

# In *Moonlight*, Perpetually Outside

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways the Academy Award-winning film *Moonlight* reveals and reflects a Black spatial imaginary that explicitly and inextricably links Blackness, queerness, and the outside. In sharpening focus on its central character's journey from bullied kid to alienated high school student to hardened twenty-something, *Moonlight*, I argue, repudiates many of the anti-Black premises that vitalize the project of white supremacy and the white spatial imaginary, particularly those that cast Black people as always already unfit or unworthy—of freedom, of intimacy, of pleasure, of life. Simultaneously, the film draws attention to and invites viewers to grapple with the ways that Blackness always already indexes a waywardness, a transience, a queerness, a “movement in excess” that is itself an instantiation and expression of refusal, a being in and for the outside.

The possibility of Black queerness first surfaces outside, amid tar-paved roads, overgrown yards, and color-soaked exteriors, in the Academy-Award-winning film *Moonlight*.<sup>1</sup> In the movie's vivid opening scene, the mundaneness of drug dealing swiftly gives way to the urgency of escape. A crew of prepubescent boys cuts across the screen—one fleeing, the others chasing. It is Little (portrayed by Alex R. Hibbert), the protagonist in the film's first act, who runs most hastily. Donning an oversized white polo and navy khakis and carrying a backpack too

large for his tiny frame, Little scuttles and weaves through grass, weeds, and chain-link fence to evade the pack of would-be assailants on his track. Beyond dodging the bodily harm that the juvenile bunch threatens to do to him, he runs to refuse their hailings. “Get his faggot ass,” one of the boys calls out. “Get his gay ass,” another exclaims. The epithets are meant to constitute Little as queer, as an outsider, as a menace to the normal order of things. Of course, the youth’s refusals to answer to the disparaging utterances only intensify his peers’ determination to subject him to their puerile discipline and punishment.

Even after Little seeks refuge in an abandoned apartment littered with drug paraphernalia, the efforts to apprehend and terrorize the already terrified youth press on. His antagonists vandalize the front door of the derelict dwelling and break its unboarded windows to make clear the imminent danger they pose. Little covers his ears with both hands in response, a simultaneously vulnerable and defiant gesture that renders explicit his desires to protect himself from the violence that often attends misrecognitions and interpellations. In the end, it is not his ambivalent gesture but the pursuing boys’ short attention spans that keep the youth safe from harm (at least temporarily); they abandon their mission once they realize they have no real way of accessing the gritty den. The episode comes to an end when Juan, a neighborhood drug dealer, pries open one of the residence’s covered-up windows and extends an invitation to Little to return outside. The outside, he assures the youth, cannot possibly be worse than his hiding place. The outside—his confident stance and the deep breath he takes on the apartment’s balcony serve to affirm—remains a site of promise despite any juvenile attempts to impose limits on its possibilities.

The striking sequence, in addition to introducing what will become one of *Moonlight*’s most meaningful relationships, compellingly establishes one of its most significant motifs. Throughout the film, Little—who mostly answers to Chiron, and, in his adult years, to Black—faces the challenge of trying to make sense of a social world that is resistant to nonnormative ways of being and to transform it into a locus of belonging. Whether it is because of the “softness” he displays on the improvised football field, the joy he experiences dancing in front of the mirror at school, or, as his mother Paula suggests, the strangeness detected in the way that he walks, Little is hailed early on as different, as “faggot,” as queer within his Liberty City community and is marginalized accordingly. As evidenced in the film’s opening beats, this marginalization places the youth at tremendous risk for abuse and mistreatment. But it also seemingly endows him with a kind of second sight—which is to say, a profound and uncanny insight—that creates openings for him at once to recognize and embrace the potential in being, as bell hooks might put it, “a part of the whole but outside the main

body,” while also refiguring the outside, literal and symbolic, as a site of belonging, desiring, and, indeed, worldmaking.<sup>2</sup>

It is through its enigmatic protagonist that Barry Jenkins’s filmic adaptation of acclaimed playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney’s original script “In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue” reveals and reflects a “Black spatial imaginary” that explicitly and inextricably links Blackness, queerness, and the outside, a linkage that both the movie and McCraney’s titles subtly gesture to.<sup>3</sup> George Lipsitz argues that, despite white attempts “to inscribe on the landscape the artificial divisions between the races that the pathologies of white supremacy instantiated in social life,” Black people have persistently drawn a distinct spatial imaginary to counter and contest oppressive conceptualizations and configurations of place and race.<sup>4</sup> Lipsitz writes of a Black spatial imaginary that is at once resistive, inclusive, creative, and generative. The strategies and sensibilities that suffuse such a spatial imaginary “guide diverse efforts to turn segregation into congregation, to transform divisiveness into solidarity, to change dehumanization into rehumanization.”<sup>5</sup> The Black spatial imaginary notably exposes white supremacist imaginings and uses of space as both fraudulent and fundamentally bereft of any coherence or legitimacy. *Moonlight*, in framing the outside as the domain of Black queerness, expands and enriches possibilities for the Black spatial imaginary, drawing attention through the characters and relationships it plots to some of the additional ways Black people not only continue to find value in devalued spaces but also to insist on the elevation of those deemed fungible and, thus, disposable by a ubiquitously anti-Black, anti-queer world. It is significant that it is outside, which circulates variously as a place, a positionality, a potentiality, a way of being, and, at times, an imposition, where Black queerness emerges most saliently and achieves greatest legibility in the film.

One of the critical ways *Moonlight* both registers and occasions dissent is by figuring the outside as a site and ideality for imagining, rehearsing, and enacting “*other* aims, aspirations, and modes of being”—that is, “aims, aspirations, and modes that, even while being vulnerable to them, fail to capitulate to the disciplining logics of normativity.”<sup>6</sup> In sharpening focus on its central character’s journey from bullied kid to alienated high school student to hardened twenty-something, the film repudiates many of the anti-Black premises that vitalize the project of white supremacy and the white spatial imaginary, in particular those that cast Black people as always already unfit or unworthy—of freedom, of intimacy, of pleasure, of life. At the same time, it draws attention to and invites viewers to grapple with what Sarah Jane Cervernak and J. Kameron Carter call the “outness” or “outdoorsness” of Blackness: that is, the ways that Blackness not only “exposes freedom’s inherent impropriety” but also reveals itself “as that which asserts vitality in the resistance to incorporation.”<sup>7</sup> This article’s articulation

of the outside is deeply informed by Cervernak and Carter's theorizations of the "outdoors" in their article "Untitled and Outdoors: Thinking with Said-iya Hartman." Offering fresh and astute analyses of Hartman's field-redefining body of work, the scholarly collaborators make clear in their piece how the state perpetuates an "anti-Black insistence on keeping Blackness outside and in the field."<sup>8</sup> Blackness "remains outdoors even when brought indoors, even when brought into the (settler) home ownership, into self-possession."<sup>9</sup> Blackness, in other words, always already indexes an "outness" or "outdoorsness"—which is to say, a waywardness, a transience, a queerness, a "movement in excess"—that is itself an instantiation and expression of refusal, a being in and for the outside.<sup>10</sup> In her article, "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion," Gayatri Gopinath offers a similar observation about nonheteronormative sexuality, writing: "Within the familial and domestic space of the nation as imagined community, non-heteronormative sexuality is either criminalized, or disavowed and elided; it is seen both as a threat to national integrity and as *perpetually outside* the boundaries of nation, home, and family."<sup>11</sup> In addition to inspiring the title for this article, Gopinath's assertion provides a vital springboard to begin thinking about the possibilities of and for the *perpetually outside*.

In what follows, I contemplate what *Moonlight* further reveals about the relationship between Blackness and the "outness" of the outside and, indeed, how Black queerness makes known and is made known by and through the perpetually outside. Attending to several of its more evocative scenes, I give particular attention to the ways the film evinces and addresses what I think of as *outside* empathies and intimacies, thereby engendering and enabling more lush and abundant ways of knowing, understanding, desiring, and feeling. Before zeroing in on the film's content, however, I first reflect briefly on how a cognizance of *Moonlight's* engagements with the outside might adjust our thinking about the work and its protagonist and, indeed, how they might be situated generically.

## Be/Coming Out/Side

Marketed as a "timeless story of human connection and self-discovery . . . [that] chronicles three defining chapters in the life of a young Black man growing up in a rough neighborhood in Miami," *Moonlight* might better be understood as a kind of new millennial-Black-queer-anti-*Bildungsroman*, a conspicuously *wordy* formulation that aims to draw attention to the ways the film troubles normative categorizations.<sup>12</sup> Whereas the traditional *Bildungsroman* "focuses on the social incorporation of the individual, the integrative merging of self and society," the anti-*Bildungsroman*, Michele Elam writes, actively flouts these generic

conventions, presenting instead central characters that “do not come of age by coming into society.”<sup>13</sup> Elam draws on Enrique Lima’s assertion that the traditional *Bildungsroman*’s “tethering of modernity and progress with the renunciation of the individual to society is disrupted in the ethnic bildungsroman” to elaborate her definition of the anti-*Bildungsroman*.<sup>14</sup> What distinguishes Elam’s conception from Lima’s notion of the ethnic *Bildungsroman* is that, whereas the latter emerges from the desires of “writers on the colonial periphery” to address “different historical realities and alternative modernities,” the former is determined by the centering of protagonists who are at once emblems of and alien to progressive modernity.<sup>15</sup> Despite sometimes existing and feeling on the outside of progressive modernity, the anti-*Bildungsroman*’s protagonist is very much a modern figure. Indeed, these protagonists are often fashioned and represented as modernity itself.

Chiron shares many of the attributes of the anti-*Bildungsroman*’s protagonist as theorized by Elam, disrupting any relinquishment of self to society and, in his Blackness, asserting “vitality in the resistance to incorporation,” as Cervernak and Carter put it. However, there are also ways that the character exceeds the category’s defining qualities. Indeed, the very thing that positions Chiron as an emblem of progressive modernity, his Black queerness, is also what necessitates the kind of *wordiness* that we might opt for when attempting to place the film in relation to other putatively comparable cultural texts. To be sure, *Moonlight* is singular in the ways it imagines “a boyhood or ‘coming of age’ for Black boys that is situated outside of the 1990s urban, hip-hop-themed cinema that offered familiar yet static images of Black masculinity” and Black sexuality.<sup>16</sup> Even still, as Sandra K. Soto reminds, the complexity and porousness of race, gender, and sexuality insists that we be much more wordy, contingent, and irresolute in our efforts to index and contextualize.<sup>17</sup> This is especially important for engagements with Black queerness, which always already instantiates a refusal of enclosure.

Black queerness is what both vitalizes *Moonlight* and animates Chiron’s sense of estrangement, his perception of being on the outside, in the film. Further compounding the youth’s feelings of detachment and alienation are the bleak conditions of his upbringing. Although critic Hilton Als contends in his review of the film that *Moonlight* avoids “Negro hyperbole”—that is, “the overblown clichés that are so often used to represent Black American life”—the dysfunctional given circumstances of Chiron’s everyday reality suggest otherwise.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, on his journey from childhood to adulthood, the youth is forced to negotiate many of the miseries frequently featured in narratives of Black pathology: among them, the crack addiction and consequent neglectfulness of his mother, the absence of his father, and the shame, abjection, and violence that often accompanies brutal poverty. He must also maneuver a distinctly Miamian landscape

marked by what Jenkins calls “cruel beauty” that not only supplies everyday reminders of the ugliness of his mundane existence but also of the perpetual out-of-reachness of the mythic “American Dream.”<sup>19</sup> “Miami is often positioned as outside the United States, with its own peculiar hemispheric sovereignty, rather than as a quintessentially southern U.S. city,” Donette Francis writes.<sup>20</sup> Francis traces the origins of this perception to a number of cultural events that took place in the 1980s: among them, the race riots that followed the acquittals of four white police officers for shattering the skull of Arthur McDuffie, a Black former marine, and an influx of new residents to the city from Cuba and Haiti.<sup>21</sup> “Fissured by inequalities based on race, immigration, class, and language, by the end of the 1980s the city would at once become functionally Hispanicized *and* despondently Black,” Francis explains.<sup>22</sup> As both Jenkins and Francis’s observations point to, the physical and cultural environment of the Miami that *Moonlight* re-presents is punishingly hard on its Black residents. At the same time, there is a sense of vastness, a sense of horizon, a sense of potentiality to be found outside, in the city’s natural splendor. Among the many obstacles Chiron faces in the film is determining how to negotiate these existential conditions and contradictions, which complicate the possibility of any integrative merging of self and society. It is in the process of trying to reconcile the ostensibly irreconcilable that the youth comes to orient himself differently: to the “outness” of the outside and, concomitantly, to the possibilities of Black queerness.

It should be noted that Chiron exists within a larger ensemble of new millennial-Black-queer-anti-*Bildungsroman* protagonists that McCraney endows with striking relationships to the outside.<sup>23</sup> There are particular resonances between the youth and the queer father-son duo, Elegba and Marcus Eshu, who appear in the writer’s celebrated trilogy, *The Brother/Sister Plays*.<sup>24</sup> Each of the three related, intergenerational plays—*In the Red and Brown Water*, *The Brothers Size*, and, *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*—feature protagonists who, in coming of age, impede the merging of self and society. Elegba, who appears in the first two parts of the trilogy and ghosts the third, actively evades social incorporation. Bearing many of the characteristics of the Yoruba deity with whom he shares a name, a trickster figure who is the *orisha* of gateways and crossroads, the character pursues choices in the plays that consistently place him on the outside of the proprieties established through hegemonic social norms, especially those that serve to constrain Black queer desire. It is prison—a putative space of *unfreedom* explicitly invented and designed to cast those deemed unruly, ungovernable, or merely unwelcomed outside of society—that becomes for the character one of the more potent sites for dreaming and desiring *queerly*. He discursively refigures prison as a kind of outside destination in *The Brothers Size* and suggests to

his childhood friend Oshoosi, a covert object of his desires, that a return there might perhaps prove libidinally liberating.

For Marcus Eshu, whose new millennial-Black-queer-anti-*Bildungsroman* narrative converges with Chiron's in many ways, it is the swampy edges of his fictional San Pere, Louisiana community that opens up space for dreaming, feeling, and desiring difference and differently. Inheriting his father's birthmark and his queerness—hence his name, “mark/us”—the character likewise embodies transgression and nonnormativity. Marcus does not so much as “come out” in the final play of the trilogy as he undergoes a process of becoming. And, as with Chiron, the outside becomes an important locus for the youth to ponder, accept, and rehearse different ways of being and loving. Indeed, it is outside that he first begins to make sense of his sexuality and to experience the transformative power of Black empathy—what we, following Nicole Fleetwood, might think of as “a mode of receptivity and an awakened presence to how we move and transform each other”—and Black intimacy—the closeness, the vulnerability that opens us up to experiencing the “thickness” of Black love, communion, and conviviality.<sup>25</sup>

Although the conditions of his life differ significantly from Marcus Eshu's, Chiron too comes to know and experience the world-remaking power of Black empathy and intimacy outside in *Moonlight*. It is also outside where the character comes to know and touch ecstasy. *Moonlight* captures Chiron in the process of becoming outside and, in so doing, opens space to consider what it might mean to make and embody another kind of life.

## Outside Empathies/Outside Intimacies

A return to the improvised football field featured in *Moonlight's* first act offers a glimpse early on at how brief brushes with the transformative possibilities of Black empathy and intimacy not only alter Chiron's perspective on the world, but also reshape how he understands his place within it. The scene zeros in on a small mass of boys huddling in anticipation of a spirited game of “throw-up tackle,” a game that is also sometimes derogatorily referred to as “smear the queer.” Chiron is the smallest of the group, and the one seemingly most aware of his own susceptibility to becoming “queered” while at play. As the other boys run, laugh, and attempt to grab the football composed of crumpled up newspapers and topple (or “smear”) its carriers to the ground, Chiron remains on the outside, never quite finding his rhythm or place within the game or the juvenile community. One of the boys predictably tries to goad the youth into accepting the “queer” role, an effort intended to underscore his status as outsider, as *un*belonging. Sensing his neighborhood friend's reticence and vulnerability, Kevin

(Jaden Piner) intervenes by picking up and running off with the makeshift ball. The empathetic act not only redirects focus away from Chiron, creating a window for him to escape from the hazards of the game and the bubbling threats of yet another band of potential assailants, but it also distinguishes Kevin from his peers as “one who is moved by and moved to act based on another’s feelings and experiences.”<sup>26</sup> It is an act aimed at bringing outside in and turning inside out, at least for a brief moment. Before Chiron can escape completely from the scene, he again becomes subject to a hailing. This time, instead of hurtling epithets, the caller shouts out his schoolyard name: Little. Chiron answers the call when he realizes it is Kevin doing the shouting. If through their goading, the other boys endeavored to cast Chiron out as a social pariah, Kevin, through his direct address, reconstitutes him as a member of the neighborhood boys’ fraternity. The subsequent advice he offers his friend on how to handle bullies (“All you gotta do is show these niggas you ain’t soft”) at once serves to shore up for Chiron a sense of communion and belonging while also exposing the folly of indiscriminate and uncritical investments in the inside.

Although Chiron’s peers on the field attempt to configure the outside as a space of exclusion and exclusivity through their youthful taunting, Kevin’s demonstrations of empathy and camaraderie recuperate it for the youth as a site for imagining, rehearsing, and embracing outside ways of being. At the same time, they afford both boys opportunities to begin experiencing and experimenting with the revitalizing textures of Black intimacy. Touch, both tender and rough, becomes central to these explorations and experimentations.<sup>27</sup> When Chiron, for example, discovers a bloody bruise on Kevin’s face, a gift from “throw up tackle,” he grabs his peer by the chin to examine the damage more closely. Touch in this moment opens space for the boys to perceive haptically, as Laura Marks might put it, and to encounter other ways of being and feeling in the world.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it becomes a vital means for both “to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you.”<sup>29</sup> Chiron’s touch, an extension of Black empathy and intimacy—an expression of the power of Black love, communion, and conviviality—enables the friends to feel themselves through feeling each other and to be mutually transformed in the process. In commenting on the scene, Jenkins notes that at the center of the relationship between young Chiron and Kevin in the film’s first act is “this idea of exploration . . . of really beginning to feel your body, to sort of even feel the idea of sexual identity or identity in general . . . the idea of blossoming into whoever you’re going to become.” What this formative scene illuminates are the ways that it is being and becoming outside that makes touching feeling and, indeed, identity imaginable and possible for the duo.

For Chiron, the possibilities of the outside—as a site of being and becoming, as a locus of Black empathy, intimacy, and belonging—come into even greater focus in what is perhaps *Moonlight*'s most iconic scene. After discovering Chiron waiting for him outside of the home he shares with his girlfriend Theresa (Janelle Monáe), Juan decides to travel with the youth to one of Miami's many shores. The Atlantic Ocean becomes a powerful setting to impart important lessons about how to survive life's many unpredictable and, at times, rough currents. Although Juan teaches Chiron how to float and swim amid rocky waters during the sequence, his cradling of the youth's head and body, words of reassurance ("I got you," he repeats), and demonstrations of protection and care also serve to christen him with a greater understanding of himself and the multitudes he embodies. Touch again becomes a catalyst for exploring the idea of identity, for fostering a sense of belonging, for experiencing new ways of perceiving. Juan's touch and displays of intimacy prove especially consequential, redefining the boundaries and meanings of Black manhood and masculinity for Chiron and baptizing him into, what Ashon Crawley calls, "life as possible."<sup>30</sup>

Juan's retelling of a story about his own boyhood experience with misrecognition, in addition to providing Chiron a lesson on the importance of self-definition, further highlights for the youth the potency of Black empathy and intimacy. When an older woman in his birthplace, Cuba, took to calling him "Blue"—because, as she remarked, "in moonlight, Black boys look blue"—Juan rejected her attempts at renaming him. "At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you gon' be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you," he advises. Along with inviting Chiron to ponder questions about who it is he wants and is going to be, the story offers insights into why Juan develops such a deep connection with the youth so quickly. Growing up Black in Cuba and being a Black Cuban in Miami endows Juan with his own unique relationship to the outside. As such, he recognizes a lot of himself in Chiron—"I was a wild little shorty. Just like you," he shares at one point—and endeavors to keep unfolding and revealing for him what "life as possible" might mean.

Empowering Chiron to perfect and embody a practice of refusal becomes central to Juan's expressions of empathy. When the youth, who very rarely speaks, asks Juan and Theresa what a faggot is over orange juice one morning and follows it up with the question—"Am I a faggot?"—Juan responds by insisting that he doesn't have to answer to any call aimed at inducing fear in him. He further explains that, when it comes to questions of identity—sexual identity, in particular—the youth doesn't have to have all the answers just yet ("You'll know when you know," Theresa adds). Of particular importance to Juan is ensuring that Chiron has space to think and live outside of any boxes and, indeed, to exercise the fullness of his imagination, liberties often denied poor Black children

living in the inner city. He also strives to demonstrate for the youth through his consistent expressions of empathy and intimacy the boundlessness of Black love.

Juan dies somewhere in the years that pass between *Moonlight's* first and second acts. And although the film does not depict its protagonist's mourning process, the effects of the loss are readily apparent in teenage Chiron's (portrayed by Ashton Sanders) despondent demeanor. Further contributing to the adolescent's sense of alienation are the relentless bullying that he endures and the range of insecurities that his mother's drug addiction induces. The teenager's many existential struggles make it a challenge to maintain an unequivocal belief in the possibilities of being outside. Chiron does, however, retain some confidence in the lessons instilled in him by Juan about its potentiality. Thus, after a particularly difficult day that sees his mother accost him for money and two teenage schoolmates badger and threaten to attack him for merely crossing their paths on the street, he rides the Miami Metrorail to the shore of the Atlantic Ocean where he attempts to find solace in being outside amid the moonlight, wind, sand, and crashing waves. The unanticipated arrival of a similarly irrepressible teenaged Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) onto the scene again restores the ocean's edge as a site of transformation and belonging. It also affords the two teens an opportunity to flirt with what it might mean to pursue the queerness of Black intimacy.

While sharing a marijuana blunt under the glow of the moonlight, the pair "vacate the here and now for a then and there."<sup>31</sup> They relinquish themselves to queerness's pull, and for a brief moment, as they kiss and Kevin works to bring Chiron to climax, they each touch ecstasy. Ecstasy, Jose Muñoz maintains, is queerness's way—"an invitation, a call, to a then-and-there, a not-yet-here."<sup>32</sup> Answering the call of ecstasy—of queerness, of Black queerness, of Black queer intimacy—supplies both teens a brief escape from the disappointments of the present tense. It also further concretizes the outside as a space for desiring more, desiring better, and desiring differently. Sensual touch opens up yet another way of perceiving. For Chiron, it also inspires and invites fresh ways of relating.

Of course, as Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman notes, ecstasy, which "evolves from the Greek *ekstasis*, which means 'to be or stand outside of oneself, a removal to elsewhere,'" also carries "the risks of overwhelm and destruction."<sup>33</sup> It has the potential to make villains of heroes.<sup>34</sup> Thus, just as Chiron begins to renew his faith in being and belonging outside, his peers at school set out to reclaim it as hostile territory. Led by a particularly merciless bully named Terrel, who, despite his persistent repudiations of Chiron, seems to make it a point to place himself in the youth's presence frequently, the teens conscript Kevin into their operation, tasking him with brutalizing Chiron during a game of "Knock down, Stay down" as a way to quiet and counter any notion that he has become "soft." Although his sensual touches once made it possible for Chiron to imagine the

world otherwise, the vicious blows Kevin delivers to his friend's face—a face that he once took pleasure in marveling at under the moonlight—provide yet another shattering example of just how cruel “the here and now” can be. The substitution of intimacy with brutality—the retraction of empathy—ultimately breaks the youth, forcing the already-hardened teen to retreat further inside and to seek violent revenge against the bully responsible for his public rejection and humiliation. Kevin's blows are a reminder for Chiron of the ways that expressions of Black empathy and intimacy persistently come under violent attack.

The years between *Moonlight*'s second and third acts are again shrouded in blackness. At some point during the interval, Chiron remakes himself into a muscled up, gold grillz-wearing, tricked-out Oldsmobile Cutlass-driving, Atlanta hustler who calls himself, appropriately enough, Black (Trevante Rhodes). Kevin first christens his friend with the nickname during their teen years, and Chiron's embrace of the moniker reveals the profound importance that their adolescent relationship has had in shaping his sense of how he wants others to perceive him as an adult. His self-presentation likewise aims to demonstrate how much time has hardened him and, indeed, disconnected him from his emotions and desires. It also serves to provide a sense of how deeply invested he is in protecting himself from certain elements of his personal history. Even as he disavows many of the details of his upbringing, adult Chiron also labors hard to perform the particular brand of Black masculinity that Juan modeled for him during his youth. This often sees him embracing and enacting many of the hypermasculine performative codes that make surviving in the street drug game a possibility. It, however, also sees him revisiting many of the lessons Juan tried to instill in him. Juan's messages about the promise of the outside remain particularly resonant for the twenty-something.

What continuing to embrace the outside as a site of promise, in part, affords Chiron as an adult is the space, both physical and psychic, to reckon with some of the unfinished business still haunting him. He continues, for example, to have nightmares about his mother's addiction, as well as wet dreams about Kevin (portrayed in act three by Andre Holland), the only person he ever allowed to touch him intimately. It is being together outside with his mother (Naomi Harris) that allows Chiron to resolve some of the pain her addiction caused him and, indeed, to consider reconciliation as a viable possibility. Sitting amid the grass and trees that surround his mother's addiction treatment facility, he is reminded of what it feels like to soften his heart and to fully believe again that someone might love him unconditionally. It is a liberating feeling, one that proves both revitalizing and healing. “In this moment, something changes, you know . . . something has changed, something has been healed,” Jenkins remarks while noting that he chose to shoot the exchange differently from all the other scenes in

the film. It is those changes, that healing, that render urgent Chiron's desires to reunite with Kevin, which he does soon thereafter.

Much has been written about the empathy and intimacy that Chiron and Kevin display while trying to make sense of what time, distance, and circumstance have done to them in the interval between their last encounter. Their togetherness avails both to experience what Crawley calls "a space of reprieve . . . a refuge without judgment, without shaming."<sup>35</sup> It is being in that liminal, liberatory space that creates the conditions for Kevin to invite his old friend to feel himself again, to turn himself inside out by reflecting on the question: "Who is you, Chiron?" The query lingers long after Chiron dares a response: "I'm me, man, ain't tryna be nothing else." Indeed, it lingers into the black that follows the men's long yearned for embrace. And it lingers still when the film returns to a shot of a young Chiron at the ocean's edge in its final beats.

That return, which captures the youth scanning the horizon before abruptly staring back over his shoulder, arrestingly affirms that who Chiron is remains deeply connected to feeling, belonging, and being outside. As he stands planted catching ocean breezes, another question seems to form in the youth's penetrating gaze: Won't you join me? It is an invitation to embrace the possibility of being in and for the outside, to experience the transformative possibilities of Black queerness, to relish in the full power of Black empathy and intimacy. It is a call, one that powerfully resonates throughout *Moonlight*, to make a different world and embody a different kind of life.

## Notes

1. Barry Jenkins, director. *Moonlight* (2016; Santa Monica, CA: A24/Lionsgate, 2017). All subsequent mentions of the film in this article refer to this version.
2. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xvii.
3. George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).
4. Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 51.
5. Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 19.
6. Isaiah Matthew Wooden, "Jefferson Pinder and the Art of Black Endurance," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 40, no. 1 (2018): 79.
7. Sarah J. Cervernak and J. Kameron Carter, "Untitled and Outdoors: Thinking with Saidiya Hartman," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 27, no. 1 (2017): 46–47.
8. Cervernak and Carter, "Untitled and Outdoors."
9. Cervernak and Carter, "Untitled and Outdoors."

10. Cervernak and Carter, "Untitled and Outdoors."
11. Gayatri Gopinath, "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: South Asian Sexualities in Motion," in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 261–79 (emphasis added).
12. This description comes from the packaging for the *Moonlight* DVD.
13. See Michele Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folks: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). Also see Enrique Lima, "The Uneven Development of the *Bildungsroman*: D'Arcy McNickle and Native American Modernity," *Comparative Literature* 63, no. 3 (2011): 291–306.
14. Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folks*, 125.
15. Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folks*, 126.
16. Simone C. Drake, "He Said Nothing: Sonic Space and the Production of Quietude in Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*," in *Are You Entertained? Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Simone C. Drake and Dwan K. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 253.
17. Sandra K. Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 6.
18. Hilton Als, "*Moonlight* Undoes Our Expectations," *The New Yorker*, October 24, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/24/moonlight-undoes-our-expectations>.
19. Jenkins notes that McCraney often describes Miami, the hometown the two artists share with the film's protagonist, as a "beautiful nightmare." "When he says that, I think what he means is: Miami is a rough place. The neighborhood that we grew up in, at the very least, is a rough place. And yet, you're always surrounded by and you're always aware of the beauty, the natural beauty of the environment," Jenkins elaborates. To this, McCraney adds, "I've found myself trying to illustrate that often; trying to draw the parallel of, you know, being in a situation where you have to come home to crack-addicted parents . . . and yet, the beautiful sunshine outside, and the trees, and the sort of amazing life that was going on around it." These remarks can be heard on the *Moonlight* DVD's special features, which include audio commentary from the director, as well as mini-docs on the making of the film ("Ensemble of Emotion: The Making of *Moonlight*"), the creation of its music ("Poetry through Collaboration: The Music of *Moonlight*"), and the significance of filming in Miami ("Cruel Beauty: Filming in Miami"). Unless otherwise noted, references to the director's commentary in the article are drawn from these special features.
20. Donette Francis, "Juxtaposing Creoles: Miami in the Plays of Tarell Alvin McCraney," in *Tarell Alvin McCraney: Theater, Performance, and Collaboration*, ed. Sharrell D. Luckett, David Román, and Isaiah Matthew Wooden (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 22.
21. Francis, "Juxtaposing Creoles," 23.
22. Francis, "Juxtaposing Creoles."

23. See my introductory essay for *Tarell Alvin McCraney: Theater, Performance, Collaboration* for a fuller accounting and examination of the inventiveness of McCraney's dramaturgy. Isaiah Matthew Wooden, "Ogun Size Enters; or, An Introduction," in *Tarell Alvin McCraney: Theater, Performance, and Collaboration*, ed. Sharrell D. Luckett, David Román, and Isaiah Matthew Wooden (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 3–15.
24. Tarell Alvin McCraney, *The Brother/Sister Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2010).
25. Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Performing Empathies: The Art of Saya Woolfalk," *Callaloo* 37, no. 4 (2015): 975.
26. Fleetwood, "Performing Empathies," 983.
27. For additional explication of how touch operates in the film, see I. Augustus Durham, "'Certainly No Clamor for a Kiss': When Black Men Touch," in *Tarell Alvin McCraney: Theater, Performance, and Collaboration*, ed. Sharrell D. Luckett, David Román, and Isaiah Matthew Wooden (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 99–III.
28. See Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
29. Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 98.
30. Ashon Crawley, "To be Held by *Moonlight*," *The Root.com*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.theroot.com/to-be-held-by-moonlight-1792774994>.
31. Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 185.
32. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 187.
33. Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, "The Black Ecstatic," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, nos. 2–3 (2018): 350.
34. Abdur-Rahman, "The Black Ecstatic."
35. Crawley, "To be Held by *Moonlight*."

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