Obscure; or, The Queer Light of Ebony G. Patterson

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A couple of decades ago, though it might have been yesterday, Evelynn Hammonds spoke of black holes.[1] She examined the fields of queer studies and black feminist thought, and she saw an absence of ideas about black feminine desire—an absence that was understandable on a number of fronts yet still difficult to take.[2] She surveyed the situation, and then she offered an opening: what if we *worked* with that absence as if it were a black hole?[3] If we did, Hammonds writes, then first we would have to shift our perception of absence to something like complex presence: "The observer outside of the [black] hole sees it as a void, an empty place in space. However, it is not empty; it is a dense and full place in space."[4] Then we would have to devise clever ways to perceive that fullness. By way of analogy, Hammonds describes what physicists do when they attempt to perceive black holes (emphatically unscientific myself, I have to take her word for it):

> Typically, in these systems one finds a visible apparently "normal" star in close orbit with another body such as a black hole, which is not seen optically. The existence of the black hole is inferred from the fact that the visible star is in orbit and its shape is distorted in some way or it is detected by the energy emanating from the region in space around the visible star that could not be produced by the visible star alone. Therefore, the identification of a black hole requires the use of sensitive detectors of energy and distortion.[5]

This principle of relativity—an inference about one element in terms of the perception of another—has lovely resonances. The exempted subject, it is true, will always be seen by the lights of the normative. Yet the proper subject, that ordinary star, bends and yields to the dark presence. The dark presence requires much cleverer tools to be seen and under-

stood—an evolved principle so sophisticated and so difficult that only the most sensitive processes will reveal it. What is there not to admire in such an account, from the perspective of the abjected, invisibilized subject? The black hole's distorting presence can, in this reading, be seen not as gauche annoyance but as full-on invisible menace, full of dark, complex materials. Who, then, might not desire to be the dark hole, this strong force making itself felt by a subtle pull so magnetizing that it draws and repels simultaneously, reshaping the visible star's orbit, contours, and status?[6]

And yet. To live in the dark is not always to know one's power; and to *be* that darkness takes a heavy toll. We are still talking about people here, though I have lingered for a time with Hammonds in the realm of the skies. Some bodies bear this metaphor more heavily than others. And the distance from celestial to terrestrial body can be vast. Hammonds notes this when she remarks on the peculiar pressures on the black female academic body: "Black feminist theorists are . . . engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body—the maimed immoral black female body—which can be and still is used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects."[7] Between the choice of the dark star and the normal star, complex presence and ordinary light, one might well in the end desire the simpler labor of producing knowledge without also needing simultaneously to produce the body, without needing to reproduce this body in various settings to suit various audiences—to make one's body visible, for a moment, to render it legitimate, however possible, in order for one's knowledge to be heard. And more, not just to render for others but to know for *oneself* what the body means—how its arrival into symbolic systems is to pass through violence of all sorts, passages that condition the possibilities of thought, making some ideas very easy to access and others seem light years away. The work is to think with the body. But how to bring the body into thought?

I

It is the opening of Ebony G. Patterson's …when they grow up… *at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 23 March 2016. I am inside the work. The installation is scaled, somehow, for a child, but I feel "inside" also because the whole piece exists in a small, low-ceilinged room, the entirety of which is rendered in pink—from ceiling to plush carpet to wall to installation backdrop and theme—making the space the interior of a body. One is invited, then, to regress but also to intrude. One is disembodied, evacuated from the carapace of adulthood, instead remembering one's own childhood. And one is also entirely surrounded by the body, zero escape. That both/and structure again rearing its head in queer theorizing, feminist experiencing. To be disembodied and embodied simultaneously, to have this proposition induced by a work of diasporic art, is no longer surprising. I think of Vanessa Agard-Jones's essay "Bodies in the System" and how to have a conversation with an interlocutor about his body: to "scale inwards to his body's most mundane functions" is also, by proxy, to "[scale] outward to talk about[, say,] farming in Martinique, about public parity in France, and about the circulation of agricultural products in the global economy."*[8] *Roland Barthes writes that it is only in the act of being photographed that he experiences himself uncomfortably shifting from subject to object: "I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object."*[9] *It strikes me that for other types of subject, this scaling effect occurs not just in front of the lens; it might happen in the course of a conversation with a trusted interlocutor. It might happen not only before the capturing filmic apparatus but also inside an art installation.*

This essay considers, in the light of queer theory, several works of Patterson's across her already prolific career. But its impulse lies most pressingly in an attempt to think with her most recent work, the site-specific exploration of childhood titled *…when they grow up…*, which opened at the Studio Museum in Harlem in March 2016.[10] In this new work is the possibility of considering an obscure rendering of sexuality—the sexuality of the child, formed out of violation, concealing its knowledge and yet inviting the viewer to look. The "productivity" of this invited look—the formulation is Kaja Silverman's—lies in the possibility of looking at this child and identifying with, rather than phobically disavowing, a connection with her abjected sexuality.[11] Working through this experience of projection that Patterson stages in *…when they grow up…* enables a consideration of her career-long project to think and represent Caribbean sexuality in ways that confront viewers with their most deeply held views and to stir their most repressed understandings about themselves. And it presents the possibility of encountering black sexuality as a black hole—full of queer light requiring the most sensitive of processes to perceive.

The extravagance of the representations in Patterson's latest work are characteristic. And Patterson's is a numerate as much as a visual imagination. It is as important the effect of the innumerable in her work (satisfied by the almost impossibly detailed embellish-

ments) as it is the specifically numerable (represented most paradigmatically by her numbering of the dead).[12] In *…when they grow up…*, we again have many: children are everywhere, pressed into group portraits, adorning the walls, each child his or her own particular compression of experiences, affect, implications, and style. The clothing of each child is of inexhaustible interest. Letters emblazoned on shirts spell things out; carefully arranged details mark bodies meaningfully. The toys, balloons, Nintendo handsets—all the accouterments of childhood—are deliberately chosen (often, indeed, rendered in fabric or other décor) and also apparently carelessly strewn. If one does not step carefully, one encounters a rubber ducky or a doll's hand.

The muchness of Patterson's presentation here, both in the number of children to try and behold and in the vastness of their things, is about superfluity, as Achille Mbembe renders the concept in his writing on Johannesburg.[13] As a racial logic of economic circulation that weds excess to necessity, the superfluity of Johannesburg's black mineworkers "consisted in the vulnerability, debasement, and waste that the black body was subjected to and in the racist assumption that wasting black life was a necessary sacrifice."[14] In Patterson's work, coming from an urban context defined not by apartheid and yet nevertheless subject to racist ideologies, the superfluous creature is not the extractive laborer but the child. Glittery with adornment, surrounded by gadgets and trinkets of all sorts, the black child in *…when they grow up…* bears the spectacular cultural weight of economic superfluity as "luxury, rarity and vanity, futility and caprice, conspicuous spectacle, and even phantasm."[15] This same child is also a figure bearing the meaning of superfluity as "misery and destitution[,] . . . a mass of human material ready for exploitation."[16] This is because everywhere one looks in Patterson's piece are signs of the wastage to which young black lives are laid. Patterson prepares us for this reading in her description of the piece at the Studio Museum website: "These children are often described as adults. Their blackness overrules their innocence."[17] And she goes on to elaborate in interviews, and the curator's description bears out, that *…when they grow up…* emerges from reflections on the "violence committed against young people of color . . . and the fears that focus on these same young people, who in the eyes of too many people appear as threats rather than victims."[18]

So the highly decorated space renders both desire and decay, both allure and sacrifice, unaccountable losses borne by families of the dead and unaccountable injury borne by children who must find a way to make their bodies mean in the wake of violation, having been made dark.

II

Long before two portrait studies from Patterson's *Of 72 Project* turned up on *Empire*, arguably the campiest show currently on television, her work was queer.[19] By which I mean that this most innovative of artists has been exploring gender's iterations from the beginning of her career, with works such as those from the 2009 series *Gangstas, Disciplez + Doily Boyz* (fig. 1) or those in *Out and Bad* (fig. 2)—all those beautiful young men with their powered, bejeweled faces and their embroidered outfits. What Patterson saw early in her career, and presented with startling clarity and assurance, was the external prettiness of Jamaican male badness; the necessary ablutions of this form of masculine display; the determined labor of its performance; and then, of course, its intense and close relationship to those presentations we call feminine. A hundred years ago the British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere famously asserted, regarding the feminine work of making up, that womanliness was a masquerade.[20] In Patterson's work, in piece after piece coming throughout the 2000s, it is possible to see how the inverse was true—to see just how much of Jamaican *manliness* is masquerade. (Indeed, the rich masquerading traditions of Caribbean performance informs Patterson's use of materials—sequins, glitter, fabrics of all sorts.) If one were searching for exemplification of Judith Butler's gender analysis in the context of Caribbean visual culture (the body as discursive; gender as iterative), then Patterson's work seems to be ready-made. And in light of a Butlerian analysis, Patterson's choice to explore the performativity of gender primarily on figures that appear to be male (at least, so it seems) makes theoretical and political sense. For if cultures inscribe themselves on subjects in a way that, according to Butler, "effects a social space for and of the body within certain regulatory grids of intelligibility," then Patterson's application of the powerful force of her hand on the figure of the masculine body becomes an apt metaphor for the social processes that gender the body in the first place.[21] Embodiment may be discursively feminine, but Patterson's choice to focus on masculinities makes it clear just how violable masculine bodies are, too, simply because to be in ownership of a body is to be subject to its potential incursion. The violations to which bodies are subject are what compel gender masquerades in the first place.

Figure 1. Ebony G. Patterson, detail from *Untitled (Souljah)* from the *Gangstas, Disciplez + Doily Boyz* series, 2009. Mixed-media installation, with toy soldiers and shelves; variable dimensions. Photograph Courtesy of Monique 'Mogi' Gilpin and Monique Meloche Gallery.

Figure 2. Ebony G. Patterson, *Russian*, from the *Out and Bad* series, 2010-2012. Mixed Tapestry with Objects, Variable Dimensions. Photograph courtesy of Ebony G. Patterson and Monique Meloche Gallery.

Grounding the queerness of Patterson's work in some of the most foundational of queer analyses—Butler's and Riviere's—gestures to the foundational ways her work makes a line of queer Caribbean theorizing possible. But if this is a line of queer theoretical analysis with which Patterson's work is at home—gender constructivism—there is also a different call in some more recent recitations of queer theorizing with which Patterson's work also chimes. I am thinking here of critics doing queer theorizing alongside inquiries into violence—those who detect a necessity to think about how political and environmental disasters unevenly impact queer and raced bodies, even as queer theory has enabled a working through of the power of bodily play, a freedom from normative strictures. Kara Keeling's essay on the disappearance of a central transgender character in the documentary *The Aggressives* is one such example. Keeling reflects on what it can mean to try and make sense of M—'s disappearance in the context of their abrupt departure from the military (and the film), when a larger cultural operation would seek to locate and violently survey them.[22] Positing an ethics of care in the face of trans violence, a violence inextricably linked to the problem of visibility, Keeling asks that we ponder the

difference between *looking for* M— (or other lost queer figures) and *looking after* M—, an elegant formulation that subtly links caretaking to a complex vision of time.[23]

A different account linking queer theorizing and violence, Tavia Nyong'o's recent essay on sovereignty and "queer inhumanism" is nevertheless connected to Keeling's reflections in that Nyong'o also wrestles with how the queer raced body is implicated in the conundrums of state violence.[24] Through a careful reading of the movie *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (filmed, strikingly, in the gulf regions near New Orleans), Nyong'o shows how the film's allure of wildness in the aftermath of environmental collapse draws the black queer(ed) child into an identification with the regenerated extinct beast (here, the iconic aurochs), rendering her complicit with a vision of the postapocalyptic landscape that, ironically, reifies European ideas of human sovereignty.[25]

These are just two recent examples that suggest queer theorizing raises new problems around violence and agency rather than resolving them. Patterson's work is at home with this, and some of her recent pieces—not coincidentally, exhibited in New Orleans—opens up a set of challenging questions about the stakes of queer analysis and violence. At New Orleans's Contemporary Art Center between March and June of 2015, Patterson was part of the show "En Mas': Carnival and Performance Arts of the Caribbean"; she showed *Invisible Presence: Bling Memories*, mixed-media coffins and photographs of their display in a live performance piece staged earlier in Kingston. At the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University, for the New Orleans art biennale Prospect 3 earlier in the year, she showed work from her series *beyond de bladez* (see fig. 3). Both projects demonstrate the way Patterson builds on earlier themes in her work and seeks always to extend and move beyond them. *Invisible Presence: Bling Memories*, for example, riffs on work done in 2011 at the Alice Yard arts center in Trinidad: the piece named *9 of 219*, in which colorfully pattered coffins were paraded down the street to mark a handful of the murders that had been committed while Patterson had been in residence. And *beyond the bladez*, though (in important ways I am about to discuss) a departure from her earlier work, interpolates figures that are by now her signature: powdered faces with jewels and sequins, gesturing to the Caribbean will to adorn.

Figure 3. Ebony G. Patterson, *... and then - beyond the bladez* (detail), 2014–15. Mixed media on paper. Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, New Orleans. Courtesy of the artist. Photographed by Nadia Ellis.

The line that connects the beautiful boys defining Patterson's early career to the coffins she exhibited in New Orleans in 2015 routes through *Of 72 Project* (2012), pieces in which male adornment and violent death coincide. *Of 72 Project* was a memorial to the victims of the 2010 Tivoli Gardens Incursion. The collection of highly elaborated portraits of men resonant with visuals associated with religious beatification, inspired by mugshots, compressed representations of criminality and innocence, of perpetrators and victims, in a work that complicates the imagery of poor young men in Jamaica as natural born killers.

In *beyond the bladez*, scenes of nature threaten to obscure human figures, forms whose genders are even more in flux than in earlier work. Patterson's characteristic investment in extravagant masquerade and performances of gender are inscribed here on to the natural landscape. Patterson has always been concerned with death, and so the presence of adorned corpse-like figures between the blades of grass in the series is not so unexpected. The surprise, if not the conjoining of delicate and particular beauty with death, is perhaps in the conjunction of the aesthetics Patterson has usually placed within the context of urban practices or scenarios—dancehall cars and party scenes—in the context of the natural landscape instead. Patricia Saunders has recently written of this work that it exemplifies a long tradition in representations of the Caribbean as a tropical inverse idyll: perilous with beauty.[26] Writing of the piece *two birdz*, from the *bladez* series, Saunders explains the profusion of nature and landscape in this stage of Patterson's work as an extension of the artist's thinking about urban violence, in/visibility, and the displacing effect of bling in the Caribbean:

> The abundance of grass, plants, and flowers that inhabit Patterson's artwork are decidedly untamed, disorderly, and explosive, all while being remarkably attractive and even inviting to the eye. It should come as no surprise, then, that her evocative visual re-imagining of the Jamaican landscape is paralleled by a discursive urbanization that captures the harsh realities of those who inhabit the ghettos, garrisons, and gullies. Blades, trees, and shrubs are transformed into *bladez*, *treez*, and *shrubz*, reflecting the edgy, precarious existence of the communities who inhabit these seemingly forgotten areas of the country's poor, urban landscapes.[27]

In a conversation I had with Patterson as the work was first being developed three years ago, she described these field-like spaces in which she was presenting her studiously adorned figures variously as suburban places and as borderlands. She was interested precisely, in fact, in the way suburbs function *as* a borderland in Jamaican urban areas, where sprawling development has meant that the separation between Kingston proper and areas outside merge delicately and often violently. She was interested in the secrets the suburbs keep.
Because of the location of the exhibition of the work, however, a New Orleans–specific moment that invokes a similarly hybrid and confounding landscape also comes to mind. I am thinking here of the case of Henry Glover, the African American man who was shot to death by police while "looting" in the wake of Katrina and whose body was set alight along with his car and left on the banks of the Mississippi. The huddled form of the car, in the brush alongside the river—not swampland but impossible not to think of that hybrid water-land associated with Louisiana—evokes the enclosure of death within the natural landscape that Patterson has so painstakingly and beautifully replicated.[28] Patterson's recent engagements in (with?) New Orleans suggests the ways black diasporic cities can have claims on each other. But more to my point here, the way she intertwines gestures of gender that masquerade with gestures toward violent ecologies demonstrates how her work tracks both foundational and recent turns in queer theorizing.

III

In *…when they grow up…* something else is happening again, building on these considerations. Patterson considers the ubiquity of violence in the formation a Jamaican child's subjectivity and desires, a formation that in some respect queers them, in that it renders these children decidedly unlike the ordinary stars of Evelynn Hammond's account with which I began this essay. But as Maggie Nelson has written, the very ubiquity of violence in sexual formation—particularly the sexual formation of a girl—makes it difficult to imagine what "normal" would be.[29] And so the work tackles the extraordinary position of black children as arbiters for deviance and as capacious holders of our worst fears and memories about our own formations. The fact of their blackness is important for the projections they make possible. As Amber Musser argues in relation to Kara Walker's silhouettes, stylized evocations of blackness in/as the visual field are simultaneously flat and full; skin-deep rehearsals of blackness—particularly black femininity—as always-already, and nothing-but, flesh at the same time they are simultaneously ciphers.[30]

So Patterson scales the portraits and installation of *…when they grow up…* to emphasize the act of looking. She is not just working in a visual register, she is thematizing visuality. It is in the bling of the artifacts adorning each piece and rendering the gallery glaringly resplendent. It is also in the unsettling stares of many of the children, who look out at the viewer as the viewer looks at them. This engagement of the visual field, in contact with a notion of black female sexuality as a celestial black hole, enables a shift in the discourse about Patterson's work from light to dark, from visibility to concealment—a shift that I anchor in the key term *obscurity.* Teju Cole's *New York Times Magazine* essay on photographing black skin offers an explanation of how I am using this term. Writing of the photographer Roy DeCarava's tendency to play with darkness in his portraits of black people, Cole remarks, "Instead of trying to brighten blackness, he went against expectation and darkened it further. What is dark is neither blank nor empty. It is in fact full of wise light which, with patient seeing, can open out into glories."[31] It is important not to misread Cole here—I almost did. I almost read him articulating some sort of teleological hermeneutics of seeing—a movement from darkness *into* light—when in fact he is describing the light that inhabits darkness. Obscurity is a way to think through, to describe, and to make meaning of the creative space in which revelation and concealment are simultaneous.

The dialectic between visibility and invisibility, being seen and being overlooked, has always been a theme in Patterson's work, and the way that the effect of light holds that dialectic in the work is long-standing. Krista Thompson, for instance, has written beautifully about Patterson and light. Thompson's book *Shine* unfolds the meaning of the video light in black diasporic cultures—how the technologies of visuality and shiny presence, as well as the gestures and performances in reaction to these apparatuses, reflect on the long history of photography in black worlds and refract these histories in new ways. Patterson's dancehall aesthetics in works like the *Fambily* series, by Thompson's lights, "negotiate the states of un-visibility, the status of being hypervisible yet unseen by the middle classes, and create spectacular dazzling presences among different communities of dancehall viewers."[32] Reframing and meta-aestheticizing such dancehall practices as skin bleaching and excessive male adornment, Thompson argues that Patterson stages an ongoing engagement with dominant, middle-class discourses around working-class bodies and practices in Jamaica, which are subject to desiring surveillance, identification, misrecognition, and disavowal:

> Dancehall culture is constantly subsumed, misrecognized in these discourses. I suggest that this is something Patterson's work foregrounds and enacts. Patterson's photography-based pieces—using models in costumes inspired by dancehall costumes inspired by dancehall fashions or visages from criminal databases—highlight how dancehall participants are often precisely not seen in the public sphere, are disappeared in the discourses of aberrant sexuality (and slackness), homophobia, materialism, violence, and criminality that surrounds them. Patterson's work underscores this point by representing dancehall subjects through their absence, through an explicitly posed proxy. . . . Patterson's costumed and staged models (who are indeed not dancehall participants) and her use of public domain photographs of criminals enacts a sense of remove, a substitution that underscores how the culture and community of dancehall participants remain allusive subjects in the media and in the public sphere in Jamaica.[33]

Allusive's assonance with *elusive* is telling. Dancehall subjects are both utilizable and forever disappearing in dominant constructs of citizenship in Jamaica. And so, Patterson's work seems to be asking, what might it mean to linger with the dark underside their visibility? What happens when we focus that attention on the particular subjectivity of the child?

It is powerful and profound what she wants to have happen with this piece, which is to help us remember that black children can, in fact, be children, against a strong cultural objection that their bodies and their subjectivities must always be read as both grown and as monstrous. The work has another effect: in shining black childhood generally, there are multiple references to the obscure formation of childhood sexuality: a toy machine gun wrapped in bright floral fabric; a girl, not centered in the composition but arresting in her leopard print and bright pink lipstick, whose playful feminine masquerade is punctuated by openings that make her a target (see fig. 4); a different girl, pulling focus because of her direct stare, both frightened and pleading, and her profoundly melancholy and knowing aspect (see fig. 5).
This last girl is surrounded by smiling children, and she is like the one lost soul in paradise. It strikes me as important that *obscurity* and *opacity*, the latter a key term in recent black studies, are not exactly synonymous. *Obscure* has

its roots in *darkness*, as does *opaque*, yes. But *opacity*'s relationship to light is troublesome for what Patterson is trying to do here, with her insistence on shine, and for what Teju Cole drew our attention to: the copresence of light and darkness in the photographic image of black skin. *Opacity* is defined by an inability to transmit or reflect light. *Obscurity*, meanwhile, might conceal itself in darkness—but so too might light conceal itself in darkness. To be obscure is also to be *undistinguished*, *imperceptible*, *difficult to understand or fathom*—it is like a reference requiring more great research to track down. (Also not unrelated etymologically: *of lowly birth*.) A striking feature of black girlhood, it seems to me, and what I think Patterson has captured in *...when they grow up...*, is the way certain black girls are seen but very little known. I am also suggesting that there is something to be said more generally about a certain kind of telling of black feminine sexuality, that we can learn from the obscure. To tell it straight right now in culture, I suspect, is to be blinded by shine. To stop looking, to overlook, is disaster. But perhaps, something in between.

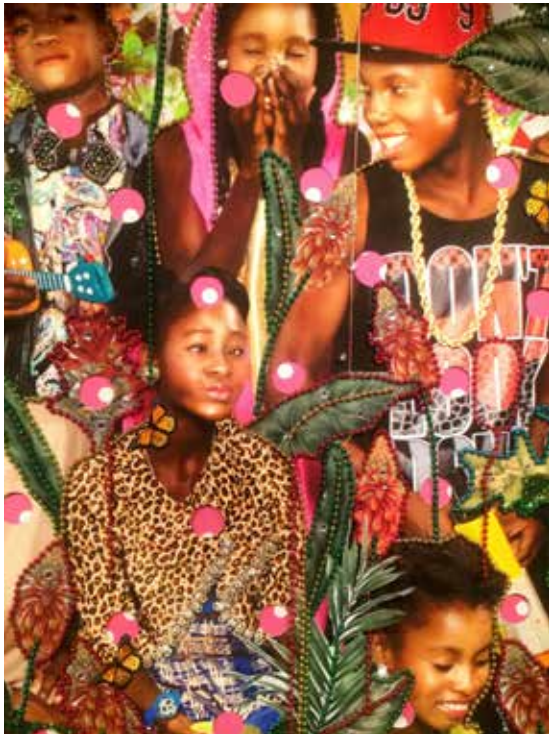

Figure 4. Ebony G. Patterson, *…they were just hanging out…you know… talking about…* (detail), from the *…when they grow up…* series, 2016. Photographed by Nadia Ellis, Studio Museum in Harlem, March 2016.

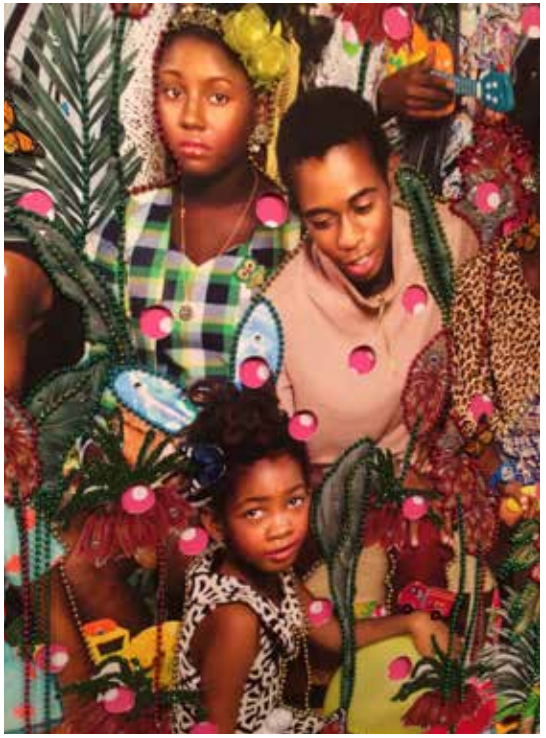

Figure 5. Ebony G. Patterson, *…they were just hanging out…you know… talking about…* (detail), from the *…when they grow up…* series, 2016. Photographed by Nadia Ellis, Studio Museum in Harlem, March 2016.

Endnotes

1 Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences* 6, nos. 2–3 (1994): 126–45.

2 Historical propriety; being barred, de facto, from the realm of the symbolic; the hypervisible/invisible dynamic of racialization; the necessity to create, as a result, spaces of social privacy and psychic autonomy, and so on.

3 In fact, it was Michelle Wallace who had originally offered the thought of black holes, in her essay "Variations on Negation." Hammonds, struck by it, lingered. See Michelle Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity," *Heresies* 6, no. 24 (1989): 69–75, reprinted in Michelle Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 1990); and Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes," 138.

4 Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes," 138

5 Ibid., 138–39.

6 And the reframing of queerness not just as non-normativity but increasingly as almost anything suggests that this desire for darkness, to *be* darkness, extends far and wide. See, for instance, Sharon Marcus's review essay "Queer Theory for Everyone": "Despite its political advantages, *queer* has been the victim of its own popularity, proliferating to the point of uselessness as a neologism for the transgression of any norm. . . . If everyone is queer, then no one is—and while that is exactly the point queer theorists want to make, reducing the term's pejorative sting by universalizing the meaning of *queer* also depletes its explanatory power." Sharon Marcus, "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay," *Signs* 31, no. 1 (2005): 196.

7 Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes," 134.

8 Vanessa Agard-Jones, "Bodies in the System," *Small Axe*, no. 42 (November 2013): 183.

9 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 14.

10 www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow.

11 Silverman argues that Jacques Lacan's account of the look suggests the possibility of what she calls "productive" looking—an activity that is different from the alienating gaze: "The eye which conjures something new into existence operates according to a different set of imperatives. . . . Instead of assimilating what is desirable about the other to the self, and exteriorizing what is despised in the self as the other, the subject whose look I am here describing struggles to see the otherness of the desired self, and the familiarity of the despised other." Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 170.

12 Two of Patterson's works are titled with numbers: *Of 72 Project* (2012) and *9 of 219* (2011), both of which, as I've written previously, do the work of elegy by listing with specificity those lost to violent death, over and against a logic of vast and faceless wastage. Later in this essay I will discuss both these pieces in the context of Patterson's new work. See Nadia Ellis, "Elegies of Diaspora," *Small Axe*, no. 43 (March 2014): 164–72, and the epilogue to her *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 177–92.

13 "Through the commodification of labor, the superfluity of black life could be manifested. But the same process also transformed the native into something more than they object he or she was, a thing that always seemed slightly human and a human being that seemed slightly thinglike." Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," in Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, eds., *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 44.

14 Ibid., 43.

15 Ibid., 41; Mbembe cites French historian Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, vol. 1, *The Structures of Everyday Life* (London: Collins, 1981).

16 Ibid.; Mbembe cites Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1966).

17 See www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow, para. 1.

18 www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow; Julia Felsenthal, "Ebony G. Patterson Confronts Race and Childhood at the Studio Museum in Harlem," *Vogue*, 5 April 2016, www.vogue.com/13423538/ebony-g-patterson-studio-museum-harlem; Lucy McKeon, "What Does Innocence Look Like?," *New Yorker*, 11 April 2016, www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/what-does-innocence-look-like.

19 See Stephen Best's hilarious and revelatory essay in the *Public Books* roundtable on *Empire*: "Black Camp," *Public Books*, 23 September 2015, www.publicbooks.org/artmedia/virtual-roundtable-on-empire.

20 Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13.

21 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 166.

22 See Kara Keeling, "Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future," *GLQ* 15, no. 4 (2009): 575–76. "That *The Aggressives* is offered 'in memory of Sakia Gunn' reminds us that its subjects live, strive, labor, and love within the terms of a world whose regulatory regimes are guaranteed through a generalized, dispersed violence and reinforced via the persistent threat of

physical violence directed at those such regulatory regimes do not work to valorize" (579). I thank Daphne Brooks, who, in a different context, drew my attention to this essay.

23 Ibid., 579.

24 Tavia Nyong'o, "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *GLQ* 21, nos. 2–3 (2015): 249–72. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, dir. Benh Zeitlin, Fox Searchlight, 2012.

25 One implication of which is the vacating of any narrative or symbolic space for Native sovereignty.

26 Patricia Joan Saunders, "Gardening in the Garrisons, You Never Know What You Will Find: (Un) Visibility in the Works of Ebony G. Patterson," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 98–137.

27 Ibid., 104.

28 See "Case 5: Henry Glover," *ProPublica*, www.propublica.org/nola/case/topic/case-five.

29 "If you're looking for sexual tidbits as a female child, and the only ones that present themselves depict child rape or other violations[,] . . . then your sexuality will form around that fact. There is no control group. I don't even want to talk about 'female sexuality' until there is a control group. And there never will be." Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2015), 66.

30 Amber Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 151–84.

31 Teju Cole, "A True Picture of Black Skin," *New York Times Magazine*, 18 February 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/magazine/a-true-picture-of-black-skin.html?_r=0.

32 Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Life in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 117.

33 Ibid., 163–64.