





FIGURE 1. Doorways in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Plan B Entertainment) and *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar Wai, 2000, © 1997 Block 2 Pictures Inc. © 2019 Jet Tone Contents Inc.). Pairing by Alessio Marinacci, "Moonlight and Wong Kar Wai" (2017), YouTube; reproduced with permission from the artist.

# “You’re in the Middle of the World”

Black and Asian Convergence  
in *Moonlight*

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Set in Miami, Florida, Barry Jenkins’s *Moonlight* (2016) heavily relies on the city’s coastline—the border between land and sea—to shape its three-part narrative about a poor queer Black boy’s journey to adulthood and the enduring desire he has for his childhood schoolmate, Kevin. Without sacrificing local specificity, Jenkins takes Miami’s waters as a point of departure to tell this coming-of-age story from a global, particularly oceanic point of view. Though firmly located in the United States, specifically the Black Liberty Square housing project “a block away” from where Jenkins grew up, the film’s overall composition borrows from other shores, more readily recalling East Asian, not North American, cinema.<sup>1</sup>

According to Jenkins, the film’s triptych structure—which divides the storyline into the stages of the boy’s life from childhood, when he is called Little (Alex Hibbert); to adolescence, when he uses by his birth name, Chiron (Ashton Sanders); to adulthood, when he is known as Black (Trevante Rhodes)—follows the work of Mainland Chinese-born Taiwanese film director Hou Hsiao-hsien. Hou’s film *Three Times* (2005), a quiet, romantic triptych, cohesive rather than episodic, lends *Moonlight* its poetic cyclicity.<sup>2</sup> *Three Times* tells three separate stories of the same pair of lovers, set in completely different eras. When asked about how he thought to apply *Three Times* to his film, Jenkins attributes the idea to the source material: an unpublished, semi-autobiographical play that its author, Tarell McCraney, describes as “Eastern” in its dramatic style. “The Western idea is to go narra-

tive from Point A to Point B,” McCraney said. “When we think Eastern, things fold back on each other. The patterns overlap and we go into cycles.”<sup>3</sup> McCraney’s play is not a triptych, but Jenkins’s reliance on Hou’s filmic structure seamlessly reorganized the play’s style for the screen. Like the lovers in *Three Times*, Little/Chiron/Black’s relationship with Kevin is a long engagement, persisting across time and space.

Perhaps the most striking reference to East Asian cinema is the film’s formal homage to filmmaker Wong Kar Wai, Hong Kong’s Second Wave auteur. Jenkins deftly swirls together recreated frames on Black childhood by filmmakers Charles Burnett, Kahlil Joseph, and Dee Rees with Wong’s recognizable cinematic motifs.<sup>4</sup> His reliance on Wong is so apparent that YouTuber Alessio Marinacci created a video essay, “*Moonlight* and Wong Kar Wai” (2017), which pairs shots from *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Happy Together* (1997), and *In the Mood for Love* (2000) alongside their restaging in *Moonlight*. In both Jenkins’s and Wong’s films, hallways guide the line of vision toward closed or opened doors, boundaries or invitations (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Fences symbolize perforated attempts to connect with others (fig. 2). Close shots of phone calls foreclose verbal communication between characters rather than opening it, leaving audiences wondering about the erotic electricity, or lack thereof, between the lines (fig. 3). Handheld cameras chase after characters in flight (fig. 4). In general, Wong is strategically restrained. The narrative is not driven by the protagonists’ agency or will. Plotlines and dialogue assume a subsidiary role to a touch, a look, or

## LEAVING AUDIENCES WONDERING ABOUT THE EROTIC ELECTRICITY, OR LACK THEREOF, BETWEEN THE LINES



FIGURE 2. Chain-link fences in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Plan B Entertainment) and *Days of Being Wild* (Wong Kar Wai, 1990, In-Gear Films). Pairing by Alessio Marinacci, "Moonlight and Wong Kar Wai" (2017), YouTube; reproduced with permission from the artist.



FIGURE 3. Phone calls with obstructed mouths in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Plan B Entertainment) and *Happy Together* (Wong Kar Wai, 1997, © 1997 Block 2 Pictures Inc. © 2019 Jet Tone Contents Inc.). Pairing by Alessio Marinacci, "Moonlight and Wong Kar Wai" (2017), YouTube; reproduced with permission from the artist.



FIGURE 4. Motivated handheld camera movement *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Plan B Entertainment) and *Days of Being Wild* (Wong Kar Wai, 1990, In-Gear Films). Pairing by Alessio Marinacci, "Moonlight and Wong Kar Wai" (2017), YouTube; reproduced with permission from the artist.

a turned back. *Moonlight's* appropriation of Wong's style creates a storytelling effect that is impressionistic rather than exact. Moreover, some of Wong's films were intended to have sequels, but they never came to fruition. The result leaves those films compellingly opaque—and Jenkins translates those achingly uncertain atmospheres into *Moonlight*.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Jenkins's pronounced allusions to Wong, film scholars have generally made little of the Asian aesthetic of *Moonlight*. And while cinephiles have been the first to recognize the film's homage to Wong, their critical observation stops at just that. This essay, however, suggests that there is something more political to the Asian elements in the film than what has hitherto met the eye.<sup>7</sup> I propose that *Moonlight* might heed a primary tenet of Afro-Asian studies: the refusal to engage the typical racial antagonism that pits Blackness and Asianness against each other while further institutionalizing white supremacy.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the film's Asian elements work against what Afropessimism calls non-Black people of color's "junior partnership"—popularly thought of as adjacency—with whiteness/humanness.<sup>9</sup> I contend that the film's borrowed Asian aesthetic actually partners with *Moonlight's* investigation into Blackness/nonhumanness. In keeping with the theme, "informalisms," of this issue of *liquid blackness*, this essay first highlights how Asian forms—particularly the Asian femininity within *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000)—work to inform the film's key ideas on Black queerness, especially its ontological implications for Black (non)being and its material

## JENKINS TRANSLATES THOSE ACHINGLY UNCERTAIN ATMOSPHERES INTO MOONLIGHT

implications for Black embodiment.<sup>10</sup> In the second section, I claim that by drawing from films in which Wong visually explores postcolonial loss—especially *Happy Together* (1997), about a pair of queer male Hong Kong migrants who work and live in Buenos Aires—Jenkins emphasizes the historic and global magnitude of queer Black diasporic dislocation and humanlessness. Ultimately, this essay outlines how the convergence of Black and Asian forms in *Moonlight* disrupts white, liberal, humanist scripts on racial, gendered, and sexual formation and positioning.

### Where Flesh Meets Ornament

Though ignored by film scholars, *Moonlight's* formal borrowings from Wong—particularly his films' refusal of visual and narrative closure—overlay onto the central rebounding question in *Moonlight*: when Little, exhausted from homophobic bullying, asks his father figure Juan, "What is a 'faggot'?" and does not get a satisfactory answer. "It is a word that makes gay people feel bad," Juan simply replies. In his provocative essay "What is A (Black) Faggot? Cinema, Ex-orbitance, and *Moonlight's* Metaphysical Question,"

Calvin Warren rightfully argues that Juan skirts the question. According to Warren, Juan distinguishes between “gay people” and a cryptic “signifier,” positing “a rift, or a gap between the two.”<sup>11</sup> The signifier exceeds its object, and the signifier itself, lacking a proper object, becomes catachresis, without any proper referent, a broken/incomplete sign. That is, the question is left unaddressed and unresolved, therefore necessitating another question for clarity. Little asks: “Am I a ‘faggot’?” To which Juan resorts to the same distinction, “You can be gay, but don’t let anybody call you a ‘faggot.’” Juan pauses and then gestures toward giving the signifier some referent—“Unless . . .”—but, quickly, his girlfriend, Teresa shakes her head in disapproval, interrupting definition or epistemological closure.<sup>12</sup> The question is still left unanswered. Further confused, Little then asks, “How will I know?” which, Warren argues, “presents problems for [the stuff of liberal humanism:] reason, logic, justification, and validation.”<sup>13</sup>

Warren suggests that Little’s “unanswerable” question “disrupts” a “humanistic narrative.”<sup>14</sup> He argues that *Moonlight* fails to have the requisite “assemblage of elements and concepts within the cinematic frame [to think of] the (black) faggot [as] being, specifically [a] human being: such as time, space, agency, relation, universality, grounding and progress.”<sup>15</sup> Though, as Warren argues, the question begs to be answered “in order to suture its humanism—black queer love, coming of age, affirmation of humanity and dignity,” it instead interrupts humanistic meaning.<sup>16</sup> Despite Juan and Teresa’s attempts

at recovery and repression, the final question, writes Warren, “folds epistemology onto itself—in a circularity of uncertainty that cannot be broken.”<sup>17</sup> And indeed, the film refuses to ever answer the question; at no stage in his life does Little/Chiron/Black “come out” and tell the audience who he is in legible identitarian terms that provide stable humanistic signification. This unanswerable question seems to find its rejoinder at the end of the film when an adult Kevin asks Black: “Who is you, Chiron?” and Black simply replies, “I’m me”—a response that doesn’t provide clear meaning for the question he posed when he was child. In light of the question’s epistemological circularity, Warren’s Afropessimistic argument aligns with the Asian stylistic techniques that I described at the beginning of the essay. However, Warren never deals with these formal issues and how they might relate to the film’s central (dis)organizing query.

Warren’s oversight (or intentional disregard for) the film’s Asian elements might be part of Afropessimism’s general skepticism of non-Black allyship—political, aesthetic, or otherwise. Warren’s essay on *Moonlight* builds on *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, in which Frank B. Wilderson III argues that that the world is divided into two camps: Black (non-Human) and non-Black (Human). Within the non-Black (Human) configuration, people of color—such as Asians—are thought of as whites’ “junior partners.”<sup>18</sup> As an aesthetic associated with human or white adjacency, the Asian elements within *Moonlight* might be seen, by Afropessimistic audiences, as an attempt to conceal nonhumanness



FIGURE 5. Looking back at the camera in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Plan B Entertainment) and *Days of Being Wild* (Wong Kar Wai, 1990, In-Gear Films). Pairing by Alessio Marinacci, “*Moonlight* and Wong Kar Wai” (2017), YouTube; reproduced with permission from the artist.

and nonbeing with non-Black stylization. As Raquel Gates has pointed out, celebration of *Moonlight*'s cinematography by critics often “veers into the territory of fetishization” precisely because it “signal[s] a relationship” to critically praised non-Black global films such as those of Wong.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the Asian aesthetic in *Moonlight* can be read as supplementing the structural racial antagonism outlined by Wilderson rather than disrupting it.

Yet a closer look at *Moonlight* suggests that its Asian elements are not as complicit with (white) humanism as Afropessimism might assume. With their focus on US-based cinema and its representation of American Blackness, Warren and Wilderson may unwittingly discount how the Asian forms in *Moonlight* allow Jenkins to shift his gaze and engage with alternative filmic genealogies—not in an attempt to escape the American camera and its anti-Black legacy but in order to reinforce the themes of his film with in-

tersecting experiences, histories, and images. Warren rightfully argues that “Chiron is a body without being,” but that body is very intentionally constituted by Wong’s signature filmic style, what critic Andrew Sarris describes as a “tribute to feminine beauty.”<sup>20</sup> The bodies of Jenkins’s characters are formed by and metonymically linked to various Asian actresses/female characters in Wong’s films who resist humanist closure in their own plotlines. *Moonlight*'s protagonist is often figured by the women in Wong’s *Days of Being Wild*, who are seduced and caught in the toxic orbit of smooth-talking playboy Yuddy (Leslie Cheung). In *Moonlight*'s second act, when Chiron looks longingly through a chain-link fence onto other young Black boys playing during school recess, he recalls nightclub dancer Leung Fung-ying (Carina Lau), who leans her body against a chain-link fence in anguish when she learns that Yuddy has left town without telling her (fig. 2). In the last image of *Moonlight*, a flashback





FIGURE 6. Resting heads in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Plan B Entertainment) and *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar Wai, 2000, © 1997 Block 2 Pictures Inc. © 2019 Jet Tone Contents Inc.). Pairing by Alessio Marinacci, “*Moonlight and Wong Kar Wai*” (2017), YouTube; reproduced with permission from the artist.

of Little on the shore looking directly into the camera, he recalls Rebecca (Rebecca Pan), the aging sex worker who raised Yuddy, after she reveals the identity of his biological mother and he leaves Hong Kong for the Philippines to find her (fig. 5). In both shots, Asian women from *Days of Being Wild* are conjured up to communicate Chiron/Little’s feelings of abandonment and reluctant individuation.

At various points in *Moonlight*, Chiron/Black is also figured by Su Li-zhen (Maggie Cheung), from Wong’s *In the Mood for Love*, who develops a relationship with her neighbor Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) when she learns that their spouses are having affair. As Chiron/Black leans his head on Kevin’s shoulder in the second and third acts of *Moonlight*, he recalls Su’s stolen moment of public intimacy with another man amid her sorrow over her lonely marriage

(fig. 6). Like Su, Chiron/Black takes a risky chance for an illicit touch. Other characters in *Moonlight* are also constituted by Su. Chiron’s mother, Paula (Naomie Harris), painfully leaves the frame as slowly as Su enters it (fig. 1). Paula’s inconsistent role in her son’s life is emphasized by Su’s on-screen/off-screen movements. And as adult Kevin dines with Black, *Moonlight* recalls the memorable restaurant scene in *In the Mood for Love*, when Su and Chow finally admit that their spouses are having an affair and that they might be developing feelings for one another (fig. 7). This recreated shot implicitly suggests that Kevin, figured as Su, might have a similar revelation about his relationship with his childhood friend.

Both *Days of Being Wild* and *In the Mood for Love* are set in 1960s Hong Kong, a time of rapid industrial and economic growth in the colony. As



FIGURE 7. Dining in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Plan B Entertainment) and *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar Wai, 2000, © 1997 Block 2 Pictures Inc. © 2019 Jet Tone Contents Inc.). Pairing by Alessio Marinacci, “*Moonlight and Wong Kar Wai*” (2017), YouTube; reproduced with permission from the artist.

Gina Marchetti points out, Wong’s female characters, or “ladies from Shanghai” (all émigrés to Hong Kong as a result of British colonialism, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Chinese Civil War), are not merely characters in their particular plotlines but highly stylized repositories for Wong’s ideas about (post)colonialism at the time. Arranged alongside posh, feminized, Asian commodities that circulate both in the West’s Orientalized imaginary and marketplace—food, cigarettes, bedroom decor, and, of course, the multitude of colorful figure-hugging cheongsams (also known as “mandarin gowns”)—Wong’s women, she suggests, are “de-territorialized” figures that function as “an allegory of Hong Kong’s postcolonial trajectory,” symbols of “the enormous political, economic, social, and cultural transformations of the twentieth century.”<sup>21</sup> Wong’s women are further abstracted from human

actresses/characters as metaphors “for the mystery of cinema,” objects “to be appreciated visually, but never fully comprehended or possessed.”<sup>22</sup>

In other words, Wong’s women are not human but, as Anne Anlin Cheng would have it, “ornaments.” According to Cheng, “ornamentalism” refers to the process by which Asiatic femininity—or the “yellow woman”—is materialized and imagined alongside and through synthetic Asian objects or aesthetic ideas about Asia. Unlike Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, which describes the Western process of turning people into things, ornamentalism describes the process of turning things into people.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the “yellow woman” is a thing that has become personized: a feminized, animated, Asiatic object. Her beauty “comes from the primacy of the object; *the human is the incidental alibi*, for, or an afterthought of, relishing this pure objectness.”<sup>24</sup> To make her case,

## **MOONLIGHT HOLDS TOGETHER WHAT SEEMS TO BE AN ONTOLOGICAL IMPASSE IN ORDER TO MAKE A CASE FOR BLACK AND ASIAN CONVERGENCE: WHEN FLESH AND ORNAMENT COME TOGETHER TO RUPTURE HUMANIST SCRIPTS**

Cheng compares two iconic images of racialized femininity from the nineteenth century that circulated in the West: Sarah Baartman, the so-called “Hottentot Venus,” and Afong Moy, simply known as the “Chinese Lady.” Both were spectacles in the curiosity exhibition circuit. Following Hortense Spillers, Cheng highlights that while Baartman was “reduced to bare flesh,” Moy was reduced to her “synthetic affinities,” the “decorative sameness to the silk, damask, mahogany, and ceramics.”<sup>25</sup> While Black femininity was rendered “‘vestibular’/bare flesh/weighted,” Asiatic femininity was rendered “ornamental/surface/portable.”<sup>26</sup> As such, ornamentalism has been “transferable,” even applied to different racial subjects—as it is to the Black bodies in *Moonlight*, whose flesh, via its homage to Wong, is ornamentalized as Asiatic artifice.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Asian aesthetic in *Moonlight*—its ornamental usage of Wong’s women—does not humanize Blackness; it provides the raw material for Black embodiment, not its being.<sup>28</sup> Though ornamentalism may be beautiful and stylish, it neverthe-

less functions not to facilitate, but to, in the words of Cheng, “abandon” humanness.<sup>29</sup>

*Moonlight* challenges the premise that Asianness, as non-Blackness, is always a priori in junior partnership with Whiteness (Humanness). Ornamentalism may very well be what Wilderson calls an “unspoken grammar” of antagonism in the film. He explains, “even when films narrate a story in which Blacks are beleaguered with problems that the script insists are conceptually coherent” (like when Teresa and Juan attempt to answer Little’s “unanswerable” question by delineating the boundaries of proper “gay” subjectivity), “the non-narrative, or cinematic, strategies of the film often disrupt this coherence by posing the irreconcilable questions of Black . . . non-ontology” (the film’s ornamentalism reinforces the Black characters’, especially Little/Black/Chiron’s, nonbeing).<sup>30</sup> As such, *Moonlight* holds together what seems to be an ontological impasse in order to make a case for Black and Asian convergence: when flesh and ornament come together to rupture humanist scripts.

To be clear, the film does not analogize Asianness and Blackness.<sup>31</sup> Rather, *Moonlight* engages in robust racial comparison, illustrating what Lisa Lowe has described as “the intimacies of four continents”: “the connections, relations, and mixings among the histories of Asian, African, and indigenous peoples in the Americas,” their “complex histories” and “survival” as a result of slavery, settler colonialism, and imported indentured labor.<sup>32</sup> For Lowe, colonial, imperial, and nationalist strategies rely on keeping these global convergences separate; by doing so, they reinforce European liberalism’s investment in “the human.”<sup>33</sup> By borrowing from both Black film and Asian film, *Moonlight* unsettles this attempt at “bounded” temporalities and histories.<sup>34</sup> It reflects how the transatlantic slave trade and imperial Asian labor migrations crisscrossed each other. The Black and Asian convergence in *Moonlight* cinematically communicates an intimacy, a sense of global interconnectedness based on humanlessness and dislocation.

Wilderson writes, “If we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that ‘the Negro’ has been inviting Whites and civil society’s junior partners to the dance of death for hundreds of years. Cinema is just one of the many institutions that have refused to learn the steps.”<sup>35</sup> Yet Jenkins recognized the way Wong attempted to dance when he first saw *Chungking Express* in film school. In an interview with the Criterion Collection called “Under the Influence,” Jenkins admits, “I had never really seen a foreign film before [but had] this feeling . . . of just how big the world was, but how small it was at the same time be-

cause I don’t speak Mandarin or Cantonese and I’ve never been out of the state of Florida and I’m watching this film and feeling all these things.” He says, “I always obsess over the Dinah Washington montage,” which begins with a man (Tony Leung) holding an ornament, a toy airplane, in the foreground to flirt with his girlfriend—an Asian woman (Valerie Chow), a flight attendant—in the background. “I had never seen anything like that in my life,” he says. Jenkins was struck not only by the visuality of the plane, however. He was struck by the music that accompanied the moment. “Here was Dinah Washington, this somewhat tragic [Black] soul singer from America and here’s this [couple] in Asia. It’s like, how small is the world?”<sup>36</sup> Jenkins was looking at Asian people on-screen and sensing not identification—the humanist wish that art shows how “we’re all alike”—but rather something particularly Black and Asian, the way in which ornament and flesh can together be aesthetically mobilized into a “feeling” that disrupts the (imperial, human) map.

### **Queer Diasporas in *Happy Together* and *Moonlight***

Of all his films, Wong’s *Happy Together* permeates *Moonlight* most (fig. 8). It features a Hong Kongese same-sex male couple, Ho and Lai, who migrate to Buenos Aires to live and work. The film showcases their pattern of verbal abuse and arguments, followed by breakups and reconciliation—the result of their position as gay Asian outsiders in Hong Kong and Buenos Aires, respectively. David Eng has argued that the



FIGURE 8. Resting heads in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Plan B Entertainment) and *Happy Together* (Wong Kar Wai, 1997, © 1997 Block 2 Pictures Inc. © 2019 Jet Tone Contents Inc.). Pairing by the author.

two men represent “the contemporary conditions of an underclass of queer Asian migrant laborers hustling in the global system.”<sup>37</sup> This idea is echoed in their names, which, as Jeremy Tabling points out, are the names of two of the film crew who worked on *Happy Together*—the focus-puller and the gaffer. They are, in

the words of Tambling, a “reminder both of the ordinariness of the names and the characters, and the arbitrariness with which they may be regarded.”<sup>38</sup> While the plotlines of *Moonlight* and *Happy Together* are different, the films mirror each other in several ways. Both films are circular in their narrative structures.



FIGURE 9. Ball games in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Black B Entertainment) and *Happy Together* (Wong Kar Wai, 1997, © 1997 Block 2 Pictures Inc.). Pairing by Alessio Marinacci, “*Moonlight* and Wong Kar Wai” (2017), YouTube; reproduced with permission from the artist.

Both saturate then bleed color to communicate the roller coaster of overflowed and repressed emotions; both films strategically focus and unfocus shots to indicate association and dissociation.

In both films, ball games become excuses for men to touch men and boys to touch boys—Asian migrants play soccer in a Buenos Aires alleyway in *Happy Together* while young black boys tackle each other around a newspaper ball in a park in *Moonlight* (fig. 9). The exchange of cigarettes in Wong’s film are reflected in the exchange of the blunt between Chiron and Kevin on the beach (fig. 10). Kevin’s preparation of food for Black signals hunger, appetite, and care—as Ho does for Lai in *Happy Together*. And Chiron/Black rests his head on Kevin’s shoulder as Lai does on Ho (fig. 8).

The two films resonate sonically as well. At the beginning of *Happy Together*, when the couple are still

in Hong Kong, they discuss an ornament, a souvenir Lai bought at Iguazu Falls, an old motion lamp that uses a rotating screen to simulate water flowing. The couple subsequently decide to visit the site together. But on their trip, they get lost, with great emphasis placed on their inability to read a map. Though they never get to see it together, the Iguazu Falls haunt the characters, symbolizing an impossible fantasy: a romantically blissful, stable same-sex relationship between two figures who recall, in Eng’s words, “Asian coolie[s], toiling anonymously in global streams of migrant labor,” along imperially devised borders.<sup>39</sup> Ho and Lai’s fight over getting lost is interrupted by a nondiegetic medium close shot of the Iguazu Falls, waters crashing into an abyss. Caetano Veloso’s tranquil bossa nova rendition of “Cucuruccú Paloma” plays in contrast in the background.

*Moonlight* also features a road trip. Near the end



FIGURE 10. Sharing a smoke in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016, A24, Pastel and Black B Entertainment) and *Happy Together* (Wong Kar Wai, 1997, © 1997 Block 2 Pictures Inc.). Pairing by the author.

of the film *Black*, grown and living in Atlanta, drives back to Miami at the quiet invitation of also grown Kevin, who randomly called him, to tell him that he heard a song that reminded him of “Chiron” (which turns out to be the song “Hello Stranger” by Black American soul songstress Barbara Lewis). And the nondiegetic song that accompanies Black’s drive is also Veloso’s “Cucuruccú Paloma.” In an interview with the music site Pitchfork.com, Jenkins said,

It’s the same song used in Wong Kar-wai’s *Happy Together*. It’s a direct homage. Even the way we framed the car driving down the highway is the same. I remember watching *Happy Together* a long time ago. It was the first movie I would say that I saw that was outright a queer film. One of the first films I saw that had subtitles, even. *Moonlight* is worlds away from *Happy Together*—it’s a movie about two Asian men living in Argentina, and here we have these two black men from Liberty City, Miami. . . . When I watched *Happy*

*Together*, I got to Asia by way of Argentina and discovered Caetano Veloso. There’s also a hard cut out of it to “Classic Man”—the Caetano is very soft and cool, the Jidenna comes in hard as fuck. Because again, the worlds clash.<sup>40</sup>

Most of the music in Black’s car is diegetic: 1990s Atlanta hip-hop such as Goodie Mob and “chopped and screwed” 1990s R&B, fragmented sounds, mirroring his fragmented identity, visualized in the triptych structure of his life. Veloso’s nondiegetic song is therefore a startling soundtrack for Black’s road trip to see Kevin.

More than dreamlike and romantic, Jenkins offers Veloso’s song as a sound signature that functions as an intertextual animator—a crucial modality of what Paul Gilroy, thinking about music, calls a “politics of transformation [that] reveals the hidden internal fissures in the concept of modernity.”<sup>41</sup> Veloso’s song is supposed to feel misplaced in both films; yet it stimulates the broader musical score that ties such seem-

ingly disparate places as Miami, Buenos Aires, and Hong Kong together. What's more, the song is originally a Mexican song, featured in over half a dozen movies from all over the world, including queer Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* (2002). Velloso's rendition provides subtext for both the Black and Asian couples' physical and emotional transience, temporariness, displacement, and homelessness, thus sonically charting a tender intimacy between humanness, the descendants of larger queer colonial and plantation experiences, on whose backs the stuff of the human—liberalism and modernity—thrive.

Ho and Lai's stories reflect the role of British colonialism in both Hong Kong and Buenos Aires. *Happy Together* was released on the eve of the British Handover of Hong Kong to China. Jonah Jeng points out that "for many Hong-Kongers, the impending Handover confused the already complicated idea of Hong Kong as home. Historically, the territory had passed through the hands of multiple sovereignties without any promise that it would ever be given full political autonomy."<sup>42</sup> Jeng suggests that the film's refrain—"Let's start over"—must have touched Hong Kong viewers in 1997: "In one of the film's most striking moments, Lai wonders what Hong Kong would look like upside-down, and we are abruptly shown images of the city present as such, simultaneously foregrounding the film's self-conscious engagement with the reality of the Handover and visually communicating the disorientation experienced by Hong Kong's people."<sup>43</sup> And Buenos Aires has been a repository

for immigrant migrants since it built its railroads in the late nineteenth century—depending on British foreign investment and its colonial labor for help.

Moreover, the colony of Hong Kong has a long history of criminalizing homosexual sex acts, while Argentina has famously been more hospitable to queer folk, benefiting from rather progressive same-sex policies. But when, after a fight with Ho, Lai pursues a white Argentine to make Ho jealous, he is beaten severely, made a victim of specifically xenophobic and racist homophobia.

Ho and Lai's exile and homelessness in the Americas are diametrically juxtaposed in *Moonlight* as Chiron is estranged from the domestic sphere, forced to live elsewhere because of his mother's abuse. He finds a mentor in Juan, who is an Afro-Cuban immigrant, embodying multiple kinds of American migrations. And like Argentina, Miami has been thought of as a gay haven, but it seems to be reserved for white gays with money, not poor, marginalized Black queers. In the second act of *Moonlight*, after Chiron hits his bully with a desk for peer-pressuring Kevin into beating him up in public, he is transported away from Miami to Atlanta, thought of as a queer Black mecca—but for juvenile detention, not a better life. And Chiron becomes part of the prison industrial complex that exiles one in three Black men, contributing to and maintaining Black social death.

Despite the wealth of scholarly material on both *Happy Together* and *Moonlight* as cultural objects, both films faced obstacles that have challenged their



## FLESH AND ORNAMENTALISM RENDER A KIND OF WILLFUL ILLEGIBILITY— ESPECIALLY IN THE FACE OF NATIONALISM AND ITS IDENTITARIAN POLITICS

canonicity. *Happy Together* was controversial upon its release—even if Wong won best director at Cannes in 1997. Posters for the movie featuring the two leads fully clothed with their legs intertwined were banned from public places in Hong Kong and removed altogether before the movie's release. In addition to Hong Kong's homophobia, officials might have been reluctant for audiences to deal with yet another post-colonial reckoning—not that the two are mutually exclusive. According to Stephen Teo, Hong Kong has generally “proved resistant to [Wong Kar Wai's] films, as judged on the whole by their consistently poor domestic box-office earnings.”<sup>44</sup> In turn, *Moonlight* was famously eclipsed by the musical *La La Land* (2016), which was initially announced as Best Picture winner during the 2017 Academy Awards ceremony even though it actually had lost to Jenkins's film. *Moon-*

*light* was the first LGBT and second Black film to ever win Best Picture but is one of the lowest-grossing Best Picture winners. On several levels, then, these films represent a crosscurrent of cinema that does not assemble in a coherent enough way to warrant accolades, monetary or otherwise, from the liberal mainstream. Flesh and ornamentation render a kind of willful illegibility—especially in the face of nationalism and its identitarian politics.

It is no wonder that both films also use water to mark not only the fluidity of the characters' desires and sense of self but the interconnectedness of two queer diasporas. Water also signals the material, elemental link between the two films. For *Moonlight*, it recalls the ships and their histories within and around what Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley understands not just as Paul Gilroy's watershed “black Atlantic” but its systematically overlooked “queer Atlantic.”<sup>45</sup> “You're in the middle of the world,” Juan tells Little when he teaches him how to swim, recalling both baptismal rebirth and “the historically specific waters, of the Atlantic of the Middle Passage.”<sup>46</sup> “There are Black people everywhere,” Juan says, “You remember that, okay? No place you can go in the world ain't Black people.” The sound of the ocean waves bookend Jenkins's film, pulling Chiron back to Miami, back to his swimming lesson with Juan, back to his sexual encounter with Kevin on the beach, back into historical trauma.<sup>47</sup> Chiron's wet dreams, in many ways, recall the abysmal waterfall in *Happy Together*, a destination the spatting Hong Kongers cannot

reach because they get lost and forced back into the industrial cities in which they work, lost in a nexus of British, Chinese, and American imperialism. Eng highlights that the opening scene of the movie—an “erotically charged scene of graphic anal intercourse” between Ho and Lai in medias res—is filmed like “the rectangular porthole of a rocking ship,” the camera frame swaying side to side as if bobbing on the ocean. Even after Lai leaves Argentina at the end of the film, both men—an ocean apart—focus on an imitation of Iguazu Falls, a substitution: a cheap lamp, a token, that becomes lovingly fetishized as the possibilities of rebirth, too—of, in Ho’s words, “starting over.”

Like the water on a shoreline comes forward only to drag back the sand, the ends of both films look forward and back nostalgically—not in the conventional sense. As Rey Chow has pointed out, *Happy Together* resists the traditionalism of Chinese cinema that romanticizes the past for nationalism’s sake. Rather, she writes, nostalgia in *Happy Together* is not “an emotion attached to a concretely experienced, chronological past; rather, it is attached to a fantasized state of oneness . . . elusive and intangible . . . which can never be fully attained.”<sup>48</sup> Jeng suggests that much of this nostalgia is realized in Wong’s signature step-printing technique—a duplication of a film frame that creates a sense of slow motion, a smear—“which visually evokes the sense of the past dragging Lai away from the present, disrupting his ability to move on.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Arzu Karaduman quotes Derek Conrad Mur-

ray and argues that with its post-Black aesthetics, *Moonlight* redefines “the parameters of blackness in the twenty-first century and [pushes] it beyond the stifling dictates of nostalgia for past political movements” that were rooted in “hetero-patriarchal black power.”<sup>50</sup> Slow motion in *Moonlight*, Karaduman suggests, “suspend[s] time by stretching it, . . . deflect[ing] the heteroreproductive logic of forward progress.”<sup>51</sup> *Moonlight* literally concludes back in time—with Little on the shore, looking back at the camera, a recreated moment from Wong’s *Days of Being Wild* (fig. 5).<sup>52</sup> The shores of both films function with tidalectical sensibility, reminding us, as T. Mars McDougall argues, that histories seemingly drowned in the ocean are rebirthed into the present; “the opening of the oceanic chasm . . . is a layering of time, of worlds, of recordings.”<sup>53</sup>

Nostalgia is also evoked in both films by ornaments—most obviously the lamp in *Happy Together* and Black’s mouth jewelry, his grill, in *Moonlight*. Yet both sets of men have shared what is, perhaps, the simplest but most globally circulated of ornaments: a smoke (fig. 10). Though originally an Amerindian practice, tobacco smoking “became Chinese” by the sixteenth century, sold by Europeans traveling and trading from the New World.<sup>54</sup> Cannabis migrated the other way, originating in Asia and making its way around the world through illicit means. Part labor class commodity, part stylistic luxury, smokes—of tobacco or cannabis—have had and continue to have as much aesthetic signification as they do phys-

iological. Smoking is also one of the queerest of ornaments, slipping between the masculine and the effete, possessing the phallus or suggesting fellatio. Ho and Lai seem to be constituted by their cigarettes; they come to embody both the global connections of the smoke and the queer diaspora within which they are lost. E. Patrick Johnson suggests that the blunt that Kevin and Chiron share is a symbol of their “makeshift masculinity.”<sup>55</sup> If an ornament is an object in human form, Kevin and Chiron are certainly constituted by the smoke on the beach: where air (“that breeze feel good as hell, man,” says Kevin) meets carbon, the ethereal meets the material, where too much nothing meets too much something, where Black and Asian converge. ■

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## Notes

1 See Zaman and Rapold, “Song of Myself.”

2 See Zaman and Rapold, “Song of Myself.” When asked if there were “any movies” in his “head while planning and making *Moonlight*,” Jenkins replied,

*Three Times* by Hou Hsiao-hsien. That had a three-romance structure—a triptych. There is an homage to *Three Times*, the first story in the pool hall. When Chiron [Black] first walks into the diner, we’re on the dolly, and then he sits at the counter, the camera pans, and we find André [Kevin]; André [Kevin] walks in the back of the kitchen, camera pans back, André [Kevin] comes down the little alley, and then we do the portraits. Because in the first story, Hou Hsiao-hsien is in the pool hall; camera’s perpendicular to the scene, just dollying back and forth, and just panning.

3 Tallerico, “Three Times.” For more on Hou’s influence on *Moonlight*, see McDonnell, “Millennium Mambo.”

4 See Jenkins, “Inspired.” In *Moonlight*, audiences certainly see Jenkins’s rich inheritance from African American filmmakers. (See Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* [1978] for visual context on Little’s attempts to play with his peers. See saturated Southern-tropical images of Black boyhood in Kahlil Joseph’s short *Until the Quiet Comes* [2013]. Dee Rees’s *Pariah* [2011] digs more explicitly into Black queer adolescence but is also the source for the blue, purple, and pink lighting throughout *Moonlight*.) But, as Jenkins says, comparing *Moonlight* with *If Beale Street Could Talk*, “With *Moonlight*, the visual inspirations were largely rooted in cinema, the work of Wong Kar Wai and Hou Hsiao-hsien.” The latter, he said, was driven more by James Baldwin’s language and Harlem photographers of the era: Roy DeCarava and Gordon

Parks. He was nevertheless influenced, also, by Japanese photographer Katsu Naito's monograph *Once in Harlem* (2017).

5 For a beautiful close reading of doorways in *Moonlight*, see Karaduman, "Post-Black Sound Aesthetics in *Moonlight*."

6 *Days of Being Wild* was originally conceived as a diptych. Wong has teased a sequel to *Chungking Express*.

7 Of all Jenkins's features (*Medicine for Melancholy*, *Moonlight*, and *If Beale Street Could Talk*), *Moonlight* is his most global in style.

8 See Vijay Prashad's foundational book *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*.

9 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 23–25, 70.

10 My essay also intervenes into the field of Afro-Asian studies' overwhelming emphasis on straight, cross-racial brotherhood at the expense of queer and women's experiences. See Sudhakar and Reddy, "Feminist and Queer Afro-Asian Formation."

11 Warren, "What is A (Black) Faggot," 127.

12 Teresa is played by openly bisexual actress/singer Janelle Monáe, lending an extradiegetic authenticity to the conversation—a real/reel Black queer.

13 Warren, "What is A (Black) Faggot?," 127.

14 Warren, "What is A (Black) Faggot?," 123.

15 Warren, "What is A (Black) Faggot?," 123.

16 Warren, "What is A (Black) Faggot?," 123.

17 Warren, "What is A (Black) Faggot?," 127; emphasis mine.

18 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 23–25, 70.

19 Gates, "Last Shall Be First," 40, 39.

20 Warren, "What is A (Black) Faggot?," 123; Sarris, "Wong Kar-wai's Visual Magic." Sarris comes just short of calling Wong a "women's director."

21 Marchetti, "Wong's Ladies from Shanghai," 222.

22 Marchetti, "Wong's Ladies from Shanghai," 222.

23 Cheng, "Ornamentalism," 435.

24 Cheng, "Ornamentalism," 435; emphasis mine.

25 Cheng, "Ornamentalism," 416.

26 Cheng, "Ornamentalism," 416.

27 Cheng, "Ornamentalism," 418.

28 For another cinematic example of the convergence of Black flesh and Asian ornament, see the episode "Striking Vipers" (season 3, episode 1) from the series *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011–14; Netflix, 2016–). In "Striking Vipers" two black men have sex with one another in a video game in which they are embodied by Asian martial arts avatars.

29 For more on the problems inherent in attaching positive feelings (or beauty, style) to Asianized objects, see Bow, *Racist Love*.

30 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 5.

31 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 36. Wilderson writes, following Fanon,

The ruse of analogy erroneously locates the Black in the world—a place where s/he has not been since the dawning of Blackness. This attempt to position the Black in the world by way of analysis is not only mystification, and often erasure, of Blackness's grammar of suffering (accumulation and fungibility or the status of being non-Human) but simultaneously also a provision for civil society, promising an enabling modality for Human ethical dilemmas. (37)

32 Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 2.

33 Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 3.

34 Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 5–6.

35 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 138.

36 Criterion Collection, "Under the Influence."

- 37 Eng, *Feeling of Kinship*, 76.
- 38 Tambling, *War Kar-wai's "Happy Together,"* 6.
- 39 Eng, *Feeling of Kinship*, 59.
- 40 Shnipper, "Music That Made *Moonlight*."
- 41 Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 37–38.
- 42 Jeng, "No-Home Movie."
- 43 Jeng, "No-Home Movie."
- 44 Teo, *Wong Kar-wai*, 2–8.
- 45 Tinsley, "Black Atlanta, Queer Atlantic," 192.
- 46 Tinsley, "Black Atlanta, Queer Atlantic," 209.
- 47 For more on how water works to shape both Chiron's narrative and characterization, see Fowler, "To Erotically Know."
- 48 Chow, "Nostalgia of the New Wave," 35.
- 49 Jeng, "No-Home Movie."
- 50 Murray, quoted in Karaduman, "'Hush-Hush I Will Know When I Know,'" 62–63.
- 51 Karaduman, "'Hush-Hush I Will Know When I Know,'" 68.
- 52 The image also recalls the final freeze frame shot from the coming-of-age French classic *The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959).
- 53 McDougall, "'The Water Is Waiting,'" 57. See also Walcott, "Black Aquatic."
- 54 Benedict, *Golden-Silk Smoke*, 2–6.
- 55 Johnson, "In the Quare Light of the Moon," 75.

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