

4-2019

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Intimacy:

In Moonlight, Black Boys Look Blue

Vanessa Iroegbulem

Religion 323: Sexual Ethics

Dr. Wolff

April 1st, 2019

The film *Moonlight* tells the story of Chiron, who is poor, Black, and gay as he grows up in the projects of Miami.¹ Chiron's story is told in three parts over the course of the film in which viewers see immense growth in his character as he transforms from a small quiet boy, to an awkward teen, and finally to a muscular and withdrawn man. In one scene, Chiron experiences an intimate moment with another character, Kevin, that is viewed as taboo in society, and especially within Black community. This scene is saturated with bluish undertones that highlight the destruction of toxic masculinity through a black, rather than white, lens.² The display of playful flirtation, bodily closeness, and intimacy between these two boys rightfully challenges everything that black toxic masculinity enforces. Heterosexism has existed in the African American community primarily because of its strict adherence to religious traditions which negatively influence how the community interacts with and treats Queer Black men and women. In an attempt to combat homophobia both implicitly and explicitly expressed in the Black community, Queer Black men and women continue to struggle to find their place, as well as their voice. Moreover, there is a problematic view of masculinity that is not exclusive to the Black community, but also extends itself to society's general view of what masculinity is supposed to look like, and Queer Black men struggle when it comes to navigating the treacherous waters of trying to figure out their personal identity amidst this view. *Moonlight* delves into the struggle of trying to be seen as something other than what people ascribe to you. In this paper, I will analyze the role of hegemonic masculinity and homosociality in order to highlight how these social scripts contribute to the inhibition of expressing or displaying intimacy between men. Then, I

¹ *Moonlight*. Film. Directed by Barry Jenkins. New York City: A24, 2016.

² Color plays a huge role in the film's cinematic theme to supplement the analysis of race, gender, and sexuality in respect to Black Queer men. The director, Barry Jenkins, uses color to set the mode and tone of the film. The color blue, in addition to black, is extremely important to the film's cinematic theme and it is one of the most frequently exhibited color that the film manipulates to tell Chiron's story.

will utilize these concepts to examine how Chiron's character presents a counter narrative to these harmful social scripts through his relationship with Juan and Kevin, a father figure and lover respectively. Ultimately, Chiron's transformation throughout the film explores how masculine heteronormativity stigmatizes male-male intimacy and what that means for Queer Black men.

The portrayal of male intimacy in the film *Moonlight* makes apparent two dominant ideas that Chiron must work against. First, the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which serves as the dominant view of what masculinity should look like within a society. In an article published about hegemonic masculinity, Jewkes et al. note that, to an extent, "hegemonic masculinity is constructed as a gender position that is as much 'not gay' as it is as it is 'not female.'"³ This type of masculinity pertains to white heterosexual males, and it reinforces characteristics like physical strength, competitiveness, suppressing emotions other than anger, refusal to admit weakness, condemning feminine attributes in men, homophobia, expressing dominance, and so forth. Historically, this is seen through the portrayal of indigenous people by the Europeans as sodomites because they had long hair, carried baskets, and "deviated" from the behaviors the New Englander's viewed as "normative."⁴ Crip theory, which builds on Queer theory's critique of traditional norms of heterosexuality, focuses our attention on how physically abled and functioning bodies are seen as more desirable than other bodies that do not possess these qualities.⁵ Since disabled bodies are not always able to subscribe to the characteristics that require them to be seen as masculine, they too are labeled as "other." Ultimately, hegemonic

³ Jewkes, Rachel, Robert Morrell, Jeff Hearn, Emma Lundqvist, David Blackbeard, Graham Lindegger, Michael Quayle, Yandisa Sikweyiya, and Lucas Gottzén. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Combining Theory and Practice in Gender Interventions." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17, no. Sup2 (10, 2015): 112-27

⁴ Goldberg, Jonathan. *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities*, 179-222. New York, NY: Fordham Univ. Press, 2010.

⁵ Löfgren-Mårtenson, Lotta. "'Hip to Be Crip?'" About Crip Theory, Sexuality and People with Intellectual Disabilities." *Sexuality and Disability* 31, no. 4 (01, 2013): 414

masculinity can only be achieved by men who possess these specific qualities outlined by societal norms. For this reason, being non-white, gay, or disabled puts one at a disadvantage with society viewing them as less “masculine.”

This leads to the second dominant idea, the concept of homosociality, which describes and identifies social bonds between people of the same sex that are not romantic or sexual in nature.⁶ This concept is typically used to refer to how men, in their relationships with other men, uphold and maintain hegemonic masculinity, thus perpetuating patriarchal systems.⁷ These concepts help explain not only why male-male intimacy is treated as taboo, but also why homophobic ideology against gay men is so deep-rooted in society. Which is not to say that Lesbians experience homophobia to a lesser degree than gay men. However, female homosociality recognizes that when women engage in intimate relations with one another, such as kissing, hugging, or holding hands, these women’s actions are perceived as socially acceptable feminine heterosexual behavior and they are not considered Lesbians, while men who engage in those same relations are frequently identified as Gay regardless of their sexual orientation.⁸

Relationships, whether it be with one’s self or another person, matter to an individual’s sense of well-being. Intimacy is crucial to normal human functioning and living without it for long periods of time can often lead to unhappiness. Psychologist Erik Erikson famously developed eight stages of psychosocial development which chronicle the different stages of a

⁶ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Wayne Koestenbaum. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

⁷ Hammarén, Nils, and Thomas Johansson. "Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy." *SAGE Open* 4, no. 1 (2014)

⁸ Hammarén, Nils, and Thomas Johansson. "Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy." *SAGE Open* 4, no. 1 (2014): 5

person's social needs throughout their lives.⁹ He argued that the successful completion of these stages is required in order to develop a healthy personality and acquire basic virtues that can aid the ego in resolving life's crises. In the sixth stage of Erikson's psychosocial development there is the question of intimacy vs. isolation. Even in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the theory of what drives human behavior, a person's need for belongingness and love, which include intimate relationships and friendships, must be satisfied in order to fulfill our highest need of self-actualization.¹⁰ As crucial and important as experiencing intimacy in human beings is, people often take it for granted. While cisgendered heterosexual male and females do not often have to struggle against societal norms to experience, express or reciprocate intimacy, whether it be in public or private, expressing or reciprocating intimacy as a Queer Black man becomes a dangerous battle these individuals must constantly decide whether it is worth facing. Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* highlights how hegemonic masculinity inhibits the expression or display of intimacy between men which is especially heightened when focusing on the lives of Queer Black boys and men.

There are two relationships through which Chiron experiences intimacy that work against the two concepts previously discussed in the paragraphs above. In the first scene, viewers see his relationship with Juan which is significantly different from the intimacy he experiences with his fellow classmate Kevin. Chiron's relationship with Juan allows him to experience a platonic kind of intimacy that is not rooted in romantic or sexual desire. Juan serves as a father figure for Chiron by guiding him and allowing him to be open about his confusion surrounding his sexuality without looking down upon or ostracizing Chiron. The scenes between Juan and Chiron

⁹ Krause, Mark A., and Daniel Paul Corts. "Methods, Concepts, and Prenatal Development." In *Psychological Science: Modeling Scientific Literacy*, 316-355. Boston, MA: Pearson, 2016.

¹⁰ Krause, Mark A., and Daniel Paul Corts. "Motivation and Emotion." In *Psychological Science: Modeling Scientific Literacy*, 356-395. Boston, MA: Pearson, 2016.

are saturated with genuine kindness and affection that stand out amidst the violence Chiron faces at school and at home. Since this relationship is not broadcasted for other characters to witness, Chiron does not receive backlash for being intimate in this way with Juan. In one scene, after Juan teaches Chiron to swim, they sit on the beach overlooking the ocean's waves. In that moment, Juan shares an anecdote from his childhood with Chiron. Imitating the voice of an old lady in the neighborhood he once lived in as a child, he says, "In moonlight, black boys look blue."¹¹ In the moonlight, with "night" acting as a cover or a shield, becomes the only time that Black men, or in this case Chiron, can drop their guard and shed their overly masculine personas they must use in their everyday lives as a tool for survival. This sentiment parallels Chiron's relationship with Kevin, specifically the most intimate moment they share together. There is a heightened sense of intimacy and vulnerability in the scene where Chiron meets Kevin on the beach where Juan once taught Chiron how to swim. Only in those moments can they be vulnerable and honest with themselves about who they are. In the moonlight, Chiron can be himself with Kevin in a way that he has never been able to experience before.

However, this idea that moonlight allows Chiron to experience one of his only genuinely intimate moments in the film is problematic when considering that in many ancient cultures the moon is associated with femininity. Even in various languages, where words are gendered, the moon is also considered feminine. This underlying symbol further serves to uphold the concept of hegemonic masculinity. The fact that moonlight, with the moon being associated with feminine symbols, is the only place Chiron is allowed to experience intimacy maintains that not only must this intimacy between Kevin and Chiron be hidden, but it is also only acceptable under the guise of femininity. The double meaning of moonlight and its usage in the film emphasizes

¹¹ *Moonlight*. Film. Directed by Barry Jenkins. New York City: A24, 2016.

that male intimacy is feminized by society. This further illustrates that even when Chiron gets to be intimate it is still never on a level that can be considered “masculine.”

Despite how vulnerable Chiron allows himself to be in his most intimate moments, as the film progresses the expression of male intimacy vanishes. Throughout most of the film Chiron represses his sexuality and regulates his behavior in an attempt to spare himself from the ridicule and bullying he faces at the hands of his fellow classmates. This recurring concept of hegemonic masculinity continues to display itself in Chiron’s life, censoring the ways in which he is allowed to be intimate with other characters, and how other characters can be intimate with him. In fact, even Kevin sacrifices the relationship he has with Chiron in order to keep his perceived image of what it means to be a “man” or to be “masculine” by brutally beating him up in front of their peers. In this scene, Kevin, egged on by his fellow classmates, knocks Chiron to the ground twice. In the background, viewers can see other boys cheering Kevin on and yelling obscenities, while Chiron is pictured in the foreground with a broken and bloody nose. When Kevin can no longer stand to throw punches at Chiron the rest of the boys take over and continue to beat and kick Chiron while he is on the ground. In the scene directly after, viewers are faced with the crippling aftermath as Chiron, his face brutally beaten, breaks down crying in the principal’s office. As much as this scene is a depiction of Chiron’s strength, it is also a devastating moment in Chiron’s life where his identity, as perceived by others, is the source of the violence against him. Since hegemonic masculinity prizes masculine behaviors, those that do not meet the expectations of heteronormative masculinity, like Chiron, are punished. Men who are complicit in performing hegemonic masculinity see homosexuality and feminine behaviors as a threat to their own masculinity causing them to lash out in the only “acceptable” way they can as men—through displaying acts of aggression or violence. This explains why Kevin acts violently against

Chiron despite not internally feeling this way. Kevin, much like all the other boys, including Chiron himself, knows that showing weakness or vulnerability weakens their masculinity as it is perceived by their peers.

Ultimately, through Chiron's relationships with other characters and the way he presents himself to those that do not understand him it is apparent that hegemonic masculinity and homosociality prevent Chiron from expressing himself or being openly intimate with those that he cares about. When Chiron represses his sexuality, he is attacked by his fellow classmates for not exhibiting heteronormative masculine behaviors. Black male bodies are especially held to this hypermasculine standard because, just by being Black, they already fall outside of what society expects of them. Society expects them to be dominant, assertive, aggressive, strong, and unemotional. On the one hand, being anything other than what is deemed "normal" for a man to be is immediately punished. While on the other hand, the characteristic and behaviors ascribed to Black men are also inherently punished. Consequently, Black men must always keep their guard up when they go out into the world and interact with those complicit in performing hegemonic masculinity. This leaves no safe spaces for them to be vulnerable or intimate in ways that society allow other bodies to be. And when one considers that the construction of homophobia among men is directly linked to the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, in every sense of their existence Queer Black men's lives are negated and ridiculed.

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