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# WHERE ARE THE STUDS?

**Kemi Adeyemi**

I've been thinking about the lesbian specificities of and within Evelyn Hammonds's (1994) "Black (W)holes" essay ever since watching people travel to Loop-hole of Retreat: Venice, which was convened in October 2022 in celebration of Simone Leigh's selection to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. The biennale is a World's Fair-style art exhibition, supported by public and private money, meant to honor the cultural production of participating nations, who are each given a pavilion to exhibit the work of their chosen artist. For the past three biennales, the US pavilion has been awarded to Black people: Mark Bradford (2017), Martin Puryear (2019), and Leigh (2022). The latter's exhibition, *Simone Leigh: Sovereignty*, continued the artist's practice of using materials found throughout Africa and the African diaspora—especially raffia, bronze, and stoneware—to erect monuments to the material, intellectual, and creative practices of Black women and to Black femme subjectivity. The work begins, in a sense, with Leigh's intervention into the exhibiting space itself. *Sovereignty* was installed within and around the Palladian-style pavilion, which Leigh clad in low-hanging thatch roofing and wooden beams to reference French surrealists' deployments of tribal artwork at the 1931 Paris Colonial Exhibition. The recontextualization of the pavilion grounded Leigh's practice as broadly interrogating the material and epistemological structures that condition the violent mythologizing of Black women.

Part of Leigh's methodology, on view in the collection of new works in *Sovereignty*, is to blur the lines between human, object, animal, and structure, resulting in sphinxes, sentinels, and satellites that contain hints of legibly human forms. Only occasionally do Leigh's sculptures resolve in what we might think of as realist depictions of Black women, as in *Last Garment* (2022) and *Sharifa* (2022). Denise Ferreira da Silva (2023) writes that Leigh fundamentally "de-forms" the bodies, objects, subjects, and ideas at play. This pushes the viewer to consider the formal, material elements of the work and to "reflect on how she *knows* what

GLQ 31:2

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she knows about and how she *understands* them” (39). That is, the work is not “data” with which the viewer can see and thus know Blackness, Africanness, or Black femme subjectivity. Leigh puts the viewer in a position of having to reflect on “what she already knows, her mental contents, including the representations of (the ‘meanings’ given to) black women and African forms and materials with which she is already familiar” (39). To aid in this task, and to celebrate and build on *Sovereignty*, Rashida Bumbray, with the advisement of Saidiya Hartman and Tina Campt, organized Loophole of Retreat: Venice, a convening that would bring together hundreds of people for “dialogue, performances, and presentations centered on Black women’s intellectual and creative labor.”<sup>1</sup> An impressive roster of artists, academics, arts workers, and people who blur the lines of all three came together for three days of talks and performances that were witnessed by an audience of primarily Black women and later uploaded to YouTube.

I had lots of questions as I watched these women, who had secured event tickets, flights, and lodging, document their travels to Venice on social media: How do we read the celebration of Black women in sites where there is a prohibitive cost of entry? What strategies do we have for articulating the historical cultural, political, and institutional logics through which the state, and public and private financiers, sponsor Black feminist gatherings? How do we map the intellectual as well as the political-economic conditions of a Black feminist gathering whose backdrop is a newly elected neofascist Italian government? What does it mean when celebrating Black women looks like celebrating Black femmes visiting the neofascist Italian state that is hosting a convention for participants in the global, capitalist art market? A perhaps shallower question dominated my thoughts as I watched or read social media documentation of people traveling to Loophole, video of the proceedings, and subsequent coverage of the exhibition and convening: *Where are the studs?*

At one level *Where are the studs?* is a totally superficial question that assumes the intelligibility of gendered sexuality can be registered through quotidian performatives such as masculine-leaning clothing, hair styling, composure, stance, and the like. The question also relies on taxonomies of racialized, gendered sexuality that can restrict our senses of possibility. *Where are the studs?* certainly gestures toward a limited understanding of the diversity of Black genders and sexualities: that the femme must/could/should be “balanced” by a more masculine formation. The question *Where are the studs?* also depends on forms of language and modes of sight that can always fail us; epistemological systems such as “femme” and “stud” are never stable. And yet sometimes you just *know*—and sometimes the rigid taxonomies we deploy give us language for that knowing, that

recognition (Amin 2023; SAMOIS 1982; Califia and Sweeney 1996). A lot of people whom I know, love, and respect were at Loophole, just as there were plenty of people who were unfamiliar to me. But I *recognized* everybody at Loophole because I recognized what it looks like for (Black femme) bodies, politics, and conversation to become normative and folded into the state and its academic and cultural institutions.

In this essay, I ask what an event like Loophole of Retreat: Venice can tell us about the bodies, subjects, objects of analyses, and methodologies that mainstream Black feminism coheres around—namely, querying the extent to which the Black femme becomes recognizable as the “proper” subject, object, and outcome of Black feminist gender and sexuality studies (Chuh 2014; Lee 2019b). The essay isn’t a dig on the Loophole convening or the many brilliant people who attended. Everyone should have access to the financial, temporal, and administrative resources to be able to be in conversation with one another in that way—it makes us better thinkers and colleagues, and it helps us secure emotional resources that allow us to return to workplaces that drain us. Nor is this essay a knock on what I call “mainstream” Black feminist gender and sexuality studies, which is just an attempt to spotlight the fact that there are certain durable Black feminist discourses that circulate widely, both within and beyond academic and arts circles. I begin with the media dissemination of Loophole to provide a vocabulary for discussing how Black feminism is made legible in the twenty-first century and how it operates through and for global and neoliberal institutional formations. Loophole tells us about a problem that feels immediate if petty (*Where are the studs?*) while pointing to larger questions of when, where, and how Black feminist inquiries become legible to and within the academic and cultural institutions we work in and within the national formations we are a part of (even as we are routinely expelled from them ontologically, epistemologically, and materially). The convening can help us think about how we as people, as agents of the university and of the arts institution, and as enactors of Black feminism have gotten to an intellectual, administrative, and financial place where such a convening can take place.

We are indeed in an era when Black feminist practices and vocabularies are seemingly more legible than ever, particularly in Western arts and academic institutions. We have departments and tenure lines and major museum exhibitions and CEO statuses and other practices and positions that underscore the changing value and viability of Black feminist theory and practices across institutional formations. We have expressly Black feminist inquiries such as Leigh’s being vaunted and valued as the pinnacle of American achievement in the arts on a global scale—and such work has given us incredible visions of the complexities

of what Black feminist theory and practice can look like. We are also in a moment when Black feminist positions, ideas, and language are mobilized to consecrate the neoliberal organization of academic and cultural institutions and the broader political states they are embedded in—to the extent that, in December 2022, the Black woman provost of The New School invoked bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* in a series of emails regarding the university's union busting. The last three selections for the US pavilion beg consideration of how the accumulation of Black creative practices into the country's narration of itself for a capitalist art market is an important part of (neo)liberal statecraft that is not separate from how Black feminist practices are increasingly absorbed into (neo)liberal academic and arts institutions in the West.<sup>2</sup> For as long as Black feminism has tested the waters of institutionalization, there have been analyses of how Black feminism cultivates necessary critical and creative thought while being continuously depoliticized and redeployed for institutional gain (Bliss 2016; Christian 1988; DuCille 1994; hooks 1981; Nash 2018). This essay aims to build on that conversation by thinking granularly about just one modality through which Black feminism articulates itself. It is very significant that the nation, the academy, and the art industry gathered around Leigh's Black feminist project, however temporarily, and it is very significant that this project is largely organized around the Black femme. What does the Black femme—as a subject, object, and mode of analysis—offer Black feminism as it is celebrated on the world's stage?

At one level, this essay travels a single route through the material and discursive histories and conditions that may have produced the Black femme as the origin, object, and outcome of mainstream Black feminist inquiry. I engage with how Evelyn Hammonds's (1994) text "Black (W)holes" maps the political-economic conditions of Black feminist intellectual production and reception on the eve of an earlier era of institutionalization in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, when US-based institutions, in particular, were developing an appetite for Black feminist studies while remaining hostile to Black feminists themselves. Importantly, Hammonds reads Hortense Spillers's essays "Interstices" (1984) and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987) as both scholars work to chart how the limited academic discourse around the diversity of Black sexualities is a product of the ontological violence that surrounds the category of "Black woman," which shapes the modes of epistemic and institutional violence that conditions Black feminists' work in the academy. Owing in no small part to the necessary canonization of Spillers within an influential body of Black feminist gender and sexuality studies, the Black femme has been positioned as the structuring condition of (Black) social life, and finding and describing the Black femme's foundational absent presence amid

the losses and misnamings that circumscribe such life has become a key task of Black feminist inquiry—its seemingly logical starting point and its commonsense subject and object. In this context, the Loophole of Retreat convening is itself a seemingly logical outcome of institutionalized Black feminism whose intellectual project has been finding, naming, and recovering the Black femme *and* the logical outcome of disciplinarity in the age of the neoliberal institution through and under which the complexity of our bodies and our bodies of scholarship is continuously collapsed and repackaged as reparative possibility.

By reading Hammonds and her invocation of Spillers across the Loophole of Retreat: Venice we can attend to different eras in which Black feminism, Black feminists, and Black women were becoming incorporated into and as agents of the institution and when the symbolic registers of Black gendered sexualities were differently legible to and within the traditional symbolics of race, gender, and sexuality that such institutions are grounded in and that Black feminism has often written against. Now that the vocabularies of Black feminism have become at least nominally incorporated into and as representative of the institution, how do we understand the ways that we ourselves become woven into and reflective of the “traditional symbolics” that Hammonds, Spillers, and others have helped us define and describe and that we have so written against? Thinking capaciously about the Loophole of Retreat: Venice as an expression of the transformations of institutional Black feminism and as a reflection of its commonsense vocabularies might help us reflect on how we know what we know about the figures around which Black feminist study is organized.

Given that, the second project of this essay thinks of the absence of the stud at Loophole itself as an example of Hammonds’s black hole, her hermeneutics of absence, the still-lost project in “Black (W)holes”: Black lesbian sociality itself, which Hammonds suggests might model more complex modes of Black feminist relationality vis-à-vis the institution and the intellectual and creative thought generated within and around it. One of Hammonds’s several achievements in that text is to situate the non-place of inquiry into Black lesbian sexuality, given the discursive and material constraints surrounding Black women’s abilities to articulate themselves to one another within the racist, conservative, heteronormative protocols of the academy. Her theorization of the “Black hole” allows her to stage a further, gentle critique of the (hetero)normative impulses of Black feminism. She argued that Black feminism’s ability to theoretically narrate the diversities of Black gendered sexualities must be inseparable from Black women’s own intimate and interpersonal processes of reformulating their relationships to “the maimed immoral Black female body” (Hammonds 1994: 134). Part of the call of the essay

is to engage in the erotics of Black lesbian sociality in this process because “Black lesbian sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised Black female body,” which has been despised both by the institutions we work in but also, at times, by Black (feminist) women themselves (137).

Since “Black (W)holes,” many heeded calls to break the silences surrounding Black women’s sexuality and have done so through textured analyses and reclamations of the real and symbolic bodies of racialized, gendered, and sexualized Black women within and beyond the academy. Yet I could cite much of Hammonds’s essay because ensuing studies of Black gendered sexualities are still shaped and constrained by what Hammonds calls “more visible sexualities.” In the real and symbolic fight to reclaim the body and, with it, the force of the field of Black feminism, Black feminists have still all too often inhabited “the outside-within stance [that] does not allow space for addressing the question of other outsiders, namely Black lesbians” (135). Hammonds’s specific invocations of Black *lesbian* possibility in “Black (W)holes” have not been incorporated into mainstream Black feminist discourse. Black lesbians are certainly assimilated into Black feminist discourses on gender and sexuality—we, for example, routinely cite the work of Black lesbians. But rarely, if ever, are lesbians the modality by which the discourse is understood. Rarely, if ever, are they the modality by which the social is understood. Rarely, if ever, are they the modality by which the political is understood.

Hammonds’s methodology, rooted in a hermeneutics of Black lesbian absence, guides my questions about how and why we have so oriented around the femme and what questions of desire, namely around sex and/or biological and/or social reproduction, might have to do with it. The particular and desexualized collapse of “Black femme” with “Black feminist” in an increasingly institutionalized Black feminism, on view at Loophole, surely tells us about who we desire to see and to be seen among; to be and be among; to think with, about, and for. I don’t want to see more studs because I can imagine queer sexuality only in a binary configuration where the femme “must” be “balanced” by a more masculine configuration. Thinking about the stud is but one part of the broader thinking about Black feminism’s relationships to both the theoretical and the lived materiality of gender variance. I want to see or at least imagine a more complex desire—for bodies and for ideas—play out when Black feminism appears on the global stage, hoping that complexities around desire feed back into our process of thinking, writing about, and convening around Black gendered sexualities. So as Hammonds pays attention to the importance of lesbian erotic desire to the Black feminism she was writing about in the 1990s, the second project of this essay pays attention to what

the stud might do—that is, how they might service—a Black feminism that may need to take stock of itself to reorient to our institutional daddies in the 2020s.

## Black Femme

In Black feminist studies, “femme” has been taken up as an analytic, tethered to embodied practices, for understanding and disrupting normative expectations of racialized gender and sexuality. “Among those who explore Femme there is a consensus that the interruption of white heteropatriarchal dominance and its regulation of femininity is a defining factor of femme identity,” writes Sydney Fonteyn Lewis (2012: 105). Lewis continues, “Femme takes heteropatriarchal femininity and queers it—fucks with it (sometimes literally), turning it into a threatening parody of itself” (105). As a set of embodied and sartorial practices, “femme” is often enacted by what may appear to be “traditional” protocols of normative feminine embodiment, such as wearing dresses, high heels, makeup, and so forth. These practices are routinely misread as adherence to the traditional, normative expectations of heteropatriarchal society, and the possibility, let alone the practice, of the femme’s “non-normative” sexuality is effectively rendered invisible. A range of scholars have thus worked to historicize the radical possibilities of the femme performance across sexual formations, often addressing the lesbian, queer, and trans particularities of femmes (Bey 2021; Coyote and Sharman 2011; Munt 1998; Nestle 1992; Story 2020). Especially when tracked via Spillers, the femme points to and interrupts the expected links between sex, gender, and sexuality, “disorganiz[ing] and confound[ing] the categories we often use to make sense of the world,” such that “femme” exists as a set of corporeal possibilities that can be rehearsed across any body (Ellison 2019: 8). This scholarship demonstrates the intimate relationship between femme theories and embodiments; by linking embodied practices to ideologies resistant to heteropatriarchy, we can understand Black femmeness as a descriptive practice and as an intentional *method* of making a politics of racialized gender and sexuality visible (not only in theory but on and through the body) (Tinsley 2022). Following Kara Keeling (2007), the Black femme undoes hegemonic common sense and points us to alternative ways of being. The Black femme’s literal appearance, often brief and fleeting, provides glimpses “into the range of mechanisms whereby transformations within and alternatives to existing organizations of life might be affected” (1). Across a rich body of study, we find that the Black femme points us toward other ways of being and knowing that are fruitful for and within Black feminist life and study.

My lingering question is *why* the femme, in particular, has emerged as the

ideal or at least a persistent formation through which such transformative reorientation might happen.<sup>3</sup> There is one story to tell about the legacy of female and femme focus within the histories of women's studies as the field consolidated in many ways around political movements to secure the rights of women—the ways that women's studies, gender studies, queer studies, and trans studies have variously converged and diverged around particular bodies.<sup>4</sup> I want to think more particularly about how our focus on the Black femme is also deeply rooted in the questions of biological and social reproduction that have been anchored in the Black female maternal configuration laid out by the canonized work of Spillers in “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987) and “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words” (1984), two texts that Hammonds reads for “Black (W)holes.” The Black reproducing subject—gendered and sexualized as female, femme, and maternal, in albeit slippery ways—has become a primary object of analysis and the goal and outcome of Black feminist thought that, however reluctantly, must reproduce its own value within institutions that depend on and profit from the very reproduction of difference that Black feminism both represents and investigates. In Spillers we find the kernels of how the Black femme becomes the organizing principle of a particular yet powerful genealogy of Black feminist gender and sexuality studies that is rooted in the physical, epistemological, and ontological violence of the transatlantic slave trade as it shaped the impossibilities for Black gendered sexuality (writ large) to emerge, be nameable, and be recognizable.

Spillers (1984: 76) writes in “Interstices” that the Black female, who exists as capital and is constituted via capital exchange, functioned primarily as a mirror with which society determined “what a human being was *not*.” Thus Black women inhabit(ed) a “paradox of non-being,” being both en fleshed yet cast out of the traditional symbolics of the human in general and of female gender in particular. Spillers (1984: 77) works through how this paradox of nonbeing marks the impossibilities of Black gender differentiation within Western onto-epistemological systems: “Under the sign of this particular historical order, Black female and Black male are absolutely equal,” which is to say their genders are variously collapsible, fungible, and/or undifferentiated and become the grist for a host of white supremacist fantasies, misnamings, misrepresentations, and abuse; “the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific.” In “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,” she continues to develop how “the structure of unreality that the black woman must confront” is a gendered structure that is of course inextricably about sexuality (77). As Black captives have been cast out of the traditional symbolics of gender, so too have they been cast out of the normative family structure, pressed into a pervasive biological

kinlessness: bearing children yet having no naming or claiming rights; reproducing but without the purported sense of security, futurity, and history that come with lineage; experiencing an immense amount of physical and emotional labor and barred from hegemonic norms and expectations of satisfaction that are attached to biological kinship bonds. In her much-cited foundational sequence, Spillers outlines the impossibility of (naming) Black gendered sexuality, given the impossibilities of (nuclear) kinship among Black captives. The specific misnaming of the African(-American) female-mother was also produced in tandem with the real and symbolic expulsion of the African(-American) male-father and the perpetual and predictable loss of the child-future.<sup>5</sup>

The syntax of American grammar is thus about the constant, enforced loss of Black differentiation, which interrupts and forecloses multiple modes of Black reproduction (of identifying language, of the sanguineous family unit). Also foreclosed are related senses of security: of sense of self, of naming rights, of kinship network, of emplacement. Given these conditions, Spillers (1984: 80) asks what language we might develop to claim gender/differentiation and, specifically, the “female with the potential to ‘name.’” This potential to name might generate a capacity to lay claim to the genealogies of gendered sexuality inaugurated through Black heterosexual reproduction and the attendant claims to affective kinship. Importantly, such a potential to name should also always index how the production of racialized gendered sexuality cannot be separated from historical, political-economic contexts of material and symbolic (re)production. Spillers ultimately developed an analytic through which we can hail the reproductive subject, in which reproduction is both biological and social: the Black female (maternal) becomes the achievement of a potentially liberated or at least self-knowing Black gendered sexual subject/position whose abilities to name the relationships between the material and the symbolic (and, specifically, the ways the symbolic often stands in for and obscures the materiality of capital relations) are entangled in but categorically resistant to the machinations of white heteropatriarchal normativity.

At first blush, collapsing the female and the maternal with an imperative toward multiple modes of reproduction is an altogether heteronormative arrangement, which Spillers acknowledges.<sup>6</sup> She notes that in the historical conditions of Black captivity, however, which continue to shape ideas and practices around Black race, gender, and sexuality, “motherhood and female gendering/ungendering appear so intimately aligned that they *seem* to speak the same language” (Spillers 1987: 78). C. Riley Snorton takes time to explore the capaciousness of gendered social reproduction within Spillers’s argument. In material but also symbolic ways, Snorton (2017: 135) writes, “Black interiority and Black sociality are both

produced through a Black maternal figuration.” This figuration is also part of a larger project of interracial social control, in which *all* Black people are rendered mother-like, given their enforced status as perpetually servile caregivers. Snorton explains that “the Black ‘mother-like’ is neither a Black ‘woman’ nor a Black ‘man’ but rather an emblem of a masochistic relation and a symbol of the processes by which Black gender becomes fungible in slavery’s political and visual economy of indifference to Black gender difference” (126). Snorton tracks the relationship between the material conditions in which Black gender is produced and, with that, how the materiality of subjugation is subsumed under the symbolic weight that is the (mis)naming and subsequent fungibility of Black gender differentiation. I cite Snorton to underscore the simultaneously slippery yet consecrating role of the Black female (maternal) in the material and symbolic life of race and/in the West, which has become central to a myriad of Black feminist studies of Black genders and sexualities.

Indeed, since Spillers wrote these pieces and Hammonds cited them, an incredible body of scholarship has worked to reveal, name, and/or recover the Black female (maternal) as an idea, a symbolic order, a figure against which colonial orders of being are set, as an embodied capacity to be disciplined and punished, as a query about reproduction, and more (Bradley 2019; Griffin 1996; Hartman 1997; Jackson 2020; James 2021; King 2019; Morgan 2004, 2021). Such Spillersian examinations of the historical and ongoing resonances of the ungendered, kinless captive serve to differently historicize while also modifying the traditional symbolics of white Western heteronormativity that undergird the mechanisms through which we are hailed into (and disciplined through/as) identities, bodies, and communities. And yet, quite often, finding and naming the Black female (maternal) resolves in the Black femme, who is perhaps the most intelligible, recognizable, legible, or possible subject formation in studies of racialized gender and sexuality that track a Spillersian genealogy. This is perhaps because there is alignment between the Black female (maternal) and the Black femme as resistive subject positions that name the material and symbolic registers of racialized gendered sexuality as shaped by capital exploitation and that are charged with forms of biological and social reproduction that are instrumental to, yet disavowed and punished within, the material and symbolic conditions of exploitation that structure Black life in the West.<sup>7</sup> As such, the Black femme helps us historicize and make sense of the (non)being of the Black (subject), which Spillers outlines, while materializing some of the stakes of inhabiting bodies that mark the collision of the material and symbolic registers of racialized gendered sexuality. Whether taken up as an analytic or an actual figure/subject, the Black femme

opens up space to theorize how people reveal and transform the symbolics of race and gender that Spillers maps and how we can actively carve out not only theories but also embodied *practices* of naming and becoming visible within and against Western logics of intelligibility.

This is not just an intellectual project. The recovery of the Black femme has become quite central to making sense of the project of Black feminism in institutions that rehearse the simultaneous expulsion of and dependency on the Black (female) maternal that has shaped Western history. So, as finding, defining, and describing the Black femme has become a primary methodology of a significant strain of Black feminist studies, inhabiting Black femme subjectivities has become (was always?) the overrepresented embodiment of Black feminists themselves as they are tasked with various forms of reproduction within and for institutions that efficiently manage minority difference, in part by cultivating intellectual and administrative processes through which the body of the Black feminist scholar is collapsed with the body of Black feminist scholarship and redeployed to represent the institution's liberalism.<sup>8</sup> And as the institution simultaneously invisibilizes the body and the theory of the Black (femme) feminist, the project of finding and naming a history for such erasure is continually necessary and valuable. Given that the call to recover the Black femme collides with the structural conditions in which institutionalized Black feminism proceeds, it's not so paradoxical that the intellectual and embodied representative of the Black femme should constantly announce their *in-visibility*, which is often the framework through which femme studies proceeds: within the elite confines of academic and cultural institutions, they must do so to justify their recovery. This intellectual-institutional formation is perhaps part of the reason the Loophole of Retreat convening was experienced as such a celebration: *Finally, we can be seen* (to one another, in scholarship and creative practice, at the Venice Biennale). *Finally, we have a place* (in theory, gathering around *Sovereignty*, at the Venice Biennale). *Finally, we have made it* (in theory, as a discipline, to the Venice Biennale).<sup>9</sup>

The intellectual and material conditions that gave rise to the convening lead to the question, however, of whether the Black femme is as invisible as we theorize. To the arts and academic institutions we are a part of, and to the corporatized state that materially funds excursions such as *Sovereignty* and the Loophole of Retreat convening, the recognition of the Black femme, for all their seeming non-representability, is in fact whole, complete, totalizing. Loophole indeed reveals that the Black femme has maybe not been fraught or invisible to or within traditional symbolics but was there all along, so much so that hundreds could convene around the Black femme at an event honoring the cultural force of the US

state that acknowledges and honors select Black citizens, hosted in the neofascist Italian state, and underwritten by the philanthropic arms of private funders and international banking conglomerates alike. It is indeed fitting that the Loophole of Retreat convening takes its name from Harriet Jacobs's/Linda Brent's experiences of enslavement, narrated in *Incidents in the Life of the Slave Girl*, where a Black woman reckons with how the complex geographies of domination and the possibilities of liberation are entangled with the financialized erotics of her captivity: this is the condition that institutionalized Black feminism is grappling with right now, decades after Hammonds queried the stakes of the field's in-process incorporation into the US academy.

Returning to "Black (W)holes" in the 2020s, and with an eye toward Loophole of Retreat: Venice, is an opportunity to query the transformations of legibility that the subjects, objects, and bodies of Black feminism have undergone as the discipline has been disciplined into a viable and valuable element within academic and cultural institutions that have been shaped by the intensification of neoliberal financial, organizational/administrative, and cultural rule. In the decades following Spillers's and Hammonds's writing, the Black feminist encouragement to reveal and reclaim what I am spotlighting as Black femme theory and praxis and, as an extension, subjectivity must reckon with the related political-economic *and* symbolic transformations that Erica Edwards maps out in *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire*. Edwards (2021: 7) spotlights the importance of holding in tension the grammars of a Black feminist canon that was laid out in the 1980s and 1990s, when concerns were with, among other issues, the place of sexuality amid a pending institutionalization and the current and ongoing need to describe "the essential features of Black women's culture that shaped itself in the crucible of late US empire," when Black women at times (re)produce the strategies, language, and performatives of imperialist power that have historically been considered somewhat, if not wholly, incommensurate with the material and ontological status of Black women. Edwards (2015: 146) elsewhere writes:

If, in the context of the post-1945 period's experiments with racial incorporation, Black women's lives and Black women's culture have now been hailed by gender categories such as woman, mother, and wife, which both eroticize and rationalize capitalism, then the task of the Black feminist critic is not only to theorize the social subject who, according to Spillers's foundational work, is cast "out of the traditional symbolics of female gender" but also to make a place, *in theory*, for the social subject who is thrust *into* such symbolics.

Edwards's work highlights the need to define and describe how Black women have become incorporated into the nationalistic project of representing the United States as a liberal democracy through, for example, hiring Black women into institutional positions of power. Her work unpacks how the deconstructive vocabularies of racialized gender and sexuality that have organized Black feminist study have become the precise tools through which Black feminist bodies, ideas, and practices are effectively managed and redeployed in the service of the purportedly liberal transformations of the state and its academic and cultural institutions.

Edwards's work opens us to consider how the traditional symbolics of gender transform as the economic-epistemic protocols of global capitalism have been transformed through the twenty-first century: on the world's stage at the Venice Biennale, the Black femme—and the Black feminist studies that analyze and emerge from this figure—appears as “evidence” that the state has moved past its racist, misogynist history to become a beacon of Western civilization/democracy/freedom. In this era of what Jodi Melamed (2011) describes as “neoliberal multiculturalism,” the state officially recognizes difference, especially racial difference, and works to demonstrate its anti-racist and multicultural competencies by, say, redistributing legal rights to, or selectively absorbing the cultural productions of, minoritarian subjects. One of the many costs of the entangled social and economic reforms of neoliberalism—and, specifically, of the state's very incomplete efforts at repair and redress—is that the language of interlocking systems of oppression is recoded as the capacity of the individual (or group) to, now having received some measure of recognition, simply succeed in a newly even playing field. (*Finally, we have made it.*) The pleasures we take in recognition condition our awareness of (and are meant to deflect our attention from) the methods the United States uses to ensure its place, as well as our own, within a global capitalist market. At the Venice Biennale, mainstream Black feminism cannot be interpreted outside how the United States wields (Black) creative power to imply the state's magnanimity; surely such recognition means that US imperialist violence is at the very least offset by the *generosity* of such a selection.

Loophole of Retreat: Venice should make us think deeply about how “ours is the anxiety of incorporation,” as Edwards (2021: 208) writes, “which, no doubt, is the psychic life of Black feminist literature and criticism in the age of terror.” Edwards's (and Melamed's) focus on literature can be scaled across fields and culture industries to wherever Black femme countenance can be (mis)recognized as productive to the (neo)liberal identity politics of the academic-arts industrial complex—and wherever inclusion means risky ties to related forms of, and practices of obscuring, state terror. The finding, naming, and claiming of the Black femme

and, with that, the Black femme feminist articulate the “proper” place of Black feminism within institutions and nations that, in Melamed’s words, have long been primed to represent (in the effort to claim their own liberal if not progressive politics) and destroy (in the effort to maintain their sovereign, epistemological power).

### **What /s It Like Inside the Black Hole?**

“Black femme” is an extremely important figure through which the symbols and the materiality of the history of capital exchange can be narrated, but denaturalizing the Black femme as an origin and outcome of Black feminist inquiry, as the commonsense vocabulary through which studies of Black gendered sexualities proceed, can open us to other forms of studying the political-economic conditions of how racialized gendered sexualities become legible, expressed, and experienced. And, importantly, this work can and should open us to other forms of sociality in the process. In light of this, *Where are all the studs?* is not some pick-me whataboutism. The question is aimed at clarifying how we have arrived at the Black femme as the commonsense articulation and inhabitation of Black feminism and how this shapes not only *how* we think but also *who* we think with and about.

Indeed, the intellectual and social projects of Black feminism were twinned for Hammonds. Writing in 1994, Hammonds is addressing Black feminist intellectual production within institutional academic spaces governed not only by white heteronormativity and the racism of the developing fields of lesbian, gay, and queer studies, but also by the conservative views espoused by Black feminist women in these spaces. The intellectual-social projects of redefining the terrain of Black women’s sexualities were vulnerable and risky in these contexts because that work mapped onto the lives of the embodied representatives of Black feminist studies: “I want to suggest that black feminist theorists have not taken up this project in part because of their own status in the academy. Reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity is a process that Black feminist theorists in the academy must go through themselves while they are doing the work of producing theory” (134). For Hammonds, the intellectual project of Black feminism is not separate from the social relations that are required to build disciplines; the intellectual risks are coextensive with material risks. The links between the body of the researcher and the body of knowledge continue to be and feel risky in this era when the seeming incorporation of Black feminism as a legitimate area of study within neoliberal institutions has been shaped by the intensified demand that there be parity between the body of knowledge and the body of the instructor (and between the body of the artwork and the body of the artist), and the instructor (or the artist) bears nearly all the

risks that come with practicing complexity in conservative political climates. Hammonds historicizes and contextualizes the risk to situate the *stakes* of developing different methodologies for defining and describing the geometries of Black female sexualities because that intellectual, institutional project is deeply enmeshed with the kinds of bodies we inhabit and surround ourselves with. The reproducibility of the “proper” subject-objects of Black feminist study is not merely theoretical but also baked into our institutional, administrative processes and the socialities they structure. We reproduce the logic of the Black femme in our scholarship, which hails certain student bodies, which shapes and affects graduate admissions, which shapes and affects future scholarship, which goes on to reproduce the logic of the Black femme. (Like, are your graduate admissions processes able to see studs???) It thus makes sense that *Loophole of Retreat: Venice* looked the way it did, given the place of Black femme people and analytics within Black feminism and within institutions that force equivalencies between the subject-object of analysis and the practitioner, be they a university instructor or an artist. Our research and creative production hails certain histories of racialized gendered sexuality and, with them, certain bodies and bodies of analysis.

*Where are the studs?* is a direct question about the mediation of Black feminism on/through global platforms, and it asks about whether our work is producing methodological diversity, which might in turn encourage a diversity of people, bodies, and experiences to be reflected in our thought, in our departments, and in our institutions. If we understand how the Black femme functions within the intellectual-economic protocols of global and neoliberal institutions—how expectations surrounding Black femmes’ intellectual and social reproduction grease the wheels of academic, arts, and culture industries—what kinds of institutional-intellectual formations and broader social relations might be illuminated if we look toward, for example, the stud as a figure of Black feminism? Our scholarship and related modes of convening may change if we, however temporarily, look away from the Black femme as identical with and representative of Black feminism and the set of ideas, practices, and socialities that issue forth from it. Imagine how our understandings and practices of Black feminist theory and sociality might shift if we took the dyke, or the bulldagger, or the boi, or the DL masc power bottom as figuring the origin, agenda, and horizon of our theories and practices. Our conversations around, say, self- and community care might shift if we set out to find and describe the political-economic emergence of babyqueer touch-me-nots. Our questions would change if the militant, man-hating lesbian were the figure through which we narrated the history of orders of being and their enmeshments, or the modality through which we understood negation and alienation. How would we

have to rearrange our methods and methodologies if our theories were to begin and end with the gold star lesbian? What if we argued that there are entirely different networks of reproduction (of bodies, of knowledge, of kin, of labor) at play when we consider stud4stud—networks that maybe don't take the feminine or the maternal or the femme formation as foundational or even relevant? Different political arrangements and possibilities may emerge when mainstream Black feminism, produced to represent the nation on the world's stage, actually engages the diverse Black gendered sexualities and socialities as its fulcrum and condition of possibility.

There are indeed many ways to ask and answer questions regarding the sheer diversity of Black gendered sexualities that press against the normative logics of who and what Black feminism coheres around. My inquiries into the specifically lesbian contours of studs offer just one approach, one interrogation—and sex and reproduction are key to the conversation. I suspect a big “problem” lesbians pose to the hegemonic common sense of institutionalized Black feminism is that they, especially those who do not conform to femme standards, are seen as biologically and socially nonreproductive, especially in disciplines and institutions that struggle to incorporate an explicit politics of sex and desire into the machinations of recognition. With that, nonreproductive Black sexuality disrupts or destabilizes existing strategies for managing minority difference. (This nonreproducibility is of course not true, but ignorance and lies are key to all hegemonic common senses.) In the political-economic and disciplinary organization of the Black femme, that figure, analytic, and person are seen to reflect and remark on the ways capitalist relations structure racialized gendered sexuality *and* are mobilized to put pressure on these relations. That is, the Black femme documents the capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist patriarchal organization of Black gendered sexuality while being tasked with undoing the forms of reproduction central to this organization, and the practice of sex, consensual and otherwise, is implicitly and explicitly tethered to this configuration. Inasmuch as they require a different political-economic and symbolic discussion of sex, the non-femme lesbian cannot be configured by existing theorizations for reproduction *or* the dialectics of refusal championed by mainstream Black feminism; the dyke can exist as a seemingly separate threat to the capitalist, imperialist, white supremacist patriarchal organization of Black gendered sexuality, but the possibilities of their material sexuality are too often neutered in order to be *useful* to global and neoliberal stagings of Black feminism.<sup>10</sup>

This is an interesting position to be in because if Black feminism were to lean into the perceived nonreproducibility of diverse Black lesbian sexualities, then we might generate expansive and rigorous theorizations of racialized gender

and sexualities in the age of neoliberalism (Bliss 2015).<sup>11</sup> The figures I'm thinking about—studs, touch-me-nots, gold star lesbians, angry dykes, and so on—don't always "function" to reproduce the political, the economic, the social, or the academic discipline in legible ways. Because of that, they may be "useful" figures for teasing out the material and symbolic resonances of racialized gendered sexual subjectivities produced in the crucible of constantly adjusting capital relations. Maybe these figures don't reproduce at all. Maybe they are not invested in normative forms of reciprocity. Maybe they are all about giving. Or all about taking. Maybe they demonstrate productive nonreproducibility, interrupting the tenets of capital exchange that shape much of everyday life, and help us think about other modes of communing and convening.

As Hammonds (1994: 131) said, using scholarship to address the silences surrounding Black women's sexuality is not only about generating new grammars within and that can speak back to an externally imposed system of power and control (e.g., how white supremacy uses the vocabularies of racialized sexuality as a mode of disciplining Black subjects) but also is key to actually addressing deeply embodied power relations "among different groups of Black women," especially in institutional, academic settings that sow many types of division. This is low-key why I wanted to see studs at Loophole; I wanted to see, materialized, the diverse types of relation that Black feminism can cultivate. Sure, yes, okay, a lot of this is about fantasy: I want to think about who's fucking whom at the expensive gatherings we convene to acknowledge and consolidate our (inter)disciplinarity because seeing that means I can *also* imagine how the affective, material, and discursive practices of vulnerability, care, tension, and protection that go into erotic attachments might play out in the theories and methods that organize our discipline. And maybe it was an entirely femme4femme affair—we love to see it! But if I can see that you got your studs flewed out, I can imagine—and it might be a long, long shot—that your intellectual practice of thinking about racialized gendered sexuality might have a relation to the conversations you are ideally having with your lover(s) about body, touch, feeling, (after)care, and other physicalities that are always, *always* the staging grounds for, the proofs of, and the exceptions to what we put on the page.

If we are to turn toward studs, or toward any expansive formation of Black gendered sexuality, in an effort to develop rich creative thinking about the world we live in and about the field(s) we work in, we don't do so to find unicorns. We're not trying to fetishize Black lesbian sexualities to satisfy our own curiosity or to make our work seem applicable or relevant to vanguard discourses. Nor are we trying to abstract Black lesbians, socialities, or frameworks as "useful to think with,"

as mere analytics that provide temporary cover for otherwise heteronormative contexts and conditions. We instead work to reiterate Hammonds's point that we still have plenty of ground to cover regarding the diversity of Black women's sexualities, and the imperative is not to simply chart this incredible diversity but to reimagine the sociality of epistemological production within (neo)liberal institutions. Paying more explicit and sustained attention to Black lesbian sexualities can afford mainstream Black feminism real opportunities to theorize the political-economic conditions of historic and ongoing field formation while reimagining our methods of convening with one another.

We are certainly all indelibly enmeshed in the capital and cultural accumulations and exploitations of the art market as it intersects with academic institutions, and we may never be able to fully escape the ways that convenings of Black creative and intellectual practices are sometimes achieved by harnessing capital associated with reproducing the nation formation and its normative logics of racialized gendered sexuality. But maybe genuinely answering the question *Where are the studs?*, with all of its theoretical but also deeply embodied, physically practiced inflections of desire, can produce an other ethics of relating to the subject(s) in and of Black feminism, relating to one another, and relating to the institution in the process.

## Notes

1. "Loophole of Retreat." n.d. Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston. Accessed September 3, 2024. <https://simoneleighvenice2022.org/loophole-of-retreat/>. This would in fact be the second Loophole of Retreat conference. The first was staged around Leigh's 2019 Hugo Boss Award-winning exhibition of the same name at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.
2. In thinking through the "proper" within disciplinary formations, I'm thinking about Kandice Chuh (2014), "It's Not about Anything," and the special issue Summer Kim Lee (2019a) edited, "Someone Else's Object."
3. There are a host of questions we should also ask about how femme theories and practices of mainstream Black feminist studies (and Black trans studies) rarely center or consider Black trans femmes.
4. There are *a lot* of materials to read regarding the historical convergences and divergences of disciplines forming around (racialized) gender and sexuality studies. Here, I'll just say that I really like Cameron Awkward-Rich's (2022) review of and engagement with the gendered conflicts that have propelled disciplinary formations, which are also conflicts about race, sexuality, and ability, and conflicts about the perceived possibilities and limits of trans studies.

5. This is an alienated subject position Spillers (1996) takes up further in “All the Things.”
6. There are two moments when she highlights that her interests in the historical dispositions of gender and motherhood appear to press against developments in queer and feminist theory. Gesturing toward developments in the then-nascent field of queer studies, Spillers (1987: 66) writes, “At a time when current critical discourses appear to compel us more and more decidedly toward gender ‘undecidability,’ it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the integrity of female/male gender.” Later Spillers spotlights established feminist critiques as she explains that “one treads dangerous ground in suggesting an equation between female gender and mothering; in fact, feminist inquiry/praxis and the actual day-to-day living of numberless American women—Black and white—have gone far to break the enthrallment of a female subject-position to the theoretical and actual situation of maternity” (78).
7. This alignment is mapped out, for example, in the 2023 call for papers to be submitted to the special issue “Black Femmescares,” edited by madison moore and Julian Kevon Glover for *Women and Performance*.
8. Hazel Carby (1992) addresses this bind in “The Multicultural Wars,” as do Barbara Christian (1988) in “The Race for Theory” and Ann DuCille (1994) in “The Occult of True Black Womanhood.” Their texts read well in conversation with Robyn Wiegman’s (2012) *Object Lessons* and Roderick Ferguson’s (2012) *The Reorder of Things*.
9. In a somewhat related conversation, Saidiya Hartman talks about the dynamics of recognition at the 1994 conference “Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name: 1894–1994.” Hartman discusses a conference attendee addressing Lani Guinier with “You are me and I am you” to ask sharp questions about other practices and expectations of sameness that structured much of the convening: “What did it mean that the most available language for expressing our being-in-common depended on the certainty of sameness? The commonplace invocation of community seemed rooted in the belief that we were the same and were obligated to be mirrors for one another” (442). Without deep attention to the many differences among Black women, she explains, “An uncritical celebration of the ‘we’ could only transform our collectivity into a parody of community” (446).
10. See, again, how we read and teach Audre Lorde’s ([1984] 2020) “Uses of the Erotic.” This is slightly different, but I think we need to think more about how we seem quite comfortable reading, citing, and assigning *creative writing* by and about Black lesbians, but the broadscale circulation of other modes of Black feminist theorizing? Not so much.
11. I’m thinking in some ways about wanting more polemical conversations in Black feminism. Not that I want to return to the “future/no future” debates of queer studies in the early 2000s, but those frank conversations about theorizing queer sexualities were also conversations about the transforming socialities of lesbian, gay, and queer

studies, which might be interesting and productive for Black feminist studies (and for gender, women, and sexuality studies and departments) to think critically about.

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