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Editor's Introduction

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The Logic of Black Hole Poetics: Transnational and Transhistorical Perspectives on Blackness

"My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light,"[1] Ralph Ellison quips in the Prologue of his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. A novel seemingly about *not* being seen, of being invisible or transparent to those who look through or *at* him, shrouding him within what W. E. B. Du Bois had termed "the color-line,"[2] Ralph Ellison's novel is not really about *sight* at all; rather, it is about *second sight*. This is rendered in two ways. On the one hand, it is rendered in terms of a seeming paradox: Black people are *made* invisible because they are constituted as *hyper*visible. As Ellison himself notes, "Despite assertions by sociologists, 'high visibility' rendered one *un*-visible—whether at high noon in Macy's window or illuminated by flaming torches and flashbulbs while undergoing the ritual sacrifice that was dedicated to the ideal of white supremacy."[3] What Ellison refers to as "*un*-visibility" is the product of the white and modern imagination, which by sleight of hand illusion or by the mechanism of social, political, or economic sectors renders Black life what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson referred to as "fungible."[4] That is, Black life is seen to possess the capacity to *be* simultaneously anything and everything—a

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[1] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1952), 6.
[2] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Cosimo Books, 2007), 9.
[3] Ellison, *Invisible Man*.
[4] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

range of infinite possibilities given the specificities of circumstance and of need: at once benign and trustworthy (as with Uncle Tom) *and* dangerous and foreboding (as with Mike Tyson); both hardworking, industrious *and* lazy; both licentious *and* beyond the range of desire—making Black life *no* particular thing at all, possessing no particular identity or culture.

In the same vein, R. A. Judy has gone so far as to argue, "*Negro* does not designate any *thing*, it has no proper object; rather it indexes *positioning in the order of things*. This is why its usage is always attended by the question, Where am I in relation to that position? Recall the 'pertinent' question asked about the Negro in Barthes's semiological analysis of myth: What does *Negro* mean as a sign in our mythology for us *who are not Negro*?"[5]

In Ellison's novel, this *no* thing, or what Judy refers to as *any* thing, is what renders blackness "un-visible." Its fungibility renders it both transparent and opaque. This, though, does not mean that Black people *are* nothing, or rendered a *nothingness*, as the first reading might suggest. Rather, a second rendering of "un-visibility" suggests quite the opposite: *no* thing or *any* thing suggests Black people are, in fact, *every* thing. In this rendering, which I would argue both Ellison and Judy ascribe, the blackness that is assigned to and occupies Black people is a unique purview within human consciousness—a *black hole of sorts*. What makes blackness such a unique purview akin to a black hole is the idea that a black hole traps light within its gravitational pull and its gravitational force, rendering life itself impossible. Similarly, it is believed that blackness as the utter collapse of meaning and value and structure into a singularly complex thing, into a specifically unspecific *position*, renders Black people dis-individuated—in other words, socially dead.

However, if we were to understand black holes in a different way and understand that black holes do not actually *trap* light but rather alter our *perception* of light—there is, in fact, light on the other side of a black hole![6]—we would need to rethink the meaning and value of totalization, one that does negate individuality or individuation taken to be akin to said death. Rather, we would realize that the *every* thing all at once, *no* thing or *any* thing inherent to the nature of black holes and of blackness and Black *life*, affords us the opportunity to alter our perception of life itself, of social and material reality itself, to understand that a shift in

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[5] R. A. Judy, *Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poesis in Black* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 256.

[6] Andrew Griffin, "Scientists See Light from the Other Side of a Black Hole for the First Ever Time," *Independent*, July 28, 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/black-hole-light-far-side-other-b1892301.html.

perception, a changing in the ontological order is not death, but is life itself. As Ellison tells us in his novel, "But that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang."[7] Thus, I would argue what Judy meant when he noted, "*Negro* does not designate any *thing*, it has no proper object," is akin to what Fred Moten calls "*panthology*," that is, the "necessity of an improvisation [a movement; a dehiscence; a quickening] of ontology for the study of social life."[8] In other words, the gravity of black holes or the totalization of blackness itself in fungibility is not destructive; it is a "gateways to other parts of space, or maybe even to new universes entirely."[9]*No*-thingness does not collapse a thing; it, in fact, sets things free.

As with all theoretical ideas, especially heuristics, there needs to be some explanation. Blackness as a kind of black hole attuned to and by Black *people* is itself a bit obscure on the face of it. However, if one takes the fundamental praxis behind the idea of the necessity of alternate frameworks through which we can render social life as other than real, it begins to make more sense. Much that is written of and about Black life is rendered through the lens of white life and white normative frameworks. Within this rendering, Black life is rendered as nonexistent—but even stronger, *impossible*. This is suggested in a myriad of ways, but at bottom, it can be surmised as white life and normative ascriptions are ontologically and metaphysically beset within the negation of the possibility of Black life itself. Although analyzing this aspect of the phenomena that is "race," it, nevertheless, does not really attend to *Black life*. For this, we would need another lens, another framework, one that cannot be rendered through the alteration or rearrangement of white life and white normative ascriptions. For this, we would need another mode of engagement.

It is here, at this juncture of thinking, that we realize a second, perhaps hidden, meaning in Ellison's novel. Rather than merely being a novel about "*un*-visibility," it is also a novel about making oneself invisible to that "eye" that cannot see. With this rendering, we can begin to hear Moten's dehiscence in Ellison's description of his hole, the *panthology* inherent in its construction. "Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a 'hole' it is damp and cold like a grave," we can hear Ellison say. "There are warm holes and there are cold holes.

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[7] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6.

[8] Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), ix.

[9] "The Other Side of a Black Hole," YouTube Video, 29:30, uploaded by Sea Squad, October 26, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVPsNDonA84.

Mine is a warm hole."[10] But holes, given their nature of being built underground, do signify that, even if they are warm, they are still dark. However, Ellison also tells us *his* hole is also light, in fact, *full* of light. The absence of darkness in a place where we expect to find darkness, the presence of warmth where we expect to find coldness, the presence of life where we expect to find death—these are the elements of the dehiscence in blackness itself. It fractures our understanding, disarticulates, cuts at its edges and at the heart with surgical precision the ontology of time and space, history, meaning, and value—the very ontology of modernity itself. But this is the point. A *black hole*, in drawing together disparate elements by its gravitational force, reveals what it can *produce*: the collapsing of expectations, of time and history, concept, and metaphor until it creates a new kind of logic—what we might call a black hole logic.

The introduction of black hole logic, then, necessitates that which can contain such dehiscence and hold it without fracturing or collapsing its content. This is what this issue of *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology* attempts to do. This issue, organized around a singularly and specifically unspecific position of singularity, at once challenges our understanding and interpretation of blackness through challenging our understanding of history, of time and space, of nation and global geography, of our social imagination and our political rendering of said space and time. Each of the four essays comprising its content, in their own individual ways, reflects this challenge. Each one alerts us to the ways in which "one might well add that these configurations and transformations are exclusively in the mode of human institutions, which delineate ranges of possible activity," and the ways in which blackness and rethinking the *gravity* and *density* of blackness as dehiscence directs "our desires by capturing or managing our imagination, spawning certain types of subjects and certain practices-of-living."[11] Namely, this issue, in reconceptualizing the possibilities inherent in blackness, reconceptualizes the very idea of space itself, of time, and its organization, resulting in differential ways of thinking history and its materialization in social, political, and economic landscapes.

In his essay, "The Legacy and Representation of Blacks in Spain," Nicholas Jones challenges contemporary historiography and literary studies by rethinking and reimagining the presence of Black people in the Iberian Peninsula, specifically Spain. Rather than conceptualizing Spain as "hybrid, a culture that was produced over the course of centuries by the

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[10] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6.
[11] Judy, *Sentient Flesh*, 28.

intermixing of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish populations and traditions," Jones's essay argues that in Spain, "Blackness is unbounded by the confines of temporality," and what is more, "anti-Black racism and ideologies have systematically worked to mute and suppress the visibility of African-descended people across the globe." Part of a larger book, *Staging Habla de Negros: Radical Performances of the African Diaspora in Early Modern Spain* (2019), Jones's essay argues that although "necrocapitalism, or the business of death" facilitates said "disappearance," "Iberian Blackness as a cultural, linguistic, literary, and lived mode of existence" nonetheless has resisted such erasure.

At bottom, Jones's essay is about the critical praxis of the *imagination*: How is blackness imaged? How do Black people imagine themselves? How would thinking through Black self-fashioning change the historical and sociological imagination of blackness in the contemporary world and, thus, how we imagine blackness to have existed in the past?

Manuela Boatcă's essay, "Counter-Mapping as Method: Locating and Relating the (Semi)Peripheral Self," is concerned with narrativity, reflexivity, and sociological method as decolonial practice—what is remembered, how it is recorded, what is "forgotten" in the production of knowledge, and how remapping the world (conceptually and literally) reshapes what is remembered and how it is remembered. Utilizing Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos's term *sociology of absences*—namely, the argument that "aims to explain that what does not exist is in fact actively produced as nonexistent"—Boatcă's essay argues that, in addition to a sociology of absences, what is needed is a sociology of emergences in which such "alternatives [as presented in the sociology of absences]" contain "the horizon of concrete possibilities." Boatcă argues that "both the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences become necessary in order to incorporate past and present experiences of the colonized world into general social theory and build collective global futures."

Similar to Nicholas Jones's essay, Boatcă's essay is about the imagination as critical praxis—that is, how we *think* about and *see* the world influences the ways in which the world as such emerges in concrete fashion. Utilizing "counter-mapping as a means to address the silences and absences produced through maps grounded in the Western political tradition of a territorial norm and a settled subject," Boatcă's essay argues that how we conceive of space shapes the way we conceive of place and time, ultimately influencing the ways in which we think about concepts

such as nationhood, nationality, citizenship, and migration: central issues around who does and who does not belong as legal and illegal persons, respectively.

As Jones's essay seeks to discover how Black people have been left out or erased from the Iberian social imagination, Boatcă's essay seeks to understand how mapmaking or cartography reflects the ways in which Black and Brown people are erased from the "territory" itself through practices of map or world making. Taken together as conceptual companion pieces, Jones's and Boatcă's essays create a kind of critical convergence of Moten's dehiscence—a breaking into that not only reveals the already existing fracturing taking place within consciousness, and in the material world, but also *produces* such fracturing as counter-knowledge production.

Falguni Sheth's essay, "Liberalism's Scrim: A Genealogy of 'American' Violence," offers an interesting meta-reflection on the Jones and Boatcă essays. As a critical evaluation of state-sanctioned violence on human persons through an investigation of what Jones termed *necropolitics* specifically targeting *Black* people, Sheth's essay offers a kind of prolegomena for the pitfalls of liberalism through black theory.

Sheth's essay is an example of Black studies, and what Black studies can offer in the realm of critique that traditional (white) theory occludes, either intentionally or unintentionally (as the previously mentioned essays have shown). For Sheth, Black studies can point out in stark clarity some of the internal problematics to liberalism itself: that is, at once valuing white life and mourning its loss, while on the other hand, or even on the *same* hand, disavowing white life and white value in the face of, perhaps, even *whiter values*, as the various school shooting have shown. Sheth's essay points out that this conflict is internal to liberalism itself. It is not just that Black life does not matter, but at a certain level *all life* becomes abstract and abstracted, and it is *Black life* that throws this reality into relief. That is, it is Black life itself and its place within the order of things that makes it clear how *all* life is enacted at the level of the state apparatus. Sheth suggests that the Parkland shooting revealed "liberal discourses of neutrality and justice are systematically linked to selective violence against certain marginal populations by dominant populations," a violence that can and is transferrable to all human populations in state-sanctioned violence.

It is in this way that Sheth's essay is a grand example of the power of Black theory, but it also works as a metatheory and a meditation on the lessons of Jones's and Boatcă's essays—the

dehiscence present within historical erasures and in the cartographical erasures, reflecting a larger theoretical apparatus in which blackness is at once fungible, yet this fungibility is not its death cycle, but its capacity to resist, rethink, and rename the world.

Lastly, Michael Sawyer's essay, "Toni Morrison's Trans-Subjective and Trans-Generational Phenomenology of Temporality," offers a great closing to this small collection. An essay fully immersed in the work of Toni Morrison, Sawyer at once lands us within the realm of Morrison's "fully evolved philosophical system," and also eloquently allows us to remain within our contemporary and historical worlds and imaginations to consider the ways in which "Black Life under the coercive threat of white supremacy, while, at the same time, illuminating the manner in which that seemingly totalizing way of being is to be breached." We began this introduction thinking about Ellison and about Du Bois, roaming through Fred Moten's *panthology* and the fungibility articulated by Zakiyyah Jackson, ending with Judy's insistence that "*Negro* does not designate any *thing*, it has no proper object; rather it indexes *positioning in the order of things*." Sawyer's essay allows us, through Morrison, to tarry with the "existence of this 'third, if you will pardon the expression, world,' in excess of the Black/white world binary that serves as the dialectical imperative," as a "point of departure as well as the goal" to begin to *think* but also to remember what has *already* been thought: to move through the historiography as Jones does; to move through both the sociology of absences and emergences as Boatcă does; to sit with the implications of Black theory as Sheth does. Sawyer leaves us with a generative and parting gift:

> to explore … a comprehensive series of topics that broadly seem to fall into the following categories:
> - Temporality/Genealogy
> - Sex(uality)
> - Gender
> - Freedom
> - Human/Animal Binary
> - Spatiality/Place-iality
> - Language

In the moment we are in, everyone, from corporate entities to individual lay persons, is motivated by the idea of the significance of Black life, centered around the phrase "Black Lives Matter." With all the literary and academic works being produced at this time, capturing the zeitgeist of the moment, this journal issue included, we are invited, the writers and thinkers in this journal before you, to think about what it means to *matter* in a philosophical, literary, sociological, cartographical, nationalistic, and *human* sense of the term. What would it mean for Black life to matter? What would have to change about our world (its memory, its organizational structure, its undercurrent assumptions) for this to not be just another moment of consumption in which Black people are turned into a commodity to be consumed like meat or *just* flesh? What would we have to consider about blackness and about how we've conceptualized *life* itself to, as Sawyer has suggested, "destabilize … the normalization of the abjection of some subject vis-à-vis the other arguing that the terms of the inversion are the extension of dialectical abjection into his third (inverted) world"? It would be more than banners and slogans and the saying of names. It would be in the building of worlds. I hope that, as Duquesne University Press publishes this, the university also investigates its own hiring practices, the ways it recruits and engages Black persons outside of the playing courts and fields, the ways it engages the extant Black communities surrounding it, especially those that are displaced within the jails it overlooks next to the beautiful and winding Monongahela River. I would hope, as has been told to me by the university itself, that it would not take this as another moment of capitalization, but would take this as a moment of critical reflection in which *to think* means *to act*.