

ONE STEP AHEAD: A CONVERSATION WITH BARRY JENKINS

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Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* opens—screen black—to the sounds of water and the modulation of Boris Gardiner's "Every Nigger Is a Star" (1973) playing in a wave pattern as though the song is settling on a frequency. This song, an anthem or pop mantra, eventually rises above the waves to the film's first shot; not Ibo walking on water but rather Juan (Mahershala Ali) pulling up in his Impala and drawing to a stop. He kills the engine and the music ends.

Juan is a drug dealer. The camera tracks him from the car to one of his corner boys dealing in the street and circles them as they speak, the anamorphic format producing a rich soft/sharp balancing of the image that announces the aesthetic project of the film, one of textured beauty and blackness. As Juan turns to leave, a young boy races by, being chased by a group. One of the pursuers yells, "Get his ass!" The boy cuts through the tall grass and up the stairs of what looks like a condemned-or-ought-to-be building. Barricaded in one of the rooms while his pursuers hurl shoes, rocks, and bottles from outside, the boy remains locked in a duck-and-cover pose waiting for the blast to pass. He is a silent black boy seeking shelter from a hateful storm. Frozen in his place, the boy raises his head to see the plywood board covering the window frame pulled away by Juan, now standing on the outside. He eventually coaxes the boy from his place. "Can't be no worse out here," he says. Cutting to screen black again, the title "i. Little" appears before a cut to a slow zoom of Juan and the silent boy eating in a restaurant. Juan attempts to find out something about the boy; his name, his home, that which is on his mind but not yet on his tongue. The boy finally speaks, "My name is Chiron. People call me Little."

Set in the Miami neighborhood of Liberty City, *Moonlight* is structured in three chapters that move from "Little" to "Chiron" to "Black," as it exquisitely tracks the boy, the teen, and the man in three distinct chapters of his life. An adapta-



Filmmaker Barry Jenkins on the set of *Moonlight*.

Photo by David Bornfriend, courtesy of A24

tion of Tarell Alvin McCraney's *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, Jenkins's *Moonlight* quietly narrativizes the evolution of a character: a black boy hunted, haunted, and desiring, coded as a "soft" victim to be abused. The use of three actors to play the three stages of Chiron's life (Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, and Trevante Rhodes) and those of his friend/betrayer/love Kevin (Jaden Piner, Jharrel Jerome, and André Holland) irretrievably shatters any speculations of essential black subjectivity: in place of this reduction, the film consequentially poses black characters as dynamic temporal beings.

The film is a rich narrative system that focalizes around Chiron and the movement of time. As mentioned above, the first chapter heading ("Little") comes immediately after Juan has coaxed Chiron out of hiding. The second ("Chiron") opens with Chiron daydreaming and being bullied in class during, ironically, a classroom lecture on DNA. The scene cuts to Chiron, lingering at the end of school in fear of the group of bullies waiting in the front, as the audience is introduced to the teen Kevin before the reveal of the chapter title. That the chapter ends with Chiron striking the bully with a chair during a lecture on the effects on the body of diminishing white blood cells is a nice touch. Bookended by science, this chapter in particular maps out how Chiron is caught

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Juan (Mahershala Ali) and Little (Alex R. Hibbert) in the first chapter of *Moonlight*. Photo by David Bornfriend, courtesy of A24

in a cycle of violent speculations. The third chapter title (“Black”) is introduced following a shot of Chiron sitting in his car, watching one of his corner dealers arguing with some people as he places his gun on the driver’s seat.

At the start of the first chapter Chiron’s mother Paula (Naomie Harris) is a single parent working as a nurse who is tender with her child, yet she increasingly slides from the role of nurturer into that of horrific tormentor and crack addict across the first two chapters. In one scene in particular, Juan confronts her about her neglect of Chiron. She stands in a pink top with jeweled wings on its back as if she is a cracked-out (fallen) angel. “You gonna raise my son though, right? You ever see the way he walk? You gonna tell him why all the other boys kick his ass all the time?” In the final chapter she is a woman ashamed and in recovery, trying to make amends for the hardness she sees in her child, the shield he had to build to survive her, the past, and the world: “I fucked it all the way up. Your heart ain’t got to be black like mine. I love you, Chiron.” The character of Paula is rendered with such complication and poignancy that to dismiss her as a pathological type is a weak substitute for empathy.

Chiron’s difference, a difference perceived on the playgrounds, in the school, and in the streets, is evident in the opening chase but comes into clearer focus in a later scene within the “Little” chapter, just after Chiron and Kevin finish playing in a field with other boys. Following a shot of the group of boys menacingly huddled together and advancing toward a slowly retreating Chiron there is a cut to Kevin walking and talking with Chiron:

KEVIN: You always letting them pick on you.

CHIRON: So, what I got to do?

KEVIN: All you got to do is show these niggers 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.

Moonlight’s cruel story of youth suggests performative strategies of black masculinity as its narrative is animated along an axis of silence and quiet. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, Kevin Quashie contends that “quiet” can act as a mode of black resistance that is distinguishable from silence and its

connotations, the sense that something has been repressed. As he writes, “The idea of quiet, then, can shift attention to what is interior . . . [which] could be understood as the source of human action—that anything we do is shaped by the range of desires and capacities of our inner life. . . . Silence often denotes something that is suppressed or repressed, and is an interiority that is about withholding absence, and stillness. Quiet, on the other hand, is presence . . . and can encompass fantastic motion.”¹ Like Jenkins’s previous feature, *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008), *Moonlight* organizes “quiet” as a force, an affective arrangement of the film’s pulsing speculation on black capacities.² It is a stirring and powerful enactment of film blackness, an idea of black film with greater attention to cinema’s place in black visual and expressive culture. In the place of a strict taxonomic or sociologically inflected approach, film blackness entails considering other prerogatives for black cinema that concentrate on discourse, sedimentations, and modalities.³ In this sense Chiron can be understood as a character moving through culture, masculinities, prescriptions, and time. Furthermore, the film itself is informed by a wide regard for the art of cinema and thus demonstrates more than any social science agenda.

Moonlight conjures black becoming through the accented lens of survivors, black masculinities, and queer desires.⁴ As Juan instructs Chiron in the film’s first chapter, “At some point you got to decide for yourself who you’re going to be. Can’t let nobody make that decision for you.” Moreover, as this chapter comes to a close, they have another significant exchange, sharing some of the pain they carry from their mothers, in a conversation aided by Juan’s empathetic girlfriend Teresa (Janelle Monae):

CHIRON: What’s a faggot?

JUAN: A faggot is a word used to make gay people feel bad.

CHIRON: Am I a faggot?

JUAN: No. You can be gay but you ain’t got to let nobody call you no faggot.

Unless— [Juan looks at Teresa and she shakes her head “no.”]

CHIRON: How do I know?

JUAN: Just do, I th nk . . . You ain’t got to right now. Not yet.

In the second chapter, the teenage Chiron shares a blunt with Kevin on the beach and speaks through a veil of silence: “Sometimes I cry so much, I feel like I’m just going to turn into drops . . . I want to do a lot of things that don’t make sense.” Kevin’s touch on the back of his neck, a shared laugh, and a look held long between them grows to something more. Chiron’s face is that of fear and hunger. They kiss.



In the middle chapter, teenage Kevin (Jaden Piner) and Chiron (Ashton Sanders), connect on the beach.

Photo by David Bornfriend, courtesy of A24

Kevin unbuckles his jeans and then there is the sound of the waves and Chiron moans like he is struggling to breathe. As the chapter winds down, Chiron is brutalized and betrayed by his openness to Kevin. Writhing in pain as he sits in the principal’s office, his face is bloodied and covered in tears. The principal implores Chiron to give up the names of the boys who beat him. “I’m not trying to disrespect your struggle,” she says. She continues to speak, but her voice and all the sounds of the room become muted. The only sound that remains is a buzzing hum that is matched by the sight of Chiron’s face. No longer pained and afraid, he now looks resolute. The chapter ends with a retaliation and him being placed in a police car.

A cut to the image of Chiron’s mother from an earlier scene follows: she is standing in the hallway of their apartment, lit by offscreen purple lights; she is high, enraged, and yelling in her angel top. This is a memory image, a nightmare. Though Chiron suddenly awakes as if he were a drowning man, the Chiron onscreen in “Black” is from another time and place. He is transformed: a man so muscular that he is anathema to the softness tag of his past, he drives a car reminiscent of the long-dead Juan’s ride, wears gold fronts, and inspires fear in his own corner boys. Chiron is now a drug dealer in Atlanta. His decision to return to Miami and see Kevin after a random phone call from him in the middle of the night leads to Chiron eventually telling his truth. A truth that builds over the course of a tender sequence in the diner where Kevin works that is textured by recollections, anxiety, and affection. Later at Kevin’s apartment, Chiron’s tongue is untied, “When we got to Atlanta I started over. Built myself from the ground up. Built myself hard . . . You the only man who ever touched me. You the only one. I haven’t really touched anyone since.”

In his consideration of the narrative aversions of *The Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer, 1958), James Baldwin writes of the connotative capacity of touch, “I doubt that Americans will ever be able to face the fact that the word, homosexual, is not a noun. The root of this word, as Americans use it—or, as the word uses Americans—simply involves a term of any human touch, since any human touch can change you.”⁵ Chiron is touched and changed: the film ends with his being embraced by Kevin as the sounds of the waves rise again—with a cut to the young Chiron on the shore in the moonlight, looking back, looking ahead.

The following conversation with Barry Jenkins was held in New York City on November 14, 2016, and covered a great deal of ground regarding *Moonlight*, music, intertextuality, art, blackness, and a shared love of cinema. There is much more to be said and written about *Moonlight*. This is a beginning, my contribution to the larger work to come that myself and others are sure to do. This film matters in inspiring ways for everyone invested in the idea of black film and the art of blackness.

MICHAEL BOYCE GILLESPIE: You’ve said that writing the screenplay was a surprisingly quick process. Were there things you had in mind in terms of how you wanted to go about adapting Tarell Alvin McCraney’s play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*? In particular I’m thinking about how *Medicine for Melancholy, Remigration* [2011], and your other works have been films that you wrote yourself. What was it like to work with material penned by someone else?

BARRY JENKINS: It is an adaptation but in some ways it’s not. I considered Tarell’s play as the starting point. His play was whole but incomplete in certain ways. The starting point of his piece is the true starting point of the film but the out point of his script left a lot of room to work with . . . it was like I was hiding behind Tarell. There’s a lot of stuff he went through that I went through too despite the fact that I didn’t have to deal with the issues of sexuality that he did. So, it was personal because I saw so much of myself in his work but it wasn’t fully personal. It felt as though Tarell had started this personal biography and that it was gifted to me to complete. Writing the screenplay happened in ten days. The end point of the film is not the end point of the original piece. He stopped writing at the point where Chiron is making the decision to drive back to Miami to see Kevin. So I kept going, I kept writing. I remember sitting in this bar in Brussels and I looked up and realized the screenplay was done and I ordered another drink.

GILLESPIE: How did you settle on the look and the aesthetic palette of the film? Your shot selection and

the way you render the depth of field and complicate the focal point is incredible. Also, I am thinking about the distinct saturation issues you explored in *Medicine and Moonlight*.

JENKINS: With *Moonlight*, I ultimately flipped the saturation concerns of *Medicine*. *Medicine* has a color palette that is meant to exude melancholy but it’s not a matter of life or death for those characters. The themes are heavier in *Moonlight*. The stakes are much higher. Tarell and I both agreed that we have this memory of Miami as a beautiful place, and while it might seem like a corrective to what I did in *Medicine* it just felt like the most appropriate depiction of this world. It’s the same thing with the aspect ratio. We [Jenkins and the cinematographer] knew we wanted it to be 2:35 and not just matte 2:35. We wanted the softness around the characters. We wanted the film to be immersive for the audience. The more I talk about the film, the more my ideas have begun to coalesce in terms of how I understand the film. This movie is dictated by the consciousness of the character and not the linearity of the plot. So there are some times when Chiron is disoriented and the audience is disoriented as well. The other thing as well is that despite the fact that we’re using this 2:35, 2:39 frame it’s not meant to function like a western. These choices arose from my conversations with James Laxton, my cinematographer, who has shot both of my features and most of my shorts.

GILLESPIE: You two have a wonderful relationship.

JENKINS: I think the way we are on set is a shared language, a shared approach to the imagery. I remember talking to James about what I wanted to do with the 2:35 frame. Again, it wasn’t about me thinking of Miami as this place like a western but I did want to depict the expanse, the big sky, and so much green grass. Chiron has the freedom to move left and right in the frame but he almost chooses not to as he begins to retreat and retract into himself until the edges become very blurred. Some of these things you try and think about intellectually but on the day I’m not going to tell an actor, “Stay in the center of the frame!” Our approach has always been to build enough of that into the intent and then when you get on set you have to make the best version of the scene you can in the time allotted.

GILLESPIE: I really like your point about disorientation. I’m thinking of the final chapter and those shots of the bell ringing and those questions that go unanswered. Why did you call me? You just drove down here? Who is you? Why do you have those damn fronts? Where are you staying tonight?



James Laxton and Barry Jenkins on the set of *Moonlight*. Photo by David Bornfriend, courtesy of A24

JENKINS: I feel like the first 80–85 minutes or so of the film is the telling of a story where the characters are advancing in age: eight, ten, twelve years of age at a time in each chapter. So we're rapidly building this portrait. For example, the two longest shots in the film are when Chiron is in the parking lot outside the diner. He pulls up in his car, gets out, puts on his shirt, combs his hair, and then starts walking across the parking lot towards the door. Then there's the shot of the door's bell ringing that shifts to a gliding camera shot. It's a very Hou Hsiao-Hsien–influenced shot that is a camera movement perpendicular to the action in one continuous moment. Then there's that close-up when Chiron sees Kevin's face for the first time and then we match it. From that point on the character has been built and now the character has to finally make a choice. He must decide who he is going to be as the film shifts into real time. I think the diner scene really resonates with people because you've grown so accustomed to the character advancing through time but now Chiron has to sit there opposite someone who's actually allowing [him] the space.

The world is always projecting this idea of who a black man is while there is always the performance of black masculinity. You see Chiron dealing with that over the course of the film. Then he walks into Kevin's home, the diner, and Kevin dominates that space but in a very tender way, a very gentle way. So, you're right. This is when the cycle of questions begins but they are never asked aggressively and there's never really a single or direct answer to these questions.

GILLESPIE: How did you come to conceive the structure of the film and those wonderful transitions of first a pulsing blue light and then a red one? Also, I'm thinking about how the scenes run for a few minutes before the chapter title appears.

JENKINS: Right. The space before the chapter headings is not uniform but structurally it was one of the first breakthroughs I had about the film. Tarell is an amazing writer and I wanted him to extend the piece on his own. I don't mean to extend in a chronological sense in terms of when the

piece ends. There was still a lot of space in between the chapters. When he first wrote this it was never meant to be staged, it was never going to be a play or a theatrical piece.

GILLESPIE: You mean it was a closet screenplay?

JENKINS: Exactly. I think maybe it was something that was meant for the screen. I describe it as halfway between the stage and the screen when it came to me. I remember when I first read it I didn't see it right away . . . until I began thinking about *Three Times* [Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 2005] and cycling through my thoughts about how he [Hou Hsiao-Hsien] contextualized each relationship according to the era, the film's triptych structure, and the acting conceit of using the same actors. When Terrell first wrote the piece it was what he described as more circular in nature. It was more like a day in the life. You would see Little wake up, see Chiron wake up, and then see Black wake up. You would see Little go to school, see Chiron go to school, and then see Black go to the corner. The piece kept advancing over the course of the day with these cycles. I just felt that for an audience that structure would not be the best way [and] I began to realize two things. First, it was important to me that the audience be able to track the journey of the character. Second, it was important that the audience be immersed . . . in terms of how the audience is receiving information. Recently I was looking at the script and saw how the title cards came at the beginning as we cut from black right into the scene. But, it was in post-production that I realized coming out of screen black that I didn't *want* to see a title card.

I definitely consider myself a termite filmmaker, I'm always on set thinking about what else I can do.⁶ If for Eisenstein the information is in the cut, then for me that information is time. The lights are literally the lights from the slate pressed up against the lens. Those light images are from shooting on the set because our movie is an "oil and sheen" movie. We were spraying the actors all the time and the Assistant Cameraperson kept putting the slate against the lens to ensure spray wouldn't get on the lens. At one point we had an 85mm anamorphic lens and the slate is right against it. I remember looking at the image and thinking how beautiful it was and saying "Roll camera." They were like, "Roll camera on what?" Those [blue and red] lights are the timecode, they are running and flashing the whole time. So you are seeing the time passing between the actors performing in those chapter moments.

GILLESPIE: It's important that you have these gestures in the film because the implication is that the film is a process. *Moonlight* needs to be appreciated as a film

and not just a reflection of the black lifeworld because while there are elements of a shared understanding of black social life that indeed inform the film, there are also other elements that are deliberately about craft and art.

JENKINS: Exactly. I try and work in that Claire Denis way. She's my favorite filmmaker. She has this reputation of being an auteur, arthouse darling, super intellectual but she is all feeling, instinct, and craft.

I was reading this piece on Kerry James Marshall. He was talking about his decision to stay on the South Side of Chicago, and the lack of black faces or black bodies in classical art, and his mission to reference classical art and openly create art that challenges and can stand next to the classics.⁷ I love his thoughts and work for his use of blackness and the black form while keeping white pigmentation out of his black colors. Now, I had not read Kerry James Marshall's ideas about blackness and color before I made *Moonlight*. But reading him I saw a lot about the approach we took and how we treated black skin in this film. When you're on a Hollywood set, or any movie set, the makeup person has powder and they powder you down so you don't reflect light. You can't be shiny. You can't be moist. Fuck that . . . because my memory of this place I grew up in is of shiny, moist, basically revitalizing and replenishing and alive skin. So I decided that this is what the hell we were going to do. So I'm reading this Marshall piece and I realized we embedded some of these issues in how we decided to shoot black skin, the treatment of these black characters, the way we're not going to relay certain bits of information.

GILLESPIE: Are there other things about Marshall's ideas on form and blackness that you identified with?

JENKINS: He [Kerry James Marshall] also talked about the African slave trade and how it was possible in part because of the Europeans using advanced technology and that we [people of African descent] have been catching up ever since. It reminded me of my first semester in film school at Florida State. We used to joke that my [entering] class was the blackest class ever because out of thirty students, six or seven of us were black. We [the black students] lacked the technical skills of some of our other classmates. I took a year off to advance my technology. It's weird but for a while I put too much emphasis on the craft because I never wanted to be in the position again where the craft couldn't carry my voice. This is why I love Claire Denis so much because if the craft is strong than you [can] take other elements and sublimate them and not have to keep churning plot.



Kevin (André Holland) and Black (Trevante Rhodes), in the third chapter. Photo by David Bornfriend, courtesy of A24

GILLESPIE: I'd like to know your thoughts about place in terms of how you render the cultural geography of San Francisco in *Medicine for Melancholy* and *Remigration*. I'm thinking here of the distance between your cinematic San Francisco and cinematic Miami, and how your practice has evolved. What does Miami mean to you?

JENKINS: That distance is huge. I describe *Medicine for Melancholy* as the place where I was both physically, emotionally, and mentally. It was the place where I am in the sense that I was living there when I made that film. *Moonlight* is much more about reaching back to this place where I was and tracing the line back to who I am and where I am [now]. We could have made this film in Georgia or Louisiana. The budget would have gone farther over the course of our 25-day shoot in those places. Yet, we rightly chose to shoot in Miami with less fiscal resources. There are certain things about the world of Miami that are such a part of who I am and who Chiron was.

At Q&As people have said how beautiful the film is and sometimes it's a banal compliment about the image quality of the film and sometimes it feels like a cynical or back-handed compliment. Tarell and I felt very strongly that

despite the fact they we both had very dark childhoods, [that] our childhoods were also beautiful. Going back to Miami, the continuity of place reinforced that. For instance, the second chapter of the film is the angriest and the darkest but it's fucking picturesque.

GILLESPIE: It's the cruelest. Where is it set?

JENKINS: He's standing in Liberty Square, the most notorious housing project in Miami, maybe the whole southeast. We call it Pork 'n' Beans. When we were in the color correction it was really difficult to get even a modest level of beauty. The paint of the buildings there was glowing and the colors were jumping off the screen. It was really lovely not to have to do the work of presenting this dark thesis about how sometimes dark childhoods can happen in beautiful places. Tarell and I are beautiful people who come from a dark circumstance and place. There is some element of this kind of imagery in pop culture and arts and letters over the past century where those things want to be in direct opposition, this sense that beauty and miserabilism can't go hand in hand.

GILLESPIE: Yes. You're reminding me of a vindictive comment that Orson Welles once made about Visconti's *La Terra Trema* [1948], a film about fisherman in a poor Sicilian village: "He photographed starving peasants like fashion models in *Vogue*." Your comments about the expectation that dark or hard circumstances be ugly and never beautiful speaks to Welles's reductive or tired measure of the capacity of neorealism.

JENKINS: Coincidentally, I will say that the one thing we said on this film is that it's not neorealism. James [the cinematographer] and I kept using "it's not neorealism" as our mantra. It's not how I think about my childhood or the neighborhood where I grew up . . . I really wanted James and I to make sure that neorealism was not our intention.

GILLESPIE: Let's talk about the music and the film's score. One of my favorite points in the score occurs in the first act when the boys are playing in the field and Mozart's "Vesperae Solennes de Confessore in C Major" is on the score. Then there is the abrupt sound of the horn from the passing train and the score is arrested for a moment before restarting. The selection and placement in the film is stunning. There are also moments of repetition with the classical themes and the use of Aretha Franklin's "One Step Ahead." The first time it's heard is in the context of suggesting that something is wrong with Paula,



Juan (Mahershala Ali) teaches Chiron (Ashton Sanders) to swim. Photo by David Bornfriend, courtesy of A24

Chiron's mom: the contradistinction of "One step ahead of heartache/One step ahead of misery" to Chiron arriving to the sounds of glass clinking and the unseen glass pipe as Paula rushes to clear the table before going to the backroom with her male guest. Then you restage the song when Chiron walks into Kevin's diner as the lyrics signal Chiron's desire and anticipation. *Medicine for Melancholy* was a perfect mixtape, but in *Moonlight* the music is more punctuated and implicated in the narrative.

JENKINS: Well, with *Moonlight* I actually had the resources to do more and control things by working with a composer, Nicholas Britell. Actually, he gave me that Mozart song before we even shot the film and I just kept it in mind; then later, he put together a chamber group and found an opera singer to record his version. We ended up using the song while we were picture editing.

It's funny because that scene of the boys in the field and the wrestling is day one of the shoot. Part of it is method and part is not. I mean we didn't have any rehearsal for the film at all and the extras weren't put through [any]

rigorous background testing process; no one had been on camera before. They are kids who played football on a Pop Warner team at that park. We had put out an email blast and had people walk through the community to get those boys to come out. So day one of production with a crew I've never worked with except for James and kids I've never met before and my two leads who've never acted before and we're doing this scene. The train wasn't planned. It came by once I just started yelling, "Roll camera! Roll camera!" and we got it.

There is not a tension but almost a resistance between certain elements of the film. We do the same thing when we use the Caetano Veloso song, which is an overt homage to Wong Kar-Wai's *Happy Together* [1997], when Chiron is driving down to see Kevin. For me, *Happy Together* is a world apart from Liberty City, Miami but we're dealing with similar emotions. It and *301, 302* [Park Chul-Soo, 1995] made me realize just how small the world is. I felt like I was handing the film over for a moment. But then, we put a hard cut from the Caetano Veloso to trap music. "Even if she go away . . ."

GILLESPIE: Right, Chiron is driving down the highway in his Juan 2.0 car with that “BLACK305” plate as Veloso’s “Cucurrucucu Paloma” comes on the soundtrack. Then the image of the long tracking shot of the car has an image of children playing in the Miami surf superimposed on it.

JENKINS: There are a lot of places in the film where we do something like that. For example, when Juan is teaching Chiron to swim. We have this track called “Middle of the World.” In the end we let the track go and it becomes Chiron in the waves with the world swirling around him and the audience. My approach to the music in the film was, not exactly to do what Claire Denis does, but to think about how she uses score in her films. That was very important to me. I wanted the music to express the consciousness of the character and not necessarily . . . the propulsion of the plot.

GILLESPIE: Amen. Two of my favorite Claire Denis scenes are the tracking shot of Camille [Richard Courcet] walking down the sidewalk while scored to Basehead’s “I Try” in *I Can’t Sleep [J’ai pas sommeil, 1994]* and the Legionnaires in *Beau travail [1999]* marching in the desert to Neil Young’s “Shopping Cart.” And, of course, there’s Dickon Hinchliffe’s “Le Rallye” in the café scene from *Friday Night [Vendredi soir, 2002]* that you cite in *Medicine for Melancholy*.

JENKINS: And you can’t talk about Claire Denis and music without mentioning [Corona’s] “The Rhythm of the Night” in *Beau travail*. My favorite score of hers is probably the guitars in *The Intruder [Intrus, 2004]*. With *Moonlight* it was really cool to work with a composer because I’d never worked with one before. Nicholas Britell did three things unprompted after our first meeting. He was deep in working on *The Big Short* [Adam McKay, 2015] but he took the time to put together a playlist. It was part Southern hip-hop and part classical. That was the first thing he did that let me know that he got what we wanted to do. The second thing . . . was [that] after reading the script and before we sent him a picture edit, he started sending us tracks that he was inspired to write. One of those tracks became the main theme of the film, “Little’s Theme.” At the time he called it “Piano and Violin Poem.” The third thing [happened] after I told him how much I liked “chopped and screwed” music and he had never heard of it before.

GILLESPIE: It’s the manipulation of time that happens with chopped and screwed that is so in line with the

experience of watching how *Moonlight* tracks the movement of time.

JENKINS: That’s exactly what Nicholas processed. In that manipulation of time new work arises. He was fully on board and it was great. As we got into it we ended up diving deeper and deeper. He began evolving the instruments the session musicians would play. It was a beautifully organic process . . . Nicholas had a double bass and he began screwing it down, tuning it down, and slowly separating it. We began trying to preserve the pitch and the timbre. I really wanted it to feel like I felt the first time I sat in somebody’s car who had a proper sound system and listened to chopped and screwed music.

GILLESPIE: What are your thoughts about being a filmmaker, a black filmmaker, circulating in this climate where some are insisting that this is a renaissance for black cinema while you are perhaps still working through a certain delimiting expectation that is not always necessarily interested in your distinctive craft as an artist?

JENKINS: I saw that Ava DuVernay was wearing this T-shirt that said “I am my ancestor’s wildest dreams.” To me that statement represents how it’s such a privilege to be working and creating in this day and age. It’s a privilege that has been earned on the backs of a lot of people who took a lot of shit before me. It’s not an ideal scenario. I mean, I read a lot of James Baldwin and others who write and think about the responsibility and demand to represent the race, to carry the cause of the race to such an extent that it supersedes the work and the art.

GILLESPIE: As though it’s almost selfish to be an artist?

JENKINS: Exactly. Yet, I always fall back on the fact that it’s a privilege to be making films. As someone who went eight years between films, there was a four-year period in the middle of that where I felt like, “Holy shit, I’m never going to make another film.”

I don’t know what it was like in any other eras of black cinema. When we had the first rough-cut screening of this film, the invitee list came to me and, for me, there weren’t enough black folks on the list. So, I was wondering who I could call. I hadn’t been in Los Angeles long. (I had moved to L.A. a year before relocating to Miami.) So with about thirty-six hours notice, [I got] Justin Simien, Terence Nance, Tahir Jetter, Naomi Ross-Chapman, Khalil Joseph, and Radha Blank. This was a screening at noon on a Tuesday and I had called these people on a Monday. Then two weeks later Ryan Coogler comes in



Alex R. Hibbert (Little) and Barry Jenkins on the set of *Moonlight*. Photo by David Bornfriend, courtesy of A24

while he's in the middle of writing *Black Panther*. I don't feel like there's a renaissance or any of that. It's not a collective because we're not all sitting in the [same] room planning. There's this thing happening where none of us have to carry the torch of the full black experience in this way that, say, Spike Lee had to in a previous era. There's a freedom in not having to carry the torch or at least to not have to carry it alone. So, I'm just making a movie about a kid from a neighborhood I grew up in with an ordeal I went through with a mother addicted to crack cocaine, which is the experience I shared with Tarell.

The blackness of it is inherent in that I'm black, Tarell is black, the neighborhood is black, and Chiron is black. But, saying it's not the point doesn't mean that I'm not aware that we're addressing blackness. We're just addressing this part that relates to the specificity of our experience. There are so many of us now doing it that we feel like we are creating this really expansive tapestry.

GILLESPIE: It's been an amazing year. The static notions of black film lost more ground. All of this new work has tacitly insisted that it is crucial to think

bigger than social categories when discussing black film. And to rethink what we are asking.

JENKINS: I take the craft of films very seriously. I take the formalism of filmmaking very seriously. In that seriousness I find ways to articulate what it feels like to be in my personal experience, what it feels like to be a young black man in America. I think divorcing the intentionality of the craft from the formalism and the expression does the work a disservice. The aesthetic has a thematic impact as well. In a Carlos Reygadas film, the way things are done is as important as the things that are depicted. [In terms of the idea of black film] there's such a volume of work now that the uniqueness of its being black is no longer the main story anymore.

Notes

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1. Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 8, 22.
2. See M. Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 119–55.
3. *Ibid.*, 1–16.
4. See Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 392–401 (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).
5. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), 80–81.
6. Jenkins is referencing Manny Farber’s essay “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art” (1962) in which Farber extolls termite art filmmaking in opposition to the grand gestures and masterpiece aspirations of white elephant movies. See Manny Farber, “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art,” in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 134–44.
7. Wyatt Mason, “Kerry James Marshall Is Shifting the Color of Art History,” *New York Times Style Magazine*, October 17, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/10/17/t-magazine/kerry-james-marshall-artist.html