



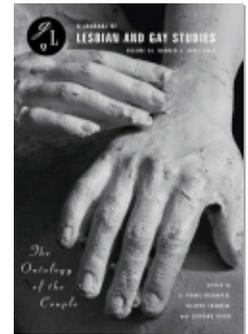
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AM I A FAGGOT?

L. H. Stallings

Negro Faggotry is the rage! Black Gay Men are not.

—Marlon Riggs

The representation of effeminate homosexuality as disempowering is at the heart of the politics of hegemonic blackness.

—E. Patrick Johnson

*H*eralded as an authentically Black gay film, Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*, the 2016 Academy Award Winner for Best Picture and Best Adaptation, the 2016 Golden Globe Winner, and winner of a host of other national and international awards, has vanquished the evil caricatures of buck hard niggas, Black sissies, and cooning faggots. Cue Luther Vandross's "Everybody Rejoice": It is truly a brand new day. Or is it? According to Black progressive viewers and media, Black gay men are the rage! Negro faggotry is out of fashion. Yet, according to Afrocentric folk, the film suggests that Negro faggotry is still the rage, Negro faggotry being the derogatory depictions and commodification of Black feminine men. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of Marlon Riggs's canonical essay centered on representations of Negro faggotry, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen," the contradictory responses to *Moonlight* suggest that the specter of Negro faggotry may no longer be seen as acceptable, but its absent-presence still haunts newly imagined constructions of Black masculinity.

In *Moonlight*, Jenkins's attempt to replace Negro faggotry with Black gay masculinity happens so as to make the film accessible to a wider audience (e.g., not gay, not Black). E. Patrick Johnson (2003: 50) once noted that Black culture's "anxiety around black masculinity is symptomatic of heterosexual melancholia," and the film's director anxiously strategizes around this melancholia throughout much of his film. What remains are updated versions of hegemonic blackness and masculine hegemony in various tones and color gradations that maintain gender binaries in which the feminine and femininity continue to be violently devalued. Many of the accolades have been so centered on the film's attempt to authentically represent Black gay masculinity, and many of these reviews affirm the hetero-

sexual director's vision to revise and continue representing the changing same or perennial crisis of Black masculinity: a vision that would be dismissed as outdated and old-fashioned were this not marketed as a Black gay film.

For example, in the online article "Faggot as Footnote" (Medium.com 2017), Max S. Gordon provides one of the most useful examinations of *Moonlight* and its vision of Black gay masculinity, stating that "the faggotry and all the other experiences that have defined some black gay lives, are completely missing. Not every black gay man is a 'queen,' of course, but the complete absence of the 'queen' in a Black gay life onscreen is suspect." Unlike Gordon's assessment, some Black media agencies, progressive and conservative alike, offer monolithic reviews touting the rebirth of daring subject matter in black "independent filmmaking."

In one online roundtable, the theater director Kimahli Powell (CBC Arts 2016) asks, "When have we seen two black men kiss? Barry Jenkins directs this film with compassion and made so many ground-breaking choices. Also important is [Mahershala] Ali's portrayal of Juan. We've seen the black drug dealer so many times [but] I can't recall a portrayal with so much sensitivity." In making this claim, Powell disavows two prominent but separate Black film traditions that did each of these things (Black queer cinema and hood films), to place *Moonlight* on this cinematic pedestal for a postrace (postnigger and postfaggot) generation. There have been Black men kissing on film in Black gay films and empathetic drug dealers in Black films.

For example, in the opening scene of Julian Breece's short film *The Young and Evil* (2008), a film about Karel, a sexually active teenaged boy who actively initiates unprotected sex in order to become infected with the HIV virus, the narrative follows Karel from his position as caretaker of an invalid mother into a hot-boy cruising the streets. The film refuses stigma and shame of being gay or HIV positive. The narrative arc, the cinematography, and the direction of the film are provocative, groundbreaking, and beautiful. However, Breece's film is not morally accessible to mainstream audiences seeking chaste depictions of Black gay masculinity that they can embrace rather than fear, like Jessie Helms viewing a trailer for a Riggs film.

Given the compassion and groundbreaking choices made in the films of Riggs, Isaac Julien, Rodney Evans, Stephen Winter, Patrik-Ian Polk, or Breece, Powell's assessment, like other reviews, erases an entire genealogy of Black gay filmmaking, as Rinaldo Walcott argues in his piece in this special issue. Such reviews show how the cultural history of Black queer film must be made more accessible: to be seen as historically foundational narratives situated in the art, language, and culture of profeminist Black gay men uninterested in reinforcing

a specific type of masculinity, or crisis thereof. *Moonlight*'s mainstream success and appeal should not erase the more radical tradition that predates the film: nor should Jenkins's heterosexual melancholy and its new aesthetics—Black gay hypermasculinity—become classified as innovation.

Fade to Black Realism: Noir by Noirs

Epigraphs by Riggs and Johnson allude to critiques about representation of gay masculinity in the late 1980s to mid-1990s in which Negro faggotry (and homophobia) was in vogue. What was also in vogue were bad niggas of Blaxploitation and New Black realism. According to Katherine Bausch (2013: 258), "Aesthetically contemporary urban settings, young black male protagonists, and an emphasis on nihilistic violence characterize New Black Realism." Directors included in this tradition are John Singleton, the Hughes Brothers, or Mario Van Peebles. Like films by these directors, Jenkins's *Moonlight* is the bildungsroman story of Chiron (Little, a.k.a. Black), a dark-skinned Black boy who may or may not be gay, growing up in Miami during the 1980s. Told in three different acts, the story includes characters such as Juan, a Cuban drug dealer and mentor; Paula, Chiron's crack-addict mother; Teresa, another mother figure; and Kevin—a friend and love interest. It possesses all the cinematic tropes of hood films: spectacularization of Black male body and culture, sexual experience linked with maturity/manhood, selling and use of drugs, one-dimensional portrayals of Black women, use of rap music as affective masculinity, and absent Black fathers.

Moonlight's presentation of "gay" masculinity stands either as more authentic than Negro faggotry as presented in the original era or as still linked to the discourses of Black hypermasculinity that produced Negro faggotry in the first place. Jenkins does evolve Black realist films given that, as Bausch explains in a footnote: "New Black Realist films troublingly focus primarily on heterosexual sex. In so doing, they position heterosexuality as the norm in the African-American community and therefore position homosexuality as either invisible or deviant. In fact, the dialogue of most of these films serves to reinforce the homosexual-as-deviant by using 'fag,' 'pussy,' and 'queer' as derogatory insults" (ibid.: 274). Akin to its heterosexual genealogy, *Moonlight* succeeds in recouping Black manhood, but for queer, homosexual, or bi butch men. With the theme of bullying, as opposed to gang violence, the film critiques homophobia without actually addressing femme phobia and how to best represent Black femininity and men in an empathetic and nondeviant way. Masculine Black men can be vulnerable, desire love and intimacy, and nurture each other only in the absence of this other.

JUAN—I Will Be Your Father Figure

Part 1, “Little,” which documents Chiron’s early family life, places the film in the nationalist frame of Black realist film noir. Riggs (1991: 390) once said, in critiquing the media, television, and film industry of the late 1980s and its depoliticizing of the snap, that he was “struck repeatedly by the determined, unreasoning, often irrational desire to discredit [his] claim to Blackness and hence to Black Manhood,” because he was gay. This is the root of Chiron’s journey in *Moonlight*, to claim what has been denied him. As La Marr J. Bruce points out, Little loiters in the beautiful precariousness of Liberty City, and the places that he lingers strategically serve as a backdrop for viewers to understand who will need to authorize a Black gay boy as worthy of Black manhood—Black heterosexual men. Enter Juan, the Cuban heterosexual drug dealer played by the powerful actor Mahershala Ali.

At the beginning of the movie, Juan’s gender and race performance appear to be the one-dimensional masculinity that Riggs (1991: 394) critiques, saying “By the tenets of Black Macho, true masculinity admits little or no space for self-interrogation or multiple subjectivities around race. Black Macho prescribes an inflexible ideal: Strong Black men . . . don’t flinch, don’t weaken, don’t take blame or shit, take charge, step to when challenged, and defend themselves without pause for self-doubt.” There are many ways in which Jenkins’s vision places Juan in this model, and there are times when Juan is situated squarely outside it.

The film’s opening sequence consists of a Black screen and Boris Gardiner’s “Every Nigger Is a Star” playing before fading in on a wave-cap wearing Juan driving a blue Chevrolet (Cadillac). One of his drug runners argues with a customer before they discuss business, with Juan also asking about his runner’s mother. Then, Little/Chiron literally crosses Juan’s path while fleeing a group of boys bullying him. He hides in a dilapidated apartment where Juan finds him and takes him to dinner. Black heteromascularity visually nourishes feminine or soft Black boys hungering for hypermasculine or hard father figures.

In silence, in jest, or in response to each other, the exchanges between Juan and Little are beautiful, but such exchanges are interrupted by pathological narratives such as when Teresa, Juan’s girlfriend, asks Little, “You live with your mama, what about your daddy,” as if that would resolve the query as to why he was hiding when Juan found him. Nevertheless, the character of Juan represents something that McCraney noted as important in one interview: “The pressure of toxic masculinity forces men to forget things that are innate. You hear from men, ‘I want love, I want tenderness’ and yet we’re taught to act in the opposite way. . . . And that’s rooted in misogyny, in a class system—‘femininity is weaker’” (GO

London.com 2017). In McCraney's other plays, his depictions of gender and sexuality are also more complex than what Jenkin provides. To address toxic masculinity, Jenkins juxtaposes Little's scenes of comfort and peace with Juan against those of Kevin and his peers as filled with boisterous, domineering, verbal abuse and violence. In one scene, Little, Kevin, and several other young boys are running and playing with a makeshift ball. Little, rather than continue the game that evolves into tackling, walks away. Kevin runs after him:

Kevin: Show these niggas that you ain't soft.

Little: But I ain't soft.

Kevin: But it don't mean nothing (Kevin pushes Little), if they don't know.

Soon after this exchange the camera blurs in and out on their movements: legs, arms, and faces come in and out of focus until fighting ends and the camera sharpens on their faces as the two boys lay breathless on the ground. Their connection is established by Little looking up at Kevin before he leaves and says, "See I knew you wasn't soft." Kevin then reaches his hand down to pull up Little. They run off laughing together. Niggas are hard. Faggots are soft.

Immediately following this scene, Little shows up at Juan's house, and they go to the beach. They talk and are intimate without violence. This intimacy sets the stage for the next scene in which what was unspoken is spoken:

Little: What's a faggot?

Juan: A faggot is . . . a word used to make gay people feel bad. [pause]

Little: Am I a faggot?

Juan: No. (Shakes head). No. You could be gay, but you don't have to let nobody call you a faggot. I mean unless . . .

The identity question, addressed but not answered, is one the filmmaker should have answered before embarking on adapting the dramatic material. For in not answering it, heterosexual melancholia remains even when Black hegemonic masculinity seems displaced or done away with in the film.

As the straight male father figure, Juan provides the authorization that Little will need to access Black manhood and that Riggs suggests Black gay men are denied access to in real and representational form. Unfortunately, the director's

decision to then have Little judge and walk away from Juan because he sells drugs reconfirms heterosexual melancholia. We know that Little's age and maturity are not the reason for this, as Juan and Paula bring these questions of moral judgment full circle when Juan confronts her about smoking crack, and she reminds him that he sells drugs. At every turn in part 1, the narrative of broken Black families and values dictate this purportedly gay Black film and its innovative vision of Black masculinity. *Moonlight* is a throwback to late 1980s and 1990s hood films that took up the perennial crisis of Black masculinity, as well as a benefactor of the strides made by Black gay filmmakers during the era of new queer cinema. Somehow it still can't quite deal with the specter of the Black faggot and the queerness of street life. Perhaps that is because Jenkins does not know and cannot figure out how to depict sexuality without violence or embrace and integrate Black femininity without pathologizing it within the genre he is working from, neo-Black realism.

It has been easy for some to argue against *Moonlight* as a realist film, since both the visual and the sonic elements suggest something more imaginative. As Bruce offers a great reading of music in the film, I would like to focus briefly on the visual elements. Chris O. Falt (2016) praises the cinematography and its use of color and contrast to style the narrative: "Right from the start, Jenkins and cinematographer James Laxton discussed wanting to move away from a documentary, or realist look, that has come to be expected of American indies tackling social issues like 'Moonlight'" (Indiewire.com). With assessments such as this, it would be difficult to sustain an argument of *Moonlight* as still continuing the tradition of New Black Realism, except when one watches some of the films from that era and recognizes that similar or same modes of color and contrast have been deployed (see any Hype Williams music video: *Belly*, *New Jack City*, *Deep Cover*, *Dead Presidents*, or *Glass Shield*). The question is what "American indies" are being referred to in making such a claim: not Black independent films. Most notably, Manthia Diawara (1993: 526–27) explains that "In a paradoxical sense, the redeployment of noir style by black film-makers redeems blackness from its genre definition by recasting the relation between light and dark on the screen as a metaphor for making black people and their cultures visible. In a broader sense, black film noir is a light (as in daylight) cast on black people."

So for Jenkins this method arises from Black indie tradition, and the play of light and dark not only creates dream-like sequences for Little, Chiron, and Black's questioning of sexual desire and identity. It also very deliberately manufactures hegemonic masculinity's repudiation of the feminine and queerness. Diawara (1993: 525) continues, "from a formalist perspective, a film is noir if it puts into

play light and dark in order to exhibit a people who become ‘Black’ because of their low moral behavior.” Light is not the only way in which morality and binaries of right and wrong occur in the film. As Gordon (2017) suggested, “While at times both brave and compelling, *Moonlight* is also a conservative film, and exists within its own macho aesthetic.”

The Pitiful Gay and Manifest Faggotry

In part 2, Little transitions into a sixteen-year-old Chiron, and Jenkins replaces Negro faggotry with the suffering and pain of pitiful Black gays. Chiron now bounces back between his birth mother (Paula) and other mother (Teresa). The musical score elongates and stretches out Chiron’s sadness before Kevin appears again, in contrast, older and fuller of braggadocio about pleasurable heterosexual exploits. In one scene, Kevin and Chiron share a blunt on the beach and discuss the difficulties of life in the hood:

Kevin: What you cry about?

Chiron: Shit. I cry so much sometimes I feel like I’m just gone just turn into drops.

Kevin: Just roll out into the water, right? Roll out into the water just like all these other muthafuckers around here trying to drown their sorrow.

Like a modern-day Tre and Doughboy from *Boyz n the Hood*, Kevin and Chiron experience intimacy and friendship that allow an openness they cannot have with others. However, here, emotional intimacy carries over to what is most feared in films centered on heterosexual masculinity, physical intimacy. They briefly kiss before mutual masturbation, and then Kevin takes Chiron home. Outside surrogate paternal dynamics, however, Chiron’s moments of physical intimacy are interrupted by violence. In school the next day, bullies pressure Kevin into beating Chiron. Kevin hits him not once but three times, saying after the second time “stay down.” The section ends with more violence and Chiron being arrested after bashing his bully’s head in with a chair.

In part 3, “Black,” viewers see an adult Chiron, who instead of being bullied has renamed himself Black, a drug dealer with his own corner boys. Black/Chiron lives a life of isolation and loneliness. Part 3 depicts the protagonist’s irresolution of domestic issues that have hindered his claims to Black manhood. “Ironically,” as E. Patrick Johnson (2003: 60) has noted, “faggotry is made manifest through heterosexual designs of living.” The film values too much heterosexual conceptions of family and refuses the inseparability between queer and

street life. The construction and deconstruction of Negro faggotry has always been conceptualized as lack of fathering and the failure of Black women as mothers, wives, and lovers. *Moonlight* is not about Black women or Black womanhood, but the irresolution of the feminine and women shapes the film. In Rebecca Keegan's (2016) online profile of the movie, Jenkins reveals as much in discussing why he felt compelled to adapt McCraney's material into a movie, explaining that it was the narrative of a son being raised by a mother who was an addict, not the struggle over sexual identity, that drew him in: "I knew that relationship like the back of my hand because that's where my life and Tarell's overlapped." Paula, Black/Chiron's single Black and crack-addicted mother, is a one-dimensional stereotype. Keegan (2016) reported that Naomie Harris, the actress playing the role, expressed some concern about taking on the role in a profile of the movie to Jenkins: "I've always said I will never play a crack addict. But the script deeply touched me. I was in conflict. Barry said, 'I don't want you to play a stereotype, but the reality is, this is my story. That's who my mother was, so what do I do?'" (2016).

Yes, the film is based on Jenkins and McCraney's life, but in a movie that worked so hard to nuance a Black male drug dealer, to avoid stereotyping Black "gay" men, as well as changed other details that are not true to the autobiography of director or writer, the decision to reproduce the notorious stereotype enables Jenkins to maintain the conservative narratives about Black mothers and Black men. Visually and metaphorically the Black crack mother, Paula, is Manifest faggotry and Negro faggotry.

In part 1, Paula is an absent (working) mother and functioning addict. In part 2, when she is no longer functional or domesticated, Chiron's bullies taunt him with verbal jibes that his mother will perform fellatio for a rock. In part 3, memories of Paula surfaces in Black/Chiron's reddish fuchsia-lit nightmare: she torments him with screams of "Don't look at me." In Jenkins's "reimagining" of Black masculinity, there is little to no work on reimagining Black femininity in black men. Such lack of reimagining of femininity is the basis of Negro faggotry. Black/Chiron, as hard as he appears to be, is still burdened by the weakness and femininity represented by Paula, who remains a part of him. The ending, in which she asks forgiveness and proclaims her love for him, does not resolve this weakness and fear of embracing her—femininity.

After visiting his mother, Black/Chiron drives from Atlanta to Miami to reconnect with Kevin. Over dinner, they engage in small talk before going back to Kevin's apartment, where Black/Chiron confesses, "You the only man that's ever touched me. You're the only one. I haven't really touched anyone since." The movie ends with Black/Chiron resting his head on Kevin's shoulder as Kevin softly

caresses his head. Neither of them looking at each other. Might such eye contact interrupt the prioritizing of a heteronormative audience gaze? Bruce generously notes this ending as a strategic moment of ambivalence meant to highlight an interstice, but this strategy is unnecessary, as Walcott points out in highlighting representations provided by Black gay directors alongside the everyday ordinariness of Black men having sex with each other. If Black male sexuality were ever represented in the mainstream, outside the pornographic, then maybe the image of two grown men holding each other would be as powerful as the filmmaker's depiction suggests it should be. For despite earlier comments, viewers never see two black men kiss in the film. Kissing was represented as adolescent sexual exploration, but in the greater narrative of Black masculinity (in the film), grown Black men do not kiss each other.

Without a "rehearsed" cultural history of Black gay representation and Black masculinity on screen, *Moonlight* becomes a false, illusory benchmark for others to aspire to, rather than exceed. If we ignore the cultural legacy of 1990s hood films and Black gay filmmakers in new queer cinema, then the lost possibilities from the failed merger of the two themes and topics coming together disallows viewers from recognizing the way that conservative gender and sexual politics get designated as "new." No, Jenkins does not exclude and disparage Black gay men from authentic blackness. Rather, he includes them, but this inclusion still hinges on a particular type of masculinity that does not understand the role black (male) femininity plays in destigmatization of all men. There are filmmakers who have been successful at broadening conceptualizations of Black masculinity and integrating homosexual desire and identities while also assessing the importance of black femininity to that broadening. Perhaps if there were no Black gay filmmaking tradition, it would be easier to accept Jenkins's film as breaking all the ground that everyone says it has. Clearly, given the number of awards it has won, it is a good film for people who fear a return to "Negro faggotry."

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