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Why Black people look blue in the moonlight: an examination of how Barry Jenkins film
Moonlight (2016) reunites the image of Black people's bodies with water.

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Abstract

A recent study highlighted that 70 percent of African Americans could not swim (Diaz-Duran, 2017), with drowning rates being far higher in Black communities than in white. The origin of this alarming statistic can be traced back to the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade and cemented itself during segregation which forcibly divorced the image of the back body and water. It is these historical events that have led to the above statistic and the subsequent stereotype that Black people cannot swim. I was surprised then when Barry Jenkins 2016 film *Moonlight* portrayed a Black child, Chiron, learning to swim without any implication of danger or risk of drowning. The film recaptures the image of Black people's bodies with water and begins to unravel stereotypes that manifested themselves in America centuries ago. *Moonlight* demonstrates how on-screen

representation is a critical factor in recognising these stereotypes, understanding where they come from and taking action to undo what centuries worth of oppression and segregation did to form them.

Key Words

Moonlight, Water, Swimming, Homosexuality

Article

There is a stereotype, predominantly in the United States of America, that Black people cannot swim (León, 2019). This stereotype emerged throughout the 19th and 20th centuries through racial segregation. It can be traced back to the transatlantic slave trade and has remained a prominent assumption in modern-day Western society. A way in which modern society is attempting to drift away from deep root stereotypes, such as this one, is through the film industry. This medium can challenge, undo and change long-standing stereotypes. A prominent example in recent cinema which achieves this is the 2016 film *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins. The film features a scene where the protagonist Chiro, from a Black ethnic background, is taught to swim as a child by his surrogate father figure Juan. Water is a central theme throughout *Moonlight* and is used by Chiron to connect with his inner self. The representation *Moonlight* presents is unique as the image of Black people's bodies with or in water is rarely shown in cinema (or other media) at all. Whilst this film breaks the stereotype, unfortunately, it is often true that Black Americans cannot swim, particularly in urban environments. Therefore, this essay will examine how such stereotypes originated, stemming from the transatlantic slave trade and continuing into segregation, and how *Moonlight* reclaims the image of Black people's in and with water.

From a historical perspective, the pre-Atlantic slave trade, Kenin Dawson's article, 'Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World', lifelong explores how swimming was a crucial part of everyday life for African tribesmen before the Transatlantic Slave

Trade. African children learnt to swim at a very young age, either 'right after learning to walk between the ages of ten to fourteen months or after they were weaned at approximately two or three years of age.' (Dawson, 2006, p. 1335) Learning at such a young age reduces the risk of drowning in adulthood and suggests African parents did not fear the water or the possibility of their children drowning. 'West Africans...used variants of freestyle, enabling them to incorporate into many daily activities.' (Dawson, 2006, p1330) Such activities included setting fishing traps meaning the ability to swim, gave Africans access to a food source.

On the other hand, White Europeans considered swimming to be 'a hopeless struggle against mother nature' (Dawson, 2006). African's ability to swim was seen as animalistic by westerners as 'animals instinctively knew how to swim (but) it was unnatural for humans to swim without logical instruction.' (Dawson, 2006) Many white westerners did not learn how to swim and devalued such skills in African tribespeople. They concluded that since swimming was a natural ability in animals, the African tribesmen must be less developed and used this as their reasoning for enslaving them. Enslaved Africans were then prohibited from swimming as slave owners saw swimming as an escape from the coastal plantations. By being denied access to an activity that was once integrated into their daily lives, Enslaved African could not pass on their tribal traditions to their enslaved children born in America.

In the 20th century, racial segregation meant Black Americans were prevented from learning to swim in public pools. Black people were discouraged from using public swimming pools as white stereotypes of Black people 'as diseased and sexually threatening served as the foundation for this segregation' (Wolcott, 2019). This

stereotype justified white managers refusing Black Americans entry to pools due to a 'fear of disorder' (Wolcott, 2019). They believed fights would break out if African-Americans were permitted on the premises. In 1964, pool manager James Brock went as far as to pour acid into a swimming pool after civil rights protesters jumped into a 'whites-only pool'. The racism and segregation African-American's have faced has denied them the opportunity to learn how to swim, which has continued into modern-day society. Many African Americans believe that swimming is a 'white activity' (Dawson, 2006, p. 1354), meaning a majority of African Americans do not learn how to swim. In the United States, the responsibility for a child learning to swim lies with the parents, and if the parent cannot swim, they are unlikely to teach their children to swim. Furthermore, a 2010 study conducted by Carol Irwin found that 'Fear of drowning or fear of injury was really the major variable' (Rohrer, 2010) as to why many African-American parents did not teach their children to swim. The cause and effect of denying a generation of African-American's in the Civil Rights era entry to pools means they were never able to participate in recreational swimming, so it never became a part of African-American culture.

All things considered, the transatlantic slave trade denied African's the chance to pass down their swimming abilities to future generations meaning something that is a part of their heritage is met with fear rather than celebration. The forceful separation of African Americans from the water has led to the image of Black people's bodies and water accumulating negative connotations, and there have been multiple news stories of Black adults and children drowning in swimming pools. 'Some 70 per cent of African-American youth cannot swim, and drowning rates for young Black (people) are

far higher than for whites' (Diaz-Duran, 2017). This statistic demonstrates how the stereotype has, unfortunately, become real for a majority of the Black Americans and the image of Black people's bodies and water dissolved completely.

This was until 2016 when the release of Barry Jenkins film *Moonlight* reclaimed the image of Black people's bodies in and with water and overturned the stereotype that Black people cannot swim. In brief, the film is set in Miami, Florida and follows a gay Black man Chiron, from childhood to adulthood and depicts the struggle and prejudices he faces because of his sexuality. Chiron finds solace through water throughout his life and can connect to his inner self - his true self when he is in and near it. Water is one of the most natural substances on Earth. According to the Bible, it was the first thing ever to exist. By associating Chiron with water, Jenkins demonstrates how homosexuality is also something that naturally occurs.

The film is split into three chapters, 'Little', 'Chiron' and 'Black'. The title of each chapter reflects how Chiron identifies during that particular time of his life. Chiron is taught how to swim during the film's first chapter, 'Little' ('Little' being Chiron's childhood nickname). This moment, depicted by a series of long takes, highlights Chiron's connection to the water as Juan, his surrogate father figure, holds him afloat in the water and allows Chiron's body to move naturally with the waves. Jenkins demonstrates his natural place with the water, as this scene is one of the only moments when Chiron is entirely at ease with himself. In this scene, the camera is handheld, allowing it to move with the motion of the water, meaning waves lap over the camera's lens from time to time. This technique makes the spectator feel as if they are included in the scene, which enhances

the feeling that what we are observing (a Black child learning to swim) is entirely natural.

Throughout the scene, classical music is played and is used throughout the film to represent Chiron's inner self. Much like swimming, classical music is associated with whiteness as 'classical music is a world in which Black people have seldom been allowed to play a leading role' (Ross, 2020). This deliberate choice made by Jenkins subverts the audience's expectation of what music would be used in a film depicting life in the 'hood'. Music used in films set in the 'hood' is typically hip-hop and rap, meaning classical music contrasts with the film's setting, representing how Chiron feels out of place within his surroundings (the Take, 2017). The classical piece *The Middle of the World* plays uninterrupted as Chiron learns how to swim, and the dialogue is not cut from its source, meaning the scene's flow feels natural and puts the spectator at ease. The classical music reaffirms how Chiron feels himself while in the water, and the unmanipulated dialogue shows how he feels at ease with Juan and in the water. Jenkins uses the swimming scene to demonstrate the bond Juan and Chiron have formed and how Juan has taken on a paternal role in Chiron's childhood as in America, the responsibility for teaching the child how to swim lies with the parent.

As the scene progresses, Chiron becomes comfortable enough to navigate the water alone. He turns away from the camera and moves out towards the open sea. The sea was seen as a means for slaves to escape by Slave Traders, and swimming was a way of achieving such an escape. Chiron independently moving out to sea represents a desire for freedom and, in particular, freedom from assumptions about his sexuality, from his mother and bullies and the abuse he faces because of it.

Jenkins uses the editing technique of separating characters from their dialogue to solidify the idea that Chiron is at odds with his surroundings, especially when he is separated from both Juan and the water. Jenkins detaches characters dialogue from its original shot when Chiron feels pressured or uncomfortable, creating a surreal and awkward feeling for the viewer. Most notably, this technique is used when Chiron interacts with his mother Paula, demonstrating their disconnect from each other. For example, when a teenage Chiron runs into Paula when she is high, her dialogue and movements do not match. Through this technique, Jenkins communicates Chiron's disconnect from his mother, a relationship that should be natural. No music plays over the top of this exchange, signalling how Chiron cannot express himself when around Paula.

The second scene in which water represents freedom is in Part II: Chiron, when Chiron's childhood friend Kevin masturbates him on a beach in front of the sea. Again, the ocean represents freedom, in this case, sexual freedom. Chiron can only allow himself to embrace his homosexuality when he is near the water. However, this freedom is still somewhat repressed. The action takes place at night, and so under cover of darkness suggesting that to express their true selves, Kevin and Chiron must do it in secret. It means they are not yet fully able to accept themselves and their sexuality. This is shown in the shot where Kevin masturbates Chiron; the camera is placed behind them, so we only see their backs with Chiron having placed his head on Kevin's shoulder. This mirrors Chiron's framing throughout the film. There are multiple tracking shots where the spectator is placed behind Chiron - we are not allowed to read his expressions or fully understand him, similarly to how he cannot understand himself.

As a teenager, Chiron is bullied at school, primarily because his peers had assumed that he was gay. Kevin is eventually peer pressured into hitting Chiron, and Chiron was beaten until he can no longer stand. Chiron subsequently hits the bully (Terrel), who orchestrated the attack with a chair resulting in Chiron being sent to a Juvenile Hall. This sequence signifies Chiron's transformation from a teenager into the third chapter titled 'Black'.

Similarly to how African Americans separate themselves from the water in modern-day western society due to a fear of the unknown, in the film's final chapter, Chiron moves to Atlanta, a city situated inland, meaning he moves away from the water. As 'Black' Chiron creates a toughened 'gangster' exterior as he makes himself physically big and strong and becomes a drug dealer. Through doing this, he assigns himself to a stereotype of Black men in America as he cannot comprehend the coexistence of his racial identity and his sexual orientation. In America, there is a feeling in Black communities that being gay is 'something that white people do' (Carbado, 2001 p. 250). The idea that being gay is associated with whiteness mirrors how swimming was (and still is) perceived to be a white activity. This rule dictated by society means Chiron is only permitted to embrace one of the two key elements of his character. By moving away from the ocean, he rejects his sexuality. Chiron suppresses the truth about his sexuality to fit into the standards of a society that continuously rejects him, and his connection to the ocean and water begins to fade away. In an interview, Jenkins said, 'growing up in Miami, the ocean has this charge, this energy, something you can feel. Sometimes you can smell it despite the fact it might be two miles away' (Entertainment Weekly, 2017). Chiron can connect to his true self when near the water since the ocean

is a central aspect of life in Miami. When Chiron lives near the sea, he seems to partially accept his sexuality despite external factors belittling him for it. At the beginning of the chapter, Chiron has just been released from prison and receives a call from Kevin to visit him in Miami. He does so, and they reconnect, with Kevin inviting Chiron back to his apartment.

In the film's penultimate shot, Chiron places his head on Kevin's shoulder - mirroring their position when Kevin masturbated Chiron on the beach. This time, however, the spectator is permitted to see the men's facial expressions as the camera is placed in front of them. Although there is no water visibly present, the non-diegetic sound of waves can be heard. It is the first time we see adult Chiron as vulnerable, allowing the toughened exterior he manufactured for himself to fall away. Jenkins alignment of this shot with the sound of waves shows that Chiron is finally at peace with his sexuality by returning to Miami.

The film's closing shot is of Little looking out to sea, highlighting Chiron's lifelong connection to the water and ultimately unites the Black people's bodies and water's image indefinitely. Before the camera cuts to black, Little turns and looks up out of frame. Although we as spectators are not privy to what he is looking at, Jenkins suggests optimism about his future that was not there before Chiron returned to Miami. The lighting is essential in this shot as it appears to have a blue tint to it, making Little's skin glow blue. The film is adapted from Tarell Alvin McCrane's unpublished play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. The play's title links Black people's bodies with water since a primary connotation of blue is water and the sea. There is also a phenomenon

in which Black people's bodies temporarily become blue in the moonlight, which infers that their (and Chiron's) natural place is with the water.

Cinema is a medium in which stereotypes can be challenged, undone and changed. *Moonlight's* masterful use of filmmaking techniques successfully re-marry the image of Black people's bodies and water. In doing so, *Moonlight* begins to overturn the centuries-old stereotype that Black people cannot swim. The stereotype will not disappear instantly; after all, it took hundreds of years of oppression and segregation for it to form. The denial of swimming as a recreational activity allowed fear to manifest itself in Black communities about the danger of swimming. On-screen representation is a critical factor in proving it wrong, as seeing a picture of oneself on screen can help overcome such fears. *Moonlight* demonstrates that these fears can be overcome, that the stereotype does not always have to be the rule and that one day, whole communities of African-American people will once again look blue in the moonlight.

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