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Shadow and Myth: On *Stranger Inside* and *Moonlight*

Introduction

If we have learned a few things about contemporary figures of black masculinity in the previous chapters, it is not only that blackness and masculinity are articulated by way of a cultural discourse and social practice of policing, material and symbolic; but also that the sexed embodiment of this figure is in no ways guaranteed. We have seen, instead, that the appearance of blackness in an antiblack world produces a crisis of category; the lines between and among the most salient binary oppositions become unstable, subject to inversion or oscillation or indistinction, including: cop/criminal, citizen/slave, white/black, male/female, human/animal, adult/child, thought/feeling, and so on. Alonzo Harris performed the whiteness of law enforcement with a recognizable black style, succeeding before failing to fulfill the earlier determination of his predecessor Agent J (Will Smith) in Barry Sonnenberg's 1997 blockbuster *Men in Black*. When talking to his white partner and training officer, Agent K (Tommie Lee Jones), about the difference that obtains between them, J declares confidently: "I make this look good." Not for nothing, *Men in Black* is an action-comedy. When the tables are turned and the black officer trains the white one in an action-drama, the cool pose struck by Smith's character (a *faux-cool* used mainly to stand out against his signature slapstick comedy, from the *Fresh Prince* persona onward) becomes the stalwart composure of Ethan Hawke's Jake Hoyt, rather than the slick maneuvering of Denzel Washington's Alonzo Harris. The jester in the former genre is entertaining, but the would-be

trickster figure in the latter winds up dead after crossing the line once too many times.

Pride shows us that the racist culture spanning from maritime slavery to municipal segregation condemns blacks for not swimming well but then animalizes and quarantines them when they do. And moving up the learning curve from the one condition to the other—from sinking like rocks to swimming like alligators—we see how patriarchal striving among black men aligns them with the same antiblack state and civil society they hope to subvert. Boobie Miles in *Friday Night Lights* becomes indistinguishable from the Permian Panthers' rivals at Dallas-Carter, confusing the line between teammate and opponent, as does Ty Crane for the Richmond Oilers in *Coach Carter*. Michael Oher in *The Blind Side* is repeatedly chided for exhibiting incongruously feminine traits of passivity, sensitivity, and gentleness, bonding primarily with women and children in his quest for masculine courage and honor. Arnold and Webster confound, in turn, the demarcations of age and generation, just as their fictional forebears, Buckwheat and Topsy, trouble differences of sex and gender and even those between the plant and animal kingdoms (recall Topsy was not born to known parents, but “just grewed”). In every case, the deconstruction of difference and degree that blackness provokes opens up a space to think again about the formulation of criterion as such.

Extimacy, or the Intimate Exterior

Cheryl Dunye has taken up this challenge better than most. Her filmmaking has consistently questioned the criteria by which we separate fact from fiction, history from speculation, memory from desire, friend from foe, coercion from consent, and freedom from captivity—all at the nexus of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Dunye's award-winning 2001 made-for-television film, *Stranger Inside*, is the director's second feature-length project. It follows upon the critical acclaim of her 1996 debut, *The Watermelon Woman*, and prefigures the commercial success of her subsequent 2004 Miramax Films production, *My Baby's Daddy* (which, despite the Hollywood constraints and unreconstructed male leads, managed to make statements consonant with black feminist and queer critical sensibilities). The earlier work, the first feature-length film directed by a black lesbian in the United States, is a docudrama following the efforts of “Cheryl,” a young Philadelphia-based black lesbian filmmaker and video store clerk played by Dunye, as she reconstructs the life and work of one Fae Richards, a black lesbian screen

actress and stage performer cast in a series of so-called “mammy” roles in Hollywood studio films of the 1920s and 1930s. Richards is the eponymous “Watermelon Woman,” so nicknamed by Cheryl after she discovers Richards listed in the credits of the undated black-and-white film, *Plantation Memories*.

Cheryl is drawn into the vortex of this historical endeavor—requiring great expenditures of time, energy and resources—because she is captivated by the found image of a black woman that she invests with deep psychosexual and sociopolitical significance. She remarks to the point: “Something in the way she looks and moves is serious, interesting.” The film thus unfolds, largely, as a multidimensional pursuit and production of this “something” that Cheryl discovers surreptitiously within the image. After ninety minutes of Cheryl’s subsequently painstaking research—availing herself of interviews, archives, and personal collections—*The Watermelon Woman* punctures and punctuates the climactic presentation of the awaited film and video montage that finally installs Fae Richards into a revised and expanded US film history with this famously revealing disclaimer: “Sometimes you have to create your own history. *The Watermelon Woman* is fiction.”

Reviewers report a range of responses to this revelation, but most note a feeling of surprise, followed by an ensuing sense of loss, and then an ultimate yearning: “I wanted Fae to be real.” The tracing of the enigmatic itinerary of *that* desire and the development of a capacity to inhabit it is the dramatic achievement of the film. And that achievement is enabled by a fiction that is licensed by an exigency. Yet, there is a rich ambiguity in the statement. Is this a descriptive indication that “you have to create your own history” in order to do something or another (best read as an instrumental statement), or is it a categorical imperative that “you have to create your own history” (best read an ethical injunction)? How conditional or absolute is the warrant, or mandate? We might wonder whether the ambiguity collapses or oscillates interminably in this particular case because the “subject” of the film—subject as focus, as protagonist, as author—is, from the dominant vantage, no subject at all: among other things, it involves a black lesbian filmmaker shooting a film featuring a black lesbian actress in the role of a black lesbian filmmaker making a film about a black lesbian actress (and along the way several vexed and shifting configurations of interracial same-sexuality and gender variance).

Yes, *The Watermelon Woman* is fiction, but what sort of fiction is it? It is certainly one that, as one review put it, “effectively [blurs] the line between fiction, nonfiction, and biography” (Vesey 2011). But is there not more at stake than a mixing of genres? Or, rather, does the formal complica-

tion that blurs the line between genres not raise the question of the law or rule of genre itself? The punch line, or punctuation mark, at the film's conclusion redacts the very terms that would seem to animate its project and mobilize its various audiences: truth and accuracy, visibility and voice, recovery and representation, history and memory. The film has thereby all the elements of a seduction, but one that underlines its ruses so boldly that they become nearly imperceptible, until they hit you, in the flash of an inter-title, in the interregnum between the opening and closing shutter of a camera obscura, in the logical time before dying, where the time for understanding after the instant of seeing never, finally, allows for the moment of concluding.

Mark Winokur describes *The Watermelon Woman* as "a primary text whose fantasy archaeology preempts any critique and history of itself" (Winokur 2001, 232). One cannot argue with the film on the grounds of its verisimilitude. But neither can its motive force be doubted. What Cheryl discovers in the image of Fae Richards is something that she has invented, a projection onto the image she constructs of "something" that she will find there as if it were a solicitation; it is a redoubled desire. This is a fantasy archaeology, which is to say an imagination of a past that never was (and perhaps could not have been otherwise), but also an archaeology of fantasy, which is to say an imagination of a future that is yet to be (and perhaps can never arrive); it is both a memorial and an announcement. One could read Dunye's cinematic historiography, beginning with *The Watermelon Woman*, and the short films preceding it, in light of the methodological problematic formulated several years later by Matt Richardson, that is, "not only to recover submerged *voices* but also to lay bare the *conditions* that create and subjugate black, female, woman-loving sexualities and transgressions of gender norms" (Richardson 2003, 64, emphasis added). To read not only what is not there, so to speak, but also what is already there, present in the form of distortion, interference, inhibition, symptom, anxiety. Conditions that create *and* subjugate, subjugate *and* create: there is no way to determine a precise and linear temporality for this structural relation, no way to extricate the voices and sexualities and transgressions from the conditions and norms that create and subjugate them, and vice versa. It's all the matter and material of the investigation, the excavation, the activity of laying bare, disclosing, discovering, of finding what is desired and desiring what is found. Put differently, the binary opposition of power and resistance is displaced here, those terms can no longer be thought as binary opposites, and, moreover, the nature of binaries in general must be rethought altogether. "I would say—when all is said and done, it is less a matter of remembering than of



Fig. 6.1 Brownie (Davenia McFadden) comforts Treasure Lee (Yolonda Ross) in Cheryl Dunye's *Stranger Inside* (2001). Image reproduced under terms of fair use

rewriting history,” Jacques Lacan offered early in his famous seminar on the technique of Freudian psychoanalysis. “What is essential is reconstruction” (Lacan 1991, 56) (Fig. 6.1).¹

What would it mean, then, to think of supposed opposites as those that take on their meaning, not at the point of greatest distance or divergence (wherever that may be), but at the point of greatest proximity or convergence? How do we think of difference—especially at the extremes—as an intimate matter? This is a bridge between *The Watermelon Woman*, with its appropriation of the conventions of romantic comedy, and *Stranger Inside*, with its appropriation of the conventions of melodrama, these characteristic genres of women’s films in the historic instance. Both films rehearse a deconstruction of “the documentary impulse” and thereby participate in “a counter-tradition” of black cultural productions “that masquerade as true in order to prompt interrogations of prevailing notions of historical fact,” if not the notion of history itself, history, in any case, as the past or a story emerging from a simple origin, or a story of origins as such (Smith 1992, 56).

¹The fuller passage reads: “[The] restitution of the subject’s wholeness appears in the guise of a restoration of the past. But the stress is always placed more on the side of reconstruction than on that of reliving, in the sense we have grown used to calling *affective*. The precise reliving—that the subject remembers something as truly belonging to him, as having truly been lived through, with which he communicates and which he adopts—we have the most explicit indication in Freud’s writings that that is not what is essential. What is essential is reconstruction” (Lacan 1991, 56).

Stranger Inside, like *The Watermelon Woman*, begins and ends on the matter and material of a captivating image, an image or imago that at once compels and confounds the search for origins, a search that has to do, for our protagonist as for everyone else, however disavowed, with the issue of the black mother. It has to do with the impossible and unavoidable matter of black maternity, and of the kinship that is foreclosed thereby. We cannot make sense of this search, its possibility or impossibility, without recourse to a conception of natal alienation that would plot this story of mothers and daughters otherwise. And we have to think about that alienation—imposed by law and culture, economy and society, but above all by *force*—in such a way that allows the natal occasion as such to become susceptible to deracination in the most universal way. *Stranger Inside* projects a “fantasy archaeology” too; it is about the fantasmatic nature of archaeology itself, and the archeological nature of fantasy, the ways in which sedimentary layers of identification and desire, rage and aggression, mourning and loss are inscribed symbolically, circulated, transmitted, inherited: fantasy archaeology and plantation memories. Maria St. John notes in an interview with the filmmaker that “an array of female masculinities are inhabited within the prison walls and are portrayed not as stigma but as signs of strength and pride” (St. John and Dunye 2004, 327). This performance of masculinity at the margins, where the power with which it is typically associated is undercut and reconfigured by female embodiment, poverty, incarceration and, above all, racial blackness, supports the overarching question of *relation* in the most fundamental sense (Fig. 6.2).

Treasure Lee (Yolonda Ross), our protagonist, suffers from reminiscences of childhood torment: “You ain’t got no mother” is the recurrent taunt that indexes a preemptive separation or severance—a cleaving—around which she organizes her psychic life. “I’m going home,” she declares, further and further into the very state of confinement from which one is supposed to flee. But here, strangely, the abyssal inside of domestic aspiration—from juvenile facility to women’s prison to isolation unit to the women’s voices heard and hallucinated through the walls, the sink, the toilet—converges with the extremity of psychosexual and sociopolitical exclusion. Treasure has nothing to give or take from the social dynamics of group therapy because she is unlike other women. Prison was her destination, not a terrible detour. She does not desire the supposed freedom and normalcy of life outside. And even when she dreams of leaving prison with her mother and living together somewhere else, she wants only to return to the hood, to the confinement of the ghetto, as it were, without another horizon. She wants her mother, so much so that she is not only willing to risk death—physical and civil—but



Fig. 6.2 The prisoners line up for roll call. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

also, more to the point, to risk *belief*, a belief in her image: the archaic imago of a lost black mother. Again, Treasure declares in the opening scene: “I’m going home.” A former occupant of her current prison bunk etches a similar statement in unadorned graffiti on the wall just above her head: “I wanna go home.” What is the difference or relation these two claims, between the doing and the desiring? And how is that difference or relation brought into relief, and obscured entirely, by the fact that Treasure has been wanting the *mistaken* image of the woman, Brownie (Davenia McFadden), who murderously usurped her mother’s place, a woman whose place she will, in turn, occupy in the wake of matricidal violence? Scar (Almayvonne Dixon) quips facetiously: “What do you think, we all look alike?”

Treasure will not accept her maternal grandmother’s declaration that her mother is dead, what is also a maternal declaration that a daughter has died. Treasure follows instead the fateful word of her play sister and fellow gang member, Shadow (LaTonya “T” Hagans), that her mother was alive and “doing life” at the Women’s Correctional Facility. The quest that takes Treasure through the descending planes of incarceration, during which she is reunited with her mother’s tenderness through discipline and punishment, requires the sacrifice of all her kin, in a restoration of the dyadic bond. That dyad provides a semblance of order and of what will become, at last, destiny. But that consuming relation, in which the world falls away entirely and reduces to the signification of a global threat, entails an even more profound potential for violence from the inside of a rivalry that lends

it any orientation whatsoever. If the mother must be let go before a relation can be established in the proper sense, then what if such letting go is interdicted by a taking that never admits the theft? “To lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past... I was an orphan. [...] This sense of not belonging and of being an extraneous element is at the heart of slavery. Love has nothing to do with it; love has everything to do with it” (Hartman 2007, 85).² This dispossession also gives rise to a new set of possibilities for Hartman, and so too for Dunye. A new set, like that invoked by the final image of the film: Shadow, the messenger and documentarian, the photographer photographing the shadow of her own image, laid flat on the prison yard, elongated, hand bearing the sign and offering of peace, anonymous and singular, standing perfectly still, only to disappear once more, out into the blackness, into the shade (Fig. 6.3).

Stranger Inside is a complex meditation on the psycho-politics of black kinship, and of black maternity specifically, as the disinherited matrix of gendering and ungendering as well as the orientation and disorientation of sexuality. Black female masculinity, under conditions of extremity, is the formation here that questions the relation between the psychic life of a state-sanctioned interdiction of black kinship and the willingness to suffer and/or inflict forms of physical, mental and emotional violence to undo—or preserve or pervert—its effects. The racialized dislocation of embodiment, gender expression, and sexual practice—where it is unclear in advance, and at various points along the way, who identifies with whom, who is related to whom, who is attracted to or involved with whom—serves also to upset the normative striving for a coherent social identity aligned with the dominant conceptions of filial love and loving affiliation. In this regard, Dunye’s work stands in powerful contrast to the contemporary Hollywood representations of black masculinity discussed in previous chapters. And, as another important contribution to the history of black feminist and queer filmmaking, *Stranger Inside* constructs a prismatic lens to review the critical itinerary travelled in our investigation to this point.

²Hartman writes further: “Love encourages forgetting, which is intended to wash away the slave’s past. Love makes a place for the stranger; it domesticates persons from ‘outside of the house’ and not ‘of the blood’; it assuages the slave’s loss of family; it remakes slaveholders as mothers and fathers. Owning persons and claiming kin are one and the same; so love cannot be separated from dispossession or property in persons. Affection perhaps softens the sting of dishonor but does not erase it... Love extends the cover of belonging and shrouds the slave’s origins, which lie in acts of violence and exchange, but it doesn’t remedy the isolation of being severed from your kin and denied ancestors” (Hartman 2007, 87).



Fig. 6.3 Treasure talks with Shadow (LaTonya ‘T’ Hagans) on the yard. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

Counter-Cinema

We have arrived, circuitously, at this final onscreen meditation, wherein black kinship operates in and through interdiction, not in spite of it; and the coordinates of gender and sexuality, no less than the distinctions of class, are devised and revised in an atmosphere of violent dispossession: from cop to prisoner, from coach to player, from parent to child, from birth to adoption, from father to mother, from black man to white woman, from housing projects to high-rise penthouse, from post-civil rights retrenchment to antebellum abolitionism and back again. We are now in a position to see, through the half dozen examples given above, that while “Black males are American cinema’s perennial outsiders and antiheroes, as well as its most stereotypically depicted ones” (Tate 2016), that cinema is, for the same reason, a site for equally perennial modes of critical reading. So, while the crises and contradictions that condense in highly patterned ways upon the forms and figures of black masculinity are perhaps brought into starkest relief *between* the seemingly stock characters of standard Hollywood fare and their more complex, multidimensional counterparts in the universe of (black) independent filmmaking, they are, in fact, immanent to *every* representation, from the margin to the mainstream.

It is tempting to hold out hope for a promising counter-cinema where, among other things, a critical appraisal of black masculinity can be more fully developed; and, in that vein, it is hard not to be excited by

the intervention of a film like *Stranger Inside* or, indeed, a whole range of recent productions from documentaries like Daniel Peddle's *The Aggressives* (2005) and Kortney Ryan Ziegler's *Still Black: A Portrait of Black Transmen* (2008) and Stephen Dest's *I Am Shakespeare: The Henry Green Story* (2017) to narrative features like Tina Mabry's *Mississippi Damned* (2009) and Dee Rees's *Pariah* (2011) and Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016). Yet, any counter-cinema worth its name, however compelling and intelligent, still demands of that viewers step back and think again. Kara Keeling (2009) has demonstrated the richness of such engagement with regard to Peddle's critically acclaimed work, tracing an aesthetics and politics of *disappearance* produced at the heart of the film that challenges at once the erasure of invisibility and the pitfalls of visibility for the eponymous subjects of the film. The concomitant audience shift would eschew both the passive habit of *looking at* the cast as spectacle and, insofar as their stories take leave of the image track and narrative frame, the active reflex of *looking for* the missing in the manner of a search party or, worse, a police operation. Rather, Keeling suggests, we might be prompted to adopt a perceptual mode of *looking after*, that is, looking in the spirit of caretaking and about what is no longer in view. This might be summarized as an abiding concern for the afterimages of life and death.

I Am Shakespeare traverses territory familiar to viewers of the cinema of policing, namely how black men can and do move across the borders of racial segregation, navigating spaces of exclusive social and cultural capital while managing the difficulties of their offstage home life. Henry Green is a fledgling actor from the predominantly black and working-class Newhallville section of New Haven, CT, just a few miles away from the Yale University campus. He excelled in the Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School theater program there and in the summer after his graduation landed a role as Tybalt in a well-received production of *Romeo and Juliet* for the nearby Elm Shakespeare Company. Shortly thereafter, he was shot and severely wounded in an armed robbery by another young black man from his neighborhood. Green, we learn, was also previously involved with a street gang and credited his acting abilities, in part, for his rapid ascent to a position of leadership and respect. His professional accomplishments, meanwhile, had little traction or legibility outside of the theater world. But, contrary to its customary framing, Green's is not just a tale of two cities and his circulation between its alternate realities. It is also, more importantly, a commentary on the difficulty of understanding the internal relations of Newhallville itself and the interiority of each and every one of its residents. The central soliloquy regards the lesson Green learns, not coincidentally, from the young man who shot him:

I saw a lost child in this kid's eyes. A human being that was confused and hurt and angry. I saw a mirror in his eyes. It was that second that changed me. I'm exactly like that person. There's people who can't get the full picture of me; they want me to be one or the other, renegade or Henry Green, and they can't imagine a world where I'm both. Every person is both. There is no black or white person. You cannot label people; we're too complex. My *shooter* is too complex for me to just label him 'shooter.' Tell me you'd still be as interested in me if you only knew my renegade. It'd be easy to call me a monster, but understanding people is not about being easy. It's not easy to do that. I am Shakespeare, and so are you.

Green does not just empathize with his shooter; he identifies with him. He declares to his audience that he too is one of the "renegade" young black males so feared by the people of Greater New Haven. As he battles the ghost pain of his gunshot wound and works slowly through the effects of post-traumatic stress, he holds on to the mirroring exchange of glances with another black man, one intent on robbing and killing him, and defends the latter against labeling and stigmatizing, against reduction and simplification. He also insists that his shooter, like himself, is knowable, or rather understandable, insofar as one is willing to live with the requisite difficulty. The most profound assertion is no doubt the universalizing of his singularity—the identity of renegade *and* Henry Green, gangster *and* thespian, criminal *and* artist—his insistence that *everyone* is *both*. He allows for no distancing from his own culpability in events leading up to the near-fatal shooting; he calls himself, to that end, "a stained individual." But, likewise, he refuses the judgmental morality of the viewer, who is no less implicated in his account, just as the shooter is more than a shooter and the shooting itself was, in fact, more than a shooting.³

This ethical refusal of the morality of good and evil and the concomitant inversion and suspension of the distinctions between black and white, high and low, civilian and outlaw culminates in the leading metaphor and its extension: "I am Shakespeare, and so are you." Green, in claiming to be The Bard of Avon, does not misrecognize himself or aggrandize his talents or

³One of the most powerful articulations of this ethics, against the morality of good and evil, is found in Bataille (1991). He writes: "We cannot be *human* until we have perceived in ourselves the possibility for abjection in addition to the possibility for suffering. We are not only possible victims of the executioners, the executioners are our fellow creatures. We must ask ourselves: is there anything in our nature that renders such horror impossible? And we would be correct in answering: no, nothing. A thousand obstacles in us rise against it... Yet it is not impossible. Our possibility is thus not simply pain, it extends to the rage of the torturer" (Bataille 1991, 18).

overstate his aspirations. He references instead something like the spirit of Shakespeare, and of all great art, to confront audiences with a critical reflection of their own disavowed conditions of existence, to challenge all of us to see a mirror in his renegade eyes too. In his testimony about the night he was shot, Green recalls that he chose not to run for his life when he realized he was being pursued: “I wanted to face that harm, I wanted to face that danger alone... I opened my arms and said, ‘Whatever you are ready to do, let’s get it done.’” Why run from something he can’t escape, what is, perhaps, his fate? And in facing his attacker and rival, he sees his double, a semblance of himself against which he is also doing battle, his inner and outer worlds collapsing into one another, becoming indiscernible, and all the better to rethink their interrelations.

Something similar is at work in all of the films mentioned in this chapter, from *Dunye* to *Jenkins*. If *Treasure*, in *Stranger Inside*, loses her mother twice over to a double, or doubled, homicide only to regain a new and different sense of kinship-in-captivity on the other side of such compounded loss; then Chiron (pronounced *Shy-Rone*), the protagonist of *Moonlight*, seeks the proper means to separate from his mother, through a no less complex doubling, forging his way between the father’s law and the brothers’ recognition. Though Chiron, like *Treasure*, does a stint in prison, off-screen, his story is focused on the life and death that orbits in many ways around the prison, in the everyday, open-air incarceration of the ghetto. *Moonlight* is arguably the most successful black cast film in US history to date, critically and commercially. Winner of a Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture—Drama and Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor, it was lauded by film critics across the board for its artistic and technical achievements as much as for its powerful social commentary and broad political significance. It landed at number one on more than a dozen of the major annual top ten lists for 2016, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, and it grossed over \$55 million at the box office on a modest \$1.5 million budget (Fig. 6.4).⁴

The critical establishment’s praise was immediate and lavish. Peter Bradshaw and Benjamin Lee at the UK *Guardian* described *Moonlight*, respectively, as “a visually ravishing portrait of masculinity” and as “proudly

⁴Nico Lang (2017) reminds us that *Moonlight* is also the first LGBTQ film to win an Oscar for Best Picture, citing the persistent homophobia of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which most critics thought a shoe-in for the barrier-breaking award, was snubbed in favor of Paul Haggis’s trite social message film, *Crash* (2004).



Fig. 6.4 Little (Alex Hibbert) stands in the kitchen in Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016). Image reproduced under terms of fair use

black and refreshingly queer,” and their colleague Deborah Orr offered that it “is probably one of the most emotionally revealing films about a man ever to have been made” (Bradshaw 2017, Lee 2016a, Orr 2017). Mark Kermode, for the same venue, called it “an astonishingly accomplished work—rich, sensuous and tactile, by turns heartbreaking and uplifting” (Kermode 2017). A.O. Scott at the *New York Times* found *Moonlight* to be “both a disarmingly, at times almost unbearably personal film and an urgent social document, a hard look at American reality and a poem written in light, music and vivid human faces” (Scott 2016). The *Washington Post*’s Ann Hornaday was even more fulsome, calling it “a perfect film, one that exemplifies not only the formal and aesthetic capabilities of a medium at its most visually rich, but a capacity for empathy and compassion that reminds audiences of one of the chief reasons why we go to movies: to be moved, opened up and maybe permanently changed” (Hornaday 2016). In all such accounts, we find mention of the film’s penchant for cultivating vulnerability where it is supposedly needed most, among poor black boys and men, in ways that allow them to escape, if momentarily, the ‘façade’ or ‘armor’ or ‘straightjacket’ of masculinity in its more hyperbolic and heterosexist expressions, “our hackneyed masculine conventions” (Tate 2016). “The Sensuous *Moonlight* Dares to Let Black Men Love,” wrote Melissa Anderson for the *Village Voice*, in homage to Marlon Riggs’s 1989 classic *Tongues Untied* (Riggs, as narrator, declares famously in the final section: “Black men loving black men is *the* revolutionary act”) (Anderson 2016). Naomie Harris,

who plays Chiron's mother, Paula, went so far as to say in one interview that "being human *means* being vulnerable" (Lee 2016, emphasis added). Such are the stakes.

Black male critics, gay and straight, had especially strong praise for the film (with the notable exception of a particularly acerbic Armond White (2016), writing for the conservative *National Review*, who unsurprisingly dismissed it as a politically-correct "plea for pity"). Ashon Crawley at *The Root* was inspired to extended reminiscence upon viewing *Moonlight*, summing up his impression thusly: "Everything in the film, this masterpiece, was a reach for connection" (Crawley 2017). Greg Tate, also for the *Village Voice*, exclaimed: "The poignant brilliance of *Moonlight* derives from the many-splendored ways it enshrines... Black male erotic repression and unconsummated desire in the face of bullying and familial breakdown" (Tate 2016). And Hinton Als, in a Pulitzer Prize-winning piece for the *New Yorker*, found *Moonlight* to be a "brilliant, achingly alive new work about black queerness" (Als 2016). Although he provided the best guided tour of the film among a cohort of reviews displaying some of the top critics' best writing, much of Als's celebration of *Moonlight* revolved around its historic impact on black gay viewers like himself, many of whom never dreamed they would see a film like this, that is, one concerned principally with black male same sexuality *and* commanding high production values, wide distribution, and international renown.

Finally, there was the oft-cited autobiographical convergence, across differences of sexuality, between the noted playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney, author of the previously unproduced original script, *In the Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, and co-writer/director Barry Jenkins, both of whom hail from Liberty City, the Miami neighborhood that provides the film's fictional setting and actual shooting location. *Moonlight* was adapted from McCraney's thesis project at the Yale School of Drama, where he returned in 2017, Oscar in hand, to direct the playwriting program. Much of the material, written by McCraney in his early twenties, was autobiographical, and it was eventually combined in the adaptation with elements of Jenkins's own life and shaped, moreover, by the incredibly dexterous interpretations of the various black male actors who star in the major roles. Greg Tate's playful synopsis of the film is as good as any: "The simplest tag you can put on *Moonlight* is that it's a queer coming-of-age story set in a Negroidal Southern galaxy far, far away from the places it's received world-cinema accolades from" (Tate 2016). Chiron is played successively by three actors bearing three titles in a three-act dramatic structure: (i) Little (Alex Hibbert), the child; (ii) Chiron (Ashton Sanders), the teenager; and (iii) Black (Trevante Rhodes), the adult.

The first two acts of the film find him “[living] in public housing with his single mother, Paula (Naomie Harris), who goes on drug binges, less to alleviate her sadness than to express her wrath—against the world and, especially, against her son, who she thinks keeps her from the world” (Als 2016). Little is neglected and berated at home by a mother who is increasingly remote and unremarkably homophobic, and he is chased and terrorized when he ventures outside by neighborhood boys whose rites of passage include his mortal threat. Early in the narrative arc, Little is taken in by Juan (Mahershala Ali), a drug-dealing father figure who finds him taking refuge one afternoon in a derelict apartment building, and his partner Teresa (Janelle Monáe). “Chiron lives for the moments when he can get away from his mother’s countless recriminations and needs, and swim in the unfamiliar waters of love with Juan and Teresa,” according to Als. “One indelible scene shows Juan holding Chiron in his arms in a rippling blue ocean, teaching him to float—which is another way of teaching him the letting go that comes with trust, with love” (Als 2016). Juan is, then, doing more in this scene than practically teaching Little the rudiments of swimming; Juan is, alongside Teresa, symbolically baptizing him in the emotional universe of everyday adult caretaking. He is, as well, modeling a paternal masculinity that Little will emulate, in part, later in life; one wherein the street smarts and physical prowess of the drug game can be alloyed with a caring and mutual intimate relationship and genuine concern for the welfare of children, whether one’s own or others; one wherein compromises and contradictions can be admitted and suffered openly in the course of one’s life (Fig. 6.5).

The obvious association with John the Baptist here seems more overwrought than apposite, yoking Little with the unduly heavy burden of signifying resemblance to Jesus. Though there is something admittedly rich about the idea of rewriting the figure of Jesus as a gay black boy from the ghetto—and the subsequent reframing of the film as a dramatic test of faith for everyone around Chiron (“as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers...”)—we risk losing the very focalization of his life in the process. There is a perhaps more justified reading of Juan and Teresa in the tradition of the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic saints Juan de la Cruz (John of the Cross) and Teresa de Jesús (Teresa of Ávila), whose commitment to the Counter-Reformation in Habsburg Spain involved the promotion of a return to the austere monastic practices of the early Desert Fathers and Mothers. Both were born to families with living memory of conversion from Judaism under the Inquisition and, while they emphasized the mystical practice of contemplative prayer in pursuit of Christian holiness, they were



Fig. 6.5 Juan (Mahershala Ali) teaches Little (Alex Hibbert) how to swim in the ocean. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

driven by the belief, unlike many of their Protestant rivals, that both faith and good works were necessary to salvation. As a result, Teresa and John earned the enmity of the Church hierarchy and many of the male members of the order Teresa founded, the Discalced Carmelites, as well (Mujica 2009).

In any case, such religious themes seem to operate ubiquitously in the background, much in the way that Mozart's 1780 *Laudate Dominum* plays as ambient, extra-diegetic accompaniment to the young boys' schoolyard roughhousing. Little, already taunted by peers during a game of sandlot football called "kill the carrier" (or *apropos* "smear the queer"), escapes momentarily from the crushing pressure of fraternity bearing down on him, literally and figuratively. Young Kevin (Jaden Piner), Little's only friend and future object of desire, jogs after him and cajoles him to demonstrate some pre-pubescent toughness as a means of general defense. In a compact moment of foreshadowing—Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) will be responsible in the second act for a teenaged Chiron's first and only sexual encounter as well as the violent assault that catalyzes the latter's transformation to the adult Black—we hear, in Latin, the famous lyrics of Psalm 117: "O praise the Lord, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people. / For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the Lord endureth forever. Praise ye the Lord." *Laudate Dominum*, "one of the most beautiful of its sort in all of church music," is the famous aria from the *Vesperae solennes de confessore*, K. 339 (Solemn vespers of the confessor) (Summer 2007, 29). Confessor is,

of course, another name for a male saint in the Catholic canon and Vespers are the evening prayers performed as part of the Liturgy of the Hours, marking the division of the day as the sun sets and the moon rises, sunlight giving way to moonlight. Layering the religious composition over the children's daytime activities in this way signals their coming evening rendezvous at the baptismal water's edge and sanctifies it. Drawing their latent homoerotic play from a scene of sublimated hostility presages the fateful reversal—homophobic violence drawing from prior sexual acts—once both become manifest in adolescence. The film score's main theme, *Moonlight Suite*, sounds like a slower, more pensive, anagrammatic transposition of Mozart's last choral work for the Salzburg Cathedral, where the great composer, himself a devout Roman Catholic, received his own baptism.⁵ The specifically Catholic subtext of the film is only underscored by Juan's immigration from Cuba (placing him among one of several black Catholic populations in Miami, including Dominicans, Haitians, Puerto Ricans, and Afro-Latinos from Central and South America), none of which is to say the film is pious in the least. It is neither pious nor impious. It is non-theistic and non-thetic, venturing through and beyond the logic of positions and propositions as such (Derrida 1987; Wigley 1995).

Not unlike *Pariah*'s main character, Alike (Adepero Oduye), Little's principal, or at least logically and chronologically prior, antagonism is with his troubled and unforgiving mother (herself besieged by a range of social forces and psychic conflicts that the older protagonist later comes to appreciate more fully). The frictions arising between him and the other boys in the neighborhood, especially the acute battle with Terrel (Patrick Decile) that unfolds in high school, seem to represent a generalization of the cruelty he first experiences at home. Little, we learn, hates his mother, as Juan hated his mother before him. The wrinkle introduced by Juan's affirmation of this intergenerational hatred is his realization, after her death, that he was also bonded with her and loved her *within* that hatred, that he misses that strange brew of feelings as an aspect of her absent presence, and that nothing more can be said about it at the moment, chiefly because there has been no opportunity or occasion for further exploration. Little's hatred of his mother, like Juan's, may very well be an inverted expression of her introjected hatred of him. And his experience of communal persecution in the outside world may feel like a perpetuation of the internal sense of

⁵For a discussion of the composition process behind the original score, see Shapiro (2017). Nicholas Britell's work was also nominated for an Academy Award.

maternal omnipotence and omnipresence that can come to characterize early childhood under particular conditions of crisis.

Little is able to crack the wall of that encircling aggression, posing a *question* in the heart-wrenching final scene of the first act about why he is hated so viscerally by so many, because Juan and Teresa's calm and stable interaction with the child presents a point of contrast to Paula's volatility. Once that other frame of reference comes to the fore, however, it allows Little to associate that fundamental maternal volatility, rightly or wrongly, with chronic drug use and he cannot explain how that use results in such a fragmented personality and painful relationship, except to think it is directly causal. That arithmetical equation prompts a break in the relation upon which the break is dependent in the first place: Paula uses drugs and Juan sells the drugs she uses, therefore Juan contributes directly to the cause of Paula's permanent disarray and Little's prolonged ordeal. Little exits stage left after the 'clarifying' exchange and Juan dies, somehow, in the interregnum. Little continues to receive Teresa's moral and material support through the end of the second act, keeping a room at her apartment for those times he is unable or unwilling to stay at his mother's place. On the day before Chiron exacts spectacular revenge on Terrel for inciting Kevin to violence (and attempting thereby to destroy Chiron and Kevin's already tenuous rapport), Paula shakes down her son for petty drug money while desperately chastising him for his relationship to Teresa ("I'm your mama! That bitch over there ain't no kin to ya. I'm your blood! Remember?"). Terrel, meanwhile, antagonizes Chiron in a thoroughly sexual manner—accusing him of a quasi-incestuous relationship with Teresa in the wake of Juan's death, insulting him with innuendos about his mother's reputation, and, finally, by threatening directly to rape him if he dares to resist his abasement—betraying a fascination with Chiron that prompts him, repeatedly, to solicit his undivided attention. In this one respect, Terrel is like *all* of the supporting characters in the cast and much of the viewing audience too, driven to distraction with curiosity, or anxiety, about what is on his mind (Fig. 6.6).

Critics, as noted, hailed *Moonlight* as romance and *bildungsroman*, novel for the subject introduced to those timeworn genres. Stephen Hall (2017), posting at the *Black Perspectives* blog, was struck by the film's ability to convey "the power of love to conquer time and space," suggesting that over the course of the film Chiron and Kevin are able to maintain a connection despite the many years and miles—and the painful betrayal—that separate them. Similarly, *New Yorker* columnist Richard Brody's suggestion that *Moonlight* avoids the usual clichés and incorporates the standard criticisms into its very



Fig. 6.6 Naomie Harris as Chiron's mother Paula. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

development turns on the language of character, consciousness and identity, all touchstones of the coming-of-age narrative. He avers:

[The] subject of *Moonlight* isn't blackness or gayness; it's one man whose many qualities include being black and being gay—and whose own keen awareness of his place in the world, and of its implications, is the high-pressure, high-heat forge of his densely solid, relentlessly opaque, yet terrifyingly vulnerable and fragile character. Blasting aside conventions, archetypes, and stereotypes, Jenkins conjures the birth of an individual's consciousness, the forging of a complex and multifaceted identity; he restores complexity to the very idea of identity, of the multiplicity as well as the singularity of being oneself—and he conveys his own primordial sense of wonder that art itself can conjure it. (Brody 2016)

Wonder is a major theme of the film, but not quite in the way the above passage would suggest. The protagonist wonders, precisely, about matters of character, consciousness and identity, and no less about matters of desire, intimacy, and pleasure, rather than arriving at, or even approaching, any final product in that regard. Nor does he come to adopt some 'life is a journey, not a destination' type of outlook. This wondering sensibility jars against the knowing attitude of those around him who seem to be saying, in one way or another, that a resolution, or at least some resolve, is on the horizon. Negatively, Chiron's tormentors, from his mother to his classmates, have decided *they* know who and what he is, long before he has any real

sense of himself. Positively, Juan and Teresa assure him that *he* will know who and what he is in due time and, in the pivotal baptismal scene, Juan declares: “At some point you gotta decide for yourself who you’re going to be. Can’t let nobody make that decision for you.” There is much in this material, and even more in the contextual media coverage of the film, to suggest that *Moonlight* features a process of empowering self-discovery and self-realization. But, to my mind, that reading of the film, or the limitation of the film to that aspect, pressgangs its fine details into the service of a coarser expectation—for character, consciousness, and identity; for desire, intimacy and pleasure—despite its very welcome and more evident demolition of conventions, archetypes, and stereotypes.

Chiron is better understood as a figure of wonder than of identification or desire. His experiences of contact—interpersonal, physical, sexual—and his relations of connection—with his mother, with Juan and Teresa, with Kevin—all seem to unfold without intimacy, rather than in its pursuit or preservation. While his early and persistent encounter with the aggression and hostility of his natal surround might reasonably result in a powerful estrangement, Chiron seems more likely struck by the strangeness of his, and all, social life, from the otherness of the body and the internal foreignness of desire to the inevitable failure to adequately grasp the entire system of operations that has composed the Liberty City of his earliest memories. Chiron moves about in states of *contemplation* that repeatedly peel away from the inevitable demands of material and symbolic wayfinding, whether the dead reckoning of his walking around the neighborhood as a child or the map reading of his dejected commute on the Metrorail as a teenager or, later, the global positioning of his spontaneous road trip from Atlanta to Miami as an adult.⁶ His relative silence, which likely indicates both an inhibition and a protective reticence linked to severe and prolonged mistreatment, is most nearly what defines his personae across the radical metamorphosis in physical appearance, from the soft and diminutive Little to the lanky and awkward Chiron to the hardened and muscular Black. And in

⁶Wayfinding is a term of art in the fields of architecture, design, geography, and psychology, comprising four basic elements: orientation, route decision, route monitoring, and destination recognition. Planners take such elements into account when imagining how best to analyze, facilitate and prevent the movement, gathering, distribution and dispersal of populations across public and private spaces of the natural and built environment (Gibson 2009; Kitchin and Freundschuh 2000).

that silence his mind seems absorbed not so much in longing or reflection as in mystery.⁷

From one angle, his moments of contemplation might resemble day-dreaming or even dissociation, two of the most notable examples being his blank stare in Mr. Pierce's high school classroom at the start of the second act (which is interrupted politely by the teacher and then derisively chalked up by an all-too-eager Terrel to Chiron's "woman problems") and his lingering gaze at his lieutenant, Travis (Stephon Bron), negotiating a drug transaction in the alley at the start of the third act (which is interrupted by the escalating tensions and rising voices between Travis and the two men he confronts). But the lack or surplus of meaning in each case is established formally by the fact that we have no access to the protagonist's thoughts at the time and the narrative elements that would lend coherence to the shot are edited out. The gaps in audience understanding, then, leave us wondering as well: we know that Mr. Pierce is teaching a lesson on the biochemistry of autoimmunity and Travis is collecting debts from delinquent customers, but what are they, or any of us, doing *really* when we make the grade or make money, when we make plans or make promises, or meaning or love? Chiron registers, again, the strangeness of our existence, of all existence, in a way that we might call radical; from the cellular structure of life to the elementary structures of kinship to the organizing principles of society to the basic contours of the natural world and the cosmological movement of the celestial bodies (Fig. 6.7).

"In the moonlight, black boys look blue": the observation sits at the crux of Juan's seaside parable, illuminating his paternal advice about the imperative of self-naming. He relays this tale to Little for several reasons: (1) at the level of phylogeny—to reveal that black people are diverse and can be found all over the world, due not only to the recent historical production of Diaspora (including the inauguration of racial slavery to the New World in and around the colonization of Cuba by the Catholic Monarchs of a newly unified Spain), but also to the larger evolutionary fact of human origination on the African continent; (2) at the level of ontogeny—to introduce

⁷This distinction corresponds to the three expressions of prayer in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: longing would be the hallmark of vocal prayer (in which one ritualistically embodies one's faith through recitation), reflection the hallmark of meditation (in which one evaluates the alignment between one's principles and practices), and mystery the hallmark of contemplation (in which one directly shares in an experience of God's ineffability).



Fig. 6.7 Chiron (Ashton Sanders) meets Kevin on the beach. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

the possibility of individual transformation and growth, and of migration to other locales; and (3) at the level of sociogeny—to establish the idea of tradition as selective inheritance and application of received wisdom among and across the generations that mediates between the other two levels. On this score, Juan passes on to Little a many-layered conception of *poiesis*: production, formation, invention.⁸ But, the *optical* effects of the titular moonlight described by the old Afro-Cuban woman are left conspicuously unremarked in both the film's dialogue and its critical reception to date.⁹ Yes, the cinematography makes great use of filtered lenses that enhance the blue hues and tints of the color palette, especially in those cool tonal scenes shot in or near the ocean. By day, the aquamarine of tropical waters plays subtly off the azure sky; by night, where the artificial light of advanced civilization reaches its limit, the dark ocean blurs without horizon into the blackness above, and only the shimmering of the moonlight across opaque surfaces admits of any distinction whatsoever. But what does this tell us about the effect of staging *this* story as properly nocturnal, as other than or outside of the diurnal states of conscious awareness and enlightenment?

⁸On the complex relations between phylogeny, ontogeny, and sociogeny and the concept of *poiesis* in the thought of Sigmund Freud, Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter, see Marriott (2011).

⁹Much has been made of the symbolism of water in the film, from the ocean to the bath. See, for instance, Gilber (2016).

I have always found something attractively perverse about artistic works that portray the hours of darkness, something that seems contrary to a universal guiding principle. [...] After all, moonlight does not *reveal*, in the straight-ahead, visual sense; it transforms, changing colors and contours in its shape-shifting light. (Attlee 2011, 5)

So writes James Attlee in his compelling travelogue, *Nocturne*. Moonlight does not reveal, it does not illuminate in the usual meaning of the word; it transforms, playing tricks on the eyes, confusing the mind. How so? Physicist Tony Philips offers the short answer: We don't know. The lunar blueshift remains unexplained for contemporary scientific research. We can only describe its effects and speculate about its causes. Black boys, like everyone and everything else, look blue because: "(1) moonlight steals color from whatever it touches, (2) if you stare at the gray landscape long enough, it turns blue, and (3) moonlight won't let you read" (Philips 2006). Given even this preliminary outline of the moon's deceptive luminescence, how could anyone fail to see the film as anything but an audiovisual poem about the beauty in the breakdown and failure of our powers of perception and apperception; or, rather, of their aesthetic deconstruction?

Chiron gives the lie to the fictions of narrative coherence, a point that is only highlighted by the visual disjuncture of his performance by three actors of rather varied stature, comportment and bearing. And for the good reason that his story is drawn from a life, or lives, that reckon privately and publicly with the inherent difficulty of understanding and the pronounced limits of any knowledge whatsoever.

Playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney wrote *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, on which *Moonlight* is based, in the summer of 2003, in the midst of graduating from Chicago's DePaul University and losing his mother to AIDS-related complications. At a crossroads, McCraney was filled with questions—about himself, about life, about going out into the world—that he could not turn to his mother to answer. Neither a traditional stage or screen play, *In Moonlight* served as a "circular map" for McCraney, a way to locate himself, socially and historically. (Brathwaite 2017)

When Les Fabian Brathwaite interviewed McCraney for *Out* magazine, he framed the project that became a cinematic landmark a bit more hopefully than the author himself. Which is to say the generic conventions of the coming-of-age story imputed to *Moonlight* seep into the space of the interview itself. McCrary's circular map was straightened out into a linear narra-

tive by Jenkins's adaptation, and the uncertainty, the worry and the wonder that mark the earlier text are domesticated, as it were, into the schema of an open ending. "I was very afraid of what my life would look like," McCrary tells Brathwaite. "I was very lonely. I still feel very alone most of the time and so I tried to figure out and put down as much of the memory that I could. I think it was an experiment in what life could look like" (Brathwaite 2017). An experiment, we must add, that the young writer inhabits in the present tense: "I was very lonely. I still feel very alone..." Elsewhere, in an interview for the *Guardian*, McCrary responds to Benjamin Lee's question—"Was it a difficult experience finally watching the film?"—as follows:

The first time, no. I think I was just so excited to see something that looked exactly like memories to me. *Then the glee of that wore off*—and I did remember feeling very depressed and very heartbroken about a lot of it. Mostly because these are not things that I have found the answers to and understand how they work. I actually ended up feeling that these are still looming questions in my life, questions about my own identity and my own self-worth that I'm still trying to figure out. Then seeing the film again, I was like shit, *these are still here and they're not going anywhere*. (Lee 2016b)

"Looking blue" is not, then, simply a visual impression of pigment and complexion in altered state. It is also a reference to the existence and experience of the blues and to those "blues people" whose creative genius McCrary participates in and renews, an acknowledgement that such work allows one to keep on keeping on, but does not, for all that, heal what ails (Davis 1998; Davis 2003; Floyd 1996; Jones 1999). This much would seem to be as evident as the visual significance of the film's title, or, as we'll see, the symbolism of the protagonist's name; but, yet again, the wide enthusiasm for an ultimately uplifting cultural event has overshadowed much of what is most moving, and most productively disturbing, about the enterprise. Chiron borrows his namesake from the oldest and most distinguished of the Centaurs of ancient Greek mythology, a Thessalian tribe of half-human, half-horse creatures. Chiron (pronounced *Kai-Ron*) was the son of the Titan Cronus, god of the harvest and seasons, and the Oceanid (or sea nymph) Philyra. Cronus was the son of Uranus, primordial god of the heavens, and Gaia, primordial god of the earth. Philyra was the daughter of the Titans Oceanus, god of the sea, and Tethys, goddess of fresh water. So Chiron



Fig. 6.8 Black (Trevante Rhodes) drives to Kevin's place after their reunion at the diner. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

inherits, on his mother's side, a profound connection to all of the waters of the world and, on his father's side, to the lands and the skies as well.¹⁰

Chiron's descent was, like all of the Greek myths, not without complication. Philyra had a son with Cronus while the latter assumed the form of a stallion, so that he might pursue her incognito and escape discovery by his wife (and sister) Rhea. This explains Chiron's hybrid embodiment (the other Centaurs were born from the mating of Centaurus with Magnesian mares). Philyra found Chiron's form to be repulsive and so sought distance from him. She begged the gods to spare her the shame of association and, as a result, was turned into a linden tree. The mother's repudiation seems resonant here, as does the graphic slippage between Philyra and Paula (which also means 'modest' or 'humble' or, better, 'small'). As Chiron was effectively abandoned by his mother, Philyra, and was never raised by his wayward father, Cronus, he was taken in by surrogate parents, Apollo—the god of light, truth, and prophecy, of art, music and poetry, and of healing—and his sister, Artemis—the goddess of the moon, of the wilderness, animals and hunting, of virginity and childbirth. Apollo and Artemis tutored Chiron in a range of skills, raising him to be a fabled teacher and healer in turn. So, beneath the above association of Juan and Teresa with Christian

¹⁰This account of Chiron et al. is drawn largely from Lamberton (1988). Accounts vary significantly across the vast literature, of course, but this narration should suffice for present purposes.

hagiography, we should cite these older mythological sources as additional inflection points (Fig. 6.8).

Chiron, due in part to his unique parentage, but more directly to his noble upbringing, was differentiated from the rest of the Centaurs, who were notorious for their lustfulness and ribaldry, and for their propensity for violence. Chiron was known to be wise and just, gifted in a myriad of ways, and eventually was credited with the discovery of ancient medicine based in botany, herbalism, and pharmacology. As fate would have it, Chiron's goodwill and good works were repaid with tragedy: he was injured by an errant missile, today's equivalent of a stray bullet. The mighty Hercules, in the course of executing the fourth of his legendary Twelve Labors, came into conflict with a group of Centaurs, some of whom sought refuge with their leader Chiron. One of the arrows Hercules shot into the group mistakenly struck Chiron instead and, because it had been dipped in the poisonous blood of the vanquished Hydra, a dreaded serpentine water monster dwelling in the passage to the underworld, caused Chiron intolerable pain. Not only intolerable, but also interminable, as Chiron's immortality prevented him from meeting what would otherwise be certain death. He was destined instead to an eternal suffering. Chiron prayed to Zeus for mercy and Hercules, anguished over his blunder against his mentor, negotiated an exchange in which Chiron would forfeit his immortality and die in the place of the Titan Prometheus, who had been punished by Zeus with a different manner of perpetual torture for bestowing fire without permission to humankind—shackled to a rock on Mount Caucasus, each day a giant eagle came and ate Prometheus's liver, only for the organ to regenerate each night, over and over again. Hercules thus liberated Prometheus from his imprisonment, the latter's sentence was commuted and his status restored. Zeus then memorialized the departed Chiron as the constellation Sagittarius, the Archer.

Chiron is, in this sense, the vanishing mediator between divine and human being, as well as between human and non-human animals. He is the great martyr whose sacrifice, brought about by another's zealous quest to redeem heroic manhood, consolidates the emergence of humanity as a break from or delinquency against the divine, rather than a simple reproduction of its image and likeness. Humanity is characterized here not by submission to or faith in the divine realm, however much worship of the gods and goddesses becomes institutional practice, but rather by resistance and rebellion, where, according to art historian Olga Raggio (1958), the "independence of human reason" is set in opposition to "the order of Zeus," the divine father. Reason, understood more capaciously as "divination, mathematics,

the alphabet, agriculture—every science and every art” as well as “the virtues of reverence and justice” becomes the gift of a precocious and disobedient son who veers off the path of the straight and narrow, against the patriarchy (Raggio 1958, 45). And he is aided and abetted by the first immortal to relinquish his greatest power, to *choose* the limitations and finitude of mortality, that is, a fundamental vulnerability and a radical openness to the contingencies of existence. The gift of *poesis*, again, is enabled by a combination of practical knowledge (*techne*) and practical action (*praxis*) illuminated by thinking at the limit (*theoria*).

There is something melancholic about this choice and one is put in mind of the competing moods and attitudes swirling about in the fictional life-world of *Moonlight* on that note. Chiron battles against the inheritance of unnamed and unnamable loss, try as he might not to fall fully into the cruelty of depression. We could think of this melancholia clinically, of course, since it is entirely understandable that Chiron would betray symptoms of the condition. “Melancholics,” writes psychoanalyst Jacques Hassoun, “come smack up against a radical absence, a withdrawal from time, a necrosis that attacks the body, from which life has withdrawn before it even was inscribed there.” He continues: “To pretend to live, a simulacrum facing a mere semblance of life, is the wearying task that rivets them to their inability to desire: what has been given them has immediately eluded them from the moment they entered existence” (Hassoun 1997, 54). How can we not see this semblance of life in the frailty of Chiron’s halting and unsuccessful attempts to gain agency (not to be confused with control or stability *per se*), his pantomime impersonation of the various roles he’s assigned in the stages of his development? This much appears congruent with the final query that Kevin poses to Black, after all these years apart, in the penultimate scene: “Who is you Chiron?” Chiron’s response is tepid and unconvincing: “I’m me, man, ain’t tryna be nothin’ else.” And his pivot to a confession of celibacy, while poignant, does no more to address the question, except to indicate that his focus and energies are elsewhere, withdrawn into himself when not employed half-heartedly in the underground economy. All Kevin concedes, finally, is that Black is not what he expected. Indeed (Fig. 6.9).

But perhaps it is better, given our protagonist’s Hellenistic cast, to think of this melancholia in a more ancient, pre-psychological sense, as related to the old theory of humors handed down by the system of Hippocratic medicine (Arikha 2007). Sickness, on this account, is brought on by an imbalance in or corruption of one or more of the four primary bodily fluids, or humors: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. Any such problems would result in the four major tempers. Do we not see, in the drama



Fig. 6.9 Kevin (André Holland) stands in the kitchen and asks Black, “Who is you, Chiron?” Image reproduced under terms of fair use

among black men struggling with and against the creative power of sexuality, these four humors represented in succession: Kevin, the sanguine (represented by spring, childhood, and air); Terrel, the choleric (represented by summer, youth, and fire); Juan, the phlegmatic (represented by winter, old age, and water); and Chiron, the melancholic (represented by autumn, adulthood, and earth)? Juan comes into Little’s life as a figure of wisdom, an old man or at least an OG (original gangster), who brings him to the healing water to feel its soothing qualities. Kevin befriends Little in his earliest years, laying the seeds for their later encounter, during which they bond over a common pleasure in the respite of the ocean breeze. Terrel comes to the fore in Chiron’s youth, ablaze with incendiary comments and searing criticism. And Black fully assumes his melancholic temper as an adult, rebuilding himself from the ground up, solid as the earth he walks on. The point is not to suggest that one position is better than another, or even that the positions are all equally bad, providing their own benefits and drawbacks. Rather, the lesson, if we can call it that, is in the constellation as it is assembled, the tension that obtains in the space outlined by connecting the dots. Temperament, after all, is not simply an index of the dominance of one of the humors over the others—or, as it happens, one pairing over the others. It signifies the attempt, always incomplete, always impossible, to find some creative way to balance oneself along the lines running between them.

Many have read Chiron’s search for *an ars vitae* suitable to the circumstances as a matter of self-affirmation, and then asserted that such affirmation is,

in this case, best found in the genuine acceptance and celebration of same sexuality, and of homoerotic desire more generally, as a means for greater connection within and beyond black communities. Crawley's meditation is exemplary:

Moonlight reminds me that black life is about a life touched and held, and that there is joy therein, that the touch I have sought and still seek is one that many of us desire, and that such desire is worthy of its pursuit. And *Moonlight* reminds me that we should seek out and find delight in black life, and that this joy and delight can be found in the general spaces, the regular places. That we can desire and find touch that frees; touch that makes us remember and makes us forget; touch that holds us close until we lovingly and intentionally embrace those parts of ourselves that we dared not speak into existence. Crawley (2017)

The reading is compelling as far as it goes. But Chiron's oracular message is not only or even most importantly concerned with whether we can and should be able to be ourselves, if you will, without apology or compunction. He demonstrates in the enigma of his own living that the question—who is you?—remains strictly unanswerable insofar as it is a claim to self-knowledge. In this respect, Chiron is foregrounding a certain Socratic insight, seen from awry, that is well stated by Rosemarie Waldrop in her poem, "All Greek to Some Greeks": "And Socrates knew that he / knew 'nothing.' And allowed the fact to split his 'I' into he who knows and he / who is known (yet cannot be known) to know nothing. And he oscillated between/them without ever finding rest" (Waldrop 2010, 118).

Chiron, the mythical Centaur, found rest only in the larger cosmos, converted to the light of a hundred stars at the center of our galaxy, and who's brilliance reflects, however faintly, upon the surface of our moon as well. The final tableau, wherein Kevin holds Black's head gently against his shoulder, invokes something of the look of the heavenly constellations, points of light amid the sumptuous darkness. "I think the ending we have is true to the experience of the characters, not myself," Jenkins said of his film. "I love happy endings, and even *obviously* happy endings. But I can't force one upon my characters" (Tate 2016). And so he refrained from that imposition and allowed something else to linger in those last moments, something other than a happy ending, something too ambiguous to be sad either. Were it not for Kevin's unexpected call in the night, as inexplicable to him as it was unexplained to Black, the protagonist would have carried on in his life of wonder and dream, astonished at the fact of his own existence, his arrival



Fig. 6.10 Little looks out over the ocean at dusk. Image reproduced under terms of fair use

and his journey, living in the aftermath of a miracle crossed indelibly by a scandal for the ages. Though we noted earlier that moonlight does not allow us to read, in general, there is one final ‘caveat lunar’ from the good scientists that seems relevant at this late hour: “Some people can read by moonlight,” we are told. “These people have ‘moonvision’” (Philips 2006). Chiron’s deeply affecting *solitude*, the one characteristic that seems to unite all of the policed and pursued figures of black masculinity addressed in this study, solicits the feel of the devastating, merciful truth expressed in one perfectly elegant line: “All isolation isn’t loneliness, or yearning” (Henry-Smith 2016).

We can thank the stars for that (Fig. 6.10).

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