MOONLIGHT'S NECESSARY COMPANY

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Moonlight (2016) is a very good film. The storyline, the color, the acting, the direction all combine to make *Moonlight* a film definitely worth seeing. Additionally, the sentiment that the cast and crew have been able to evoke in viewers makes *Moonlight* a very significant film. Nonetheless, the singularity that has been conveyed by the reception of *Moonlight* raises a number of questions for me as a viewer of queer films. Reviewers wrote of the film as uncommonly graceful, centering touch, and an urgent social document all deemed deeply special and even a first for Black film and Black queer film in particular (Scott 2016; Sims 2016; Crawley 2017). First, the film's overwhelming reception that seems to suggest a singular Black gay experience, one that is really only a partial African American gay experience, should give pause. And second, the evocation of a specific Afro-Cuban Miami experience as a "universal" African American and thus Black (queer) male experience should raise further questions about *Moonlight*'s reception and its singularity in the canon of Black queer filmmaking.

Thus I want to begin with a certain kind of dissembling about *Moonlight* because I think that its reception, its promotion, and the rhetoric around its singularity provoke important questions for Black queer criticism and Black queer theoretical and conceptual debates, especially those in film studies. I am interested and concerned about how the overwhelming reception of *Moonlight* has been positioned as offering us something new about Black men, and in particular Black queer men's intimacies and masculinities. I am concerned that *Moonlight*'s reception begins in an assumed pathology and culminates in a suggestion that the film works against such pathology. In short, the film's reception is steeped in stereotypes about Black men—especially queer Black men—and viewers celebrate the film because these stereotypes do not fully come to fruition.

What has puzzled me about *Moonlight*'s reception is that much of what has been suggested as being new appears otherwise to me. What I mean is that the arc

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of the story—coming of age, drug addiction, bullying, sexual exploration, poverty, and so on—are not unfamiliar to this particular "genre" of film, that of a coming-of-age story in Black cinema in which the central "troubles" revolve around where the main protagonist might land in the context of family tensions, usually represented by an antagonistic mother. *Moonlight* is based on the semi-autobiographical play written by Tarell Alvin McCraney, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* (2003). Barry Jenkins's adaptation of the "play" and his direction of the film is a masterful execution that has tapped into a lacunae of images, emotion, and Black aesthetic desires, by drawing on well-known images and stories of contemporary Black life. He then queers that life, giving viewers a luscious visual narrative of one aspect of contemporary Black life in the United States.

One of the more difficult things about engaging *Moonlight* critically is the manner in which reviewers have moved between assessing it as a film that is a fiction and assessing it as semi-autobiographical and thus sociological work that represents both McCraney and Liberty City, Miami, where the work is based and set. This slippage between the filmic and the loosely sociological poses a problem for the critic who both desires to read the filmic text as a text and to think about it as it circulates outside a certain kind of authentic verification. Indeed, when one reads the limits of the cinematic text, those limits have been countered by an appeal to the sociological, and similarly in the other direction as well. As someone outside the specific culture being represented, I watched the film like an ethnographer: that is, I can see myself in it, but I am also apart from it. It is that apart from that allows me to see *Moonlight*'s limitations as an ur-text for universal Black queer possibilities, as its reception tends to suggest. Such critical practices have made it difficult to cut through audiences' love for the film so that other kinds of questions might emerge that can place the film in a conversation and debate about representation and Black queer filmmaking. In what follows I seek to unpack some of the ways in which both the cinematic text of *Moonlight* and its reception have induced a certain kind of cinematic amnesia at the same time that its reception clouds a much more nuanced and complex representation of Black queer men and Black masculinities in general.

The first issue that we might tackle is the image that has marked the film from its debut, an image offered as one we had not seen before—the image of Juan (Mahershala Ali) holding Little/Chiron (Alex Hibbert) as he teaches him to swim. The image is interpreted as offering an image of Black male intimacy not often seen, especially on film. This image quickly has come to characterize *Moonlight*'s reception. The entire discourse concerning the practice of care in the film between Juan and Little/Chiron is a problem because of what it assumes about forms of

Black care among Black men and boys as well as among Black men more broadly. The reception of the film has meant that the sociological bears down on interpreting its narrative, and it seems clear that the stereotype of Black male noncaring is one frame through which the film has been read. This produces a troubling reading because empirical evidence now suggests that Black men do care for one another (Jones and Mosher 2013). What is striking for me is that such a scene is in fact rather familiar. If one grew up near a beach or an ocean, the scene is reminiscent of how young boys are taught to swim by older boys and men. The film needs the use of the sociological for its impact and for its wider sense making, but different sociologics emerge too from the encounter with the filmic text. Indeed, that was how I was taught to swim as a young boy in Barbados. I have seen that scene enacted too many times to think it extraordinary. In fact, the scene probably comes from the specificity of the story's Afro-Cuban history, from memory and from its sensibility. What is striking is how the scene stands in as one example in several reviews (see above) for a lack of Black men's intimate lifeworlds, which is to say, the reception of the film proceeds from limited if not stereotyped knowledge of Black men's worlds. That such an ordinary scene of Black male life would take on such extraordinary work tells us much about how Black men are imagined and understood in North America both by others and by themselves. That we imagine a lack of care, a lack of concern between Black men and boys, is both troubling and simultaneously untrue. In terms of Black audiences the question remains: What have we come to believe of ourselves? Sylvia Wynter (2001) has long written that Black men often become the stereotypes that others project onto them, proving the stereotype a kind of truth. It appears that the vast cinematic archive that comprises the "Black in the hood" film genre has led viewers to understand cinematic Black masculinity and its actual representation as hard and lacking in caring. The actual lives of Black men and Black queer men in particular do not conform to such stereotypes.

In many ways *Moonlight* has a strange relation to the hood film genre of the 1990s and early 2000s. It might be characterized as a continuation of the story of the Black family in the age of crack. That Juan is not grooming Little for the drug trade seems to surprise viewers, as the twist, as it were, in the plot. Juan's intentions are simply those of care, and viewers' reactions to those intentions as groundbreaking betrays the culture's deeper sense of how it understands Black men and masculinities. Indeed, one might argue that *Moonlight* trades on the traces of Black stereotype, never taking us fully there, to make its emotional appeal. This film's characters and their tropes are well known to viewers of contemporary Black film. A (lovely) drug dealer, a drug-addicted and conflicted mother, a potential homophobe

who might be queer, a bully, and so on. What *Moonlight* does differently with these characters is to resist full-on nihilism, and this makes the film noteworthy. But these very traces are its limit too. In particular, the roles women play in the film do not break any ground for cinematic representations of Black women. Chiron's mother tarries on the edge of the stereotypical domineering Black woman. The character of the addicted Black mother who terrorizes her child is one we have seen repeatedly, and in this case her assumed homo-hatred, as she most likely screamed faggot at him, haunts him well into adulthood. In fact, by the end of the film, despite a certain kind of mother-son relationship, full reconciliation appears impossible, as Chiron's distance continues to reveal unresolved familial tensions.

In part what makes *Moonlight* a film that occupies an important place in a queer cinematic canon, but does not break with it, is the central place that bullying plays in the film. In many a film where Black queer characters appear, bullying becomes central (here I think of the queer aspects of Clément Virgo's *Rude* [1995], Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* [1991] as examples). In fact, bullying might be one of the central tropes in all of contemporary queer cinema. But it might be that many queer people do not necessarily come into noticing their sexuality through bullying, even if it has come to dominate cinematic representations in terms of drawing out emotional commitment to queer characters. In this sense *Moonlight* may be rather normative. The bullying that Chiron experiences in the film places *Moonlight* in a certain kind of popular queer film normativity that mainstream audiences are now socialized to be comfortable with.

And speaking of mainstream comforts, at least one notable absence requires further speculation. The last part of the film is particularly unsatisfying for a certain kind of Black queer sensibility. As an adult Black gay man, I found the ending of *Moonlight* deeply dissatisfying. The lack of a credible sex scene, whose absence has been justified by many as another quality that makes the film special, is suspect to me. Indeed, both the kiss and the jerk-off scene in the second chapter of the film reference a certain kind of Black queer coming of age that many queer men will recall. But what troubles me about the end of the film is that it somehow seems to stall at the possibility of being able to represent Black queer men having sex beyond the stereotype. Indeed, actual Black queer men fuck every day beyond the stereotype; art that cannot produce or represent that moment fails in a certain way. As a Black queer critic, I have seen enough film and television to know what is possible and what has been approached before. From Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* to Rikki Beadle-Blair's *Metrosexuality* (2001) to *Noah's Arc* (2005–6) and other media representations, we have indeed viewed images of Black queers and Black queer love that were and are both complicated and beautifully shot. What must we

forget to affirm *Moonlight*'s singularity? In fact, one might read *Moonlight* as an assemblage of scenes from various films, curated in one film, minus the sex scene. I remain suspicious of the attempt to read *Moonlight* as exceeding all that has come before it, especially by self-identified Black gay directors.

Finally, there is something strange about celebrating a cinematography that loves Black flesh because we would expect that Black filmmakers' goals would be to do just that. Indeed, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1990) set a standard in this realm that has yet to be surpassed. If most Black filmmakers fail at such an attempt, it might say more about the relationship between technology and imagination than it does about those who succeed at it. By this I mean, what is Black cinematic art worth if it cannot imagine and film Black people as they actually are? If it cannot produce Black queer sex beyond the stereotypes of porn? To raise these questions about *Moonlight* is not an attempt to steal cinematic joy in the filmic text but to begin to figure the stakes of representing Black queer masculinities as more complex and multivalent than any one film might offer at this time.

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