
In the Quare Light of the Moon: Poverty, Sexuality and Makeshift Masculinity in *Moonlight*

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Abstract

This essay performs a quare reading of the film Moonlight to demonstrate how the film illuminates an alternative path to sexual selfhood that is paradoxically facilitated not by access to material wealth or socioeconomic mobility, but rather through abject poverty. Through what the author refers to as a “makeshift masculinity,” the use of Yoruba cosmology, and an analysis of sexuality, the essay traces the various stages of the protagonist Little/Chiron/Black’s life and his relationship with his friend, Kevin, to highlight how a working-class epistemology might offer a different understanding of black same-sex desire.

In late summer of 2016, I was contacted by a representative at A24 Films, the distributor for the film *Moonlight*. A24 was setting up screenings of the film at various theaters around the country in advance of the official release in late fall. I ended up attending two screenings before the film’s official release—one in a large theater in downtown Chicago and one at a smaller, neighborhood theater, which included a talkback discussion with Tarell Alvin McCraney, upon whose short story, “In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue,” the film is based. At both screenings I sat spellbound by the images washing over me. Never before had I viewed a film that engaged black queer sexuality and gender in such a complex and non-stereotypical way. I was also struck by the director Barry Jenkins’s cinematographic choices, which included the use of silence, stillness, landscape, lightness and darkness, etc.—not to mention the incredible performances by the cast. During the talkback discussion with McCraney—lead by film historian Jacqueline Stewart and myself—I was also struck by the composition of the audience: a sea of

black and brown youth who sat speechless for a few minutes after the film credits, many weeping, while they absorbed what they had just witnessed.

Given the uniqueness of *Moonlight* in terms of its mostly unknown cast and its focus on the coming of age story about a young black queer boy from the South, I never imagined that the film would go on to garner the kind of critical acclaim it eventually did, being nominated for eight Academy Awards and taking home three, including the Best Adapted Screenplay (Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney), Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role (Mahershala Ali), and Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of the Year. *Moonlight* is not the typical Hollywood film. And yet, the story that the film tells us about poverty, drug addiction and dealing, motherhood, and, especially black gender and sexuality, resonates with audiences in ways that avoid the stereotypical depictions of such themes and the story also takes us on a journey into the world that can be imagined otherwise. Indeed, given the context of where the film takes place—in a predominately black



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1980s poverty-stricken and drug-ridden community in Miami—the story that unfolds in *Moonlight* provides a space to reconsider prescribed gender and sexual roles as they relate to race and class. As we learn through the relationship between Kevin and Chiron, intimacy might be the salve for the wound of poverty.

In the journal article, “‘Quare’ Studies or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother” (2001), I draw on my grandmother’s vernacular pronunciation and malapropism of “queer” as “quare” to index an alternative theorization of sexuality—one not solely predicated on sexual identity, sexual behavior, or visibility, but rather a theory of sexuality that accounts for its relationality to other embodied ways of knowing, particularly in terms of race and class. In this essay, therefore, I perform a quare reading of *Moonlight* to demonstrate how the film illuminates an alternative path to sexual selfhood that is paradoxically facilitated not by access to material wealth or socio-economic mobility, but, rather, through abject poverty. Through what I refer to as a “makeshift masculinity” I trace the various stages of the protagonist Little/Chiron/Black’s life and his relationship with his friend, Kevin, to highlight how a working-class epistemology might offer a different understanding of black same-sex desire.

Making Masculinity Out of Nothing

Kevin and Little exist within a world in which heteronormative society frames their existence from their early childhood through adulthood. Their responses to that entrapment vis-à-vis their gender expression and their sexuality is very different. Kevin’s response is to embrace—at least outwardly—a more traditional or hegemonic form of masculinity, one that manifests most dramatically when Kevin assaults Chiron on the school yard to prove his masculinity. Chiron’s response, ultimately, is also to embrace a traditional masculinity, but in both instances, the performance is a mask for a much deeper and more complex masculinity—what I would call a *makeshift masculinity*, which I define as a masculinity created from the scraps of one’s life and grounded in a working-class epistemology or queerness that does not privilege “outness” or visibility. The materiality of poverty at times facilitates a different relationship to masculinity and to same-sex desire in ways that make gender and sexuality illegible within a visual economy of hegemonic queerness. Indeed, masculinity and same-sex desire become quare. In *Moonlight*, Jenkins’s direction and his and Tarell McCraney’s screenplay employ the combination of landscape, poverty, and

Yoruba spiritual cosmology to facilitate each stage of Little/Chiron/Black’s sexual awakening.

As a product of abject poverty in the South, I know first-hand the ingenuity it takes to move toward sexual selfhood. Indeed, a lack of access to certain resources and materials goods breeds creativity—a makeshift epistemology. For the kids that grew up in the black neighborhood of my small town in the South, for instance, it was turning cardboard boxes into playhouses, playing in the crawl spaces underneath our apartments, or playing hide-and-go-seek in the backyard. These spaces of ingenuity carved out of our necessity—our desire—to play, however, also created a space for our sexual exploration: the cardboard box playhouse served as cover for “doctor and nurse” or “doctor and doctor” and “nurse and nurse,” as it were; the crawl space became the dry hump space; and, the hide-and-go seek, quickly became hide-and-go-get-it—“it,” of course, being sex. What I am outlining here is not a narrative of glorifying poverty as an ideal site of sexual awakening, or what others might refer to as “poverty porn.” Rather, I’m suggesting that like water, sexuality will find its way in—and out—no matter what boundaries are marshalled to police it. For the working poor, then, budding sexuality is often expressed through the makeshift sites where pleasure can be found.

In *Moonlight*, we see the confines of poverty that trap Chiron and his mother, and the others that make up Liberty City, also known as “Model City,” a predominately black neighborhood in Miami. The community began as a housing project in 1933 under the FDR Administration after the Great Depression. It was the first housing project of its kind in the US South. Significantly, *Moonlight* is set in and spans the eighties into the nineties, a time when Liberty City had one of the highest crime rates, was ravished by the crack epidemic, and race relations between blacks and whites were poor, particularly in the aftermath of the 1980 acquittal of police who murdered Arthur McDuffie, a black insurance agent and former marine, which incited protests in response. According to a community profile of Liberty City by the Jay Weiss Institute for Health Equity (2015), almost half of the residents live below the poverty line and more than 40 percent have neither a high school diploma nor a GED (p. 7). This setting is not coincidental. Both McCraney and Jenkins hail from Liberty City, and grew up blocks from the each other, but met for the first time after they began collaborating on the film. Both men are also the sons of mothers who were drug-addicted and infected with HIV from their drug use. For McCraney’s part, the short story,

“In *Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*,” on which the film *Moonlight* is based, is semi-autobiographical, with many of the characters in the film—including the drug-dealing mentor, Juan—based on real people. The final screenplay, however, is a collaboration between McCraney and Jenkins, with Jenkins also incorporating some of his own personal experiences growing up in the neighborhood. Ultimately, the artists try to capture the Liberty City of their childhood in a way that, according to the *New York Times*, “was at once a place that buckled under the rages of crack but also, defiantly, maintained a cultural richness and sense of community that nurtured and inspired the two men — it was a place that both contained and freed them” (Hannah-Jones, 2017).

The way the film is shot makes the surroundings in Liberty City feel less spatially suffocating than is typical of most representations of urban ghettos, whereby people are literally living on top of one another. Part of this is due to Jenkins’s leveraging of the geography of Miami and its proximity to water and to the community’s southern blackness (including those from the global South). Thus, the public housing units that make up the neighborhood are one and two-story, as opposed to high rises. And, the film opens with Chiron being chased by a gang of boys not down a street or a concrete sidewalk, but through bushes and grass between project buildings to a two-story abandoned apartment building, where he finds temporary refuge from these boys’ homophobic bullying. Reminders of where he lives are reinforced through him finding and fingering a used needle—almost foreshadowing his own relationship to drugs vis-à-vis his mother, his father figure, Juan, who is a drug dealer, and Black, the older version of himself who becomes a drug dealer. The point, however, is that the poverty that, on the one hand, encloses Chiron, also, on the other hand, opens up a literal space for him to journey toward a different expression of masculinity and sexual awareness. And as with all things quare, as opposed to queer, Chiron does not make this journey alone or without heterosexuals. He does so with the help of Juan and his girlfriend, Teresa, and his childhood friend, Kevin.

For the remainder of this essay I will examine three scenes in the film that exemplify my theorization of makeshift masculinity and quare desire. These moments correspond to Chiron’s maturation into manhood and his relationship with Kevin: the wrestling scene between Kevin and Little at the beginning of the film; the masturbation scene between Kevin and Chiron toward the middle of the film; and, the reunion scene between Kevin and Black near the end of the film.

With each close reading of these moments I argue that Jenkins’s and McCraney’s emphasis on landscape and physical environment, intimacy, and invocation of Yoruba orishas coalesce to create not only an alternative representation of black poverty, but also an alternative expression of black masculinity and same-sex desire.

Wrestling with the Moon(light)

Early on in the film, we see Little and Kevin, along with a group of boys in their neighborhood, playing a form of tag football with a ragtag—i.e., makeshift—ball made of balled newspaper. The scene takes place in an open field which belies the urbanity of Miami and opens with the camera’s pan of the faces of a group of boys, who represent black “boyhood” in its most recognizable form: aggressive play. Tellingly, Little stands outside the gaggle of boys for most of their rough-and-tumble play, participating more as a spectator than participant. Even when the ball is kicked in Little’s direction, he hesitates to pick it up, presumably fearing being tackled by his peers, who, from the vantage point of the camera’s gaze, look eager to trounce the next ball carrier. At this point, Kevin intervenes, running up on and grabbing the ball in front of Little’s feet and charging off into the distance into the open field. Little hangs back and then wanders off in the opposite direction from Kevin and the chasing boys. Moments later, Kevin calls out to Little and runs in his direction. When he catches up with Little he inquires: “Why’d you leave?” to which Little replies, despondently, “I don’t know.” Reading the situation, Kevin concedes, “Yeah, it get boring after a while.” As they continue to walk, Little begins to stare at Kevin’s face, which has a smudge of blood on the right cheek. When Kevin asks, “What? It’s bleeding?” Little doesn’t respond, but continues to stare at Kevin’s face and then cups Kevin’s chin with this left hand, all the while continuing to stare at Kevin’s face. Though he moves closer to confirm that Kevin is indeed bleeding, Little still remains silent, still staring at Kevin. When Little drops his hand, Kevin begins to grin and stare at Little, which prompts Little to ask Kevin what he’s staring at, to which Kevin responds, “You funny, man.” “Why do you say that?” Little retorts, looking off into the distance as they both continue to walk toward nowhere in particular in the open field. “Just is that’s all,” says Kevin. When they come to a stop, Kevin berates Little for allowing the other boys to pick on him. Little asks Kevin for instructions for what to do and Kevin informs him that “All you gotta do is show these niggas you ain’t soft.”

It is in this context where Kevin begins to model for Little how to be butch or tough—and this pubescent pedagogy comes in the form of wrestling, one of the most homoerotic homosocial forms of play and a common code in film and literature for same-sex attraction. The camera angles of the two boys wrestling are evocative of passionate sex as it captures flailing legs, bear hugs, moans and groans. At the end of the tussle, a spent Little lies on his back breathing heavily next to an equally spent Kevin—the camera providing an aerial view of Little, then side view of Kevin, and then back to an aerial view of Little. While the camera’s gaze is from the perspective of the viewer and Kevin, it is interesting to note that Little’s expression, played brilliantly by young actor Alex Hibbert, is one of vulnerability and longing, as Kevin says to him, “See Little, I knew you wasn’t soft” and extends his hand to help Little up from the ground. This prior moment of (adult) homoerotic tension is disrupted by a reversion to childish play, as Little and Kevin impulsively begin to race each other, while the sounds of children’s laughter are heard in the background.

As briefly mentioned above, many writers and filmmakers employ wrestling scenes to symbolize homoeroticism and homosexual desire. Notably, this scene between Little and Kevin is reminiscent of a wrestling scene between the characters John and Elisha in James Baldwin’s debut novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1985). Jenkins is undoubtedly familiar with Baldwin’s work as he adapted another one of Baldwin’s novels, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), for the screen. Thus, I am suggesting that Jenkins is riffing on Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain* by including a wrestling scene in *Moonlight*, but with some key differences upon which I will elaborate below. But first the parallels.

Similar to Kevin, the character Elisha is mentor to John, the fourteen-year-old protagonist of the novel, despite Elisha only being three years John’s senior. John’s story is also a coming-of-age narrative in which he “wrestles” with his budding homosexuality and attraction to Elisha and his adherence to fundamental Christian doctrine, which is imposed on him by his tyrannical (and hypocritical) father, Gabriel, who serves as a pastor to a storefront church in Harlem. One day while John and Elisha are supposed to be preparing the church for worship, Elisha initiates a wrestling match with John:

Elisha let fall the stiff gray mop and rushed at John, catching him off balance and lifting him from the floor. With both arms tightening around John’s

waist he tried to cut John’s breath, watching him meanwhile with a smile that, as John struggled and squirmed, became a set, ferocious grimace. With both hands John pushed and pounded against the shoulders and biceps of Elisha, and tried to thrust with his knees against Elisha’s belly. Usually such a battle was soon over, since Elisha was so much bigger and stronger and as a wrestler so much more skilled; but tonight John was filled with a determination not to be conquered, or at least to make the conquest dear. . . . And so they turned, battling in the narrow room, and the odor of Elisha’s sweat was heavy in John’s nostrils. . . . They stumbled against the folding-chairs, and Elisha’s foot slipped and his hold broke. They stared at each other, half grinning. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 52-53).

While the homoeroticism evoked through Baldwin’s writing in this scene is a bit more explicit than in the wrestling scene between Little and Kevin in *Moonlight*, Jenkins’s nod to Baldwin’s novel is clear—but with some noticeable differences that distinguish the film’s engagement of gender and same-sex desire and spirituality from the novel.

The obvious departure from Baldwin’s scene and Jenkins’s in *Moonlight* is the setting. Suggesting the claustrophobia and judging eyes of the Christian church, Baldwin has John and Elisha wrestle in the “narrow room” of a storefront church in Harlem. Alternatively, Little and Kevin wrestle in an open field, under a blue sky where no one is watching and up toward a universe of possibilities. Indeed, place is important in this instance because it allows Jenkins to explore the connection between the budding sexuality of Little and Kevin and the landscape. Unlike Liberty City, for example, Harlem’s landscape is filled with high rises and concrete sidewalks—no vast open spaces like the field upon which the boys in *Moonlight* play and explore their manhood. And though Liberty City is a neighborhood within Miami, which many do not consider the South, Jenkins’s cinematography actually amplifies not only the neighborhood’s lush landscape, but also its connections to the global south, and especially Cuba. That connection to Cuba is established early on in the film in an exchange between Juan and Little when Juan says to Little, “I’ve been here a long time. Out of Cuba. A lot of black folks are Cuban.” This connection to Cuba is not coincidental in that McCraney is very much aware of the imbrication of African culture and spirituality in the African diaspora. He explicitly represents that connection in *The Brother/Sister Plays* (2010), a tril-

ogy of plays grounded in Yoruba practices and whose characters are named after Yoruba deities such as Osun, Shango, and Ogun. Thus, the deliberate reference to Cuba opens up other connections to spirituality and Yoruba cosmology that go beyond Baldwin's focus (and critique) of Judeo-Christian beliefs. Indeed, the Yoruba belief system, which has influenced spiritual practices around the world, comprises a cosmology of orishas or deities who serve as intermediaries between the living and the dead and control specific elements of nature, such as the earth (Aye), the river (Osun), the ocean (Yemaya), fire (Shango), wind (Oya) and fate (Esu Elegbara). And, unlike Christian traditions that sometimes reinforce rigid notions of gender and sexual expression, African diasporic spiritual practices often provide a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality. For example, in her study of Haitian vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Condomble, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblè* (2005), Yvonne Daniel notes that when an orisha takes hold of someone in the Bahian religion, the person becomes "suprahuman" and gender becomes "flexible." She writes: ". . . like most of the orixas, both men and women may receive their bodies. When she arrives, the person who receives her is understood socially as suprahuman female, despite her/his gender. Gender is flexible and shifts according to the divinity in Bahia, just like in Haiti and Cuba" (2005, p. 290).

Given the Cuban and Yoruba subtextual elements I just described, if we considered Kevin as Esu Elegbara, the trickster deity who represents a crossroads for Little, who initiates his journey into manhood, who teaches him how not to be "soft," this scene can be read as an initiation scene, in which Kevin as Esu Elegbara, "mounts" Little—literally and spiritually—as he begins his journey into self-discovery. Kevin accompanies him on this journey through adulthood, even as their relationship transforms over the course of time. While Little's maturation process from Little to Chiron to Black is explicitly marked in the film, if we think of Kevin as being a part of Yoruba cosmology, he too, transforms into different manifestations of deities based on what Little/Chiron/Black needs at that time. The wrestling scene, then—one that takes place on the lush, fertile landscape of Liberty City—marks the beginning of Little's sexual awakening and is a part of a fomenting makeshift masculinity.

A Laying on of Hands

As Little moves into his teenage years as Chiron, he experiences yet another transformation of gender and sexuality—and again, it is facilitated through Kevin. But rather than symbolic sex (wrestling), Chiron and Kevin engage in an explicit act of sex—masturbation—that shapes the rest of Chiron's life. At this point in their lives, Kevin and Chiron have taken different paths toward their relationships to traditional forms of black masculinity. Kevin's is a hard, thug-like persona, marked by braggadocio about the number of his female conquests, his ability to smoke weed and his street smarts. The hyperbolic nature of Kevin's cool posing, however, reveals it more as performative strategy than authentic expression. This is made even clearer when Kevin, in a moment of trying to prove his masculinity, punches Chiron in the face on a dare from the now young adult bullies who chased Chiron at the opening of the film. (This betrayal would keep the two apart for almost a decade.) Chiron, on the other hand, constantly fails at performing hegemonic masculinity, as he doesn't speak much and when he is confronted by Terrel (an obvious reference to McCraney) and another bully, he can't defend his mother's honor through pugilism. He can only get revenge by breaking a chair over Terrel's back in the classroom.

Where the two teenager's gender performance seems to be transformed, however, is at the beach by the water. In this scene, Kevin's performance of masculinity is no less hyperbolic, but is refracted through Chiron's subtle, quiet masculinity that is actually more authoritative than Kevin's, as he informs a surprised Kevin that he has smoked pot—and is actually quite skilled at it. This exchange sets the stage for what in their childhood was communicated through physical horseplay, but now as teenagers shifts to physical intimacy.

Similar to the wrestling scene, this moment in the film begins with flirtation, but this time the sexual innuendos are more explicit to reflect the maturation of the two young men. Kevin finds Chiron sitting on the beach looking out at the ocean and opens the conversation with the question, "You was waiting for me?" The conversation quickly turns to sexual repartee in the guise of who has more experience in smoking marijuana:

Kevin: What you doing out here, man?

Chiron: I'm doing what you doing out here.

Kevin: This my smoke out habitat, nigga. [pause]
Oh, what, you smoke out here, too?

Chiron: Something like that.

Kevin: Naw, you don't smoke. Why you pretending? You trying to put on a show for me, Black?

Chiron: Why you always calling me that?

Kevin: What? "Black"?

Chiron: Yeah, "Black."

Kevin: That's my nickname for you. You don't like it?

Chiron: Naw. It's just what kind of dude goes around giving other dudes nicknames?

Kevin: The dude what just sat down that's about to put you onto this blunt, nigga. Yeah. You like the water? Well, I can introduce you to some fire.

Unlike the preamble to the wrestling scene, this dialogue between the two on the beach is explicitly flirtatious with the camera capturing the knowing looks between Chiron and Kevin as they take turns puffing on Kevin's (phallic) blunt, jabbing each other in the side, and laughing up toward the night sky. Moreover, this initial dialogue further concretizes Chiron's connection to his blackness in a way that both moves it beyond a literal reference to skin color to a reference to cultural affiliation and solidifies the intimacy that he and Kevin share. Notably, very few white people are shown on screen, indicating that the community and worldview of these young men is black—something also underscored by the fact that 84 percent of the population of Liberty City is black. And, despite the spelling of Chiron's name being the same as the centaur "Chiron" from Greek mythology, the pronunciations are very different. The Greek mythological character's name is pronounced KĪ-rən, while the character's name is pronounced shī-RŌN (which rhymes with Tyrone, a popular name for black boys), a decidedly black vernacularized pronunciation, which pays tribute to Chiron's "hood" background.

A more obvious explanation for Chiron's nickname is that he is dark skinned; thus, the nickname is a form of colorism directed toward him by his peers. But a subtler interpretation of the name is that Kevin's reinterpretation "blunts" the stigma associated with it by imagining it as *his* special name for Chiron, one that bonds them through their shared experiences as poor, young black

men and as intimate friends. This is, perhaps, why Chiron fully embraces the name as an adult.

Just after this exchange the conversation moves to a discussion of the breeze and its existence as an antidote to their abject poverty:

Kevin: That breeze feel good as hell, man.

Chiron: Yeah, it do.

Kevin: Sometimes around the way where we live, you can catch that same breeze. It comes through the hood and it's like everything stop for a second 'cause everyone just wanna feel it. Everything just gets quiet, you know?

Chiron: It's like all you can hear is your own heartbeat. Right?

Kevin: Yeah. It feels so good, man.

Chiron: So good.

Kevin: Hell. Shit make you wanna cry it feel so good.

Chiron: You cry?

Kevin: Nah. Makes me *want* to. [pause] What you cry about?

Chiron: Shit, I cry so much sometimes I feel like I'ma just turn into drops.

Kevin: You just roll out into the water, right? Roll out into the water like all these other muthafuckas around here trying to drown they sorrows.

Chiron: Why you say that?

Kevin: I'm just listening to you, nigga. Sound like something you wanna do.

Chiron: I wanna do a lot of things that don't make sense.

Kevin: I didn't say it don't make sense. But tell me, like what? Like what lot of things?

Chiron: Damn, dog. You nosey.

Kevin: Oh, Chiron cursing now, huh? You trying to get smart with me?

Chiron: Whatever, man.

Kevin: [playfully jabbing Chiron in the arm] Nah, you trying to get smart with me, huh, Chiron? Yeah, you trying to get smart with me, huh?

As Kevin delivers this last line he caresses the back of Chiron's neck while longingly looking at Chiron and licking his lips. They then begin to kiss. The kiss leads to Kevin masturbating Chiron, an event to which I'll return later, but first I want to address the importance of this dialogue.

The dialogue between the two in this scene is an allegory for how they are trapped by their surroundings and how the elements (water, earth, wind, fire—again all associated with Yoruba deities) reconnect them to blackness and their experience as poor black men who are free to cry, to love one another, to embody different kinds of masculinity that include sexual intimacy. McCraney's references to Yoruba spiritual traditions are evident in this scene. In Yoruba cosmology, for example, Oyé is orisha of the Niger River and is associated with storms and wind. She also assists humans with inner and outer transformation. Indeed, she is the deity of change. Kevin's and Chiron's reference to the breeze that "comes through the hood" and makes "everyone just wanna feel it" or that "feels so good it makes you wanna cry" indexes the quiet before the storm, so to speak, as Oyé's winds can go from the gentlest breeze to hurricane winds. In the midst of their surroundings—drugs, poverty, and violence—there also exists hope in the peaceful stillness of the winds of potential change. The black folks of Liberty City yearn so much for this change that they luxuriate in the breeze that brings everything to a standstill so that they may hear their own heartbeat. Though momentary and ephemeral, the occasions of the gentle breeze offer some semblance of hope in an otherwise grim worldview. As the change associated with Oyé happens quickly—from breeze to hurricane—the folks in Liberty City hold out hope that their change will soon come as well.

Kevin's character takes the form of several Yoruba orishas during this scene as he guides Chiron into (queer) manhood. As Esu Elegbara, the trickster orisha, Kevin questions Chiron's taking solace in crying so much that he turns into drops. He knows that Chiron's tears are reflective of the inner burden he's carrying regarding his turbulent home life with his mother, be-

ing bullied at school, and also his being queer. Kevin purposefully needles Chiron by suggesting that he, like "all these other muthafuckas around here," simply feels sorry for himself and yet does nothing but "drown [his] sorrows." Thus, Kevin turns Chiron's words against him by asking Chiron what he cries about. Chiron deflects by telling Kevin that he's "nosey." Because Esu Elegbara is the deity of fate and the crossroads, Kevin's embodiment of the orisha in this moment is apropos: Kevin ribs Chiron about his use of curse words as a ruse for Chiron to make a choice—either give in to his queer desire or "drown his sorrows" by remaining inactive. Chiron chooses the former and responds to Kevin's invitation. As the two kiss, Kevin unbuckles Chiron's belt, cradles Chiron's head, which rests on his shoulder, while masturbating him to climax. This moment is foreshadowed, of course, in the opening dialogue of the beach scene, with the line "The dude what just sat down that's about to put you onto this blunt, nigga. Yeah. You like the water? Well, I can introduce you to some fire." Again, the blunt is a phallic symbol and the reference to fire conjures Oya's husband, Shango, the orisha of virility, masculinity and fire. Indeed, Oya and Shango are often thought to work together to transform the environment from one state to another. Thus, it makes sense that Kevin and Chiron symbolically consummate their relationship through the invocation of Oya and Shango both of whom assist Chiron with his inner and outer transformation to queerness.

Even the sand is significant as a sign of earth (associated the orisha Ayé) which Chiron sinks his fingers into at the moment of climax and to which Kevin returns Chiron's semen when he wipes it over the sand's surface. Feeling embarrassed by giving in to his desires and ejaculating into Kevin's hand, Chiron whispers, "I'm sorry," to which Kevin replies, "What you gotta be sorry for?" affirming Chiron's right to be comfortably queer. Finally, this scene of bonding and sexual intimacy takes place outside by the ocean, evoking Yemaya, orisha of the ocean, who symbolizes the womb and "the mother of all." As a protector of all her children, she presides over this entire scene. Indeed, through the manifestations of several orishas, Kevin assists Chiron with his transition from boyhood to manhood and birth of "Black"—a transition that continues for years and comes full circle at the end of the film.

Walking through the Door (of no Return)

In the third and final chapter of the film, Chiron transforms to "Black." No longer a teenager, he has

succumbed to societal pressures to conform and fully embrace—at least on the surface—a hegemonic performance of masculinity. His body is bigger, beefier; he wears a gold grill (“fronts”) on his teeth; drives a gangster car; carries a gun; and is a drug dealer, now living in Atlanta. We also assume that he has spent some time in prison for assaulting the young man who bullied him in high school, though the film never makes this clear. And yet, underneath all of that armor is Little, who longs for the love of his life, Kevin.

Ten years have passed since he has seen or heard from Kevin when, out of the blue, Kevin contacts him by phone. Not surprisingly, the conversation is strained. Kevin reveals that he has been incarcerated for several years, but learned how to cook while in prison, which led to him now being a cook. He also apologizes for “all that shit that went down” (referring to the violence precipitated by Kevin’s betrayal) and invites Black down to Miami to visit and promises that he will cook for him. He also shares with Black that a customer at the diner played a song on the jukebox that reminded him of Chiron—a song that he also promises to play for Black should he visit. Black responds to the apology and invitation to visit with silence. Kevin ends the conversation and Black stares at his phone and falls back onto his bed. It is clear from his (non) response that he is emotionally shaken by the call. The next scene is a dreamlike montage of Kevin standing outside his diner having a smoke. The camera alternates between gazing upon Kevin’s face—from the side and front—with Kevin seemingly aware that he is being watched, as he subtly strikes poses, and Kevin gazing into the camera, erotically blowing smoke from his mouth. The scene ends with Kevin walking away with his back to the camera as he saunters down the side of the diner. The next scene makes it clear that the previous scene was Black’s (wet) dream of Kevin. He awakens to discover his undershorts soiled by his semen—another reminder of his sexual awakening prompted by Kevin’s masturbatory hand. Despite their past, Kevin and Chiron still share a bond.

In response to this yearning, he drives from Atlanta to Miami in search of Kevin, not knowing what he will find, but in need to see where the journey will lead. And when they reunite, they do the DL dance, to riff off Jeffrey McCune’s formulation (2014), which comes in the form of a mating ritual: dinner and drinks. The *mise-en-scène* of this ritual is a diner, where Kevin works as a cook. As soon as Black opens the door to the diner, we hear the sound of Aretha Franklin singing “One Step Ahead” (1965), a torch song about how

the singer is unable to keep herself from falling back in love with a former lover because “one step ahead is a step too far from you.” The song frames the reunion between these two grown men who have not seen each other since Kevin betrayed Chiron by punching him in the face when they were in high school. Yet, it is clear that they have unresolved feelings for one another.

Their first interactions in this scene underscore the sexual tension between the two, with Kevin not initially recognizing the transformed butch man that he tried to help Little become when they were kids wrestling outside in the field. When he realizes that it is Chiron sitting at his counter, he stops in his tracks, the camera providing a head-on shot of his surprised face, as he says Chiron’s name. The shocked expression turns into the sly grin that we’ve come to associate with his character throughout the film. He walks around to the other side of the counter and the two embrace, but it is not the hug of two “straight” men, as the pull back from each other occurs slowly and lingers for more than what it should for “friends.” The sexual tension has returned. Kevin tries to diffuse the erotic tension by joking with Chiron as he had done in the past, but this time Chiron, now Black, flips the script:

Black: What’s up Kev?

Kevin: Damn, man. What you doing down here? I mean . . . Hey, you’re here now and that’s all that matter.

[Black nods]

Kevin: There you go with that damn nodding again, man. You ain’t changed one bit. You still can’t say more than three words at a time, huh?

Black: You said you was gonna cook for me. I know how to say that.

Kevin: Yeah, I did say that didn’t I? You don’t look like your ass been missing no meals. [laughter] But I got you, man. Sit down. Sit down, man. What you want? You can order off the menu if you want to, or I could just hit you with that chef special. [Long pause as the two gaze at each other.] Yeah, we’re here, Chiron.

What is interesting about this conversation in the beginning of their reunion is how Chiron and Kevin have reversed roles to an extent. As kids and teenagers, Kevin was the one who took charge, teaching Little

how to fight back against bullies and not to be “sorry” about being queer. But in this scene, Kevin is giddy and not necessarily “in control.” He’s flummoxed by Chiron’s transition from Chiron to Black and unsure about where the reunion will lead. His recourse, then, is to revert to the domestic space of the kitchen where he does have control.

The meal he prepares for Black is chicken breast with onions and peppers, rice and black beans, the foodstuff of the working poor and of the Afro-Caribbean. Jenkins films Kevin’s preparation of this meal in a way that captures the love and care of a person preparing food for someone they want to impress and for whom they have great affection. With the background of classical music playing, the camera captures Kevin gently slicing limes and squeezing their juice over chicken and onions cooking on the grill; carefully scooping rice from a pot and placing it in a round container to mold before turning it over on the plate; stirring black beans before nestling them between the rice and fried plantain; and, finally, chopping cilantro and sprinkling it over the entire plate for garnish (this is shot in slow motion). During the course of preparing the food, Kevin occasionally peers under the hood of the stove to make sure Black is still sitting at the booth, awaiting this culinary delight. This moment is sweet and tender, and clearly a mating ritual. When Kevin emerges from the kitchen with the meal he announces to Black, “Chef’s Special.” Upon seeing what Kevin has prepared, Black questions: “So you Cuban now?” Kevin responds: “Only in the kitchen, Papi.” This exchange is just one of several filled with sexual double entendre and tension. Indeed, after Kevin “hits” Black with his chef’s special and they catch up while Black consumes Kevin’s meal and downs two glasses of wine, Kevin invites him back to his place.

Kevin doesn’t own a car so Black offers him a ride home. Kevin is again startled by the kind of car Black is driving—a souped-up Oldsmobile—and that he is listening to “Classic Man” by hip-hop artist Jidenna, a song that glorifies drug dealing (“now my niggas sling ‘caine like a dandy”). As the two drive through the streets of Miami back to Kevin’s place, Kevin relates how hard life is for him in Miami. He has fathered a child that he has to support and his main income is working at the diner, hardly enough to get by—again indexing the plight of black people in Liberty City who, after close to 30 years, seemed to have not progressed. And yet, he and Black have reunited in the place where it all began, but still with the cloud of the violence that Kevin enacted upon Chiron ten years prior, alongside the still palpable love and desire Chiron feels toward

him.

Once they arrive at Kevin’s apartment, the tension between the two (and in the viewer) rises even higher because so much is said in what isn’t said—through silence and knowing glances. Once out of the car, Black looks out into the black of the ocean, which conjures the memory (in his mind and the viewer’s) of the night at the beach when he and Kevin were intimate. As they enter Kevin’s place we understand that the two men are trying to find their way back to each other but somehow can’t find the words. And then Kevin asks the question that initiates a soul-bearing moment:

Kevin: Who is you, man?

Black: Who? Me?

Kevin: Yeah, nigga, you. I’m saying, man, those fronts, that car . . . who is you, Chiron?

Black: I’m me, man. I ain’t trying to be nothing else.

Kevin: Ok, so you hard now, huh?

Black: I didn’t say that.

Kevin: Well, then, what?

[Black looks down in silence]

Kevin: Hey, hey. I ain’t tryin’ to hem you up or nothing, but man it’s just I ain’t seen you in a minute and it’s not what I expected.

Black: What did you expect?

Kevin: Do you remember . . . you remember the last time I saw you?

Black: For a long time, I tried not to remember. I try to forget all those times.

Kevin: Yeah.

Black: When we got to Atlanta, I started over. I built myself from the ground up, built myself hard.

Through this exchange Black reveals how, working from the scraps of what was left of a life that had been shattered by the betrayal of his best friend, his mother’s drug addiction, and his own troubles with the

police, creates a makeshift masculinity that helps him manage the pain of what he has been through. While it is not the life that Kevin thought Chiron would end up leading or the one he hoped for him, it is the one that Chiron had to pull together to survive. But Kevin understands that Black is a mask for the vulnerable young boy that he befriended twenty years prior. The appearance of “Black” also shatters Kevin’s perhaps stereotypical expectations of how Chiron’s queerness would manifest—as effeminacy. Fronts, a gangster car, and rap music are not the accoutrements of black queers that Kevin is used to seeing—or perhaps the one he thought he freed Chiron to become on the beach. In this way, McCraney and Jenkins implement a critique of hegemonic masculinity as it relates to sexuality—and they do so throughout the film, beginning with Little’s father figure, Juan, who, in response to Little’s question, “What’s a faggot?” tells him that “a faggot is a word that people use to make gay people feel bad” and that Little is not a faggot, but he might be gay. Being taught this distinction between gayness and faggotry at an early age—by a heterosexual, cisgender, drug dealer—offers a refreshing rebuttal to representations of black masculinity that also supplant in Little a way of being himself that does not internalize traditional gender roles.

Perhaps the most memorable line of this final scene comes when Black tells Kevin, “You the only man that’s ever touched me. [pause] You the only one. I haven’t really touched anyone since.” It is a moment of reckoning that is heartbreaking at the same time that it is tender. What most expect next is that Kevin and Chiron will have hot, passionate sex, tapping into the viewer’s libidinal economy of queer desire. But that is not what happens.

In an interview at Northwestern University in 2017, McCraney explains that Jenkins shot the last twenty minutes of the film in real time to capture the tension of the two characters having gone a decade without seeing each other:

The last part of the film is actually in real time. You spend twenty minutes with them and they spend twenty minutes with each other. They haven’t seen each other since then [the fight] and then that time that they see each other is the amount of time you spend with them seeing each other. (McCraney, 2017)

This explanation was in response to interviewer Aymar Christian’s question about McCraney’s thoughts about a few critics’ and viewers’ (many of whom were black gay men) disappointment in Jenkins’s choice not

to have Kevin and Black have a sex scene at the film’s conclusion. McCraney goes on to explain, “And so, I think it’s a critique of one’s self if you’re like ‘In these twenty minutes they should have got to the part where they smashing.’” Indeed, that would be a *queer* ending to the film, but instead the film gives you a *quare* ending—something a little off kilter—disavowing a happy ending (pun intended) in favor of something much more subtle, ambivalent, open ended. Kevin’s grin after Black’s profound statement about not being touched by another man indicates that he understands what Black needs and that it is not sex; rather, it’s to be held by the man who first intimately touched him—wrestling in the open field, sexually on the beach, and violently on the school yard. But Kevin has touched more than just Chiron’s body, he has also touched his heart. These two men have found their way back to each other, but they need to figure out what that means for them in the future. For now, they just need to *be*. Appropriately, the final scene of the film takes us back, Sankofa-like, with Little, facing the oceanic waters of Yemaya, facing his future, facing his journey toward a makeshift masculinity, while glancing back in time at us in the *quare* light of the moon.

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