to protect them from the sun now wraps itself around them in the wind and the rain and serves as a sacred space of some sort, reminiscent of a church—screaming, shouting, hollering. The individuals become "part of a *circuit*" (emphasis mine), united by those elementary particles that define what matter is in the first order of things. Later in the summer, Miss Ella comes to his mother's house to deliver collards and tomatoes. For a moment, she and the young Kenan are locked in calm regard as Miss Ella says, "'That was something the other day, won't it?'" And then, "'Now you can tell folk you been struck by lightning.' She let out an inky dark, earthy, loud unrepentant witch's laugh. The very sound of it and the look on her face made me grin. She winked at

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me" (164). In this moment, Miss Ella is earth itself, "inky" and "dark." But the literal *power* of shared experience does not last, as Kenan remembers, "Those days [. . .] were not lived, for me, like a character in a children's book" (164). Of his relationship with Miss Ella, he notes, "In truth, Miss Ella treated me not much differently than she had before the lightning strike. Her life had not been altered much at all, but I knew mine would be. Such knowledge is at once a separation and a binding" (165). Reflecting on his own life as a child, Kenan cannot bring himself to explore the black (w)hole of Miss Ella's life; the alteration in it is evidence not seen, a point in the narrative that his young self, or his older self, reflecting upon the life of a Black woman, cannot touch. Or perhaps it is Kenan removed from his youth and settling into the directional force that pulled him away from Chinquapin community in body, but never in mind. Perhaps the (w)hole of his life is bound with hers, no matter the parts or places of jarring juxtaposition. Kenan would go on to mark this "separation" and "binding" in his works of prose and fiction and the stories he would tell about the fictional Tims Creek community, based upon his beloved Chinquapin.

Matter

The lives of Black women.
A disruption.
Elementary particles.
A constant unknowing.
Some scientific inquiry.
Already known to us.

It is a curious space, indeed, one captured by Hammonds in that 1994 Black feminist moment and in so many ways thrown into relief by the tale that Kenan spins in his story of growing up queer and Black and male in the South. At the end of the story, the eleven-year-old Kenan witnesses "electrons spilling into our atmosphere" in the form of the Aurora Borealis (165). The wonder that is the kaleidoscope of color brought forth by the cleaving of earth and sky caused by particulate matter will always be a mystery to us. Perhaps. But I return to the epigraph that begins this rumination on the impact of Evelynn Hammonds's work and its attempt "to reclaim the body—the maimed immoral black female body." The reclamation that Hammonds seeks is also an impossibility, as that body's retrieval is dependent upon its opposition to all that is right. How can such absolute opposition be settled

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with any conviction? In many ways, Miss Ella's body is the immoral entity in Kenan's story, and one that he attempts to reclaim through *science*. His own body is also made immoral through the accusatory gaze of Miss Ella and, by extension, that of her daughter, who "looked at me as if I had escaped from the pound" (160). The *whole* of Miss Ella's life seems to be sequestered from Kenan, perhaps because of gender or sexual difference or because of something else just out of reach. The young boy in Kenan's memory and the grown woman embodied as Miss Ella are two sides of the same coin, both immoral and each standing out(side)-of-gender: one feminized, the other always already *not* a "woman." Perhaps the question need not be how these two can be brought into the social life of the community of the living, but how they can stand *altogether* in that charged space and be to and for one another something other than is prescribed for them. That is my wish. A letting be and letting go. A commitment to solidarity in relation and its elementary particles, without the science that consistently explains through erasure and opposition how we came to be in this *place*.

A new science of black (w)holes.

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Notes

1 It is interesting that on the same page, Hammonds notes that Hortense Spillers, Mae Henderson, and Valerie Smith take up Freudian paradigms, but she does not engage with any of their work, preferring to couch her observation in the fact that each of these Black feminist scholars uplifts Freudian paradigms, rather than the work they do to upend psychoanalytic discursive strategies that then cause problems for feminist theorizing around concepts of "family" in particular. But in the next paragraph, she does reference Spillers ("Mama"), as she tries to think through how an engagement with Black sexual difference and desire might alter the queer (feminist) course but "how differently located black women engage in reclaiming the body and expressing desire" (138).

2 Since 1993, a plethora of work on the Black feminist project has stepped away from this more paradigmatic approach. See Roach, in particular, for work on the problematic binary between silence and visibility in Black feminist work.

3 In *an other: a black feminist consideration of animal life*, I posit that the most interesting question to come out of enslaved experience

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is not necessarily what white people can do to Black people, an ontological question at best, but an ethical one: should you, could you take the overseer's whip when its handed to you? The question hangs in the air between the flesh in the air and the handler of the whip in Spillers's important contemplation of the difference that Black femaleness makes for our understandings of what gender is and does, at least historically.

4 In an interview with Charles Rowell at *Callaloo*, Kenan outlines how he moved from writing science fiction to writing about place. He also notes, "By the time I got to college [UNC at Chapel Hill], I was heading for a major in physics" ("Interview" 139). Kenan credits his mentor, Max Steele, for pushing him to write about "home": "He knew what I did not know; that I came from a background, specifically, rural, black Southeastern North Carolina, that had not really been written about" (139).

5 See Adams for a brief discussion of the creation of Highway 10 in Louisiana. See Holland, "'Put Honey in the sky where it could drip and make the world sweet': Looking for Purvis Young and Thomas Samuel Doyle, But Seeing Something Else, Meditations on the *Matter* of Black Freedom" for a discussion of artist Purvis Young's Miami neighborhood. See also Rose.

6 E. Patrick Johnson's two ethnographic projects—*Sweet Tea* and *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.*—on the Black Queer South span decades of oral histories. L. H. Stallings's body of work is the most comprehensive critical engagement of the Black south and its cultural production and its consequential impact on that thing called Black thought. See *A Dirty South Manifesto* and *Funk the Erotic*. For one of the most comprehensive ethnographic projects in the United States on the queer South, see Rae Garringer's podcast *Country Queer*s. See also Gray, Johnson, and Gilley; Herring; and C. Johnson. Kiese Laymon's securing a MacArthur in 2021 will no doubt help to change much of the conversation about Black literature and its Southern constituencies. See Laymon's conversation with NPR's Mary Louise Kelly.

7 In the introduction to *Me and My House*, Zaborowska discusses the throughgoing critique of the Raoul Peck film, *I Am Not Your Negro*, which elides Baldwin's place as an LGBTQ essayist and writer, while pointing out, though obliquely, his relationship with writers and musicians like Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone, respectively. Zaborowska's archival research among the items that Baldwin left in his house in Southern France after his death in 1987 demonstrates the profound relationship Baldwin had with Black women and their effect on his work.

8 The contextualization of Kenan as a "Southern" writer is often debated as a claim among other Southern scholars and scholars of the South, who consider in what ways it might delimit Kenan's genius. This question is both odd and perplexing, as it muddies the terrain of how we think about Blackness more generally and when and where Kenan enters into discussions of Black literature. In his assessment of *A Visitation of Spirits*, scholar Brannon Costello finds that Southern critics like Kenan for his discussion of the "sturdiest tropes" in Southern fiction (146), while they also note that Kenan is limited at times by comparisons and references to other "Southern" authors like Faulkner, for example.

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9 See Stefanie K. Dunnings's rich and evocative study of the natural world and blackness in *Black to Nature: Pastoral Return and African American Culture*.

10 While he doesn't mention Kenan's interest in physics, Costello does provide a reading of the novel that takes into consideration Kenan's other influences, like comic books and science fiction.

11 See my discussion of Hammonds's "Black (W)holes" in *The Erotic Life of Racism* 68–71.

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