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"I knew you wasn't soft"—masculinity in Barry Jenkins' Moonlight and If Beale Street Could Talk

By

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Abstract

The focus of this study is black masculinity presented in films written and directed by Barry Jenkins, as the director's approach to African American manhood is arguably modern and offers a new, fresh perspective. As this dissertation asserts, characters created by Jenkins are complex and not easy to categorize, breaking with stereotypes that might be present in the media and the minds of the general audiences. The director's films, therefore, stand in opposition to the mainstream Hollywood pictures of African Americans, as they focus on showcasing black experiences without relying on conventions and prevailing stereotypes. As the focus of this study is on representations of black masculinities, it also involves discussion of different types of manhood and their perceived expressions, as a more nuanced understanding of these is imperative to interpret images and characters that Jenkins presents. Additionally, to help to recognize and appreciate the director's methods of filming and showcasing his characters, this dissertation also brings to attention the notion of counter-cinema.

Keywords: Masculinity, Films, Black Men, Barry Jenkins, Counter Cinema

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Introduction

Mainstream American cinema reaches worldwide audiences and presents them with images that very often have little to do with real life. As the audience, we are accustomed to representations that often include stereotypical views or fail to cover certain aspects of life. Due to the media coverage often neglecting minorities and people of colour, "'white' becomes an overarching norm," according to Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack, "against which all other races are measured and compared."[1] Similarly, the scholars propose that mainstream pictures "largely reflec[t] the perspectives of white individuals," hence minorities' "issues of social powers and oppression"[2] are often not included in the Hollywood narratives. Therefore, features that comply with the mainstream ideas and forms of representation are often shot just to make a profit, as opposed to leaving an impact on the audience. Using stereotypes that, as Walter Lippmann defines, function as "pictures in our heads" offering "an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world,"[3] this kind of filmmaking focuses on quantity—or mass audiences and profit—rather than the quality of the pictures. Such an approach is countered in many ways by independent and art-house cinema. Filmmakers who prefer to go against the Hollywood notion of making movies often choose to include groups that are underrepresented and show images that relate more closely to diverse social realities. Independent films can not only show appreciation to people from all walks of life but also present reality which can be honest, brutal and harsh.

One of the directors that represents the art-house movement of the current moment is Barry Jenkins. His films focus on showcasing the black experience in America, as he argues, making this experience speak to the general audience. Jenkins' approach to filmmaking centres on his characters—their feelings, thoughts, motivations. Rather than focusing on their actions, the director underlines their drive and reasoning, indicating inner worlds and sublimated emotions. Using close-ups and slow pacing, Jenkins encourages the audience to feel and think with the characters on screen. What is also important to note is that the director's pictures engage profoundly with histories and themes of black American cinema. Thanks to the lighting, makeup, and non-stereotypical, sincere approach, Jenkins' characters can be said to affirm blackness, proving to be a positive representation and a reinforcing

[1] Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack, *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 139.
[2] Ott and Mack, 143.
[3] Walter Lippmann, "Public Opinion," http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6456/pg6456-images.html.

image for the broader audience as well. One of the prominent aspects in Jenkins' films is his approach to black masculinity—the director focuses on black lives, particularly black men, and their approaches to life and diverse manners of expressing themselves. Jenkins' representation of black manliness rivals that of the mainstream Hollywood cinema and arguably provides the audience with a more accurate and complex portrayal of what it is like to be a black man in the United States. Moreover, and most relevant to this discussion, Jenkins presents his audience with intersectional aspects of manhood and its expression, showing the overlapping issues and qualities with which men have to struggle while trying to establish themselves and their status in society.

When it comes to portrayals of masculinity in general, and black masculinity in particular, Hollywood cinema has not offered many positive examples—with a few notable exceptions such as *Black Panther*, and the pioneering studio-supported work of Spike Lee, Lee Daniels, or John Singleton. In terms of masculinity, constructing its characters on outdated, patriarchal values, most mainstream cinema offers a stereotypical view of men who are tough and strive for success. Representations of men in films reaching worldwide audiences often include men that are hypermasculine, hypersexual, and blatantly homophobic—qualities found for example in many Quentin Tarantino's films. Under the pretence that "real men" do not show any emotions, negate everything that is effeminate, and focus on their strength and physical appearance, the stereotypical views that originated in the past are still circulating not only within the film industry but also in the minds of many people. Such ideas and opinions, when internalized from a very young age, can influence men's self-esteem and make it impossible for them to express and explore themselves freely.

Nevertheless, to fully understand the concept of what has been called toxic masculinity, its representation, and its impact on the audiences, we need to realize its ideas, origins, and different expressions. Hence the first chapter of this dissertation focuses on manliness and its variations. This part focuses first on the definition of masculinity, as well as its different forms; then the chapter moves on to discuss representations of black masculinity, its main traits, and how it can circulate in distinctive ways culturally, in the black community and beyond. Next in the chapter comes the analysis of queer manliness and how it inflects upon notions of masculinities presented earlier. Such intersectional analysis provides an insight into the hardships of men who find themselves facing and incorporating diverse and potentially competing identities. The first chapter also goes into more detail about counter

cinema, providing the necessary explanation to fully understand and appreciate films made by Jenkins and other art-house directors.

The second chapter centres on *Moonlight* (2016), Jenkins' second and most critically acclaimed feature to date. This section provides an analysis of the film's masculinities, following its three-act structure and focusing on central characters. Keeping in mind the intersectional identities portrayed and their impact on men, especially in their youth, the chapter, just like the film, explores what it means to be a young black gay man growing up in America.

The third and last chapter presents an analysis of Jenkins' latest feature, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018). Set in the 1970s and adapted from James Baldwin's novel, the film introduces masculinities of various black men, making an interesting overview of past and present-day expressions of manliness. This part of my thesis examines said men and their approach to life and its hardships, and to an extent their linked intersectional experiences. Moreover, it explores the dualities found within a person's expression of themselves, proving that Jenkins' characters are not one-dimensional, but rather full of complexities that, arguably, more intensely and creatively reflect black experience.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

Portrayals of masculinity have been present in films since the beginning of the industry itself. It remains an integral part of motion pictures and is often studied by sociologists, psychologists, and media scholars amongst others, due to its impact on the audience and the perception of men. This chapter will focus on defining manhood, centring mostly on black and queer manliness—their representations within the film industry are often distorted and stereotypical which is why I believe Jenkins makes them the focus of his movies—and its portrayal and influence. Additionally, this chapter will also discuss counter cinema, as, due to being in opposition to main Hollywood trends, art-house films have the potential to present masculinity in all its forms without submitting to prevailing stereotypes, as a further section will show.

1.1 Definitions of Masculinity

Masculinity comes in many different forms and variations, the construct affecting us even without our conscious knowledge, therefore, it is hard to define and conceptualise. As Mimi Schippers characterises it, masculinity is "a social position, a set of practices, and the effects of the collective embodiment of those practices on individuals, relationships, institutional structures, and global relations of domination."[4] Masculinity, therefore, is not something that people own, but rather that they "move through and produce by engaging in masculine practices."[5] When it comes to the practices itself, Patricia Sexton suggests that "male norms stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body."[6] Such qualities are usually associated with manhood and prove to be the accepted male forms of behaviours.

The leading theorist of masculinity is a sociologist Raewyn Connell whose research proves useful in the task of trying to understand how manhood works. Connell considers masculinities as plural, for it is hard to distinguish a single paradigm of manliness that would be present everywhere[7] and defines them as "actual patterns of conduct or representation."[8]

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[4] Mimi Schippers, 'Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony,' *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (2007), 86-7.
[5] Schippers, 86.
[6] Mike Donaldson, 'What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?,' *Theory and Society* 22, no. 5 (1993), 644.
[7] Raewyn (Robert) Connell, 'Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities,' *Social Thought & Research* 24, no. 1/2 (2001), 16.
[8] Connell, 20.

Connell claims that various lifestyles, societies, and historical periods form and enact masculinity in different ways,[9] hence, while studying the concept, the focus should be on a particular group rather than all men alike. Moreover, masculinities are collective—behaviour patterns defined by them are present in unofficial groups, occupational places, and various establishments.[10] As Connell also points out, manhood is present within culture, cultivating distorted images of manliness which require men to submit to such expressions of masculinity.[11] Furthermore, as the scholar proposes, masculinities are actively constructed—the enactment of the gendered patterns of behaviour is what makes manhood an active product of societal norms instead of a predetermined manly disposition internalized in the early stages of boyhood. [12]

A significant concept in masculinity studies is its hegemonic variation. As Mike Donaldson explains, hegemony "is about the winning and holding of power and the formation . . . of social groups in that process."[13] Concerning masculinity, "hegemonic," as writes Connell, "signifies a position of cultural authority and leadership, not total dominance; other forms of masculinity persist alongside." Nevertheless, the dominant form is notably more privileged—as pointed out by Connell, "some [masculinities] may be actively dishonoured, . . . some are socially marginalized, . . . some are exemplary." Hegemonic masculinity encompasses stereotypical male traits, a definition of which is proposed clearly by Donaldson and is worth quoting at length:

> A culturally idealized form, it is both a personal and a collective project, and is the common sense about breadwinning and manhood. It is exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent. It is pseudo-natural, tough, contradictory, crisis-prone, rich, and socially sustained. While centrally connected with the institutions of male dominance, not all men practice it, though most benefit from it. Although cross-class, it often excludes working-class and black men. It is a lived experience, and an economic and cultural force, and dependent on social arrangements.[14]

Hegemonic masculinity, therefore, benefits men that can fit into the white, rich, and successful "male norm" stereotype. It mostly disregards and, at times, oppresses other masculinities and groups of men who do not meet its standards. Additionally, what is

[9] Connell, 16.
[10] Connell, 18.
[11] Connell, 18.
[12] Connell, 18.
[13] Donaldson, 'What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?,' 645.
[14] Donaldson, 'What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?,' 645-46

imperative to point out is that, as Connell writes, such type of manliness "is hegemonic not just in relation to other masculinities, but in relation to gender order as a whole." Hence hegemonic masculinity enables the advantage that men commonly share over women [15] and further impacts men's and women's social standings. The awareness of such a form of masculinity is essential to understand men of colour and their expressions of manhood.

1.2. Black Masculinity

As stated before, masculinities come in different forms and versions, influencing each other and the present societal norms, however, this section will centre on black masculinity as such is the focus of Jenkins' films and this dissertation. There are many different expressions of black manliness for, as previously stated, black men's expression of masculinity differs depending on their social standing, upbringing, culture, sexuality, and experiences. Nonetheless, it has been argued that the way that men of African descent perform their manliness has been greatly influenced by the history of colonization and slavery, as well as institutionalized racism and systematic oppression. As writes Ajamu A. Banjoko, "because of the perceived potency of the black male body, black men have posed a consistent and unremitting threat to white masculinity and to the white power structure"[16] which resulted in racism and mistreatment of men of colour, as well as cultivation of stereotypes and misleading representations. Colonization, as observes Pierre W. Orelus, "permitted the emergence of white male supremacy" for, by having a higher status than those colonized, white European men "put black males in a subordinate position."[17] He further suggests that black men's manhood "is founded in their colonial past, and this has been the hegemonic lens through which racist individuals and white supremacists have perceived and treated them."[18] Such perception of men of colour, as writes Orelus, "range[s] from perceiving them as untamed, sexual objects built for manual and physical work, to seeing them as lazy and unintelligent."[19] Furthermore, Banjoko notes that "the masculine positioning of African American males is often times viewed as being defiant, reluctant, or aggressive behaviour

[15] Connell, 'Understanding Men,' 17.
[16] Ajamu A. Banjoko, 'Adolescent African American Males and Hegemonic Aggressive Masculinity,' *Counterpoints* 392 (2011), 137.
[17] Pierre W. Orelus, 'Black Masculinity under White Supremacy: Exploring the Intersection between Black Masculinity, Slavery, Racism, Heterosexism, and Social Class,' *Counterpoints* 351 (2010), 65.
[18] Orelus, 66.
[19] Orelus, 68.

that warrants restrictions,"[20] which is why systemic oppression and institutionalized racism are silently sanctioned by the governments.

Widespread representations of black males as violent and aggressive very arguably impact both their social standing and their manifested manliness, which in the view of many can turn into hypermasculinity—"an exaggerated form of stereotypic gendered display of power and consequent suppression of signs of vulnerability."[21] As Gwen J. Broude explains, "key to the concept of protest masculinity are high levels of physical aggression," as well as "destructiveness, low tolerance for delay of gratification, crime, drinking, and similar dispositions."[22] Expressing this "protest masculinity" is an "attempt to gain social and cultural acceptance"[23] as portrayals of black men in media tend to focus on hyper heterosexuality, and, in the words of Herman Gray, "drugs, sexism, pleasure, excess, nihilism, defiance, pride, and the cool pose of disengagement."[24] Such images are visible not only in films—examples of which could be Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (2004) or John Singleton's *Shaft* (2000)—but also in televised media content, an example of which is the narrative surrounding the Central Park Five in the 1989 Central Park jogger case. Even though now masculinities presented in media to men of colour may differ, they continue to cultivate the prevailing stereotypes, which is why such a great number of men of African descent internalize and express such patterns of masculinity.

Another important point to make in regards to black manhood and its expression is the social position of men of colour. As noticed by Antonia Randolph, hegemonic masculinity can powerfully create the subordination of men excluded from the elite. Hence "subordinated men . . . lack institutional power."[25] This, in turn, forces black men to be "at the intersection of Blackness and maleness, while also being at the centre of a form of popular culture and the fringes of dominant society."[26] Men of colour, even though present in the media and often sexualized or glorified for their achievements in sports, lack the social power and standing of other men. This point is also brought up by Matthew Henry in his 2004 article on the film

[20] Banjoko, 'Adolescent African American Males,' 138.
[21] Banjoko, 139.
[22] Gwen J. Broude, 'Protest Masculinity: A Further Look at the Causes and the Concept,' *Ethos* 18, no. 1 (1990), 103.
[23] Banjoko, 139.
[24] Herman Gray, 'Black Masculinity and Visual Culture,' *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (1995), 401.
[25] Antonia Randolph, '"Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful": Black Masculinity and Alternative Embodiment in Rap Music,' *Race, Gender & Class* 13, no. 3/4 (2006), 203.
[26] Randolph, 203.

Shaft. As the author observes, "on the one hand, as a *black* within a racist social and political hierarchy, he has neither power nor privilege; yet, on the other hand as a *male* within a still patriarchal power structure, he has both."[27] As Henry points out, within the patriarchal structure, black men can be seen to have power over women, no matter their race. However, within the society and political system men of colour are still perceived as less important and are denied their voice. It is this double bind, or duelling problematic of potential patriarchal privilege and disempowering white privilege that creates a paradox for clearly situating or defining black masculinity within hierarchies of power and social mobility. Nevertheless, such inconsistency is present within many different divisions amongst men—one of which is sexuality and its expression, which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

1.3. Queer Masculinity

Keeping these issues and social complexities in view, a further intersectional position relating to queer masculinities raises additional critical and conceptual questions. Within the LGBT community, one can find many different expressions of masculinity as people identifying as queer often do not conform to the heteronormative positioning of gender roles and express their gender identity and behavioural patterns freely, regardless of societal norms. In this analysis, however, I want to focus on masculinities of gay men as they experience most blatant homophobia due to their perceived effeminate nature, which is present in one of the films that will be discussed later. G. W. Dowsett states that homosexuality is more than just sexual orientation—as the scholar notes, being gay "encompasses an internalized identity as gay, a citizenship, identifiable patterns of gay social relations, and a culturally inscribed body dressed as gay, desired as gay."[28] Therefore, media portrayals of gay men often misrepresent said group for they repeatedly use what Bryant Keith Alexander describes as homotropes—"expected, stereotypical, or overly generalized characteristics" of gay men which include "oversensitivity, the use of double entendre, snapping, throwing shade, swishy walking" or "flamboyantly fabulous gays."[29] However, as Peter Nardi observes, "gay men exhibit a multiplicity of ways of 'doing' masculinity" as

[27] Matthew Henry, 'He Is a "Bad Mother*$%@!#": "Shaft" and Contemporary Black Masculinity,' *African American Review* 38, no. 1 (2004): 119–26, https://doi.org/10.2307/1512235, 120.
[28] G. W. Dowsett, 'I'll Show You Mine, If You'll Show Me Yours: Gay Men, Masculinity Research, Men's Studies, and Sex,' *Theory and Society* 22, no. 5 (1993), 703.
[29] Bryant Keith Alexander, 'Queer(y)Ing Masculinities,' in *Global Masculinities and Manhood*, ed. Ronald L. Jackson and Murali Balaji (University of Illinois Press, 2011), 52–74, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1xcg9p.7, 64.

"some enact the strongest of masculine stereotypes through body building and sexual prowess, whereas others express a less dominant form through spirituality of female impersonation."[30] Hence, numerous gay men "blend the 'traditional' instrumental masculinity with the more 'emotional' masculinity that comes merely by living their everyday lives."[31] Defining gay masculinity, therefore, proves to be a challenging task as many men do not conform to stereotypical representation of being effeminate.

Similarly to black men, gay men also face hardships due to "institutionalized compulsory heterosexuality that surrounds them,"[32] and hegemonic masculinity which, according to Connell, is "explicitly and exclusively heterosexual." The author states that "to many people, homosexuality is a *negation* of masculinity, and homosexual men must be effeminate," due to the perception of men as being tough and strong, without showing signs of vulnerability. Hence, homophobia is so closely tied with manhood for "antagonism toward homosexual men may be used to define masculinity."[33] That is why, according to Dowsett, numerous gay men "experienced the painful foreclosure of the feminine, and the subsequent sense of exclusion and desertion as [they are] taught to be a 'man'"[34] and change their behaviour. Additionally, as a subordinate group, gay men cannot use the privileges granted by hegemonic manliness—as Dowsett points out, problems with which gay men have to struggle vary from "discrimination . . . in housing and insurance" to "recognition of gay relationships for taxation" to "adoption and care of children."[35] In the same way as black males, as men, gays profit from the patriarchal system—as Connell states they "enjoy the general advantages of masculine gender" and "draw economic benefits from the overall subordination of women"[36]—however, as gay, they suffer from institutionalized heteronormative social structure. This intersection of identities—gender, race, sexuality—is rarely recognized by the public and, in turn, filmmakers, which allows for the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

1.4. Intersectionality

Having discussed both black and queer masculinities, another vital approach to understanding Jenkins' films, as well as this study, is the intersectional aspect of manhood

[30] Peter M. Nardi, *Gay Masculinities* (SAGE, 2000), 1-2.
[31] Nardi, 2.
[32] Connell, 748.
[33] Connell, 736.
[34] Dowsett, 'I'll Show You Mine, If You'll Show Me Yours,' 700.
[35] Dowsett, 703.
[36] Connell, 'A Very Straight Gay,' 737.

and personal identity. Intersectionality creates a space for those who are otherwise disadvantaged based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, class, or wealth. Efforts and practices towards anti-discrimination, as noted by Kimberle Crenshaw, usually focus on a particular subject—gender, race, etc—rather than its intersectional aspects. Due to centring on those that are "otherwise-privileged," those who are "multiply burdened" are further marginalized in an already discriminated group. Crenshaw's article focuses on black women and their experience in particular, however, it addresses the discrimination faced by all those that are disadvantaged. As the scholar notes, "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated." [37] Similarly, any analysis of black and gay masculinities has to focus on its overlapping qualities and experience.

Being both black and queer means a person is not only discriminated against because of their race but also their sexual preference and gender expression. Orelus writes that heterosexual men of African origin "often try to associate themselves with the social, political, and ideological club to which privileged, straight white men belong," sharing their conservative values and "embracing the white culture."[38] Therefore, as mentioned before, they perceive homosexuality as "unmanly" and a threat not only to their acquired values but also to their social standings as black men. The prejudice caused by both racism against people of colour and an additional layer of homophobia from straight black men, paired with systemic inequality and oppression causes black gay men to suppress their feelings and hide their sexual orientation and identity. Hence Edward Brown II proposes that black gay men "wear many masks as a means of survival," however, underneath them "lays no vestige of a healthy identity." The scholar claims that gay men of colour have been deprived "of the possibility of self-esteem and self-love" due to homophobia and racism both present and in the past. Brown also points out that such negative attitudes towards black gay men are continued by them themselves due to social pressure.[39] That is why, in the words of Brown, gay men of African descent "do not want to identify at all with being gay," and, instead,

[37] Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1989), 140.
[38] Orelus, 'Black Masculinity under White Supremacy,' 82.
[39] Edward Brown, 'We Wear the Mask: African American Contemporary Gay Male Identities,' *Journal of African American Studies* 9, no. 2 (2005), 29.

"have created a new hierarchy of identities or labels to substitute their sexual identity." According to the scholar the most prominent and problematic is the term "down low," or "DL," which describes "identities ranging from those men who are aware that they are gay, but do not profess their sexual identity, to those men who are otherwise convinced that they are heterosexual and only have sex with men." The term was coined to avoid any association with homosexuality and, subsequently, suppress any feminine connotations that come with identifying as gay for, as Brown observes, many black gay men feel that "they must be homophobic and divide their sexual identity from their black male identity in order to be accepted and to maintain a high ranking in the hierarchy of men."[40] In other words, to maintain their already disadvantaged social standing as black men, gay black men hide their true identity and take on the homophobic stance imposed by hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Brown proposes that such "avoid[ance of] social stigma by not acknowledging their gay sexuality" might be perceived as internalized homophobia for such behaviour "diminishes their authentic identity."[41] Hence, those who choose to express themselves openly and embrace their feminine side are persecuted more than those who choose to live as down low. As Brown says, "sexism and heterosexism practiced by both heterosexuals and homosexuals are at the root of the many problems gay men face in forging a homosexual identity,"[42] as they are oppressed not only by the society but also their community.

An example of such oppression is found in the historical figure of James Baldwin, a gay black American writer and essayist, whose work focused on the Civil Rights Movement, black men's experience in America, as well as sexuality and relationships. Baldwin, whose oeuvre will be discussed in more detail in one of the next chapters dedicated to *If Beale Street Could Talk*, was openly gay and was not afraid to speak about it. This stance proved to be problematic for many believed he should focus his attention on fighting for civil rights rather than writing about male love. As observed by Josep M. Armengol, other black writers of the Civil Rights Movement "equate[d] blackness with heterosexual virility, thereby diminishing black homosexuality in general, and Baldwin's homosexuality in particular." The scholar further claims that while, within the community, blackness was considered "as the epitome of masculinity," Baldwin was criticised for "lacking in masculinity and, therefore, blackness."

[40] Brown, 30.
[41] Brown, 32-3.
[42] Brown, 34.

An exceptional essayist and activist, in his times Baldwin was not as celebrated and listened to as the other male writers due to his sexual orientation.

The concept of masculinity and femininity baffled the author himself. In his 1985 article "Here Be Dragons," Baldwin proposes that all people are androgynous for "there is a man in every woman and a woman in every man." Throughout this article, Baldwin discusses what it means to be a black gay man in America and how it impacts a person's identity. Following what was stated before, the writer admits that being gay was perceived as unmanly. In Baldwin's words:

> The condition that is now called gay was then called queer. The operative word was faggot and, later, pussy, but those epithets really had nothing to do with the question of sexual preference: You were being told simply that you had no balls.[43]

Such standing of black gay men exists to this day, hence many of them prefer to hide their sexual orientation or consider themselves as down low. Putting on a facade of heterosexual hypermasculinity, they hide their true selves and continue to perpetuate the homophobic stance which caused them to hide in the first place. For this reason, an analysis of intersectional aspects of the lives of a particular group of people is essential to fully understand the problems they are facing and the condition in which they found themselves. With an understanding of all aspects of masculinities and their performance, one can realize that images of men presented and cultivated by the mainstream film and television industries are simplistic and stereotypical. That is why filmmakers who choose to present their characters realistically often turn to different forms of cinema, one of which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

1.5. Counter Cinema

As this paper focuses on Barry Jenkins and masculinity in his features, it is important to discuss the concept of counter cinema and its different forms, focusing on art-house cinema of which Jenkins is a part. The broadest definition of counter cinema includes films which stand in opposition to classical Hollywood filming style and mainstream cinema and are in turn not "distributed by the major studios or their related subsidiaries," as well as prove to be "a useful tool for social commentary and change,"[44] highlighting qualities of the notion they belong to—feminist, art-house, avant-garde, black, queer, Third Cinema, and others. Out of

[43] James Baldwin, 'Here Be Dragons Or Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,' *Playboy*, January 1985.
[44] Christina Lane, *Feminist Hollywood: From Born in Flames to Point Break* (Wayne State University Press, 2000), 21.

many different categories of counter cinema, as stated before, this paper will focus on art-house films. What should be noted is that, according to Bert Cardullo, "the 'art' in art-house cinema . . . differentiates itself from the art of other cinemas" for "art films are usually expressive of national concerns" and "attempt to conform with canons of taste established in the existing 'high' arts." In other words, while drawing on nation-specific experiences, art-house films elevate their status from being only a source of entertainment to being a thought-provoking commentary through the usage of artful methods and practices.[45]

Another characteristic of an art film is a protagonist without, as Cardullo says, "clearly defined and singular desires" which influences the narrative and causes it to be "less clearly structured by explicit temporal markers . . . and enables the self-conscious use of style to evoke atmosphere and ambiguity."[46] While the mainstream cinema shows characters with a clear objective, with the story often containing itself within the three-act structure, art-house cinema allows a director to exercise their freedom with the narrative and build more intricate characters. As stated by David Bordwell, "the cause-effect linkage of events" in art films "become[s] looser, more tenuous," focusing on the reality of the events.

This is in agreement with another trait of art house films, which is its focus on "realism and authorial expressivity." As Bordwell highlights, art films show "realistic—that is, psychologically complex characters," together with actual, realistic struggles and places."[47] This kind of cinema, as he further explains, "permit[s] characters to express and explain their psychological states" as well as take their time with reacting for art films are "less concerned with action than reaction." Instead of rushing through the events and focusing on a character's emotions only in pivotal moments as in classical Hollywood narration, art films take time to explore the protagonist's feelings and inner struggles—as Bordwell puts it, "it is a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes."[48]

What is also present in many art-house films is ambiguity and uncertainty. As Bordwell writes, these are used to give a sense of realism or as an "authorial commentary," as the film "hesitates, suggesting character subjectivity, life's untidiness, and author's vision." Similarly, many art films are open-ended, for, in the words of Bordwell, "given the film's episodic

[45] Bert Cardullo, 'Art-House Cinema, Avant-Garde Film, and Dramatic Modernism,' *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 45, no. 2 (2011): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.5406/jaesteduc.45.2.0001, 2.
[46] Cardullo, 3.
[47] David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice,' *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (1979), 57.
[48] Bordwell, 58.

structure and the minimization of character goals, the story will often lack a clear-cut resolution."[49] This further impacts a film's realism as the audience is left without having all their questions answered. The open ending also provides space for further analysis of the film and discussions about not only the story, but also its relevance and connection to real life.

Another form of counter cinema worth discussing in regards to Jenkins is black counter cinema. This kind of cinema, as writes Manthia Diawara, "is any Black-produced film outside the constraints of the major studios." Due to standing in opposition to mainstream Hollywood images of black people, these films "put on the screen Black lives and concerns that derive from the complexity of Black communities." These forms of Black-centred cinema, according to Diawara, "provide alternative ways of knowing Black people that differ from the fixed stereotypes of Blacks in Hollywood."[50] Keeping the focus on black communities, such films can often perform the act of marginalizing white people to focus on black experiences. As Diawara says, filmmakers who choose to work on Black-centred films "investigate the possibilities of representing alternative black images on the screen; bringing to the foreground issues central to Black communities in America; criticizing sexism and homophobia in the Black community; and deploying Afrafemcentric discourses that empower Black women."[51] This approach to filmmaking is visible in Jenkins' features, as in his movies the director focuses on black struggles, love, and experience in the world of systemic oppression and racism.

[49] Bordwell, 60.
[50] Manthia Diawara, 'Black American Cinema: The New Realism,' in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (Routledge, 1993), 7.
[51] Diawara, 5.

Chapter Two: *Moonlight*

Barry Jenkins, a 40-years-old director and scriptwriter, is only at the beginning of his career, however, he has already gained a prominent status. With only three feature films, *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008), *Moonlight* (2016), and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018), Jenkins is renowned for his deliberate and precise aesthetic, slow pacing, and focus on characters' emotions rather than just their actions. The director's films focus on the experience of minority groups, mostly of African descent, in America. This chapter will focus on his second feature, analysing its representation of black masculinity, both in terms of straight and gay identities.

Moonlight is Jenkins' most critically acclaimed and well-known picture. The story, which focuses on a black gay man named Chiron, is told in three parts, covering his childhood, teenage years, and adulthood. The film was very well received, an example of which is Mark Kermode calling it "an astonishingly accomplished work—rich, sensuous and tactile, by turns heartbreaking and uplifting;"[52] as well as a review by Peter Bradshaw, who stated that "the film has power and generosity" and "leaves you feeling somehow mentally smarter and physically lighter;"[53] Benjamin Lee called *Moonlight* "both proudly black and refreshingly queer."[54] Nonetheless, the feature's critical acclaim does not only show up in reviews. Jenkins' work was nominated for numerous accolades, including eight Academy Awards, six Golden Globes, and four BAFTAs, among others. *Moonlight* won the Oscars for Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actor in a Supporting Role, and Best Picture which in turn made Jenkins only the second black person to direct a winner of the latter award. The film's success is also visible in numbers—with a budget of 4,000,000 dollars, worldwide *Moonlight* grossed over 65,000,000 dollars.[55]

What made *Moonlight* so popular with both critics and casual moviegoers, apart from its aesthetic, soundtrack, and unusual approach to black masculinity, is arguably its ability to

[52] Mark Kermode, 'Moonlight Review – a Five-Star Symphony of Love,' *The Guardian*, 19 February 2017, sec. Film, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/19/moonlight-review-five-star.
[53] Peter Bradshaw, 'Moonlight Review – a Visually Ravishing Portrait of Masculinity,' *The Guardian*, 16 February 2017, sec. Film, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/16/moonlight-review-masculinity-naomie-harris.
[54] Benjamin Lee, 'Moonlight Review – Devastating Drama Is Vital Portrait of Black Gay Masculinity in America,' *The Guardian*, 3 September 2016, sec. Film, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/03/moonlight-review-devastating-drama-is-vital-portrait-of-black-gay-masculinity-in-america.
[55] 'Moonlight,' Box Office Mojo, accessed 10 July 2020, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl2558428673/.

engage and influence the viewer. The film's quiet mood and use of silences force the audience to assimilate with the characters on screen and think about their inner turmoil. *Moonlight* speaks about various problems, like drug abuse, incarceration, unstable upbringings, and poverty in black communities, however, it does so in a way that translates to wider audiences with differing experiences. As Jenkins points out, "people are bringing things to the film" and, therefore, "not everyone's going to get the same thing out of it."[56] Its reception only proves that even though the film focuses on a black gay man growing up in Liberty City, Miami, the story can be said to be universal, and was able to attract a large number of viewers, many from diverse backgrounds.

As stated before, *Moonlight* is a coming of age story of Chiron. Jenkins based his film on a screenplay *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* written by Tarell Alvin McCraney, a black gay playwright. The story is told in three acts—Little, Chiron, and Black—following the protagonist as a child, teenager, and adult. What is notable is that the three versions of Chiron were played by three different actors who had never met, for, as Jenkins admitted, he wanted the audience to focus on "spirituality and the emotions of the characters as reflected in their eyes," instead of their actual physical appearances.[57] Within the three-act story, we see Chiron turn from a quiet, harassed child to a bullied, misunderstood teenager, and then to a well-built, hyper-masculine drug dealer. During his transformation, the audience is presented with multiple portrayals of masculinity, not only that of the main character but also of the men surrounding him. The subsequent analysis will follow the three-act structure of the story, studying and analysing the protagonist as well as the other men in the feature.

2.1. "Little"

The first part of *Moonlight* titled "Little" takes its name from Chiron's nickname, which is due to his height and small, skinny figure. In this section of the film, we find out about his mother's, Paula, addiction to crack cocaine, as well as Chiron's relationship with his peers and the world around him. Additionally, in this part, we are introduced to Juan and Teresa, a couple that becomes parental figures to Chiron when Paula's addiction deepens.

When we first meet Chiron, he is running away from his bullying peers. As the camera follows, running with him, we are encouraged to identify with the boy from the very

[56] *Moonlight Director Barry Jenkins on Changing the Perception of Manhood,* 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7_GimSKeiw&list=WL&index=6.
[57] *Moonlight Director Barry Jenkins on Changing the Perception of Manhood*.

beginning. This is further influenced by the following scene, in which Chiron hides in an abandoned flat, covering his ears and closing his eyes as the boys bang on the doors and throw rocks through the window. The camera stays in the room with Chiron, drawing the audience in, to feel his tension and fright. When the boy is finally found by Juan, he continues to be distrusting and does not say anything, rather opting for silence. Therefore, from the very first scenes, the audience does not only identify with the protagonist but also gets a sense of his quiet and observing persona, being visually and sensually engaged to think and make out Chiron's feelings based on his expressions and the aesthetics and tonal qualities of the film. Similarly, this sequence makes the audience aware of Chiron's different—alternative to the norm—expression of masculinity. Drawing on the work of filmmaker Marlon Riggs, Eguchi, Calafell, and Files-Thompson articulate a connection between "black masculinity and silence," arguing that "vulnerability was [often] associated with femininity."[58] Such is the case of Chiron for instead of acting like a boisterous child, being loud and playful, and running with the rest of the boys, he keeps a quiet, silent exterior, assessing and observing rather than participating.

Chiron's withdrawal from society and his peers is further highlighted in one of the subsequent scenes, in which a group of boys is shown playing football on a field. All the boys are running around, kicking the ball and getting in contact with each other. Chiron, however, is shown standing on the side, running after the boys but keeping a safe distance and not participating in the game. At one point in the scene, his peers force him to take part, circling the boy and kicking the provisional ball closer and closer to him, even as Chiron is trying to retreat. His expression clearly shows the boy's discomfort and distrust; nevertheless, he stays silent. This display of teasing and bullying Chiron simply for being passive, quiet, and little, therefore not fitting the conventional role of a young boy, shows how traits of toxic hypermasculinity can be transferred to children from the youngest age. This is also underlined by the conversation which Chiron has with Kevin when the latter catches up with the protagonist after the game of football:

Kevin: "Why you always let them pick on you, man?"

Chiron: "What you mean?"

[58] Shinsuke Eguchi, Bernadette M. Calafell, and Nicole Files-Thompson, 'Intersectionality and Quare Theory: Fantasizing African American Male Same-Sex Relationships in Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom,' *Communication, Culture & Critique* 7, no. 3 (n.d.), 374.

Kevin: “You always let them pick on you.”

Chiron: “So? What I gotta do?”

Kevin: “All you gotta do is show these niggas you ain’t soft.”

Chiron: “But I ain’t soft.”

Kevin: “I know, I know. But it don’t mean nothing if they don’t know.”[59]

After the exchange, the boys proceed to wrestle to prove that none of them is “soft.” When they finally get up and dust themselves off, Kevin comments: “I knew you wasn’t soft.” Such conversation, together with wrestling to prove toughness, calls attention to the conception of masculinity and how it is embedded in boys from the very beginning. Even though in the scene we are presented with a group of black boys, all growing up in the same neighbourhood with similar experiences, they are already bullying and tormenting Chiron for not expressing the kind of masculinity that the rest of the boys are. His peers view Chiron as “soft” and, therefore, effeminate which to them proves he is not a real boy but someone to pick on and abuse. This further underlines the social pressure around developing entwined masculine, queer, and African American identities.

The fact that it is Chiron’s timidity and effeminacy that make him a target of bullying is confirmed in a scene with the boy, Juan, and Teresa, all sitting at a table at the couple’s house. Chiron sits with his head down, looking unusually uneasy and quiet, before he asks Juan: “What’s a faggot?” Even though it is never explicitly stated, the audience is aware of the fact that Chiron has been called that particular slur many times, which prompted him to ask the question. As Juan responds that “a faggot is a word used to make gay people feel bad” Chiron asks again, “Am I a faggot?” The boy’s innocence and vulnerability only highlight his confusion and hurt at being bullied for a concept that he does not understand. What adds to the damage is that Chiron is persecuted by his own community, within which he should be able to find refuge and not oppression. This is one among many scenes in which Jenkins addresses the complexity of developing and supporting intersectional identities.

Another character through which the expression of masculinity is prominent in the first section of the movie is Juan. We know little about him, other than that he comes from Cuba and is a drug dealer, employing others to sell in his name. Juan’s performative masculinity is visible from the very first scene of the film—he arrives to check on his local dealers in a car with a gold crown on the dash, wearing a durag, gold necklace, earrings, and

[59] Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight*, Drama (A24, 2016).

a watch, walking with ease and confidence. Even though his appearance is that of a stereotypical black criminal, he cares about his community, a striking example of which is Juan asking one of his dealers about his mother and her health.

Juan is the person that notices little Chiron being chased by the group of the boys; he does not ignore the bullied boy but makes sure Chiron is not harmed and tries to convince the boy to speak to him. From the day they meet, Juan becomes a father figure to Chiron, providing him with food and shelter when the boy's mother struggles with addiction. His pivotal role in Chiron's life is also underlined by one of the most prominent sequences in the picture when Juan takes the boy to the ocean to teach him how to swim. In a baptismal-like scene in which Juan supports Chiron while the latter learns how to float, the man and the boy cement their bond and trust, Juan promising Chiron "I won't let you go, I got you," forging a relationship which will continue to influence Chiron throughout his life. Nevertheless, the sequence is more than just building a father-son like bond—Juan also teaches Chiron about self-confidence and self-expression, pointing out that "at some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you gonna be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you." Therefore, Juan's expression of masculinity is one that affirms being true to yourself and your feelings. Although Juan's appearance conforms to the stereotypical appearance of black men from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the dealer's ability to express his feelings and vulnerability in front of others makes him a realistic, sympathetic, and positive character, regardless of his profession which further draws back people in his community.

2.2. "Chiron"

The second part of *Moonlight* follows Chiron over a couple of days during his troubled, teenage years. This section of the film explores the masculinities of Chiron and his peers as teenagers, providing an insight as to why the protagonist is the victim of bullying. It also gives the audience a deeper understanding of Chiron's relationship with his mother Paula, Kevin, Teresa, and his own sexuality.

The section titled "Chiron" opens in a high school classroom. The camera is focused on the protagonist, as the teenager looks into space, lost in his thoughts, rather than listening and participating in class. This scene alone allows the audience to realise that Chiron has not changed—he is still the boy from the first part, timid and observant, keeping to himself. Nonetheless, it is not the only scene in this part of the feature where Chiron is withdrawn from society and the reality surrounding him. Similar to the above-mentioned sequence, the

protagonist finds himself alone wandering around the city or avoiding coming back home and sleeping at train stations. Even as a teenager, Chiron is still very quiet and closed off, communicating mostly with the use of silences and his eyes, highlighted and captured by Jenkins' camera. His manner of masculinity, therefore, continues to go against the common conceptual expression of a teenage boy.

There are plenty of reasons for Chiron's persistent withdrawal and passivity offered up by the second part of *Moonlight*. As the plot develops, the audience learns that Juan has passed, leaving the protagonist without the support of his father-like figure. Additionally, Paula's addiction deepens and she relies on prostitution to support her drug needs. In one of the scenes, she announces to Chiron that he cannot stay home for the night as she is expecting a guest. As he is forced to leave and care for himself, the audience is made aware of the fact that this is what Chiron is used to—fending for his own needs and coming up with solutions. Due to his mother's addiction, he had to grow up and be an adult sooner than the rest of his peers, therefore, his expression of teenage masculinity differs from that of other boys. Hence Chiron is still a target of bullying and persecution, as in one of the scenes the protagonist is tormented by one of his classmates, Tyrell. The boy loudly announces that Chiron's—whom Tyrell still calls "Little"—problems with concentration in class come from having "women's problems," alluding to the main character not behaving in a manner which would fit within the standards of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity and the perceived effeminacy due to his timid and introverted nature. Such a scene, then, is an example of how hypermasculinity is bound up in gynophobia and homophobia, which impact not only those who internalize them but also those who cannot express their alternative identities due to fear and persecution.

Another struggle with which Chiron has to come to terms with is his sexuality. In its second part, *Moonlight* further explores the protagonist's sexual orientation, showing him experience sexual intimacy and trust, only to end up hurt and betrayed. In one of the most well-known scenes of the film, Chiron sits at the beach with Kevin. The teenagers smoke and discuss life—Chiron opens up and admits: "I cry so much, sometimes I feel like I'mma just turn into drops." The protagonist also questions Kevin about why the latter gave him a nickname: Black.

Chiron: "Why you always calling me that?"

Kevin: "What? Black?"

Chiron: "Yeah, Black."

Kevin: “That’s my nickname for you. You don’t like it?”

Chiron: “No, it’s just... What kinda dude goes around giving other dudes nicknames?” On a surface level, this exchange and Chiron’s interest in the nickname seems to arise from the concept of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, in which men giving each other nicknames is perceived as unmanly and effeminate. Nevertheless, the audience knows Chiron struggles to define himself and his sexuality, therefore, his question about nicknames seems to actually concern the nature of his and Kevin's relationship. As a subsequent scene shows, the teenagers’ bond rises from the homosocial to the level of potentially sexual and romantic. Through this exploration of sexuality and intimacy, Jenkins lets the audience experience the intersectional identities presented in the picture; we are invited and encouraged to feel Chiron’s vulnerability and raw emotions as he allows himself to open up to another man and begin to accept his homosexuality.

However, the trust and romance between Chiron and Kevin do not last long—dared by Tyrell, Kevin is forced to punch Chiron while the rest of the school observes. This betrayal changes Chiron and his attitude towards the world around him—he keeps his head up, challenging Kevin and gets up after every punch. The shift in Chiron’s approach continues even after the beating, as he is seated at the principal’s office. At first, the protagonist protests to the teacher calling him “boy”—his face changes as he objects that he “ain’t no boy.” However, after the teacher points out that “if [he] were a man, there would be four other knuckleheads sitting right next to [him],” Chiron breaks down. Through his tears, the audience can see his spirit harden as his demeanour changes. The protagonist clearly makes a decision, which he carries out the next day. Chiron walks into the school with his head held high, his steps full of confidence and determination. Instead of a boy who hides in the corridors and makes himself small, the audience is presented with a self-assured man who has a purpose. As Eguchi, Calafell, and Filess-Thompson argue, “social stigmatizations and penalties such as community isolation, violence, and prejudice occur when Black men do not conform to the heteronormative masculine performance.”[60] This was the reason for Chiron’s oppression and his change of mind. As Chiron breaks a chair on Tyrell’s back, his masculinity shifts to the level of performative hegemonic masculinity, for the lack of which he has been bullied throughout his life.

[60] Eguchi, Calafell, and Files-Thompson, ‘Intersectionality and Quare Theory,’ 375.

Regarding other male characters in this part of *Moonlight*, Kevin's expression of masculinity is worth focusing on, for the teenager presents different versions of manliness, fitting into both Tyrell's and Chiron's worlds. In the first part of the "Chiron" section of the film, Kevin presents the stereotypical masculinity, bragging to the protagonist about being in detention for having sexual intercourse on the school grounds. Similarly, when speaking to Tyrell, the boys reminiscent of how they used to beat their peers when they were younger. Additionally, as mentioned before, under Tyrell's influence Kevin decides to attack Chiron, even though, as the audience, we can tell from the look on his face that this is not something he is proud of. Nevertheless, as in the aforementioned scene with Chiron by the ocean, Kevin has shown signs of his true identity while bonding with the protagonist, mostly abandoning his bravado and instead expressing himself freely. By presenting the audience with such different behaviour of a singular character, Jenkins comments on how masculinity is a performance forced upon men by societal norms—depending on where and who he was with, Kevin projected different versions of himself to best fit the situation, often hiding his true self in the process.

Another character whose expression of manliness stands out in the film is Tyrell. The teenager, as stated before, is mostly shown as a bully and oppressor, who tyrannizes Chiron because of his perceived lack of stereotypical and expected by society maleness. Tyrell's hypermasculinity is highlighted not only by his aggressive, loud, and outspoken persona but also by his clothing—the teenager wears mostly loose, baggy clothes, with gold chains and dreadlocks. His effort to perform and achieve the stereotypical "thug" manliness is also underlined by his homophobic stance and language—oppressing Chiron for his perceived effeminacy and calling him a "faggot." Tyrell's character is the epitome of stereotypical, performative masculinity which negates everyone who does not conform to its expression. Including this character, Jenkins prompts the audience to think about such performances of manliness and their problematic influence on intersectional identities.

2.3."Black"

The third and last part of Jenkins' feature shows Chiron as an adult, living in Atlanta after being released from prison. This section shows the audience the day-to-day reality of the protagonist's life and his relationship with his mother; nevertheless, the most important sequence is his reconnection with Kevin.

In the last part of *Moonlight*, Chiron's appearance matches the performative expression of masculinity shown by Juan, Tyrell, or any other stereotypical black "thug." The final sequence of the film presents the protagonist wearing gold jewellery, a gold grill on his teeth, driving an American car with a gold crown on the dash, visibly inspired by Juan and his aesthetic. Similarly to his father-like figure, Chiron is also a local drug dealer, employing younger men to deal on the streets. His appearance has also changed—from a skinny little boy and a slim teenager, he transformed into a bulky, muscular man, who carries himself with confidence and is feared and respected. Juan's influence on Chiron is also noticeable in his relations with his younger dealers: he takes interest in their lives and trusts them with the work, watching them from a distance, however, he also tests them and keeps them aware of the fact that they are below him. His exterior persona, therefore, is one that conforms to the heterosexual hypermasculine image of black men presented in the media and forced upon them.

On the other hand, Chiron's personality and inner self have not changed in the years between his teenage years and adulthood. Even though in front of his dealers the protagonist seems tough and full of confidence, when he is alone, the audience can see the facade fade away. On his own, Chiron acts just as he did as a little boy and a teenager, insecure, timid, and contemplative. He remains quiet and withdrawn, showing his feelings on his face rather than communicating them. Nevertheless, the audience can see the change in Chiron when he visits his mother. Whereas in the previous parts of the film the protagonist was unable to stand up to Paula and passively accepted her behaviour, in the last section he challenges and confronts his mother. Chiron points out that she has not been a mother to him and is not afraid of showing his feelings. To Paula's confession of love, the protagonist openly sheds a tear and is openly affectionate towards her. Chiron's behaviour, then, continues to go against the expected and heteronormative expression of manhood, even with the slight change.

Nevertheless, the sequence in which the audience learns the most about Chiron and his vulnerability is when he visits Kevin in his restaurant, after receiving a phone call from the latter. As stated in the picture, the two men, once close, have not seen or spoken to each other since the incident in high school. When they finally meet, Kevin has a hard time recognizing Chiron, for the man's appearance has changed so much; however, he immediately notices that the protagonist's persona has remained the same: "You ain't changed one damn bit. You still can't say more than three words at a time." This statement

proves that throughout Chiron's life, his timidity and passivity—the trope of silence drawn on by Riggs and others—have been his defining qualities, his manner of manliness being more "effeminate" rather than hypermasculine. Hence the protagonist's appearance is so jarring, for it does not match his personality or his behaviour. Such observation is also made by Kevin:

> Kevin: "Who is you, man?"
>
> Chiron: "Who, me?"
>
> Kevin: "Yeah, nigga, you. I'm saying, man, the fronts, that car... Who is you, Chiron?"
>
> Chiron: "I'm me. Ain't tryna be nothing else."

The fact that Chiron embodies the look of a conceptual black drug dealer does not correspond with his inner self and his sensitive and introverted nature, which is why his persona is challenging the expectations placed upon him. By choosing an actor of such a posture to play Chiron, Jenkins makes the audience aware of the stereotypes present both within the film industry and the minds of the spectators.

What is also important to note is the scene in which Chiron admits to Kevin: "You're the only man that's ever touched me. You're the only one. I haven't really touched anyone since." While making this confession, Chiron is tense, visibly struggling to confess the truth and make himself so open and vulnerable. In the subsequent, last scene of the film, the protagonist is leaning against Kevin, who gently strokes his head. Such images and declarations show that masculinities of both Chiron and Kevin are defying the stereotypes which the audience might have placed upon them based on their looks. While Kevin seems more at ease with himself and his sexuality, Chiron is noticeably struggling to come to terms with his sexual orientation and the more "effeminate" sides of his personality, as well as a physical presence both "performative but also sentient: contested public territory and sensual private experience"[61]—hence he hides behind his muscles, a grill and a durag. Such struggles come from the need to be accepted by the society which "collide[s] with exploring and understanding one's own body, with relating to the world as a gendered being, with being an erotic or sexual subject."[62] Jenkins' picture shows, therefore, that such intersectional

[61] Jeffrey Geiger, 'Intimate Media: New Queer Documentary and the Sensory Turn,' *Studies in Documentary Film* 0, no. 0 (27 June 2019): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2019.1632161, 16.
[62] Geiger, 11.

identities are difficult to accept and display at all ages, especially without the support of family and friends during upbringing.

Overall, the different portrayals of masculinity in the picture show black men, both straight and queer, as a diverse group with various approaches to life and personal expressions. *Moonlight*'s treatment of black masculinity challenges and goes against the stereotypes presented in the media as it shows the reality of black men's life and all the different stimuli which impact their behaviour. According to bell hooks, "the colonizing culture's manipulation of representation is essential to the maintenance of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."[63] Such subjection to stereotypical images that originated in the colonial and slavery times is present within the mainstream Hollywood pictures—this is what, however, black counter cinema rebels against and presents differently. Jenkins, therefore, basing the script on his life and experiences, provided the audience with an authentic description of African American manliness which is yet to be found in mainstream Hollywood pictures.

[63] bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (Routledge, 1996), 84.

Chapter three: *If Beale Street Could Talk*

Jenkins' latest feature, as stated before, is adapted from a James Baldwin novel of the same title and presents the story of a young black couple fighting unjust incarceration and racial profiling in the 1970s. This chapter will analyse masculinities of black men of various ages presented in the feature, showing the consistencies in Jenkins' approach to manhood and focusing on the themes of hypermasculinity and its toxic traits.

If somewhat less financially and critically triumphant than *Moonlight*, *If Beale Street Could Talk* was still a success which further elevated Jenkins' status as an art-house director focused on telling less visible black stories. Mark Kermode called the feature "a heart-stopping cinematic love story, told with a tough but tender truthfulness;"[64] Doreen St. Felix sees the feature as an "undeniably beautiful film."[65] Geoffrey Macnab claims that *Beale Street* represents "magical filmmaking which looks for, and finds, beauty in the most unlikely places"[66] and Ann Hornaday states that "deliberately paced, unapologetically mannered and contemplatively attuned," the feature "invites audiences to venture beyond the screen in front of them to connect with the characters and their world on a deeper, more mystical plane."[67] Such acclaim in reviews matches the film's recognition in terms of awards. Jenkins' third picture was nominated for numerous accolades, including three Academy Awards, three Golden Globes, and two BAFTAs. *Beale Street*'s success is also noticeable at the box office—worldwide, the film grossed over twenty million dollars.[68]

Both the book and the feature follow a nineteen years old Tish Rivers and a twenty-two years old Alonzo "Fonny" Hunt as they struggle to prove Fonny's innocence and get him

[64] Mark Kermode, 'If Beale Street Could Talk Review – a Heart-Stopping Love Story,' the Guardian, 10 February 2019, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/feb/10/if-beale-street-could-talk-review-barry-jenkins-james-baldwin.
[65] Doreen St Félix, 'Can We Trust the Beauty of Barry Jenkins's "If Beale Street Could Talk"?,' The New Yorker, accessed 30 July 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/can-we-trust-the-beauty-of-barry-jenkinss-if-beale-street-could-talk.
[66] Geoffrey Macnab, 'If Beale Street Could Talk Review: Magical Filmmaking That Finds Beauty in the Most Unlikely Places,' The Independent, 8 February 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/if-beale-street-could-talk-review-barry-jenkins-kiki-layne-stephan-james-regina-king-a8765971.html.
[67] Ann Hornaday, 'Review | The "Moonlight" Director Is Back, and His New Movie Is One of the Must-See Dramas of the Season,' *Washington Post*, 19 December 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/the-moonlight-director-is-back-and-his-new-movie-is-one-of-the-must-see-dramas-of-the-season/2018/12/19/067f9ed8-fe60-11e8-ad40-cdfd0e0dd65a_story.html.
[68] Barry Jenkins, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Drama, Romance (Annapurna Pictures, Plan B Entertainment, PASTEL, 2018), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7125860/.

released from prison. The young man was unjustly accused of rape by a Puerto Rican woman, Mrs Rogers, who was coerced into the false accusation by a police officer, Bell—a man who has a personal vendetta against Fonny. Adding to the struggle is the fact that the couple is expecting a baby and, prior to Fonny's arrest, were to be married. Another hardship comes from their families: while the Rivers do everything in their power to have Fonny released and to get Mrs Rogers to admit the truth, Fonny's mother and sisters are indifferent to the suffering of the young couple, the young man's mother cursing the child in Tish's womb.

Even though the film follows closely the book's plot and somewhat modernist narration, telling the story from Tish's perspective and mixing the present events with retrospections, it does miss some of the more raw and painful facts from Baldwin's writings. As in the book, Jenkins shows the prejudice against Fonny and the struggles with which the couple has to deal—not only Fonny's incarceration but also before his arrest, regarding employment and housing; however, he omits the gruesome details that Baldwin used to even further comment on the social standing of black men. One of such omissions is the fact that Fonny's friend Daniel, which will be further discussed in the chapter, while serving time for a crime he did not commit, was raped. Another significant change made by Jenkins is not showing the fact that Fonny's father, Frank Hunt, committed suicide after his employer realised he was stealing from work and he was afraid he would no longer be able to support his family and would be imprisoned just like his son. Similarly, Jenkins has also changed the ending—instead of leaving it ambiguous regarding Fonny's future, the director decided to include a scene in which Tish with their child visits Fonny in prison, as he agreed to take an offered deal. Such changes and omissions made the film less distressing for general audiences, however, they also might be seen to take away from the outrage expressed in Baldwin's book at black men's subjected positioning within the society.

When it comes to portrayals of black masculinity, the central male character in the film is Fonny Hunt. The audience is introduced to two versions of Fonny—one presented in real-time, in jail, and struggling; the other is shown through Tish's memories and retrospectives of the times when the couple was together, planning their future. There is a noticeable difference between the past and present Fonny, mostly visible in his body language and facial expressions. Fonny seen through Tish's retrospectives is full of positivity, and an optimistic approach. When incarcerated, the man lacks such energy, coming off as quiet and distanced, even though he tries to keep the facade.

Throughout the feature, Fonny's most persistent and visible trait is his love and admiration for Tish. From the very first scene in the film Fonny's feelings for Tish are made clear—he looks at her lovingly, letting his emotions show on his face. The man is not afraid or ashamed of the way he feels for his girlfriend and shows his vulnerable side. During the rest of the film, Fonny never tries to hide his adoration for Tish; around her, his face is always open, his emotions written all over it. Moreover, the protagonist is very respectful towards his girlfriend—he never pushes or forces her to do anything, being gentle and supportive instead. When Tish recounts the couple's first intercourse, Fonny is shown as being kind and tender, promising Tish that he "wouldn't hurt [her] for anything in this world."[69] Such an approach to a character is what Jenkins often assumes—letting them feel the emotions and express them freely and openly. This freedom allows Fonny to express his masculinity in the most vulnerable way, as he is not criticised or ridiculed for his emotions; instead, both the audience and the character have a deeper understanding of his feelings and the bond between him and Tish. Such freedom of expression matches that found in *Moonlight*, in scenes when Chiron opened up to Kevin and let his emotions show on his face. In both features, therefore, Jenkins' explores vulnerability and trust between the characters—qualities that black characters may not be usually associated with.

Fonny's vulnerability also shows in his approach to life, as well as his interests and occupation. As stated in the movie, the man went to a vocational school, however, he left to pursue his true passion—woodcraft. Having stolen the tools from school, Fonny found work in the kitchen to support himself and spent his free time working on his art. From Tish's memories, we learn that Fonny is inspired and determined to not only work on himself and his art but also provide a good life for his partner. His sensitivity is also highlighted when he gives one of his sculptures to Tish's mother. Such an act of gratitude and appreciation shows how confident Fonny is in his manliness and how he expresses it. This confidence is further underlined by a scene in which Fonny, in his jail cell, thinks and reminisces about working on his art. Through the use of editing, we jump in between images of the protagonist in his cell and working in his studio. While working, Fonny is shown through a fog of cigarette smoke, in slow motion, looking at and appreciating his wooden creations; in his cell, the man is shown shedding a tear. Such visible gentleness and sensitivity influence positive images of black masculinity, as Fonny is not afraid of expressing admiration for his art and the people

[69] Barry Jenkins, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Drama (Annapurna Pictures, 2018).

around him. Instead of hiding his artistic side and implementing a facade of bravado, Fonny embraces his vulnerability and kindliness, going against the stereotypical images of black men.

Another aspect of Fonny's masculinity is his sincerity and truthfulness while dealing with other men. As the film shows, the man is open to others and does not try to hide the truth. When looking for a place to live with Tish, Fonny was straightforward about his doubts towards the man who agreed to rent them a loft. Similarly, in one of the scenes in a Spanish restaurant the man used to frequent, he was open about being hungry but not having any money and the need to pay at a later time. Nevertheless, the scene which highlights Fonny's honesty and open approach is when he talks to Daniel, his old friend. Fonny admits to the man that he and Tish had experienced racism when it comes to housing and confides in him about their struggles to find an apartment. He also confesses that he is scared of losing Tish, declaring "I got two things in my life, man. I got my whetting stones, and I got Tish. Without them I'm lost, I know that." Fonny's sincerity and ability to stay true to himself in front of other men is what makes his character a positive representation of black masculinity. As seen in *Moonlight*, black men can contradict themselves when confronted with their counterparts, often hiding their true selves to fit into the stereotypical ideas of black manliness. Fonny, however, remains true to his values and is not afraid to open up and admit his fears.

What is also important to point out when it comes to Fonny's character, is that even though his attitude changed while imprisoned, he remained positive for Tish. Once in jail, Fonny was visibly at odds with his new reality—he was agitated and admitted to struggling mentally. He was noticeably deteriorating, and, in one scene, was seen beaten up. Through the use of close-ups on his face, it is easily seen that, while in jail, Fonny was struggling not to give up, was questioning the justice system and his future. Despite that, whenever Tish came to visit, Fonny tried to remain positive. He was making jokes and trying to make her laugh, to keep her happy. His love and admiration for Tish remained unchallenged, and, therefore, his sensitivity and vulnerability prevailed. This goes against common stereotypes of black masculinity and incarceration, the prevalent trope of aggressive "hypermasculinity in prisons" which dominates a popular imaginary.[70] Similarly, his healthy expression of natural, unfiltered masculinity persisted. Whereas the audience could have expected Fonny to

[70] Tony Evans and Patti Wallace, 'A Prison within a Prison?: The Masculinity Narratives of Male Prisoners', 10, no. 4 (18 September 2007): 484–507.

assimilate with the stereotype of those imprisoned, he continued to be gentle and kind, refusing to assume the role of a criminal.

Another character who shows similar to Fonny's manner of masculinity expression is Daniel. Daniel, as Tish recounts, is one of Fonny's oldest friends, and, in the words of the girl, is "big, black, and loud." Even though shown in just one sequence, his presence leaves an imprint on the audience—the first impression is that of an optimistic, positive, and funny character, though as the audience later learns, his story is chilling, even with the omission made by Jenkins. As in the book, Daniel admits to Fonny that he has been incarcerated for two years, serving time for allegedly stealing a car; however, as the man confesses, he cannot drive—his sentence was unjust as he is innocent of the crime. In an honest and sincere conversation with Fonny, Daniel opens up to the protagonist, and reveals that in prison "they were just playing with [him] cause they knew they could" and that "when you in there, they can do with you whatever they want." Talking about his time under imprisonment, Daniel is visibly struggling, his cool and funny persona giving way to the horrors he has endured. Through the use of close-ups that focus on the man's face and reveal his anxiety and hurt, Jenkins shows that Daniel is still living with the pain, having been out of prison for three months, and that he is still processing the damage inflicted upon him. The character has tears in his eyes as he admits that "the worst thing is that they can make you so fucking scared, Fonny. Just scared." Daniel does not put on a brave face and hide his feelings, pretending they do not exist; instead, he honestly acknowledges his fears and reveals them to Fonny. During that conversation, his vulnerability, candour, and directness come forward, making him a real, relatable character who stays in the audience's minds long after he disappears from the screen. His playfulness and positivity, combined with his sensitivity and openness, make his manner of expressing masculinity a positive example. Similarly to Fonny, he does not submit to the societal expectations of how a young black man who has been imprisoned should act like. Just as with Chiron and Kevin in *Moonlight*, Jenkins shows that the prevailing stereotypes of incarcerated men of African descent—"characterized as criminals, gang members, drug traffickers, and violent criminals"[71]—have little to do with the reality of their lives, and, through his characters, gives them the freedom of expression.

A man who represents a different age group than Fonny and Daniel, and, therefore, is expected to show a different version of masculinity is Tish's father, Joseph. *Beale Street*

[71] R. Robin Miller, *Impacts of Incarceration on the African American Family* (Routledge, 2018).

presents Joseph as “the man of the house”—he is confident and controlled, respected not only by his family but also the family of Fonny. In the scenes in which he is present, he is shown as very affectionate towards his wife, as well as caring and protective of his daughters. When Tish confesses her pregnancy to him, Joseph makes sure that this is what she wants and, once reaffirmed, expresses his joy and delight. He is also presented as resourceful and forward-thinking. In a scene where Joseph and Fonny’s father, Frank, meet to discuss their circumstances and the future, Joseph uplifts the man, admitting to having been stealing to support his family in the past, and convincing Frank that this is the way that will help them survive. Such confession and planning show the complexities of his persona, as well as his development. Even though he is a positive character and his way of expressing and performing manliness matches the truthful, honest characterization of both Fonny and Daniel, he is still involved in criminal activities to help his family survive. Nevertheless, his manner of masculinity does not match that of a street criminal; shown as the head and provider of the family, Joseph openly shows his affection towards his wife, daughters, future son-in-law and his father, as well as his yet unborn grandchild. Such duality of his character separates him from the black, hegemonic, performative masculinity discussed earlier and makes him an example of a positive black father figure rarely present within the film industry.

The last man whose masculinity is worth analysing is Fonny’s father, Frank. His age group is similar to that of Joseph, just as their circumstances. What differs the two men, however, is their relationship with their family. Whereas Joseph and his family are noticeably close and appreciate each other, Frank, his wife, and his daughters do not get along. As shown in the scene where the Hunts find out about Tish’s pregnancy, Fonny’s mother and his sister do not approve of their relationship and the decision to keep the baby. As the audience learns, that is one of the reasons why Frank quarrels with his family. Observing the two families, there is an obvious lack of respect for Frank from his wife and his daughters, which may result in him feeling emasculated and unable to provide. As the aforementioned scene continues, the audience sees Frank slap his wife across the face, to the despair of his daughters and the utmost shock of the Rivers’. Such behaviour shows the toxic masculinity traits of the character—he is prone to violence and insults his wife and daughters, expressing the performative kind of hypermasculinity. Nevertheless, when alone with Joseph, Frank comes across as reserved and closed off. He admits to being stressed about Fonny’s situation, confessing to Joseph that he has trouble considering himself as “a man” for he is unable to

help his child in need. This connotes with the idea of an "absent father" persistent within the African American community explained in *The Myth of the Missing Black Father*. The "modern forms of discrimination" prevent black fathers from performing the "idealized roles of family members," impacting their self-esteem and approach to upbringing, as well as the connection with their children.[72] The duality of Frank's persona, the proneness to aggression typical for stereotypical masculinity performance, yet openness and honesty so uncommon to black men portrayed in films, makes for an interesting character worthy of attention. Had Jenkins included Frank's decision to take his own life, his manliness and approach to expressing it would have been even more unprecedented. Instead of falling into the stereotype of an unsuccessful, bitter man who struggles to gain respect from his family and resolves to violence, Frank proves to be a complex character with no definitive way to characterize his masculinity.

If Beale Street Could Talk focuses on the African American experience in the 1970s, however, its portrayal of the characters remains universal and refreshing for an audience accustomed to negative, stereotypical, and toxic portrayals of black characters. In his fashion, Jenkins focuses the camera and storytelling on the characters' emotions and feelings rather than their actions, allowing us to relate to and understand their situation. As this chapter shows, in his latest feature, the director focused on presenting masculinity in its most vulnerable, emotional state, allowing the characters to admit and process their feelings. Such freedom enabled Jenkins to represent the characters realistically, without falling into stereotypical ideas and images—even when presenting toxic traits of performative manliness, the characters were complex enough to show many different forms of expression, and, therefore, did not submit into stereotypical expectations.

[72] Roberta L. Coles and Charles St Clair Green, *The Myth of the Missing Black Father* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

Conclusion: "I ain't soft."

Masculinity is a broad spectrum of ideas and social practices, affecting not only men but also women, for men's expressions of themselves, their reactions, and gender performances influence and impact on those around them. As the first chapter has shown, what have been called "toxic" traits of masculinity can be internalized from a very young age, impacting a male's freedom of expression. James Baldwin observed that "if you're treated a certain way you become a certain kind of person. If certain things are described to you as being real they're real for you whether they're real or not."[73] As the content presented in the media—such as films and television—shows, men that are hypermasculine, hyperheterosexual, and that adhere to old patriarchal values and expectations, can be negatively influenced, while young men are conditioned to believe this is the standard male behaviour.

These stereotypical ideas impact on the black community in particular and profound ways, as the mainstream stereotyped image of a man of African origin is usually that of a muscular man in trouble with the law, often hypersexualized and presented as not experiencing any emotions. As the first chapter explains, such images of black men might be seen to stem as far back as the slavery era in the U.S., as, among other oppressive practices, they were used to degrade black males' status and provide further reasoning for their enslavement. Though much has advanced in recent years, their persistent existence, until recently, within the media industry proves how little the mainstream cinema has moved forward and the lack of understanding of the African American community.

Similarly and also profoundly, the lack of representation and cultural understanding affects men with overlapping, intersectional identities. Hollywood pictures, for example, fail to recognize the problems of men who align themselves with many different personal aspects and identities, like race, sexuality, religion, or economic situation. The negligence of recognizing these crossing identities and the pressures to conform or negate one in favour of the other results in the simplification of these sometimes struggling lives.

An awareness of such intersectional identities and the impact of representation on young lives and marginalised identities is visible in films by Barry Jenkins. In his features, Jenkins examines black masculinity in new and challenging ways, allowing characters (and

[73] Nikki Giovanni, *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1992), 76.

by extension audiences) to explore themselves and express their manliness in their own way. Both *Moonlight* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* deal with men of African descent at crucial points in their lives. The first film, following the character in three stages of his life, shows the significance of inclusive intersectionality, as Chiron's harassment is seen to come from within his own community. Instead of finding a refuge in his peers, Chiron is oppressed by them due to what is perceived as effeminate, "queer" masculinity and the homophobic stance of others which, as noted, comes from their own toxic and fragile manliness. Without considering Chiron's intersectional identities, one could assign all his problems to being a black man within a racist society, ignoring the added persecution based on his sexuality. Furthermore, the film also shows the masculinities of men who are more at ease with themselves, as well as those who give in to the pressure of hegemonic masculinity. Jenkins, therefore, within one picture, shows a plethora of different versions and expressions of manliness, enabling the audience to consider for themselves what masculinity means and its impact in its different manifestations, and showing how little mainstream perception of black men has to do with the reality of their lives.

In the same way, *If Beale Street Could Talk* presents us with diverse versions of black masculinities, many of which do not conform to past and ongoing Hollywood conventions. The film, even though set in the past, shows black men that are aware of and express their feelings, proving that an alternative to stereotypical manliness is not just a modern-day concept. Moreover, through showing men that are open and talk about their fears and hopes, Jenkins challenges the idea of tough, closed-off men who never admit their feelings. The director's honest and compassionate approach to his characters also shows up in the complexities of his characters—they are not just one-dimensional men; instead, they present traits of various masculinities, which makes for an interesting and influential viewing.

The purpose of this dissertation was to break down various concepts of masculinity and show that films made by Barry Jenkins provide an array of black masculinities, showcasing them in a manner that does not submit to stereotypical ideas but instead provides an inclusive and complex portray of African American men. As the previous chapters have shown, the Jenkins' viewpoint on masculinity and its expression is in many ways new and unique, as well as harkening back to foundational figures such as James Baldwin, for he takes time to understand his characters and allows them to progress in their own manner, in this sense not simply opposing but helping to advance black representations in the mainstream

cinema. The director's films prove that black men who express their manhood in less conventional ways "ain't soft"[74] for not expressing the performative masculinity does not define one's manliness. Jenkins shows his male characters feeling their emotions on screen, encouraging the audience to relate to them. His use of close-ups further influences the feeling of intimacy and closeness between the characters and the viewers. As a filmmaker, Jenkins shows the audience a complex and vivid experience of what it means to be black and male in America. In place of perpetuating the stereotype of a tough black man—most visible, among others, in Antoine Fuqua's *Training Day* (2001) and the notorious "King Kong ain't got shit on me!"[75] scene—Jenkins introduces positive, relatable portrayals that can influence the audience. The director's approach to filmmaking is to showcase black lives—or, as Doreen St Felix asserts, make "portraits of black love that are highly stylized but not aloof, politically urgent but not aimed at anything as basic as correcting a stereotype."[76] Therefore, Jenkins' films are not only entertaining and critically admired, but also celebrated by the black community—an example of which is Hilton Als admitting that *Moonlight* "undoes our expectations as viewers, and as human beings, too" and that Jenkins presents the life of a black gay man with "knowledge, unpredictability, and grace—"[77] as his features affirm our lives and prove they are captivating enough to be viewed and desired by worldwide audiences.

[74] Jenkins, *Moonlight*.
[75] Antoine Fuqua, *Training Day*, Crime, Drama, Thriller (Warner Bros., Village Roadshow Pictures, NPV Entertainment, 2001).
[76] Félix, 'Can We Trust the Beauty of Barry Jenkins's "If Beale Street Could Talk"?'
[77] Hilton Als, '"Moonlight" Undoes Our Expectations,' 17 October 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/24/moonlight-undoes-our-expectations.

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