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Research Report:

'Homo-*erection*: Black Film and the Representation of Male Homo-eroticism.'

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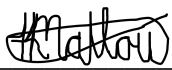
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Introduction

Trying to underpin the exact reasons behind the pandemic prevalence of homophobia appears to be simultaneously easy and impossible:[1]easy, because I dare to postulate that in any given context, a resonant logic exists, i.e. that the opposite sexes are both created and required by Nature to unite for the purposes of copulative procreation. Their failure or refusal to do so means that they are living in defiance of the "natural" laws to which all species should adhere. This defiance is to be punished — not by the laws of nature however, but by the man-made laws of the homophobic society in question. On the other hand, a universalist understanding of homophobia remains elusive because societies are not only diverse in their cultures, religions and histories, but are also internally complex, with unique beliefs, customs and ideological particularities often (co)-existing within the various identifications of what may be considered a single community. These varying norms include the different ways in which sex, gender and sexuality are perceived, performed and ultimately (re)presented.

In the West, the Christian religion has had a puritanical impact on what Western societies consider to be morality, and on what is considered sexual *im*morality.[2]The term 'sodomy', which generally (and derogatively) refers to anal intercourse — is for

[1] I understand the term 'homophobia' (and its derivative, 'homophobic') as referring to the fear of homosexuals and homosexual practices. This fear encompasses a range of discriminatory attitudes towards people who embody transgressive sexual and/or gender identities and practices.

[2] I deem it well worth recalling that Christianity is an Abrahamic religion which has its roots in the ancient Middle East. Despite the Semitic origins of Jesus Christ however, the Church as we know it today is a Westernised institution whose colonial history has far eclipsed its Oriental inception. While non-Western Christian churches such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Armenian Apostolic Church existed in pre-colonial times, these churches (and their doctrines) did not spread far beyond their national borders, probably because they did not benefit from the historic *Scramble for Africa*. Western Christianity on the other hand enjoys mainstream privilege as the face of Christianity today, due to its far-reaching colonial expansion. I do not necessarily believe that Eastern Christianity has a less judgmental, and less puritanical interpretation of sexual morality than Western Christianity. I simply mention these peripheral Eastern sects, in order to highlight the manner in which colonial conquest, and the expansion of Euro-Christian empires, enabled Western Christianity to spread its doctrines around the world.

example derived from the story in the Biblical book of Genesis, where YHWH is traditionally interpreted as punishing the men of **Sodom** and Gomorrah for their "immoral" desire to *sodomise* His angels (Douglas and Tenney, 2011):

> But before they retired for the night, all the men of Sodom, young and old, came from all over the city and surrounded the house. They shouted to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to spend the night with you? Bring them out to us so we can have sex with them!' So Lot stepped outside to talk to them, shutting the door behind him. 'Please, my brothers,' he begged, 'don't do such a wicked thing.' […] 'Stand back!' they shouted. [...] But the two angels reached out, pulled Lot into the house, and bolted the door. Then they blinded all the men, young and old, who were at the door of the house, […] (Genesis 19: 4-11, NLT).

These lecherous *sodomites* are the first of many references in the Bible to same-sex desire, and to God's uncompromising wrath against it.[3] Owing to the far-reaching nature of European colonialism and its missionary modus operandi, the African continent has largely become assimilated into the Christian understanding of morality, and absorbed the classical Abrahamic beliefs on sexual practices, which hold firm that "it's disgusting for men to have sex with one another, and those who do will be put to death, just as they deserve" (Leviticus 20:13, *CEV*).[4]While one should not dismiss the post-colonial continuation of indigenous beliefs, customs and practices related to sex, it is undeniable that Christianity has also played a powerful role in shaping societal views on sexual relations in Africa and the African diaspora: fundamentalist Christian teaching has been and continues to be one of the

[3] See also: Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11, 1 Timothy 1:10, Jude 1:7, inter alia.

[4] For an Islamic reading on homosexuality, see, inter alia, the Hadith book *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsat,* where the prophet Muhammad is said to have taught : "if a woman comes upon a woman, they are both adulteresses, if a man comes upon a man, then they are both adulterers" (Al-Tabarani, 4157, n.d.).

most potent catalysts behind homophobic legislations, persecutions and attitudes today.[5]It is against this homophobic socio-religious backdrop that I seek to analyse the manners in which the contentious sexual act between men has been represented by one of the most pertinent forms of art in the contemporary world: Black film. More specifically, I am studying the representation of male homoeroticism within the sub-genre of Black Queer film.

Aim

The primary aim of this thesis is to study the representation of male homoeroticism in Black Queer film.

I have invoked a traditionalist Christian paradigm for both African and Western contexts as the homophobic backdrop against which my entire thesis is rationalised. My deliberate focalisation of Western Christianity as a socio-religious backdrop against which I investigate homoeroticism in Black Queer film, is not intended to dismiss the presence of Islam, indigenous belief systems, and other religions in the given societies. Rather, it continues the argument begun in the introduction, that Christianity pertinently informs (and even shapes) both African and Western societal norms at a larger scale. Furthermore, I am not turning a blind eye to the homophobic prejudices that exist in traditional African belief systems, or in Islam — another widely practiced religion. Instead, I decisively give Christianity conceptual preference, because my own beliefs and experiences are rooted in Western Christianity. Owing to it being the faith that I practice, and one of the main lenses through which I see the world, it makes sense for me to identify Christianity as a critical moral paradigm within Black Queer film. In this Christian paradigm, it is the sex, not the love, which is *explicitly* forbidden between members of the same sex: "No man is to have sexual relations with another man; God hates that" (Leviticus 18: 12, *GNT*). In light of this

[5] A film which exemplifies this would be Roger Ross William's *God Loves Uganda* (2013).

Divine interdiction against same-sex coitus, I wish to investigate the homoerotic in Black Queer film; to take keener interest in the representation of the more physical aspects of homosexual relationships — the arousals and *erections*, the sexual tensions and contact, and all the other sexual elements underlying the on-screen romances that we as the viewership have come to love.

The secondary aim is to introduce my theory of the Hetero-Gaze as my scholarly intervention to the discipline of Queer film criticism. Drawing on the critical theories of 'White Gaze' and 'Male Gaze', I aim to introduce and theorise the Hetero-Gaze as a new conceptual framework for criticising the representation of Queer male characters in cinematic *oeuvres d'art*. Questioning whether or not the camera casts a Hetero-Gaze on homosexual characters is therefore pivotal to understanding the representation of male homoeroticism in Queer Black film.[6]

Research Question and Rationale

Queer film, which has had a predominantly White and Anglo-American/French history, has hitherto represented the homoerotic, and homosexual relations in general, as a matter of *coming out*: secrecy — the desperate attempt to stay hidden in the closet — is at the heart of on-screen sexual relations between men. These hidden "bromances" are further permeated by the crippling fear of being not only discovered as homosexual, but of being seen or caught in the very moment of copulation, for such a discovery usually comes with a heavy penalty for the transgressing parties. Moreover, sex between men is often represented as a violent encounter: relying on **homonormative** ideas of 'tops' and 'bottoms' (i.e. dominance and

[6] For want of a convincing explanation as to which wording should be preeminent, I use the terms 'Queer Black film' and 'Black Queer film' interchangeably throughout the thesis.

submission), Queer film characteristically presents us with a **straight-presenting** man who assumes the role of the sexually dominant partner, and who — due to his inability to reconcile his own homosexual feelings— has violent, homophobic and often effeminophobic reactions to the presence and/or advances of the character who will assume the submissive sex role.[7]Having been comfortable in his own convictions of being heterosexual, the former initially resents and wishes to punish the latter, whom he blames for the "sudden" homoerotic curiosities that he experiences, and to which he succumbs after a futile resistance. The sexually submissive character on the other hand, is typically established as a Queer male who is in touch with his own sexuality, effeminate or not. He may be in the closet, but he is more comfortable with being a homosexual and is often portrayed as the seductress who lures the straight-presenting man into a Gay romance. Amidst these sexual tensions is the presence of a female character. Characteristically, this is the partner/spouse of the straight-presenting man who — hitherto assumed to be *as straight as a ramrod* — cheats on her with his secret Gay lover. Because the said adulterous lover is typically depicted as relying on seduction to win over the "straight" object of his affections, Queer film inadvertently vilifies Queer males as a threat to Christian matrimony, which is traditionally heterosexual and monogamous.

Making a conclusive connection between the heteronormative, homophobic Gaze to which homosexuals are subjected in society, and the hitherto representation of same-sex relationships as *illicit* love affairs in the mainstream cinema is by no means an extrapolation.[8]As with real life hidden Queer romances, the characteristically **closeted** homosexuals on screen must keep their relationships secret at all cost, lest they are discovered by the morally upright gatekeepers and punished for their "abominable" natures.

[7] Effeminophobia very aptly refers to "the fear of effeminacy" (Richardson, 2009, p. 528).

[8] I utilise 'mainstream cinema' as a broad and circumnavigating term, referring not only to Hollywood and the (English-speaking) Western world, but to those widely distributing industries that are predominantly White and that benefit, eco-culturally, from the hegemonic natures of Whiteness and White images. I therefore include —without limiting myself to — the French, Russian (which is Eastern, but White), Italian and (to an extent) German film industries in my conceptualisation of mainstream cinema.

While these homosexual relationships go down in both cinematic history and academic historiography as love stories, less critical attention is paid to their more erotic aspects, i.e. to the fact that they are about physical attraction and sexual acts inasmuch as they are about "the love that dare not speak its name." It is important therefore, to regard the sexual intercourse between characters of the same sex not only as moments of consummated love, but to also study them as erotic moments par excellence, in which all the moral codes that had hitherto inhibited — if not *prohibited* — the characters' sexual desires and practices have been irreversibly transgressed and subverted.[9]

As outlined, the foundational argument of the thesis is that the cinematic conventions we associate with Queer stories have been historically and systematically established by Queer film in the White hegemonic tradition. Departing from this argument, the research question can be worded thus: is Black film seeking to develop its own Black Queer aesthetic, or is it simply reproducing an already established (White) form? Embedded in the research question is therefore an interest in understanding if and how Black (Queer) film adheres to and/or departs from the given historiographic description of Queer film in the White hegemony. My attempt to answer the question through a study of homoeroticism will rely primarily on the firm assertion that sex between males is transgressive (in society), and that as such, any image or medium representing this act becomes transgressive by default, irrespective of

[9] This is not to say that I am completely doing away with any critical examination of the love stories in which the sexual acts may occur: if one is to comprehensively understand the manners in which homoeroticism is represented in (Black) Queer cinema, it remains unequivocally important to study both the sexual acts and the love stories that underpin them. The eroticism within these love stories is foregrounded in my research however, because I deem it important to study the sexual intercourse as a self-standing occurrence, even when it occurs within the context of love, forbidden or not. As already iterated, it is not only the fact of loving a person of the same sex that's condemned by society, but also the single *action* of lying with the said person — irrespective of whether one is espoused to them or only known to them through a once-off Grindr hook-up, no strings attached.

whether the representation itself is empowering, degrading, flattering, or somewhere between the negatives and the positives.

Theoretical Framework

Black film.

In my own words, "Black film" is the socio-political identity of *the cinema of Black people*. It serves as a popular medium to confront and disrupt the ontological erasure of Blackness in representation. In more classical terms, Black film has been used as a genre-title to distinguish films made by (and for) Black people from films that embody the White cultural hegemony. It has also been classically understood as referring specifically to African American productions. In *Black Film as Genre*, Cripps (1979) begins his scrutiny of Black film by stating that it "may be defined as those motion pictures made for theatre distribution that have a black producer, director, and writer, or black performers; that speak to black audiences, […] and that emerge from self-conscious intentions, whether artistic or political, to illuminate the Afro-American experience" (p. 3). In the same fashion, *Redefining Black Film* (1993) uses 'Black film' as a term referring specifically to the African American experience, and similarly regards the genre as encompassing those films that are created by Black filmmakers, for the purpose of permitting "audience identification with black characters" (Reid, 1993, p. 44). Reid anchors himself in the traditional conceptualisation of Black film, affirming that Black films are characteristically centred on "black-oriented socio-political content" (p. 44). While the African American experience has premised the traditional understanding of Black film, I oppose this narrow understanding for three reasons primarily: firstly, it disregards the fact that the first identification of audiences of and *with* Black film, is with the Black cast to which Cripps (1979) refers, — irrespective of whether or

not the filmmaker is understood to be Black. Secondly, it dismisses the importance of films that were not necessarily made by Black directors, but that nonetheless express the stories and experiences of Black lives, and competently so. Thirdly, the limiting of Black film to an American context furthermore ignores the diasporic nature of Black identities and their (artistic) expressions. I understand Blackness as a diasporic (though by no means hegemonic) identity that connects all peoples of African descent. For this reason, I refrain from making a separationist distinction between the Black modes that have hitherto been distinguished as Black film and **African** film, and from privileging the *American* Black film as preeminent. This does not at all mean that I do not see 'African film' as a culturally, geographically and historically distinct development. Without dismissing the agency and distinctness of the Black African cinema that developed specifically in the post-Independence Sub-Saharan Africa of the 1960s, I categorise African film within a diasporic — rather than American — 'Black film', in order to connect international films from different Black traditions across space and time.

Despite being an earlier source, Cripps (1979) appears to be more inclusive in his description of Black film than Reid (1993). Cripps rebuts his initial outline by conceding that "our definition of black film must necessarily be broader so as to include […] the black filmmaker whose work emerged from the conventional channels of production that were lined with white money, advice, and control, even won to 'final cut' approval, and finally, though rarely, film produced by white filmmakers whose work attracted the attention, if not always the unconditional praise, of black moviegoers and critics" (Cripps, 1979, p. 4). In concordance with Cripps, I do not dismiss films like *Paris is Burning* (1991) and *Inxeba* (2018) because of their White directors de facto. Instead, my approach is to interrogate the White privilege and positionality of these directors, and to scrutinise the invasion of the White Gaze when I analyse these works as Black films. Afterall, "almost every black film,

from production through distribution, was affected by whites", but "a broader compass [on Black film] also allows us to avoid the trap of claiming too much black control of certain films" (Cripps, 1979, pp. 3-4).

White Cinema.

In contrast to Black film, 'White film', or 'White cinema', appears not to have a standard definition, or a body of scholarship seeking to define it. I attribute this to the mainstream and hegemonic nature of White cinema: it is regarded as the standard, universally understood cinematic form, and therefore requires little explication. Notwithstanding, Seewood offers a definition, stating that "the White film is narrowly defined […] as a film with at least one White in the lead role or co-lead role and Blacks or other ethnicities in supporting or non-influential roles where the narrative resolves itself by giving more dramatic attention to the emotions and circumstances of the White character(s)" (Seewood, 2014). Self-explanatorily, these White-led films aren't necessarily anti-Black, but scholars are mostly on the same page regarding the films' focus on White lives. Made most often by White filmmakers and White-owned studios, these are the kinds of films that sparked the #OscarsSoWhite movement in the 2010s.[10] Moreover, these films look at the world from a privileged lens, resulting in the recurrence of the notions of "Whiteness" and "White privilege" in the literature that surrounds them.[11]The cinematic conventions of White cinema, especially as pertains to Black sexuality, will be discussed in the literature review, and in the close reading analysis.

[10] Due to the range of genres that can all be described as "White", I do not identify White cinema as a genre in the same way as Black film. Part of the hegemony of White cinema lies in the fact that these are the films that people around the world, including people of colour, stream, download, or view in theatres most frequently.

[11] See, for example, Gaines (1986).

(New) Queer Cinema.

The category of films which explicitly and unapologetically prioritise the narratives of Queer characters is more specifically referred to as New Queer Cinema — a movement whose naissance is dated as the early 1990s. Chin (2015) explains that the term 'New Queer Cinema' "was coined by B. Ruby Rich in several publications […] to describe the appearance of certain films […] in the early 1990s that evinced a politicized stance towards queer culture" (p.1). Rich focussed her reviews on a perceivable "commitment to queer culture in those particular films" (Chin, 2015, p. 1), and as such, she included works such as *Edward II* (1992), *Swoon* (1992) and *The Living End* (1992) as illustrative examples. In a 1992 article in the British film journal *Sight and Sound*, Rich argued seminally that a 'new queer cinema' existed: "There, suddenly, was a flock of films that were doing something new, renegotiating subjectivities, annexing whole genres, revising histories in their image" (Rich, 1992).

Much like Black film, New Queer Cinema was initially identified as "the culmination of several developments in American cinema and American culture" (Chin, 2015, p.1). After B. Ruby Rich's 1992 article in *Sight and Sound* however, the blossoming of the New Queer Cinema "soon led to the term being used indiscriminately to denote independent films with gay and lesbian content" (Chin, 2015, p.1) from both the United States and other countries, and has hitherto continued to be used academically to describe Queer-themed films by mainstream and independent filmmakers alike. Hark thus my theoretical framing of Queer film vis.-à.-vis. 'New Queer Cinema': following on the coinage of 'New Queer Cinema' in 1992, I use this term to refer to those films belonging to the rising production of Queer-centrist filmmaking from the early 1990s until the present day. 'Queer film' however, refers inclusively to both the *New* Queer Cinema and to Queer cinema produced before the 1990s: a decades-long showreel of Queer films paved the way for New Queer Cinema — a culmination of "the long and important tradition of gay and lesbian

filmmaking within the history of independent, experimental and 'outsider' cinema" (Rich, 1992).[12]

In order to reach for as encompassing an understanding of the evolution and historiography of Queer cinematic representations as possible, it is important to pay attention to the "Aggressiveness of New Queer Cinema" — the biggest difference between New Queer Cinema and the Queer film that preceded it. According to Chin (2015), it is "the aggressiveness with which the core films of New Queer Cinema assert homosexual identity and queer culture that distinguishes them from earlier queer films such as *Parting Glances* [1986] and *Mala Noche* [1986]" (p. 2). It is equally important to remember when analysing New Queer Cinema however, that although united by a common style, "the new queer films […] aren't all the same, and don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern"(Rich, 1992).

Queer.

I make an intentional distinction in my thesis between **men** and **males**: the former self-identify as men due to the ways in which they experience, understand and perform their gender. The latter occupy penis-endowed male bodies biologically, but are not men because they neither identify as men nor perform their gender in ways that conform with the gender-normative moulds of "manhood" that society has outlined for them. The difference therefore

[12] Chin (2015) identifies Gay artists such as Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulus and Curtis Harrington — whose films often "dealt with themes deemed too controversial for mainstream cinema" — as some of the initial developers of the "very active and coherent experimental film culture" in the 40s and 50s that would establish a filmographic foundation for New Queer Cinema (p. 1). Examples of (post-90s) films described as New Queer Cinema include Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), the French film *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013) as well is the critically acclaimed *Carol* (2015), all of which "have benefited from the new openness made possible by New Queer Cinema" (p. 3).

lies in the distinction between gender and sex. While both men and males can be called 'Queer', it is easier to refer to Queer *men* using narrower terms that are more specific to sexual orientation, such as homosexual or bisexual: as self-identified men, it is only their sexuality which is Queer, not their gender. *Males* who are Queer and who do not self-identify as men on the other hand, are not as easy to inhibit with such socially constructed terms as "Gay", because although they may be described as homosexuals where their *sex* is concerned, their gender is experienced, understood and performed in ways that transgress the very practices, cultural roles and social identities that we have come to associate with homosexuality itself. Such Queer-male identities may include — without being limited to — gender-queerness, gender non-binary sexualities, and/or transgender inhabitations of male bodies.[13]In the context of on-screen characters, these identifications are to be made by the film analyst, especially in films where the sexual orientations and/or gender identities of characters are displayed, but not explicitly stated. The film analyst must also take note of the representation of those characters in Queer film who fit and/or conform to societal norms of how "normal" homosexuality looks like, and how it ought to be expressed. These characters can be described as 'homonormative.'

> Rosenfield (2009) identifies the homonormative (within the context of "a post-war assimilationist politics") as "a gender-conforming [homosexual] person" (Rosenfield, 2009, p. 621). This post-war homonormativity is "centred on the construction of an acceptable homosexuality based on its adherence to heteronormativity" (p. 621). Although Rosenfield claims that society has since evolved (from the post-war era) and now sees a "new, neoliberal homonormativity",[14] I wish to argue that the post-war

[13] Cf. "Gay" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

[14] This new homonormativity "privileges consumption, privacy, and domesticity over radical social change or a critique of heteronormativity" (Decena, 2008, p. 405, cited in Rosenfield, 2009, p. 621).

homonormative 'category of person' is one which society still embraces and values — more than any other (type of) Queer individual —for their gender conformity, and because of the undying "public privileging of heterosexuality", which demands "that homosexuals pass as heterosexual" (Rosenfield, 2009, p. 621). Due to the pressures that homosexuals experience, to pass as heterosexual, one can begin to identify the **straight-presenting** (and homonormative) character in Queer film as an individual who *acts straight t*in order to escape the brunt of homophobia.

Homoeroticism.

The identification of the thesis as a study of eroticism, and not of sex, in Black Queer film, is premised on my argument that sex refers plainly to the physical activity (in its various forms), while eroticism is the filmic expression and *representation* of sexual desire, which becomes erotic when it is artistically expressed, irrespective of whether actual coitus occurs or not.I therefore disagree with the description of the New Queer films as "Homo Porno" (Rich, 1992): eroticism differs from pornography in that porn seeks to capture sex in its raw and unhindered form in order to stimulate voyeuristic and/or masturbatory pleasure, while eroticism invokes Sex as an artistic muse to evoke sexuality, emotionality, spirituality, etc. When same-sex desire is focalised in given oeuvres d'art, these expressions fall into the *genre* of Homoeroticism — an "aesthetic", rather than "prosaic"(Mann, 1925, cited in Kontje, 2002, p. 327) mode of expressing carnal inclinations amongst members of the same sex.

B. Ruby Rich alludes to the homoerotic aspect of New Queer Cinema when she states that "above all, [these films]are full of pleasure" (Rich, 1992).Regardless, Homoeroticism[15]rebelliously existed long before the rise of New Queer Cinema through the "underground film" of avant-garde Gay artists such as Jack Smith, Warren Sonbert, and

[15] Also termed Homoerotica by way of the heterosexual Erotica.

Andy Warhol (Chin, 2015, p.1). According to Chin (2015), “works such as Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and Andy Warhol's *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) were especially influential in establishing an iconography of homoeroticism that would eventually be replicated in mainstream commercial cinema” (p.1).

Literature Review

Queer Black film.

While critics have largely conceded that Black film has an anti-slavery, decolonial and pro-Black aesthetic, very few have spoken about its positioning of Queer people, and about how the medium goes about representing what bell hooks refers to as ‘transgressive sexual practice’ (Transgressive Sexual Practice, 2014).Despite the common consensus that “theory formation in black film studies should reflect the socio-historical and political-economic conditions of the black experience” (Yearwood, 2000, p. 69), Black film scholars such as Reid (1993) and Yearwood (2000) neither mention nor appear to be at all concerned with the *Queer* Black experience. Queer Black film is not considered a ‘Signifying Practice’ in its own right, and — lacking the high level of acknowledgement enjoyed by Queer film among mainstream film critics — it has not been studied substantially as a standard film genre/practice. This Queer Black ontological absence is perhaps defensible due to the preoccupation of Black film scholars with developing a Black film theory that provides “concepts, tools and strategies for initiating and maintaining a struggle against the way the black world is marginalized and shaped by forces beyond its control” (Yearwood, 2000, p. 69) — a marginalisation which does not (readily) bother the White film hegemony: Black film aesthetics have perhaps been so preoccupied with interrogating the (historically anti-Black) “discourses generated in film as well as discourses in society about film and

filmmaking" (p. 69), that scholars have not adequately investigated whether— and if so, how —Black film represents the experiences of its Queer people as it seeks to draw attention to the socio-political conditions that Black people are faced with. On the other hand, it is also important that we do not over-excuse our own ontological absence as Queer Black people, lest we forget that (All) Black Lives Matter. Yearwood (2000) is for example writing at the beginning of the 21st century: prominent Black films centred on the Queer Black experience — such as *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Paris is Burning* (1991) — had already been made in the preceding decades. It is therefore not farfetched to see the blind eye that he turns to Queer Black aesthetics in his study of 'Black Film as a Signifying Practice' (2000) as deliberate heterocentrism. Similarly, Reid offers a privileged heterocentrist conception of Black film by omitting the question on whether the techniques used by Black artists to "permit audience identification with Black characters" (Reid, 1993, p. 44) permit audiences to also identify with, or instead disassociate from homosexuality where Queer Black characters and their homoerotic experiences are involved.

Black male sexuality.

Theorising in 'The Construction of Black Sexuality', Jones (1993) argues that the "imagining of Black sexuality in mainstream film, particularly Black male heterosexuality, continues to be the most denormalizing factor in the definition of the Black screen character. By sabotaging the ability to create or maintain primary ties to other individuals through intimate contact, the Black male character calls into question not only his ability to function as a legitimate, full — in other words, normal — member of film culture, but also cancels the ability to be perceived as capable of complete humanity" (p. 247). While I agree with Jones that "Black male hetero<u></u>sexuality itself is also a repressed discourse characterized by

powerlessness and reaction in the mainstream cinema" (Ibid.), I also seek to draw attention to the fact that Queer Black males are marginalised by cinematic representations not only because they are Black, but also because they are Queer. These characters must therefore constantly negotiate the 'double consciousness' of being minorities within a minority, and I posit that Homoeroticism can be used as a lens to help us examine how this Queer-Black twoness is negotiated.[16]

Jones (1993) further states that "the motion picture industry has inscribed into the film culture sexual intimacy as the only legitimate humanizing contact" (p. 248). What this statement does not consider is that in order for society to view the sexual intimacy as a humanising contact with legitimacy, it has to be between characters of opposite sexes. A homoerotic lens is useful in determining whether sexual intimacy between homosexuals is still given the same legitimacy to humanise characters, or if it is instead represented as completely dehumanising and inhuman.

(Black) Gay independent film.

Possibly having Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) in mind, Jones (1993) suggests that "Black gay independent film has produced the most valuable model for reconstructing Black heterosexuality" (p. 248). The homo-eroticisation of the Black male — whose body has been perpetually represented in problematic manners — is however not of much concern for mainstream critics: "although homosexual themes had appeared in mainstream commercial films in the 1960s, […] independent gay films made the

[16] 'Twoness' — also referred to as 'double consciousness' — is a term coined by W.E.B. DuBois, initially used to describe "the [two-edged] anomaly of American racial arrangements, which segregate black from white, discriminate along racial lines, (and yet) oblige Afro-Americans to assimilate the values of white America"(Cripps, 1979, p. 5).

most impact" (Chin, 2015, p. 1). This submission is made without any allusion to how Black Queers may have been implicated in these films, especially where eroticism as an integral aspect of Queer filmmaking is concerned. Mainstream critics are furthermore not substantially vested in the contributions made by Black film to the Queer film movement in general: completely disregarding *Looking for Langston* (1989) as a landmark Queer Black film, Chin (2015) only refers to *Mala Noche* (1986) by Gus Van Sant and *Parting Glances* (1986) by Bill Sherwood as "the most direct precursors of the New Queer Cinema" (Chin, 2015, p. 2). Chin further claims that the New Queer films "aggressively assert identities" and that they "demand an acknowledgement of queer culture" (p.3) — without the slightest mention of a Black Queer culture that is largely underrepresented in the New Queer Cinema movement despite the participation of Black directors such as Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs.

In a similar manner, B. Ruby Rich alludes to a Homoeroticism that is AIDS-conscious at the dawn of New Queer Cinema without giving credit to Queer Black filmmaking and the ways in which it was among the forerunners to New Queer Cinema. Referring to Laurie Lynd's *R.S.V.P.* (1991), Rich says that "the tragedy and trauma of Aids have led to a new kind of film […] practice, one which takes up the aesthetic strategies that directors have already learned and applies them to a greater need than art for its own sake. This time, it's art for our sake, and it's powerful l[…]" (Rich, 1992). But from whom did these 90s directors learn their *strategies esthétiques?* Was the Black director Isaac Julien not among their most prolific 1980s forerunners? Indeed, his 1989 film *Looking for Langston* manages to be both erotic and AIDS-conscious. Fitting the description that Chin (2015) gives to "some [of the] films associated with New Queer Cinema", *Looking for Langston* is "in black and white", utilises "a large number of interior shots", and excluding the extras, features "a limited number of actors" (p. 2). While *Looking for Langston* can be described according to this criteria, Chin doesn't credit the film as a (Black) precursor to New Queer

Cinema, nor do they mention *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Paris is Burning* (1991) — the other Black films named by B. Ruby Rich in *Sight and Sound* (1992). We cannot disregard Black contributions when we reminisce on "the efflorescence of queer cinema initiated […] by the New Queer Cinema" (Chin, 2015, p. 3).

Conclusion.

Film critics have evidently been preoccupied with studying Black film as a medium which seeks to deconstruct the negative representations of Blackness that mainstream cinema stereotypically perpetuates. According to Reid (1993) and other theorists, Black Film has a political agenda, to disrupt the negative images, narratives and stereotypes about Black people that have become dominant discourses in mainstream cinema. Very little evidence exists of scholars interrogating the idea that Black film may also produce negative representations of its own minorities (when it does choose to represent those minorities at all). The fundamental problems on which Black film aesthetics have historically focused are "an emphasis on reformulating the nature of film image" as well as "the way filmic signification helps to establish or challenge social meanings" (Yearwood, 2000, p.69): Black film scholars have hitherto been minimally concerned by the ontological absence of characters who suffer the double exclusion of being both Black and Queer, and of their underrepresented sexual practices. If homosexual love and Gay sex in particular are considered transgressive in Black culture(s) however, then it is important to understand how (Queer) filmmakers go about creating Homoerotica in an industry that has traditionally been homophobic.

Inversely, while Black film scholars are not concerned with queer Blackness, scholars of Queer film are also not concerned with black Queerness, let alone of

an erotic nature. Chin (2015) explains that the rejection of heteronormativity, as well the representation of Queer characters who live on society's margins, is characteristic of (New) Queer Cinema. Although scholars are enthusiastic about these films, they also have not critically regarded the erotic aspect of Queer cinema, and how Queer creatives have represented same-sex desire differently from the broader heterosexual film culture. *I* want to delve deeper into filmic discourses regarding Black Homoeroticism. The research therefore involves the quest to understand how Queer Black film reformulates the (Eurocentric) nature of homoerotic images.[17]

Methodology

My primary case study will be a recent (Queer) film in the Black film tradition, *Moonlight* (2016).I study this coming-of age tale as a homoerotic oeuvre and conduct a **close reading** in order to understand the manners in which it goes about representing sex between men. Barry Jenkins's film is of particular interest because it follows the homosexual feelings of the main characters from early childhood through their adolescence into adulthood. In so doing, it allows me to investigate how Homoerotica is established in the childhood phase — where there are homosexual feelings, but no sexual activity — and how this differs from the ways in which it is expressed during the characters' sexually active adolescence and adult years, so as to understand at what point homosexual sex is portrayed as the most transgressive. The close reading is conducted in a comparative manner against three historic films in the Queer cinema filmography:[18]*Un Chant d'Amour* (1950), *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Young*

[17] An attempt thus, to uncover the agency of Black film Homoeroticism in challenging, or perhaps even confirming, social assumptions about male-with-male sex.

[18] 'Queer cinema' used here in the general sense, to include Black films as well as films from the White hegemonic tradition.

Soul Rebels (1991). In order to study the representation of male Homoeroticism in these oeuvres as intently as possible, I do not only analyse the sex in the moment of intercourse, but I also investigate the different discourses surrounding that moment, as well the different types of sex that men are portrayed engaging in, such as felatio, anilingus, manual genial stimulation, etc.

Directed by Jean Genet in 1950, the French silent film *Un Chant d'Amour* — whose popular English translation is 'A Song of Love'[19] — is imperative because although it is not a Black film, it is identified as "one of the earliest and most remarkable attempts to portray homosexual passion onscreen" (Summers, 2012, p. 109). When one excludes works that are strictly pornographic, *Amour* (1950) can thus be regarded as one of the earliest examples of a developing (White) homoerotic aesthetic. I would describe this silent film as a male homo-eroticisation of the warful prison system that characterised Europe in the early to mid-twentieth century: within a woeful world war atmosphere, a voyeuristic prison guard spies vicariously on the prisoners as they masturbate and try to quench their sexual fantasies in each of their solitary cells. The prisoners are all White except for one Black man.[20]Although all the prisoners are objectified by the prison guard, this sole Black character is eroticised from an obvious White Gaze, which seems to animalise more than sexualise him. Despite *Un Chant d'Amour* being banned from mainstream distribution in the United States in 1966 (Green & Karolides, 2014), I consider it as the film that introduced (and perhaps even established) male homoerotic aesthetics in Queer cinema, albeit anchored in the White

[19] *Un Chant d'Amour* can also be translated as 'A Chant of Love.'The preferred translation, 'A Song of Love', will henceforth be used interchangeably with the shortened French title, *Amour* (1950).

[20] These are all presumably prisoners of war considering the milieu, and the military attire of the prison guard. One of the main characters has been described as "Algerian-looking" (source unknown), but I would argue that he presents as a white European with dark features, and that the abovementioned Black male is therefore the only identifiable person of colour in Jean Genet's silent film.

hegemony. The presence of the Black body in the film means that Queer Black males were implicated in Queer cinema from its very inception, even though these films might have portrayed us in ways that were racist, or at the very least fetishistic. I therefore utilise close reading as a methodological tool to examine the manners in which Black Queer film emerges from the pre-existing White Gaze to become its own (homoerotic) genre.

While *Amour* (1950) may have debuted male Homoeroticism as a cinematic artform, my methodological approach privileges *Looking for Langston* (1989) as the spring from which the history of Black Queer film begins to flow *sui iuris* with the emergence of the Black and British filmmaker, Isaac Julien. Directed by Julien, *Looking for Langston* — which I shall be shortening to *Langston* (1989) — bears testimony to the existence of Black cinematic representations of homoerotic desire before the widespread rise of New Queer Cinema proper, and I therefore study it as the earliest example of Black Queer film, and of a developing Black Queer aesthetic. This black-and-white directorial debut about Black Gay experiences during the Harlem Renaissance is notably not a traditional narrative fiction film, but incorporates scripted narrative with poetry, photography and archival footage to render historical fiction.

A pioneer of Black Queer film, Isaac Julien succeeded *Langston* (1989) with a narrative fiction film in 1991 — *Young Soul Rebels*. The latter is noteworthy because it is one of only three Black films to be included in the seminal article by film critic B. Ruby Rich in *Sight and Sound* (1992), in which she coined the term 'New Queer Cinema'.[21]This movement has since been dominated by White filmmakers however, whose continuance to shape Queer narratives only began experiencing the waves of disrupting waters more aggressively in the 2010s.*Young Soul Rebels*(1991)not only defends the ontological presence

[21] Out of a total of eighteen, the other two Black films mentioned by Rich were *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Paris is Burning* (1991). I do not include these two films in my analysis because I do not consider them to be Homoerotica.

of Blackness within the New Queer Cinema movement, but also serves as an historiographical link between the emergence of Black Queer film in the late 1980s, and its resurgence in the 2010s.Because of the spatial limitations of the thesis's word limit however, *Rebels* (1991) will be analysed but briefly — a choice with which I am comfortable since Isaac Julien receives his due in my more lengthy analysis of his earlier film, *Looking for Langston* (1989).[22]

Looking at this list of films, it is easy to point out that there are none from continental Africa. While this might be misread as a detouring of African film — which, in my framework, is categorised under the broad and diasporic genre of Black film—, I wish to clarify that I have not deliberately sidestepped (male) homoerotic films from the African continent. The only work of considerable length I could find was *Inxeba* (2017), and while I see it as a Black film, its complexity and depth of cultural detail has led me to exclude it from my thesis. As a homoerotic film, the controversies of its socio-political evocations are such, that an entire thesis devoted to it alone would be required to discuss it sufficiently.

Close Reading Analysis

In my attempt to theorise on the Hetero-Gaze, and to understand the manners in which the camera not only exposes the Hetero-Gaze but may also act as the medium through which this Gaze is cast on the world, it is imperative that I make my own positionality clear: I am theorising from a male perspective, and therefore criticise the "Hetero" as I have understood it from within an effeminate male body — a body whose main aberrations are its Queerness and its Blackness. As already alluded to, my coinage of the term 'Hetero-Gaze' draws from

[22] Although academically important, *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) furthermore doesn't seem to have been as impactful on popular culture as its predecessor, *Looking for Langston* (1989).

two conceptual frameworks in identity politics: White Gaze and Male Gaze. Critical race theorists have mainly sourced from the writings of Frantz Fanon to posit the White Gaze, which in its widest sense, is a refusal to see Black people as just that — people.[23] Under the scrutiny of a White Gaze, Black people perform a white Blackness in order to make themselves pleasing, acceptable and/or praiseworthy to White people and thereby *earn* their (sense of) humanity.[24] In feminist discourse, the Male Gaze has traditionally been described as looking at the world from a perspective that is masculine (and masculinist), heterosexual cum heteronormative tendencies, and domineering (with patriarchal licence for male supremacy). Coined by the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, the overarching cinematic trend of the Male Gaze is to depict females as objects — material objects owned by patriarchal men, and sexual objects whose purpose it is to provide pleasure for the hetero-cisgender male *Gazer*.[25]Film as a visual medium furthermore enables the Male Gaze to be enacted on three different platforms: firstly, the director can wittingly or unwittingly exercise a Male Gaze behind and through the camera; secondly, the characters in the story world can perform and exhibit the Male Gaze; and thirdly, the viewer can perpetuate Male *Gazing* through the ways in which they look at the images on screen. My conceptual coinage of 'Hetero-Gaze' draws from 'White Gaze' and 'Male Gaze' to describe the ways in which heterosexuals look at the world, and at homosexuals in particular; or phrased inversely — the ways in which homosexuals are *Gazed* at by non-homosexuals in society. These ways of Gazing are homophobic, hetero-centrist and fetishistic, with a hetero-normative inability to understand the homosexual as "normal". As shown by the films I analyse, the Hetero-Gaze is inwardly conflicted because although it seeks to banish the "abomination" of homosexuality

[23] See 'Black Skin, White Masks' (Fanon, 1952) & 'The Wretched of the Earth' (Fanon, 1961), for further reading.

[24] Other writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin also echo these descriptions in their writings. See 'The Souls of Black Folk' (Du Bois, 1903) and 'The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy' (Baldwin, 1961).

[25] Note that there are also theorists who use the 'Female Gaze' as a conceptual reaction to the Male Gaze.

(through especially punitive measures), it also fetishises the homosexual, pining to sleep with him as much as it wants to stone him. Just as I believe that people of colour are themselves capable of perpetuating the White Gaze, and that the Male Gaze can be embodied by non-male bodies, I also believe that homosexuals are able to look at the world with said Hetero-Gaze: this is aptly displayed in *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950), where a prison guard who has clear homosexual desires exercises a Hetero-Gaze by whipping a male prisoner with his belt in order to punish the prisoner for his infatuation with another man. Similar behavioural patterns are echoed in both *Langston* (1989) and *Moonlight* (2016).

'Un Chant d'Amour'

Overview

French writer Jean Genet provides one of the first homoerotic representations of the Black male body with *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950). The film can be read as an avant-garde, mid-twentieth century exploration of male homosexual desire — a desire which the film portrays as being imprisoned, tortured, and hidden behind a heterosexual façade. While the film evokes empathy within the viewer for this imprisoned desire, it also provokes us to critique the Hetero-Gaze perpetuated by straight-presenting homosexuals — a Gaze which they are able to cast behind their straight façades.

A number of interesting features characterise *Un Chant d'Amour*. Firstly, no dialogue is used: the film is completely silent, with neither diegetic nor extra-diegetic sound. This absence of audio accentuates the visuals, thus forcing the viewer to really *look* at the characters' bodies — particularly the faces, forearms, penises and armpits on which the camera focuses intently. Moreover, the characters in the film are not named, and we have to

refer to them by how they look and by what they do. The alluring anonymity adds to the eroticisation of the all-male figures. Among these characters, only one of them is Black. The most compelling aspect of the representation of the Black man is that instead of being humanly eroticised like his White counterparts, he is eroticised in a manner that *others* him; he is othered as an erratic, genitally oversized spectacle. Like his fellow captives, the Black man is an object of a (White) prison guard's erotic fantasy. Unlike the White inmates however, he is also there for show, performance and entertainment — an appropriation of his Blackness. Furthermore, while the character of the prison guard subjects all the other characters to a Hetero-Gaze, the Black man is under both a Hetero-Gaze and a White Gaze, and I am hyper-aware of his double consciousness even though he is not portrayed as being aware of it himself.[26]

Plot

In the confines of a remote prison, male sexual frustration is exposed as the prisoners on display perform self-pleasing sexual acts in the solitude of their cells. These acts are not only a form of sexual release, but they are also expressions of the lust that the prisoners feel for their fellow inmates whom they cannot see through the brick walls that separate them. Only one man can see how the prisoners pine for each other: with a quasi-omniscient Hetero-Gaze, a White European prison guard in his early middle age walks through the prison and peeks voyeuristically into each cell, despising what he sees but deriving vicarious pleasure from it all the same. This battle between repulsion by and attraction towards homosexuality is characteristic of the Hetero-Gaze: when no-one is watching, "heterosexuals" derive sexual

[26] One could argue that in the case of a Queer Black man, a 'triple consciousness' exists, because the (1) Hetero-Gaze and the (2) White Gaze that scrutinise him are in this case also simultaneously a (3) *Male* Gaze. I refrain however, from delving too deeply into the triple consciousness of Queer Black men, because in order to do so, I would need to elaborate if, how and when Queer Black men are as males themselves exempt from exercising the Male Gaze (as characterised in this report). Unfortunately, the scope of the research does not allow me to delve this deeply into Queer Black male 'consciousness.'

and/or aesthetic pleasure from looking at homosexuals. They privately fantasise about and get off on homosexual activity, but openly condemn and even punish it. This dangerous self-conflict is illustrated when the prison guard enters the cell of the protagonist and whips him with his belt in order to punish the protagonist for his ferocious romantic love for the prisoner in the cell next door.[27] Later, the prison guard fantasises about placing his pistol into the protagonist's mouth and forcing it in as though the protagonist were performing deep-throat fellatio on the pistol. It is amidst these *fatal attraction*s that the Black male body finds itself under the fetishistic scrutiny of the (White) Hetero-Gaze.

Analysis

Depending on the cell at hand, the prison guard either looks into the cell through a face-sized square frame that can be flapped open from the outside in order to allow the voyeur to look inside—granting him an eye-level view —, or he looks with one eye through a peeping hole at the cell's entrance, which in turn gives him a high angle view. One of the most interesting elements of the prison guard's behaviour is that he tiptoes from one cell to the next. From a practical strategy, he tiptoes so that the prisoner whose cell he is going to pry on next will not hear him approaching and thus stop whatever "dirty" activity the guard hopes to see. The tiptoeing as a self-conscious action also serves to emphasise the fact that the prison guard is going against both the correctional rules of the jail and the moral rules of society. The prison itself can be read as a metaphor for the social and psychological imprisonment that homosexuals suffer: with dark shadows falling on the walls and obscuring the characters due to dim (chiaroscuro) lighting, the prison is a twilight zone where the inmates are free to express their sexuality because they are no longer in the Christian society. Because the prison is (presumably) located in France, the idea of a 'Christian society' brings to mind the

[27] While the main plot line surrounds the forbidden love between the said protagonist and the prisoner in the adjacent cell, I am focussed on scenes outside of the main storyline, and I therefore do not delve much into the scenes in which the two main lovers appear.

separation of Church and state, which has characterised the republic since the early 20th century.[28] Building on the assertions in my thesis introduction, however, I use 'Christian society' to refer to the religious morality that informs the ways in people are *expected* to behave in society, even though they may not necessarily be religious as individuals. In this way, the prisoners have escaped the moralising nature of Christian society, where one would not be free to masturbate openly to another man, as they now do unabashedly. It is interesting however, that this freedom is never fully consummated through actual sex with another man in the film. This suggests that although abandoned, Christianity still has prohibitive powers in the prison, in that its sexual interdictions are enforced firstly through the prison walls, and secondly through the surveillance of the prison guard. The latter himself, ironically, falls prey to his own "unchristian thoughts."

Throughout the film, the prisoners are constrained from consummating their sexuality because they are barred from one another. The film's establishing scene — where the prison guard walks towards the prison — shows that it is broad daylight on the outside (00:09- 00:22). The afternoon sun stands in stark contrast with the shadowy interior of the prison, thus emphasising the 'in-between' nature of male homosexuality: as the cells in the prison are always in between night and day, homosexuality in Queer film is an in-between state of being— between love and morality, between desire and immorality**,** between fear and self-liberation. *Amour* (1950) uses the character of the prison guard to show that even the gate-keepers of sexual prohibitions are themselves guilty of the same "sins", using whatever power they have to manipulate the system in their favour. The gun with which the guard threatens the prisoners becomes both a metaphor for his throbbing penis, and an extension (or

[28] For an historical context, refer to the law passed in 1905, which stripped the Church of its governing powers France.

should I say erection?) of his dangerous sexual frustration.[29] To the contemporary viewer, it is clear that the **theme of imprisonment** in *A Song of Love* has had a lasting effect on Queer film, and has also been retained by Black Queer film, as I will later show.

Expanding on her theorisation of the Male Gaze, cinema feminist Laura Mulvey elaborates that the psychology of this gaze can be likened to scoptophilia — the "desire to look at sexually stimulating scenes especially as a substitute for actual sexual participation" (Merriam Webster Medical Dictionary, scoptophilia entry).Put simply, men deriving sexual pleasure from looking. In the case of the Hetero-Gaze, it is not women who are being looked at however, but marginalised males who are looked at by a man in power. Looking at the prisoners from a masculine, i.e. *dominant* position, the first erotic image that the prison guard sees is the erect and exposed penis of a man urinating into a toilet. In a high angle medium shot that shows his lower body from the waist down, the man strokes his erect penis with his bare hand after urinating. The guard proceeds to the next cell, where — with a high angle wide shot of the entire room — he looks at a bare-chested man using a handkerchief-like cloth to masturbate himself as he lies on his back sideways on the bed with his legs against the wall, writhing around as though the masturbatory act were causing him pain. The hands that cradle his crotch while he tosses to and fro not only suggest that he is suffering from an excruciating erection, but further emphasise the film's central **theme of sexual frustration**: the prisoner may be able to wank, but his raging libido ultimately has no (access to) satisfactory release; his unquenched horniness is part of his suffering as a prisoner. Following on this tortured image, the prison guard tiptoes to the cell next door, where in a medium shot from the chest down, the camera focuses on the crotch-area of a man who is washing himself

[29] The fact that the prison guard inserts his pistol and not his penis into the protagonist's mouth shows that although he is not himself incarcerated, he also is imprisoned: he spies on the prisoner's sexual activities, but he cannot go all the way with them lest he is discovered by the system.

from a basin and masturbating at the same time. The man is almost entirely naked save the shirt that he has rolled up to his chest. When he perceives the square flap open, he turns around and faces the guard's face, smiling at him while he continues to scrub his head with one hand and masturbate himself with the other, walking backwards with an inviting smile until his upper body is entirely in shot. This is the first character who sees the prison guard watching him, and by masturbating knowingly *at* him, he is the first character to suggest that it is possible for homosexuals to reverse the Hetero-Gaze.

While the first three characters I have discussed as being spied on by the prison guard are White, the only Black man in the film is introduced in the scene that follows. Through the clever use of continuity editing, which flows (without obviously cutting) from the prison guard tiptoeing towards the next cell to the Black man (dancing) inside the cell, it is unclear whether the Black man had already been dancing before the guard peered through the square opening. It is safe to assume however, that he had already been dancing because Genet establishes in the previous erotic scenes that the prison guard finds the men already in action; the presence of the guard outside the door is not the reason for the action in the cell, but may induce a particular reaction if the prisoner at hand sees him. Interestingly, the Black man is not giving himself sexual pleasure like the other inmates, nor does he have an erection: he is shirtless, and is wearing long white trousers that sit low on his waist. The fly is open and his penis is hanging out. Before the Black prisoner sees the prison guard, his dancing is slow and rhythmic, with his right arm outstretched as though he were dancing with an imaginary partner. When he sees the guard, he looks directly at him and caresses his exposed penis slowly — rhythmically rather than sexually — with his left hand as he gradually transitions into a faster, more energetic dance. Even though the Black man is still wriggling his penis with his left fingers while dancing, his is more of a dance scene than an erotic one. Under the White man's watch, his dancing intensifies and becomes more erratic,

because he has been enlisted both as an actor and as a character to *perform* his Blackness to a White audience.[30] After a few beats the dancing slows down, becoming less erratic and more emotive. The prisoner lies down prostrate on the bed and writhes atop of it as though he is making love to it, or — in the theme of sexual frustration — to an invisible partner. These movements are energetic, but there is a poignancy and an anguish that make his writhing seem almost painful. This sense of pain is a similarity that the Black prisoner shares with the second prisoner, who appeared to be nursing an excruciating erection with a handkerchief. The White man is eroticised in a humanising way however, unlike the Black man who is instead *othered* through the exposure of his penis against the snowy white material of his trousers — a contrast that exaggerates the size of the penis, making it look larger than what the White Gaze would consider "normal". The emphasis on the (size of) the Black inmate's 'phallus' is indeed an attempt to eroticise him like the other characters in the film, but this attempt unfortunately lands the film in the colonial trap of suggesting that the Black male is to be desired for his genitally *over*-endowed animality rather than for his *human* sex appeal. The Black character also shares a behavioural similarity with the second prisoner in that he too looks directly (back) at the prison guard as soon as he becomes aware of his presence. Unlike the Black man however, the second White prisoner does not perform for the prison guard; he taunts him with sensuality and seduction. The performance by the Black character shows that Genet is not trying to expose a White Gaze in this scene. He is himself not aware of his own White Gaze and what could have been a powerful juxtaposition of a Black prisoner with the White male authority figure embodied in the person of the prison guard becomes a White filmmaker's appropriation of Black stereotypes for the pleasure of a White

[30] While I use the term Blackness as I understand it in terms of today's identity politics, I believe that conscious Black viewers of the 1950s would be aware of the fact that the Black character has been recruited to *perform* and that the film thus relies on dance as a stereotyped talent of Black people.

Gay audience.[31]Although there is a measure of seduction in the dance, the fetishistic and animalistic exposure of the Black man's 'phallus' is exacerbated by the fact that he plays with it, gyrating it but not masturbating it like the White man in the previous scene. As a result, the penis becomes an oversized spectacle and an extension of the Black man's sub-humanity.

The Black man in *Un Chant d'Amour* is not only othered through "the manipulation of Black sexuality by society, of which cinema is the most powerful mechanism" (Jones, 1993, p. 256), but also through the manner in which his scene is shot. In all the preceding interior scenes, the lighting is notably dim. The black-and-white celluloid filming of the time adds to the visual sombreness, making it look like the interior scenes are nocturnal despite the film's opening scene having established their diurnal nature. Genet makes use of an eye-level long shot of the Black prisoner's cell, thus placing him at the centre of the room. However, as a consequence of the dim lighting (against the backdrop of the grey prison walls that further darken the shot) the Black prisoner appears darker than dark! While the White characters are perfectly visible in the dim lighting, the facial features of the Black man are completely unidentifiable; we only see the contours of his shadowy face. This adds to the overall depersonalisation of the Black body in the film.

My analysis of the Black male's presence in *Amour* (1950) shows how the Black male body entered the emerging genre of Homoerotica under both a White Gaze and a Hetero-Gaze. Through these two hegemonic lenses, it was animalised and fetishised, and portrayed as more of a spectacle than a human being. Through the depiction of the prison guard as a violent scoptophiliac, Queer film at its inception condemns the violence that heterosexuals exercise

[31] Genet also includes a Black character in order to give the film a wider appeal, but still falls into the trap of his own Gaze.

against homosexuals. *Un Chant d'Amour* suggests however, that this violence stems from the frustration of a troubled sexuality which the so-called heterosexual himself is not able to reconcile internally. The film is therefore not entirely against the prison guard using his power to look into the cells for his own gratification, but seeks rather to provoke awareness about the torture and danger of imprisoned sexualities. A key feature of the film, which Black Queer film consequently inherits, is the absence of female characters — a phenomenon which I will discuss further in my analysis.

'Looking for Langston'

Overview

With the previous film, I discussed the overtly (White) Hetero-Gaze which spies in a scoptophilic manner on the sexual behaviours of men behind bars. Though seemingly powerless due to being incarcerated, *Amour* (1950) shows that these prisoners have power over the prison guard, because they are able to use their sexuality to compel him to reveal his own illicit desires. The dawn of Queer film thus came with the introduction of the idea that the "straight" men in our midst are not necessary the upright heterosexuals that they pretend to be. Like the prison guard, they simply *look* straight. Because of the heterosexual privilege that he is given by society, the straight-presenting (male) homosexual is able to punish everyone who is *other*, and does so out of a sexual schizophrenia which is evident in each film. As a sexual voyeur, he is furthermore unable to diagnose himself as suffering from scoptophilia. It is therefore interesting to investigate whether Isaac Julien reverses this (White) Hetero-Gaze in *Langston* (1989).

Looking for Langston is a black-and-white formalist film about the experiences of Black Gay men during the Harlem Renaissance. A 1989 directorial debut by Isaac Julien, *Langston* is notably not a traditional narrative fiction film, but lies somewhere between fiction and documentary, incorporating scripted scenes with archival footage, photography, and poetry to fictionalise the history of the Harlem Renaissance from a Black Gay perspective.

Plot and Analysis

In the Harlem neighbourhood of New York city, an explosion of the arts, of intellectual thinking, and of extravagant social life, occurred in the 1920s . It was known as the 'Harlem Renaissance', and African Americans were at the centre of it. Also known as the 'New Negro Movement', it was understood as a "renaissance" due to the lively resurgence of Black culture that it brought about.[32] At the heart of this Black culture, was the music of Black people — Jazz. *Langston* (1989) zooms into the Jazz scene of the 1920s, focalising a Jazz bar as the main location of the film's diegesis.

In the opening credits, the film is unveiled with two introductions: firstly, as "a meditation on Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance" and secondly, as being "in memory of James Baldwin" (*Looking for Langston*, 1989, 0:13-0:30). Both Langston Hughes (1/02/1902 –22/05/1967) and James Baldwin (2/08/1924 –1/12/1987) are historic Black Gay men who lived in the 20th century,[33] and the reference to them at the beginning of the film predisposes the viewer to a Black Gay politic. The fact that the film is by a Black Gay

[32] Despite the new sense of pride and purpose with which the Harlem Renaissance empowered Black people, Gay Black men were greatly ostracised from African American society. Most of them hid their sexuality, because at the time, "homosexuality was a sin against the race, so it had to be kept a secret, even if it was a widely shared one" (*Looking for Langston*, 1989, 07:04-07:10).

[33] While the idea of Langston Hughes having been a homosexual is contested by conservatives, the film follows the argument that he was a closeted homosexual. Langston and Baldwin are not characters in the main storyline, but are incorporated into the film's consciousness through photographs and archival footage.

director is therefore not to be taken for granted: *Looking for Langston* inducts into post-modern cinema the fusion of Black film and Queer cinema, but makes it clear from the word go that Black Gay men will be at the centre of the new genre — Black Queer film.

The film enters the realm of Homoerotica with the image of a Black man costumed as Cupid (05:41-06:08). The classical Cupid is usually represented as a White male child or adolescent, but Julien's Cupid is a muscular Black man clothed in nothing but makeshift wings and a nappy-like cloth around his loins. Julien's choice to invoke Cupid, a mythological god from the Greco-Roman antiquity believed to induce both mortals and deities to fall in love is an interesting one, and it is made even more provocative by the fact that instead of a bow and arrow the Black Cupid holds up a life-sized picture of Langston Hughes, followed by one of James Baldwin. The displaying of these two icons in Black Gay politics not only emphasises the "meditation on Langston Hughes in memory of James Baldwin" (Ibid.), but also introduces a new cinematic mission: the reimagining of Black Queerness. Where the Black male body had performed to a White Hetero-Gaze in *Amour*(1950), he now becomes a deity (Cupid). While popular culture is prone to imagine Cupid's two targets as heterosexuals, Julien does not invoke Cupid's power to make two characters fall in love, but instead uses it to cause the viewer to fall in love with the two men whose faces he is holding up: Hughes and Baldwin. The naked Black Cupid is therefore not simply an erotic image but is also an iconographic reference employed to focus the viewer on Hughes and Baldwin, both of whom represent ostracised Black Queerness. When read historically, Hughes represents **closeted homosexuality** while Baldwin represents **activist homosexuality** — a dichotomy with thematic centrality in the film. Even more evocative is the fact that the Black Cupid is standing in a cemetery as he holds up the two banners,

inviting us to simultaneously mourn and love the two Gay icons; to mourn the loss that their deaths represent to the (Gay) Black community.[34]

Much of the erotic language in *Looking for Langston* is expressed through dance. This subtle eroticism is introduced at an early stage in the film: in a Harlem Jazz bar, the camera pans down from a funeral scene upstairs to a Jazz scene downstairs, where three male couples stand motionless arm-in-arm, cheek against cheek, as though they had been waltzing when time came to a sudden stand-still (02:30-02:53). Each couple is made up of a Black man and a White man, body against body in silent motionlessness. The dancing resumes later when the camera returns to the Jazz Bar to explore the race relations more deeply. This (homosexual) Jazz bar is the central location for Julien's fictionalised re-enactment of the Harlem Renaissance. A love triangle between a White man and two Black men is introduced in the bar. The first Black man is Alex, the protagonist in the fictionalised **sub-film**.[35] The second Black man is Beauty, the focus of Alex's affection. The White man is the one whom Beauty is seeing however, and Alex must vie with him for Beauty's attention. In the midst of the waltzing interracial couples, Beauty and his White companion sit together at a table drinking champagne and listening to the live Jazz performance. Alex looks at them from the high bar stool where he is sitting and smoking. When Beauty looks up at Alex, the shot is reduced to an extreme close-up. A warm, soft light is shone on his face (against the dark background of the wall behind him), making it look like his face is glowing brightly and exuding light itself. The spotlight radiance attributed to Beauty's face highlights the fact that he is the only one on

[34] Ultimately, *Looking for Langston* laments the freedom and acceptance that James Baldwin and Langston Hughes (more centrally) never fully experienced in neither Black nor Queer communities. Having lived their lives in a perpetual state of 'double consciousness', the film invites the viewer to love them for what they are: Queer Black men.

[35] Alex is not named directly in the film, and I only discovered his identity in the closing credits. Structurally, *Langston* (1989) is composed of the main documentary (archival) film, and the fictional sub-film.

whom Alex has fixed his eyes as a possible mate. Beauty's White companion feels threatened by Alex however, and possessively slams the champagne bottle against the table, thus regaining Beauty's attention (through a violent action). In *A Song of Love* (1950), there is a White Hetero-Gaze which indulges in scrutinising the Black male body. Thirty-nine years later, the first White character to be introduced in *Looking for Langston* presents much less heterosexual and would undoubtedly be described as a 'twink' in Gay popular lingua: he is petite, effeminate-looking, and wearing make-up. As typecast White effeminates, 'twinks' are usually represented in visual media as having an insatiable lust for 'Big Black Cock'. Beauty's White companion has a violent possessiveness over him, but nonetheless, the film seeks to explore race relations between homosexuals from nuanced and more personal perspectives.[36]

A key part of understanding the Homoeroticism in *Langston* (1989) is a comprehension of the linkage that the film makes between sexuality and social mobility, as suggested by the question asked in the voice-over at the beginning of the film in reference to the (secret) Black Gay intelligentsia active during the Harlem Renaissance: "were they seeking the approval of the race, or of the black middle class and the white literary establishment?" (*Looking for Langston*, 1989, 06:27-06:34).In the sub-film which re-enacts these events, everyone at the Jazz bar is dressed elegantly in chic suits. Because Beauty's White companion doesn't want the other men to look at Beauty, he baits him with money — a powerful resource that prevents the other Black men from having him. Evidently, 'Beauty' is the film's central erotic image, and the main fixation of desire among his peers. The luminescent moment in which Beauty had looked back at Alex (before the violent interruption) was brief, and Alex must

[36] The Hetero-Gaze is not present in this White character however, because he is neither homophobic nor hetero-centric, and he fully embraces and expresses his sexuality. His dominance comes instead from his Whiteness, and his White Gaze is betrayed by the disdaining look he throws at any Black man who dares to look at Beauty, notwithstanding the fact that he is possibly also in love with Beauty. His White Gaze furthermore expresses itself in the fetishistic manner in which he desires to sleep with Black men.

wait his turn as Beauty first has a love scene with his White companion: standing in an empty (grey) room, Beauty is completely naked while his White partner is still wearing his underwear and a vest. The camera caresses their bodies as the White man takes off his vest with Beauty's help. They smile at each other and giggle slightly. It is in this tender moment that a turn takes place in the film: the smile and the giggle that they share suggest that they might have true feelings for each other; the White man is not merely fetishising Beauty but might actually be in love with him. Owing to the possibility of Beauty reciprocating these feelings (and his apparent joy in this scene), Queer Black film at its emergence is seen representing the Black man as being pleased to have the White man 'look' (but not Gaze) at him in this example. Through Beauty's relationship with the White male character, Black Queer film begins to explore the possibility of an amorous relationship between a Black man and a White man, despite the existence of Whiteness and the challenges that it poses to pure (interracial) love. Though I see a romantic tenderness between Beauty and his White friend, the slamming of the champagne bottle earlier on serves as a reminder that the White man is paying for his and Beauty's night out. The unbalanced dynamics of race and class cannot be removed from either romance or Homoeroticism; race and class are both powerful determinants of who has power in a homosexual relationship.

With regards to Alex and Beauty, *Looking for Langston* introduces the idea that Homoeroticism between Black males is the pursuit of the man whom one desires with little assurance of whether one will succeed or not. Alex eventually succeeds in consummating his desire for Beauty, but their first erotic interaction is entirely imagined: Alex envisions himself in an open day-lit field, where he walks hastily in his formal Jazz-bar attire until he finds Beauty standing in the middle of the field, naked. The camera captures Beauty from behind, panning slowly up from his feet, legs, thighs, back and arms. Because the camera is behind

him, it captures his buttocks rather than his penis, and focusses on his muscled backside as the evidence of his virility. When the camera breaks the imagined 180º line and captures him from the front, i.e. from Alex's perspective, it is the upper body and mostly the face that are in focus. These cinematographic choices together with the voice-over's poetic indulgence in Beauty's naked body collaborate to achieve what I identify as the **deification of the Black male body**:[37]

> "He was searching […],
> then he saw two strong legs, dancer's legs,
> the contours pleased him.
> His eyes wandered on past the muscular hocks
> to the firm thighs, the rounded buttocks,
> then the live narrow waist — strong torso and broad deep chest.
> The brown eyes looking at him!
> His hair curly and black and all tousled; it was Beauty […]"
> (*Looking for Langston*, 1989, 12:21-13:09).

In its eroticisation of the Black man, *Looking for Langston* glorifies him, thus inducting into Queer Black film an eroticism which not only humanises, but also deifies the Black male body, showing that the mechanism of eroticisation — which had hitherto functioned to animalise the Black body — can be used contrarily. Through Julien's exhibitionist pans across Beauty's body, Beauty becomes the Black archetype for a desirable male body, speaking back to White archetypes such as the *Vitruvian Man* or Michelangelo's *David*. The erotic deification of the Black man therefore serves to disrupt the age-old dogma of White desirability in art.

[37] Recited by an extra-diegetic narrator, the voice-over poetry is central to the eroticism in the film, intensifying the viewer's engagement with the characters' experiences.

When Alex cradles Beauty's face lovingly in his hand — at which Beauty smiles back sweetly — and strokes his cheek down to his neck, it is evident that Beauty is not a mere erotic object for Alex, but that he is the beloved on whom Alex dotes. The latter realises however, that he must wait until Beauty is ready to requite his love, because Beauty — cockily assured of his own desirability — rejects Alex's advance in the fantasy-dream, telling him "I'll wait" (Ibid. 13:17).This (imagined) rejection affirms my argument that Homoeroticism between Black males is the unsure pursuit of the man whom one desires.

Alex's second erotic encounter with Beauty is not conjured in his imagination however, but takes place actually in a sleeping chamber upstairs the Jazz bar. The scene continues the deification of the Black male body. While Alex is not the central erotic allure in the film, his own naked upper body is displayed as he breathes slowly in his sleep, his protruding nipples in focus. He awakes to admire Beauty lying next to him. The shots utilised in the scene are achronological, with several shot repetitions, and a jump-cut suddenly places Beauty on top of Alex.[38] Beauty kisses Alex on his mouth in a close-up of the two faces before the editor jump-cuts back to their sleeping bodies. This time, Beauty is lying with his head in Alex's lap. A slow pan goes from Alex's face down to his thighs which support Beauty's head, their arms wrapped around each other's bodies in medium shot. It is important to note that despite the nudity, the men's penises are not exposed in the entirety of the film. In this scene, Beauty's head is not only placed in Alex's lap as an aesthetically pleasing image, but is also there to protect him from (over)exposure. This is a noteworthy departure from the attention drawn by the White Gaze to the Black man's penis in *Amour* (1950). As stated by Jones (1993), "Black men have traditionally been on display, depicted as

[38] Much of the film itself is rendered in an achronological fashion, following a non-linear narrative structure. As such, it is not clear why and how Beauty eventually gives in to Alex. The image of Beauty lying alone on the bed with the camera panning across his naked body is presumably from this encounter with Alex, but it also appears earlier in the film, before Beauty's love scene with his White friend.

overly developed and animal forms. This is not to suggest that White men have not and do not appear nude in motion pictures. Yet, categorically, […], the racial inconsistencies of the exposure and depiction of the bodies of men is clearly tied to the inherent dehumanization of the Black man in society" (p. 249).

Continuing the film's nocturnality, one of the (unnamed) characters who has left the Jazz bar late at night walks alone in a dark street. The confessional poem recited by the voice-over makes it clear that the young Black man is "stalking", i.e. walking around in pursuit of sex:[39]

> "Stalking.
> The neighbourhood is dangerous, but we go there.
> [...]
> To be under the sky, above or below a man — this is our heat.
> Radiant in the night, our hands blister with semen.
> A field of flowers blossoms where we gather in empty warehouses,
> our seed falls without the sound or grace of stars.
> We lurk in shadows; we are the hunger of shadows.
> In the dark, we don't have to say, 'I love you.' The dark swallows it,
> and sighs like we sigh when we rise from our knees.
> I am lonely for past kisses, wild lips; certain streets breed for pleasure.
> Romance is a fuck's hole. This kind of war frightens me.
> I don't wanna die sleeping with soldiers I don't love.
> I want to court outside the race, outside the class, outside the attitudes.
> But love is a dangerous word in this small town.
> Those who seek it are sometimes found face down, floating on their beds.
> Those who find it protect it, or destroy it from within.
> But the disillusioned — those who've lost the stardust, the moon dance,

[39] The combination of the singular and plural forms in the poem are an indication that the voice-over is a revelation of the character's inner world as well as an expression of the shared experiences of the Black Gay men that the character represents in this scene.

> the waterfront, — like them I long for my past.
> When I was ten, thirteen, twenty, I wanted candy;
> five dollars, a ride"
> (*Looking for Langston*, 1989, 18:48-21:55).

A number of pertinent revelations are made in this erotic scene. Although the Gay men go to "the neighbourhood" looking for casual sex with strangers, the poem recited refutes the popular (and Christian) belief that Gay men are sex-crazed and only interested in frivolous perversion. The character's thoughts reveal that these men are in fact lonely, and that like heterosexuals, they too are hungry for love. The neighbourhood is therefore a place where they go looking for love as much as for sex. Heterosexuals do not have to "lurk in the shadows" in order to copulate however, and the recitation laments the danger that homosexuals put themselves in to be "above or below a man" (Ibid.), as some of them are found lying dead in their beds, implicitly murdered by their one-night stands. The emotions felt by the Black male character are not only expressed in the voice-over, but are also enacted: his frustration at the Gay plight — the lurking of homosexuals in the shadows of society — comes to the forefront when he kicks an empty can annoyedly at the beginning of his walk. Towards the end of the scene, where he keeps walking and disappears into the moonlit night, he stands still for a moment and a medium shot on his face allows us to see the tears streaming down: he is not only heartbroken by his loneliness, but also disillusioned by his inability to find (lasting) love as a homosexual. Two central themes are explored in this scene: the **theme of interracial relationships**, which had already been introduced earlier through Beauty and his White companion, and the **theme of prostitution**. The voice-over reveals the character's desire to "court outside the race" (Ibid.).Using juxtaposition as an editing technique, the Black character's walking in the street is juxtaposed with the emergence of a White man in the cemetery bushes, also performing the "stalking". The

camera focuses on his boots to create suspense as he paces up and down in anticipation of a sexual experience. This experience is not with the character walking through the neighbourhood (and to whose thoughts we are privy) however, but with a different Black man, newly introduced in the scene. This Black man and the White man meet each other in the cemetery. As soon as they stand face to face, they make out without saying a word to one another. They have sex off-screen while the initial Black character walks off tearfully into the night. This audio-visual juxtaposition is a further aid in uncovering the internal world of the main character in the scene. The one-night stand between the two strangers is exactly what he laments, i.e. spending the rest of his life loveless, "sleeping with soldiers" he does not love (Ibid.). He does not want to spend his life in pursuit of frivolous sex, dying with no tenure of love.[40]

In *Un Chant d'Amour,* the White man derives sexual pleasure from looking at a Black prisoner without an agentive voluntariness on the prisoner's part to be a source of pleasure for the scoptophilic White Gaze. In *Langston* (1989), the idea of White dominance in interracial relationships is complicated, but not neglected: on the one hand, the hook-up which occurs between the Black man and the White man in the cemetery is a consensual act by both parties. It is suggested in the voice-over however, that this is also an act of prostitution by the newly introduced Black man: "when I was ten, thirteen, twenty, I wanted candy; five dollars, a ride" (*Looking for Langston*, 1989, 18:48-21:55).When he was younger, he accepted "candy", literally, and small childlike gifts, figuratively, from older men in exchange for the sexual favours that he rendered. Now that he is older, he requires monetary

[40] 'Soldiers' is a reference to the militancy with which homosexuals fight for their survival in society. The character finds himself caught in both a race struggle and a class struggle, and longs to "court outside the race, outside the class, outside the [class-race] attitudes" *(Looking for Langston,* 1989, 18:48-21:55). As desirable as sex is, it not all he desires.

remuneration for "a ride" as in sex, and the "ride" that is the lift, or the cab fare provided for him to get home safely after the one-night stand. Whether the men who took advantage of him were (always) White is open-ended. What is clear is that the film associates wealth with Whiteness, and decisively links the Whiteness to a homosexual White Gaze willing to pay money in order to lie with the Black body it so hungrily fetishises.

Back at the Jazz bar, there is a very small number of White men, some sitting and drinking, and some dancing either with each other or with Black partners. One notable difference from *A Song of Love* is the fact that the White men form the numerical minority in *Looking for Langston*. Despite being minorities in terms of numbers, the Gay White men are nonetheless depicted as holding the power.[41]Focalised among these White homosexuals is Beauty's companion. The close-up shot of his face as he looks smirkingly across the Black men in the room, and the smug look he throws at anyone who dares look at him serve to emphasise the pre-eminence of the White Gaze even in spaces where (all) homosexuals are meant to feel "free". Another key difference between *Amour* (1950) and *Langston*(1989) as pertains to Gaze is that in the latter, the White Gaze is for the most part separate from the Hetero-Gaze. Being effeminate and openly homosexual, Beauty's White companion does not look at the world with a Hetero-Gaze, but has a (dominant) White Gaze which he performs from a feminine point of view. He continues the fetishisation of the Black male body by paying to have sex with Black men. Unlike in the previous film, this fetishisation does not come through inversely — i.e. through the attention paid by the critic

[41] It is easy to note that the White men are wearing make-up, and are noticeably more effeminate than their Black counterparts; more flamboyant in their self-expression. Julien's juxtaposition of an effeminate White homosexuality with a masculinist Black homosexuality enhances his recreation of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, during which "homosexuality was a sin against the race" (*Looking for Langston*, 1989, 07:04) for Black people, but more easily performed and accepted in White bourgeois circles.

rather than the filmmaker —, but is developed decidedly by Isaac Julien who explores the double consciousness of Gay Black men through their sexual relations with White men. A 'viewing scene'[42] accompanied by an evocative voice-over poem gives us more insight into these unequal relations (25:15-26:50). Beauty's White companion — who functions as a representation of the "liberal" White homosexuals from the 1920s — takes centre stage: wearing the same white vest and underwear from his love scene with Beauty, he walks into a dark viewing room which has images of naked Black men projected throughout the space. As the voice-over dissects White positionality and privilege in White-Black relationships, the White man walks around the room, admiring and stroking the various projected images. At the end of the scene, he is sitting on a chair in the self-same room, and a Black man standing next to him is facing him. This is the same Black man whom we saw walking down the street alone at night, crying in the "Stalking" scene. Short white pants are his only vestment. His earlier lamentation about sleeping with unloved soldiers comes full-circle when Beauty's friend takes out a note and gives it to him in remuneration for a sexual favour that occurred off-screen. They both clutch onto the note for a moment, and the camera pans up to the Black man to give us a shot of his solemn face before he takes the cash and walks away. It is clear that the Black man has resorted to prostitution to support himself, and that the White bourgeois uses his disposable income to indulge in Black male prostitution.[43] Culminating in this monetary exchange, the scene makes it clear that race and class are at the core of the inequality between a Black homosexual and his White partner, romantic or merely sexual. Notwithstanding, what makes these relationships *inherently* unequal is the White Gaze. Beauty might reciprocate genuine affection for his White lover, but he nonetheless cannot escape the latter's Whiteness. The White man is indeed highly scoptophilic as he walks

[42] I.e. a scene which takes place in a viewing room (where the character views another medium).

[43] Jones (1993) refers to the White male as "the only segment of the [American] population with true disposable income" (p. 249).

around the projection room, indulging voyeuristically in the erotic photographs of Black men — an image reminiscent of the White prison guard walking from cell to cell in *A Song of Love*, peeking inside in order to derive sexual pleasure from the erotic activities of each cell. Because *Looking for Langston*'s subjects in this particular scene are photographs of people rather than the people themselves, there is a greater degree of erotic tension between the voluntariness of the naked subjects to be seen, and the intrusiveness of the spectator's dominant Gaze. One can thus begin to identify a visual and thematic leitmotiv within the genre of Homoeroticism: the tension (caused) between the Object and the Gazer. The most contentious question central to this tension is, 'who is looking at whom'? As a Black film, *Langston* (1989) takes this question further by exploring the way in which White males fetishise Black males while simultaneously claiming to be part of the same "Community" as them.[44]Throughout the film, the only point at which we see the exposed penises of Black men is in this viewing room, in three of the projected photographs. Refreshingly, these penises do not appear in animalised forms: their natural size is not secondarily accentuated as was the case in *Un Chant d'Amour*. Because the film's focus is not on the photographs of the Black men but on the White man Gazing at them, the camera pans quite quickly across each image. The photos are not the most important images in the scene, and more cinematographic attention is paid to the live image of the White Gaze. While a close reading of *Amour* (1950) exposes a White director's fetishism in Gazing at a Black prisoner through the eyes of a White character, in *Langston*'s case a Black director *shows* a White character Gazing with fetishism.

In another viewing room, another Black character — this time from the eighties — projects a silent pornographic film from a film reel and watches it alone in the

[44] It is important to remember that the Harlem Renaissance took place long before widespread Gay Rights activism, and that a Gay community would have been pursued but not understood in the same way we understand it today when we think of the Rainbow flag.

darkness.[45] In making a character in his film watch a film which reflects the character's lifestyle, the filmmaker makes use of *mise en abyme* as a filmic device for social commentary. This mirroring of the two Gay worlds is overlain with the (recurring) poetic voice-over which once again acts as an entryway into the character's inner world. Because the camera (in the main text) focuses mostly on the character watching the sub-text, not much of the homosexual porn film that the character is watching is shown. We see a glimpse of bare-chested Black men, two kissing shadows, and the legs of two Black males writing passionately against each other, dropping their jeans to the floor. By making us look at the character (in the main text) looking at himself (in the sub-text), *mise en abyme* gives the viewer a deeper understanding of this character, because the characters in the sub-text represent him, his peers and his lifestyle, and therefore co-operate with the voice-over to unearth what he is thinking while he watches the porn flick:

> "Lowering my pants before another mouth,
> the cheap movie reel rattles in its compartment
> while the silent colour movie, four quarter, grinds around and around.
> We pant in a dark booth; the musk of hair burns our nostrils,
> I moan as his mouth swallows me.
> This is the first sound in this 'silent movie'. Then he moans,
> giving the movie its dialogue.
> Now we think, as we fuck — this nut might kill us,
> there might be a pin-sized hole in the condom, a lethal leak.
> We stop kissing tall dark strangers, sucking moustaches,
> putting lips, tongues, everywhere.
> We return to pictures, telephones, toys,
> recent lovers, private lives. Now we think as we fuck:
> this nut might kill. This kiss could turn to stone…"

[45] The commentary made by the poetic voice-over, as well as the denim attire of the characters in the movie that the character is watching, indicate that this scene is meant to comment on and reflect the 1980s — the real time in which *Langston* (1989) is made.

(*Looking for Langston*, 1989, 27:10-29:05)

This scene, situated in the 80s and not during the Harlem Renaissance, is especially evocative because it uses eroticism to speak about the AIDS pandemic which plagued the 1980s. Connected to the aforementioned theme of prostitution, the **theme of sexual frivolity** is evoked in this scene: the person before whom the character lowers his mouth (in order to receive a blowjob) in the reflection is simply "another mouth", and they have sex "in a dark booth", both phrases indicating the unspecificity of the partners and places that enable casual sex. The fact that they practice *safe* casual sex does not, however, deter them from thinking: "this nut might kill us, there might be a pin-sized hole in the condom, a lethal leak" (Ibid.)[46] Needless to say, the leak is lethal because it transmits the pandemic Human Immunodeficiency Virus from one man to another, at a time when advancements in antiretroviral treatment had not yet been made, and dying from AIDS was the expected outcome of such a transmission. The scene therefore reflects upon the dangers carried by sexual frivolity, and uses *mise en abyme* to lament the plight of homosexual men in Christian society: the taboo nature of homosexuality in Christianity impedes homosexuals from having open, monogamous, *safe* relationships. Unable to find or to commit to a single partner due to the persistence of shame, fear of ostracization, the façade of heterosexuality, and other impediments arising from Christian morality, these men settle for frivolous, hidden sex with unfamiliar people in unfamiliar places. Aware of the riskiness inherent to this lifestyle, the characters invoked by the voice-over cease to kiss "tall dark strangers", and return instead to "pictures, telephones, toys, recent lovers, private lives" (Ibid.). Sexually stimulating pictures, telephone calls made to simulate sex over the phone, and sex toys are all ways in which self-pleasure can be achieved, while the recent lovers and private lives iterate the attempt to stop

[46]The word 'nut', used colloquially, refers to semen, or to an ejaculation. As a commentary on the AIDS pandemic, the scene clarifies that *Looking for Langston* is not only about the Harlem Renaissance; it also invokes the Gay politic of the 1980s.

"putting lips, tongues, everywhere" (Ibid.) Aware of the AIDS pandemic, the characters choose instead to limit their sexual activities to the lovers they have known most recently, and to convert these activities from dark, dingy and dangerous to private and domestic. The film thus illustrates that Homoeroticism is not simply a mechanism to trigger the sensual responses of the viewer. It can be used socio-politically as in this scene, where it serves to remind us that casual sex is not just *cum and go*, but may come with a deadly disease. Through the stylistic device of *mise en abyme*, a perpetual self-examination is achieved: the character — who represents the commonplace, sexually frivolous homosexual — looks at a movie of homosexuals having sex, thus examining his own lifestyle in the process. In watching the character examining himself, the viewer in turn examines themself, and how they might be practicing sex that is "safe" but reckless nonetheless, in light of the existence of HIV/AIDS.

The **theme of sexual frustration**, which had permeated *Amour* (1950), recurs in *Langston* (1989), where we gain the understanding that this frustration is as much **homosexual frustration** as it is sexual frustration: it is the frustration of men who perform heterosexuality, but who have hidden homosexual desires. Their modus operandi in dealing with these (frightening) desires is to punish those who are "freely" homosexual. In the final scene of the film, a multiracial mob of men storms the Jazz bar from the outside, slamming on the locked doors with sticks. As they violently hit the doors, the homosexuals dance euphorically inside, even breaking glasses on the floor in the ecstasy of their freedom. Interestingly, an 80's club song is used as extra-diegetic music for this scene, accentuating the contrast between the outraged heterosexuals outside and the homosexuals dancing uninhibitedly inside. While the Jazz bar and the events connected to it had been used until this point in the film to transport the viewer back to the historical époque of the Harlem

Renaissance, in this scene, contemporary music is used to connect the 1980s to the 1920s, thus solidifying the connection between the homosexuals alive in the 80s and those who had experienced the Harlem Renaissance: both are victims of the straight Christian society which wishes to destroy them. In a manner that is visually reminiscent of the police raids which led to the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, the heterosexual mob eventually breaks into the bar and disrupts the celebration, chasing the dancers away.[47] This mob-looting scene, which visually and thematically connects the Harlem Renaissance, Stonewall, and the 80s, illustrates that the passing time has done little to efface **homosexual frustration**. The "heterosexual" prison guard in *Amour* (1950) held a pistol, the metaphor for his penis which ached for the prisoners, but which remained frustrated — and therefore punitive — because they were forbidden fruit in all respects. Reminiscent of said pistol, the sticks brandished by the "straight" mob in *Langston* (1989) can be read as metaphoric penises, extensions of frustrated homosexuality. The men who attack the Jazz bar do so in a hypermasculine attempt to prove their contempt for homosexuality, but their overzealous attraction to the bar indirectly betrays their desire to fuck the men who are seeking their freedom inside. The ultimate punishing tool would be the penis itself, but it remains tucked away, its frustration and Christian self-shaming revealed in the violent persecution of open homosexuals.

'Young Soul Rebels'

Overview

[47] The Stonewall Rebellion is named after Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Manhattan, which was raided by New York police on 28 June 1969. In reaction, members of the Gay community demonstrated against officials, and the riots largely resulted in the gay liberation movement in the United States.

Film critic Frank B. Wilderson III argues that "in the main, Black cinema deploys a host of narrative strategies to slip the noose of a life shaped and compromised by the very existence of slavery" (Wilderson III, 2010, p. 96). In light of Black film's perpetual engagement with slavery, it is not far-fetched to argue that *Looking for Langston* (1989) invokes the theme of prostitution as an illustration of how Black bodies remain under the dominion of Whiteness, even though that dominion is coerced socio-economically rather than enforced like slavery proper. Vividly invested in interrogating the intersections between race and sexuality, it is interesting to see how Isaac Julien deals with these intersectionalities in his first feature film, *Young Soul Rebels* (1991). As a period piece set in 1977, the film revolves around English youth sub-cultures during the Funk-Soul era, and how these sub-cultures intersected with race, class and sexuality.

Brief Analysis

Already in the first act, Julien delves into the fetishisation of the Black male body — a theme which he had eagerly dissected in *Langston* (1989) — but this time there is criminality involved and Black lives are at stake. The first scene takes place in a park in London at night: a young Black man — posthumously identified as Terry James (TJ) — is walking alone through the park, listening to his portable cassette player in the dark. An older looking White man approaches him and seduces him, thus winning his trust. It is clear that these kinds of nightly sexual encounters with strangers are commonplace, but things turn fatal for TJ when the man who seduces him uses the erotic trap to rob and kill him sur place. Due to society's conscious and subconscious criminalisation of Black men, the viewer is predisposed to expect the 'defenceless' White to fall prey to the lawless Black. From the word go however, the film seeks to expose the dangers which are posed to Black male bodies by the White male fetishist obsession with them. Though we don't actually see his face, the White man has an older air to his overall appearance. He runs away from the scene, and it is only revealed the

following morning that Terry James was killed in the park. With the White criminal violently robbing the young Black man off his cassette player, the White Gaze — and with it the White notion of Black male criminality threatening Western civilisation — is reversed.

As TJ's robber runs away from the crime scene, two White males having sex on the grass pose a physical obstacle to his escape. He jumps over their engrossed, naked bodies, but they don't notice anything. At this point, we recall that although the film is made in the nineties, it is set in the seventies — the 'Soul' era, during which AIDS had not yet become pandemic.[48] Sex is therefore not invoked to provoke an AIDS-consciousness as in *Langston* (1989), but is instead the vehicle which drives the film's conversation around the racial experiences of Black homosexuals in a "Christian" society notorious for its racism.[49] The ignorance of the two White lovers who continue to make love after a Black man has been murdered not far from their mating spot is therefore not accidental: just as it exposes their buttocks in the dark, Homoeroticism also exposes White ignorance over the injustices that Black people, and Black homosexuals in particular, face in British society. The scene illustrates that as a sexualised being, the Black male does not necessarily stand to gain. The White criminal uses this sexualisation against him as a trap, costing him his life. In contrast to the naked White men making love on the grass however, TJ and the White man who robbed him remained completely clothed throughout the seduction and the touching that occurred. This lack of nudity between the two, particularly where the Black character (TJ) is involved, thus marks a choice made by Black film within the nineties New Queer Cinema movement,

[48] The 'Young Soul Rebels' refer to two of TJ's friends, Chris and Caz, who play Soul music as DJs on radio. Unlike the two preceding films, *Rebels* (1991) has female characters, one of whom —Tracy, Chris's girlfriend — is central to the plot.

[49] Unlike France in *Amour* (1950), England has a state religion — Anglicanism —, and describing the film's milieu as Christian in this case refers both to morality and to the actual presence of the Church of England. Historically, the Church has supported Westminster politicians in outlawing homosexuality.

to no longer *over*sexualise the Black male even when he is engaged in eroticism — a choice which *Moonlight* (2016) will iterate.

Like the Jazz bar in *Langston* (1989), the London park where Terry James was killed is famously frequented by young Gay men. Unlike the Harlem bar which is a space of familiarity, socialisation and openness, the park is a place where one goes when one is looking for casual sex with strangers at night. Homoeroticism interrelates with TJ's death to reveal two important thematic issues in the film, the first being the **designated nature of Gay sex**: taking place at a specific time and place (and on the condition that the given pair can remain hidden), Gay sex is a designated activity which depends on circumstance above spontaneity. When Chris asks Caz why he had stopped at the Park the previous night, Caz replies, "for I might get a bit" (*Young Soul Rebels*, 1991, 06:36). Because the potential sexual experience to which he is referring is a **designated practice**, as a homosexual in a society in which homosexuality is systematically ostracised, Caz must go specifically to the park, specifically at night-time, with the specific purpose of having sex. Over and above these social constrictions on homoerotic activities, the second thematic issue is **the danger behind the designated nature of Gay sex**. Being a designated practice renders Gay sex dangerous because it can turn unsuspecting Gay youths into easy prey for criminals. As a Black film, *Rebels* (1991) therefore introduces a **homoerotic conflict** between safety and sexual exploration to the canon of Queer cinema. Horrified by both the spatial and personal proximity of Terry James's murder, Caz confides in Chris: "I know it aint right, but I keep thinking that it could've been me, you know?" (*Young Soul Rebels*, 1991, 08:54). Chris was also at the park the same night that their friend TJ was killed, but they did not see each other, nor did any of the park visitors hear anything suspicious. As a heterosexual Black man, Chris

is the first one to be suspected however, and though absolved, his character arc is central to the film's exploration of the homoerotic conflict between staying safe and having sex.

In *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), the homoerotic conflict between safety and sexual exploration shows that we homosexuals are not only punished by society for being homosexuals, but that sex with another male can in itself result in a punitive, if not fatal, penalty. Nearly three decades later, *Moonlight* (2016) will continue to illustrate the punished nature of homosexual existence.

'Moonlight'

Overview

Much of the critical work on Barry Jenkins's coming-of-age film *Moonlight* (2016) has focussed on Black masculinity from the lens of sexuality. My intervention is to uncover how this and other themes interact with Homoeroticism. Unlike its predecessors, *Moonlight* was made at a time when the homoerotic tradition was already well-established. The film's avoidance of nudity shows however that it rethinks Homoeroticism, being less overt and more suggestive of homosexual desires than *Amour* (1950), *Langston* (1989) and even *Rebels* (1991).

Plot and Analysis

Act 1[50]

In the prologue of the film, i.e. the opening scene before the opening of the first Act (titled 'Little'), a group of little boys chase the protagonist Chiron after school, and he hides from them in the neighbourhood's 'crack house'. Due to the insight gained through the analyses of the film's predecessors, I can readily identify the bullies' chase as the beginning of the **homoerotic chase** itself. The previous films have shown how heterosexuals have an obsessional pull towards homosexuals, and *Moonlight* demonstrates that children are no different. Chiron's schoolmates are not yet fully aware of sexuality, but they understand that he is *other*, and they persecute him for being different while constantly gravitating towards him out of scoptophilic curiosity.

In the first act of the film, Chiron is a small child who could be eight or nine years old, raised by a drug-addicted single mother in Liberty City, Miami. He is effectively an outsider, save for the one friend he has in Kevin who has compassion for Chiron despite his own popularity. Kevin catches up with Chiron when the latter leaves an afternoon's soccer practice prematurely, and as they walk side by side Chiron notices that Kevin is bleeding slightly on his cheek. In a close-up shot that emphasises the importance physical touch will have in the two's relationship, Chiron grabs hold of Kevin's chin in order to have a better look at his cheek. Already aware that Chiron is different from the rest of their peers, Kevin shakes his head and remarks "you're funny, man" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 14:58). Kevin proceeds to confront Chiron about why he lets the other boys pick on him. He shoves him in the chest so as to

[50] Due to the film's reliance on the 3-Act linear narrative structure, I conduct my analysis chronologically act by act.

provoke him to prove that he "aint soft" (Ibid. 15:21). A light wrestling match quickly ensues, and the hand-held camera used acts like a third party in the match, adding to the breathlessness and instability in the wrestling. As they shove and roll around on the grass, the hand-held camera is careful not to eroticise the two children from an adult male's Gaze. At the same time, Jenkins likens the match to an adult love scene and in so doing evokes the erotic feelings that they (already) feel for each other: like two adult men, they tumble and stumble uncontrollably all over each other, each one fighting for dominance over the other. Their shoes come off while wrestling and once they are done, they lie on their backs panting next to each other in the same way that adult characters are classically depicted lying after they have had sex. This metaphoric love scene is emphasised by the editor cutting to a close-up of Chiron's face when Kevin gets up: he is panting heavily out of breath, his mouth hanging open while he looks up speechlessly at Kevin. Chiron's wide-eyed dumbfoundedness betrays how awestruck he is by the close proximity he has just had with another boy.

As a director understood by his viewership to be hetero-cisgender, Jenkins interrogates the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality in the scene where Kevin and his friends compare the sizes and appearances of their penises in the school toilet (23:25-24:18). The scene suggests that from early childhood, males have a natural, primal curiosity over the penis — the most pertinent expression of male libido and virility.[51] Because this curiosity extends to *looking* at others' and not just at one's, filmic Homoeroticism is by default not exclusive to homosexuality: like their homosexual counterparts, heterosexual males grow up pondering upon the size of the penises of other males, and as they grow older, this question

[51] Homoeroticism among 'heterosexual' males does not necessarily foreshadow homo*sexuality*. As these boys indicate early on, males who identify as heterosexuals may be curious about, engage in and even enjoy homoerotic experiments with other males, without seeing themselves as 'Gay'. *Moonlight* portrays homosexuality as a state of being which manifests itself not only erotically, but also emotionally, psychologically, and sociologically.

evolves into one of virility and sexual performance. Even Chiron, the "soft" outsider is included in this primal rite, although the initial discriminatory reaction when he barges into the bathroom is "who let his ass in?" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 23:40) Because the young boys are already cognizant of the social tabooing of their actions, Kevin asks if Chiron is alone, and double-checks the door to make sure it's locked, lest their curiosity of each other's reproductive organs be discovered by older disciplinarians.[52] For Chiron, the experience of unzipping his fly in front of the others is an intense one: the camera pans slowly across the circle of boys, gleaning over their faces in complete absence of music in order to create anticipation for Chiron. This long, silent moment of suspense further serves to stress that Chiron is different from his peers. He is shy about unzipping his pants because for him, this act is about more than just measuring himself up against other males; it is also about revealing some part of who he truly is.[53] Indeed, he spends more screen time looking at Kevin's penis than at his own, thus revealing (to the viewer) his attraction to Kevin at an early age.

Act 2

Jones (1993) posits that "the hysterization of Black sexuality has historically been fundamental to the hegemony in popular film" (p. 256). Limitingly, 'Black sexuality' is classically understood as heterosexual, but *Moonlight* illustrates the double consciousness experienced by Black homosexuals as the hysterization of their sexuality is not only on account of its Blackness, but also on account of its Queerness. The film does not seek to

[52] Although curious about each other's bodies, they are already aware of the unacceptable nature of homosexuality, as "faggot" is a word that is used against Chiron already in the first act.

[53] Beginning to question his sexuality in the first act, Chiron asks his surrogate father figure Juan how he will know if he is gay, to which Juan responds, "you just do, I think." Teresa, Juan's partner and Chiron's surrogate mother figure, adds: "you'll know when you know" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 34:00-34:30).

denormalise Black homosexuality however, but rather focuses on showing both cinematically and narratively how this sexuality is denormalised by default in society. At the centre of the "hysterization" and *denormalization* of Chiron's sexuality during his adolescence — the life stage during which homosexual sex is portrayed as the most transgressive — is his school bully Terrel. The opening of the film's Midpoint[54]unveils that Homoeroticism is not always intimate: it is also found in the "hysterization" of a body that is Gazed at. The Gazing performed by the school bully occurs more predatorily than we saw in the three preceding films, because it is a (public) violence that is sexual, physical and verbal altogether.[55] The invitation that the camera gives us into the classroom is key to uncovering how Chiron's (perceived) sexuality acts as an electric chair he inhabits inescapably:

"Teacher [*noticing that Chiron is not focussing in class*]: Chiron, you need something?

Terrel: Hey yo that nigger forgot to change his tampon. [*As fellow classmates giggle*]I'm sorry Mr Peers, he just having woman problems today. Aint that right, Little?

Teacher: Alright Terrel, that's enough.

Terrel: That can't be enough for Little! How much you need Little?!

Chiron: Don't call me that.

Teacher: Alright Terrel, that's it.

Terrel: What you gonna do, Chiron? I fuck you up.

Teacher: Ey yo Terrel, out! (*As Terrel walks out the classroom*) Come on man, what's wrong with you?"

(*Moonlight*, 2016, 36:24 – 36:53).

[54] I.e. the introductory scene of the second act, where the main Conflict is introduced.

[55] Chiron can be argued to suffer more than TJ in *Rebels* (1991), because even though the latter is murdered, the former's suffering is perpetual.

The most striking cinematographic aspect of this three-way bickering is the close-up shot of Terrel's menacing face when he looks directly at Chiron and says: "What you gonna do, Chiron? I fuck you up" (Ibid. 36:24 – 36:53). This focalisation — which is met by a close-up shot of Chiron's frightened expression — anchors Terrel as the main antagonist. Not surprisingly, Terrel does not actually *know* that Chiron is homosexual, but assumes it based on the latter's less aggressive presentation. Publicly, Terrel womanises Chiron because he doesn't understand how Chiron's (perceived) homosexuality could be compatible with his African American maleness. The references to Chiron's "woman problems" are part of a ceaseless attempt to prove to everyone that because Chiron is noticeably less masculine, he must be a woman. In so doing, Terrel inadvertently exposes his own pathological curiosity about Chiron's gender-sexuality. Terrel's behaviour towards Chiron is therefore an outward projection of his inner incapacity to reconcile his own **homosexual frustration** with the hypermasculinity that he is expected to perform.

After class, Chiron is a lonesome figure among the throng that exits the main building. Terrel and one of his friends bump against him purposefully, and the language that Terrel uses as he shoves past is telling: "Imma be waiting for your ass, Little" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 37:19). On the surface, this is a threat that Terrel will be waiting for Chiron after school in order to 'kick his ass'. From a Homoerotic perspective, Terrel's aggression towards Chiron advances my argument about the former's sexual frustrations over the latter: Terrel is attracted to Chiron and wants to fuck him, but is firstly enchained by a Christian society which condemns "sodomy" and secondly terrified by the threat that Chiron's "unmanly" presence poses to his own sense of security in his heterosexual identity. Because expressing his feelings for Chiron healthily would emasculate him and furthermore refute the hypermasculine identity with which he guards himself, Terrel finds verbal and

physical ways to punish Chiron.[56] This evocative sequence is composed of a still shot wherein Chiron walks backwards as everyone else walks forward. Chiron's movement in the opposite direction as his peers conveys his othered nature and emphasises his ostracisation from society. His physical retraction in the moment moreover foreshadows his complete isolation from society in the (incarcerated) future. Nicholas Britell scores the sequence with a melancholic composition that enhances Chiron's state of aloneness.

The vicarious side to Homoeroticism, which we first saw in *Amour* (1950), is also present in *Moonlight* (2016), but this time it is not from a Hetero perspective. Refreshingly, the Gay man takes voyeuristic interest in the "straight" man's sexual encounters with women, thus allowing Homoeroticism to function through the homosexual's vicarious sex with the heterosexual. This arrangement is first introduced in the second act when Kevin brags to Chiron about how he got detention after one of their teachers caught him having sex with a girl. Chiron immediately wants to know who the girl was, to which Kevin replies "damn, you nosy Nigger!" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 38:03). Chiron's "nosiness" is but an indication of how he imagines himself submitting to Kevin, like the anonymous girl who did. Chiron's vicarious fantasies over Kevin drive the rest of the second act until he is finally able to share a corporeal sexual experience with him.

[56] It is easy to find a sexual undertone in the language that Terrel uses in all of his interactions with Chiron.

In the Rationale section, I discussed the trope established in the hegemony, where Queer males are problematically represented as 'threats' to heterosexual relationships. This representation stems clearly from what I have described as the Hetero-Gaze. In focalising the protagonist's subjectivity, Jenkins however reverses the Hetero-Gaze: from Chiron's point of view, the girl is firstly the one who keeps from him the boy he desires. Secondly, she is also the desirable feminine body into which Chiron can project himself in order to sleep with Kevin imaginarily. Like the dream that enabled Alex to marvel at Beauty's naked body in *Langston* (1989), Chiron has a dream in which he walks into Teresa's garden and finds Kevin having sex with a girl whose face is not captured by the camera. Diegetic sound plays an important role in this sequence (42:29-43:19). At first, it appears as though it is the sound of the ocean which wakes Chiron in the middle of the night and lures him from his (guest) room. As he walks ever closer to the outside however, the sounds of two people having sex are heard more loudly; the sounds that the sleeping Chiron is dreaming about waking up to and following outside. In the previous films, the *looking* was always performed by the agent who occupied the more dominant position in society. Most often, the coalescence of Whiteness and economic mobility placed the Black male on the receiving end of sexual encounters with White men (irrespective of who would 'top' and who would 'bottom'). It is thus striking that Chiron — the most socio-economically marginalised character in the film's milieu — is the one who is *looking*, albeit in a wet dream. It is Chiron's very subjugation in society however that makes his scoptophilic dream a case of 'looking' rather than 'Gazing', for the former reveals curiosity while the latter necessitates power. Once Chiron is outside, we see that Kevin penetrates the girl *from behind*, i.e., he stands behind her and they both face ahead of them. Jenkins chooses to have the two engage "doggie-style" in front of Chiron, because it is the position that is most commonly associated with Gay sex and therefore demonstrates both to the viewer and to Chiron his wildest desire

— to be taken from behind by Kevin. The unveiling of the dream as a projection of Chiron's yearnings is accentuated by the fact that for three important seconds, he moves out of shot and we only have Kevin and his faceless partner in view: at eye-level medium, Chiron's desire is brought to the forefront and he looks on as it plays out. The dream-fantasy becomes even more fantastical when Kevin turns around and addresses Chiron directly, asking him "you good Black?", and licking his lips at him (*Moonlight*, 2016, 43:13). The licking of the lips is a subtle indication of the lust that Chiron wishes Kevin would direct at him in real life, while the cocky question also happens to be the ultimate thing that Chiron wants Kevin to ask him. Unlike the buddy-manner in which Kevin usually addresses him however, Chiron wants to hear the question while he is bent over in front of Kevin, penetrated by him *in place of the girl*. Just like the girl whom Kevin had told Chiron about sleeping with at school was nameless, the girl with whom he sleeps in Chiron's dream is faceless, and both cases of anonymity should not be taken for granted: we do not get to know Kevin's female partners, because they function not as individuals, but as representations of heterosexuality and the clog that it places on transgressive sexualities. Although Chiron had a momentary character goal to know whom Kevin had been caught having sex with on the school premises, in the greater thematic scheme it matters not who these females are, but that they belong to the impeding heterosexual hegemony.

In the dream, Chiron has a conflicted facial reaction to the coitus unfolding in front him — pained that he is not in the girl's place, horrified by his own voyeurism but guiltily glad that he sees Kevin making love. Knowing how much of Kevin Chiron wants, it comes as a surprise that he does not imagine him naked. *Amour* (1950) and the White cinematic conventions that succeeded it animalised the Black man primarily by overexposing him and by allotting a sub-human sexual ability to him. Nudity permeates *Langston* (1989), but the film mostly conceals the penis, using nudity skilfully to deify the Black male body.

Where bodily exposure is involved, *Moonlight* (2016) leans more towards *Rebels* (1991) in its avoidance of nudity altogether: in the sex scene dreamt by Chiron, Kevin is fully dressed; only his shirt is lifted up slightly in the front, with his pants lowered moderately beneath his underwear.[57]Where *Langston* (1989) had honoured the Black male body through its deification, *Moonlight* (2016) honours it through *privatisation*, i.e. restoring to it the (dignifying) privacy which it had been denied in White cinema. In both cases, the Black director's agency in depicting the Black male body is exercised.

The only person who gives Chiron the sexual attention he craves is his nightmarish bully Terrel, who continues his possessive obsession with Chiron's sexuality. In the second classroom scene (46:28 – 46:48), Chiron catches Terrel staring disparagingly at him while everyone else in the biology class is preoccupied with the papers in front of them. A sudden cut to the after-school scene where Terrel and his friend Pisa harass Chiron magnifies the pertinence of Terrel's thoughts about Chiron, i.e. the editor cuts directly to the after-school scene because Terrel could not wait to get there (46:49 – 48:00). Terrel and Pisa intimidate Chiron as he walks down the street and after a short confrontation, Terrel says: "[…] Now I aint with that gay shit, but if you fuck with me, I'll give your ass more than you can handle how you run into your crack-head-ass Mama" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 47: 30). Terrel thinks he is completely in charge of the situation, but this is also the first time he (inadvertently) reveals clearly that he would sleep with Chiron if given the opportunity. His threatening words, "I'll *give* your ass more than you can handle" (Ibid. 47: 30), betray his desire to insert his penis into said ass. Jones (1993) argues that "in White-directed mainstream film, the sexuality of the Black male character can be seen as the struggle for power-over" (p. 255). This "power-over" is traditionally in relation to the female counterpart,

[57] The girl in front of Kevin is also fully clothed; Jenkins does not fall into the trap of exposing women for the gratification of the (White) men watching — a tendency for which White male filmmakers are notorious, according to Jones (1993).

over whom he strives to assert power "as the only means of gaining recognition and prestige" (Ibid). Through a Homoerotic lens we begin to see how the power-over struggle can also exist between two male characters, especially where one of them suffers homosexual frustration: the straight-presenting Terrel is not merely homophobic but also experiences a homoerotic anxiety about the Queer-presenting Chiron, whom he sees as a threat to his own (fragile) sense of masculinity. Terrel mocks Chiron for the tightness of his jeans, firstly because they make him anxious by enticing sexual feelings in him, and secondly because he wants to control the way Chiron presents himself. This power-over would allow Terrel to continue believing that Black masculinity is homogenous. Through the power-over dynamic, *Moonlight* underscores that at the root of Terrel's (or the heterosexual's) homosexual frustration is his anxious suspicion that he himself is a "faggot", an anxiety which he confirms when he asks if Teresa gives "free head" (Ibid.47:15) and remarks — "[…] Nigger's nuts must be chokin' in those jeans boy, I swear" (*Moonlight,* 2016, 47:45-47:55). The question on whether Teresa voluntarily performs felatio on Chiron is one of the many examples through which *Moonlight* illustrates how straight-presenting men overemphasise their heterosexuality in order to conceal their internally rampant homosexual frustrations, particularly by speaking overtly about sexual engagements with women. The mention of Chiron's "nuts" (i.e. his testicles) is another sexual reference which helps me theorise the Hetero-Gaze: because Queer-presenting males *appear* to be more comfortable with their sexualities, the so-called heterosexual men resent them. As Chiron experiences when Terrel's violating hand pulls at his jeans, the Hetero-Gaze seeks to disrupt any sense of self-assuredness that Queer males may feel in order to coerce them into conforming to heteronormative moulds of masculinity. The irony of Terrel's obsession is that Chiron is in fact not self-assured at all, and the entire scene is shot with a shaky hand-held camera to evoke the latter's personal and sociological instability.

Despite having remarked in early childhood that Chiron was "funny", Kevin becomes the first (and only) sexual experience that Chiron has. The two characters are sitting and smoking on the beach at night during the Second Act Turn (49:10),[58] and the conversation quickly becomes intimate and confiding. It is Kevin who puts his hand on Chiron's neck in an initially playful, brotherly manner, teasing that the latter is "trying to get smart" with him (*Moonlight*, 2016, 54:09). Then suddenly the bromantic pull on Chiron's neck becomes a gentle caress; slowly and tentatively, Chiron leans in for a kiss, with Kevin beckoning him on with his eyes. As they (finally!) kiss, Kevin holds on to Chiron's neck and prolongs the kiss. Assumed by everyone to be straight, Kevin takes the lead in this Adolescent Love Scene, unbuckling his belt, placing his hand inside Chiron's pants and proceeding to masturbate him.[59]Unlike the previous sex scene, this one is not dreamt but actual, but as with its imagined predecessor, the trap of over-sexualising the Black male is avoided. Speaking back defiantly to the White Gaze's infamous obsession with the black 'phallus', *Moonlight* uses the very instance of eroticism to reclaim Blackness: no nudity is involved in the love scene between Kevin and Chiron. Kevin's stimulation of Chiron's genitals is shot from behind the two characters, so that we only see their backsides. Quite decisively, Homoeroticism is used to invoke a tender, gentler way of performing Black masculinity — an alternative to the violence with which Black maleness is associated: with Kevin's one hand still on his neck, Chiron rests his head trustingly on Kevin's shoulder in total surrender of the hand job that the latter is giving him, making the moment both erotic and affectionate. The scene is rendered

[58] When following a classical narrative structure, the Second Act Turn is the central moment in the second act where a big dramatic turn occurs for better or worse, and the characters' false goals become their true dramatic goals.

[59] Kevin takes the dominant role in the erotic moment not only because he is more assertive than Chiron, but also because his own homosexual frustration is spilling out of its confines.

even more poignant by the diegetic sound resounding from the ominous sea. Jenkins relies on a cut-away shot of Chiron's hand clutching desperately at the sand to stress the corporeal nature of this experience, the physicality and tangibility of their consummation. The tenderness of the night comes as a breakaway from the violence that Chiron experiences every day. The scene thus seeks to demonstrate that relationships between Black men do not have to subscribe to violent performativities: it is possible for them to be brotherly, affectionate, sexual and all the other non-violent qualities which likewise permeate the scene. Because the milieu is not a progressive utopia, the idyllic picture ends as soon as Chiron has ejaculated. As though ashamed of his unhidden ecstasy, Chiron apologises to Kevin, but the latter assures him that he has nothing to be sorry for. Kevin's reassurance is contradicted however, by the close-up of his hand wiping itself clean off Chiron's semen. The evocative wiping away of the semen on the sand serves as a metaphoric foreboding of the manner in which Kevin will later behave as though his memory were *wiped clean* off any remembrance of this night.

Indeed, the following day at school Terrel and his friends pressurise Kevin into beating Chiron. Kevin succumbs to the peer pressure and turns against Chiron, punching him continuously in the face until he is lying on the ground while the observing crowd cheers on. Characterised as an anti-hero, Kevin proceeds to watch the gang as they trample upon Chiron, stomping him into a stupor. The violent scene (1:00:20-1:02:00) is the climactic result of Terrel's sexual obsession with Chiron: because Terrel could not contain, change or *have* Chiron, he opts to publicly strip him off his humanity. This punishment is worsened by the fact that Terrel uses Chiron's only friend, Kevin, to impose it. Based on the sexual chemistry introduced between Kevin and Chiron in the first act when they were small, one could argue that Terrel is aware of the attraction between them, and that his attack verges on a crime of passion because he enviously wants to destroy what they share. The stripping away

of Chiron's humanity can be likened to the violent raping of a victim dehumanised by a predator (Terrel) who uses rape as a tool not for gratification but for the psychotic assertion of power. Kevin partakes in it in order to prove to his peer group that he is as aggressively masculine as they are. Only as an adult will Kevin be able to confess his adolescent interiority to Chiron: "I was never really worth shit. I just kept on man. Never really did anything I actually wanted to do. Cause all I could do was do what folks thought I should be doing. Wasn't never really myself" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 1:43:03-1:43:28).

Believing that pressing charges as encouraged by the headmistress will not change the behaviour of his bullies, Chiron chooses to take matters into his own hands: he barges into the biology classroom, grabs a chair and smashes it twice on Terrel's back, leaving him incapacitated. Chiron's classmates quickly hold him back. With Terrel lying motionless on the floor, the camera cuts to a handcuffed Chiron being led down the staircase by two police officers and being shoved into a police car. He stares at Kevin's guilt-ridden face as the police drive him off to his incarceration.[60] Tragically, Chiron pays the price for Terrel's sexual obsession over him. *Moonlight* thus sheds light on how society's prohibition on healthy, consensual homosexual (and by extension *homoerotic*) relationships contributes to the creation of toxic masculinities. These masculinities in turn use violence to escape their torturous homosexual frustrations. As the domino effect between Terrel, Kevin and Chiron illustrates, there are no real winners were homophobia is involved.

Act 3

[60] The theme of imprisonment which we saw in *Amour* (1950) therefore recurs in *Moonlight* (2016).

Throughout his childhood and adolescence, Chiron learnt that if he let people see he was "soft," he would always have reason to cower in fear. It comes as no surprise therefore that in his adult life, he performs a heteronormative, straight-presenting and at times violent masculinity as the completion of his character arc. He is now a drug lord in Atlanta, carries a pistol, and has become very adept at intimidating other men in his line of work. He also exercises diligently in order to maintain his built, muscular physique, indicating that prison was an opportunity for him to reinvent himself.

The adult Chiron has done everything in his ability to disassociate from his past, bullied self, but when Kevin calls Chiron one night to check up on him and to apologise for "all that shit what went down"(*Moonlight*, 2016, 1:13:06), it is clear that after years, Chiron is still in love with him: there are long, yearnful pauses on Chiron's side of the line, and his mournful facial language exposes his longing for Kevin as he listens to his voice. Two cinematographic choices are especially evocative on Chiron's end: firstly, Chiron's face is captured at close-up throughout the entire conversation. While the fact that this close-up is at eye level might suggest that he is now grown and can so to speak face Kevin man-to-man, the hand-held camera used alludes to his *shaky* emotions during the conversation; the instability of the shot conveying his internal unquietness. Chiron's unextinguished desire for Kevin is further evidenced by the fact that the morning after the call, he wakes up to find that his boxers are wet with semen; he ejaculated in his sleep out of uninhibited lust for his childhood crush. Despite the machismo that he displays, Chiron is no more able to control his homoerotic compulsions for Kevin than when he was a teenager. *Moonlight* uses the semen on an adult Chiron's boxers — an unromantic image that might easily be read as "dirty" rather than erotic — to posit that no matter how hypermasculine a Queer man might (try to) be, he can never escape his sexuality. As Chiron's frustrations have done in his sleep, the

hidden homoerotic feelings will always catch up with him and haunt his carefully constructed straight identity.

Towards the end of the third Act, Chiron pays Kevin a surprise visit at the diner where he works. They give each other a "manly" half embrace after years of not seeing each other, but Chiron lingers in the hug and becomes the shy little boy he used to be when he looks at Kevin. The close-up shot of his coy face as he asks with melancholic friendliness, "what's up Kev?" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 1:24:58) makes it clear that he can still feel the homoerotic night he shared with Kevin on the beach as a teenager. It seems ironic and anti-climactic that Kevin — who was rough and assertive when they were growing up — turned out to be the domestic, law-abiding one: he works as a cook and has a son, Kevin Junior, with Samantha from school. To display his middle-class civil servantship, Kevin cooks a "chef's special" for Chiron and after an awkward yet intimate meal, they return to Kevin's apartment.[61] The night becomes more personal and confrontational, albeit in a reserved, tentative manner: with a revealing medium close-up on his face, Chiron confesses painedly "you the only man that's ever touched me. You the only one. I haven't really touched anyone since" (*Moonlight*, 2016, 1:44:37-1:44:55). Chiron's confession on his disengagement from any kind of sexual activity since Kevin, and the long speechless stares that they consequently give each other reveal the unforgettable nature of their homoerotic experience: like a branding iron, Kevin's touch has marked Chiron for life, and the latter is incapable of giving himself sexually or romantically to anyone else. Comparably, Kevin co-parents his young son with Samantha, but their relationship did not succeed. Likewise branded as belonging to Chiron by his first same-sex

[61] The sequence of Kevin cooking the meal can be read as a reflection of Kevin finding his way through cooking to assimilate into middle class American society as a Black man. He had revealed earlier in his phone conversation with Chiron that he had also served time as a prisoner, and the cooking sequence becomes symbolic of the restorative journey which forms *his* character arc (but not Chiron's).

kiss, Kevin is the one who makes the phone call. This agentive action evidences that he cannot forget Chiron and sees him as his first and true love. The Adolescent Love Scene on the beach is therefore used by the film to revert the fundamentalist Christian idea that homosexual activity is merely an example of men doing "shameful things with other men" (Romans 1:26-27, *NLT*).Instead, the film explores the irrevocability of same-sex desire. Homoeroticism in *Moonlight* is not used for the mere purpose of stimulating the viewers' sexual pleasure, but is an activist tool functioning in defence of Black Gay love. Through a Homoerotic lens, this love is portrayed as Natural, irrefutable, and *necessary*.

With the director's evident Homoerotic point of view, *Moonlight* (2016) explores how the ostracisation of the young Queer Chiron by a homophobic African American society has led him to live on the same drug-abusing margins of society in which both his biological mother and his surrogate father figure Juan were trapped. In the closing scene of the film, *Moonlight* suggests that an ostracised Black man like Chiron not only suffers the 'two-ness' of African American existence, but has in fact a triple-consciousness: he is Black, Gay, and Criminal. Juan, who sold drugs to Chiron's addicted mother, volunteered to be a positive male influence in Chiron's life after he found the young boy hiding from his bullies in a crack house. Juan had already passed away when Chiron was an adolescent, but Chiron follows in his drug-dealing footsteps and as an adult. Though not a substance abuser himself, drugs are the only way in which he learnt he could make a living as a Black man, and they render him even more transgressive in society than his Blackness and his Queerness. For all this, and for the loneliness that has haunted his life, he seeks comfort in Kevin's arms in the closing scene at Kevin's apartment (1:45:51 – 1:45:59). Given the highly eroticised images of Black men in *Amour* (1950) and *Langston* (1989), one expects a heated sex scene as the climax to the night of Chiron and Kevin's reunion. It is imperative to remember however, the turn introduced in

Queer Black film by *Rebels* (1991) — a choice to not oversexualise Black males even when they are engaged in eroticism. In making this historiographic link, I am able to make sense of Jenkins's decision to show the two characters embracing rather than doing anything straightforwardly sexual: Kevin strokes Chiron's head gently, which is rested against his own. They embrace comfortingly and their eyes close in recognition of their mutual affection. Rendering this image in a still, close-up shot highlights the scene's prioritisation of affection over sex. Instead of a voyeuristic unclothing of the characters, the camera focuses on their most humanising features, their eyes and faces. This *mise en perspective* subtly expresses one of *Moonlight*'s most powerful messages: that sex is part of but not inseparable from homosexuality. The soothing diegetic sound of the ocean in the background — a motif in the film — reoccurs, and aids the scene to transition to the closing shot of Chiron as a little boy, standing alone in front of the sea. Unlike in the first act where Juan taught him how to swim, the image here is nocturnal with the colour grading highly saturated. This nocturnal image and the saturation thereof stress the unjust sentence society imposes on homosexuals.[62] The sentence is unjust because it condemns all the aspects of our sexuality — social, cognitive, sartorial and so much more — on a premise that is essentially sexual, i.e. all of it is wrong because we abominably want to sleep with other males.

Conclusion

I have discussed how mainstream cinema characteristically represents women and Queer males as rivals for the affections of the heterosexual man. In reaction to this vilifying trope, we see how early Queer film does away with female characters altogether, so as to disrupt the idea that (male) homosexuality is by nature a threat to heterosexual relationships. First

[62] The saturated, blue tint of the image is also a reference to the title of the screenplay on which the film is based, which was said as a line by Juan to Chiron earlier in the film: "In moonlight, black boys look blue" (*Moonlgiht*, 2016, 20:05-20:10).

introduced in *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950), the all-male cast is continued by *Looking for Langston* (1989). A turn occurs in the nineties, with *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) introducing a female character central to the plot. It is in *Moonlight* (2016) however, where female characters are especially pivotal to the life of the homosexual protagonist.

A key commonality between Queer film and Black Queer film is the camera's refusal to cast a Hetero-Gaze on homosexual characters. Instead, Homoeroticism is used to *look back* at society and reverse the Hetero-Gaze which haunts male homosexuals. Notwithstanding the commonalities, my analysis makes it clear that Queer Black film did not simply inherit a blueprint that had already been established in the Queer film hegemony. More so than *Amour* (1950), *Langston* (1989) politicises the Gaze, portraying convincingly that homosexual desire is not simply about looking at (or looking back at) lustfully. It is also about looking *for*: love, emotional security, lasting companionship and ultimately, it is about Black men looking for other Black men. In *Un Chant d'Amour*, the Black character is an (animalised) fetish for the pleasure of both the prison guard and the White audience. *Langston* (1989) represents the Black male as an object of the White man's desire not to facilitate the White spectatorship's fantasy, but to expose race and class as key determinants of the Black body's submission to Whiteness. In so doing, the film disrupts the historical *mis*representation of the Black male in Queer film.

The thesis opens a new gateway to theorise Queer Black film as its own genre, but my case studies make it apparent that the films is this genre are not always congruent: there is a **deific** Homoeroticism in *Langston* (1989), and a fatal one in *Rebels* (1991). *Moonlight* (2016) conveys that sex (and particularly sexuality) between men can indeed be a violent

engagement: the sexual encounter between Chiron and Kevin wasn't violent itself, but the violence permeated through Terrell's scoptophilic hysterization of Chiron's sexuality. Homoeroticism isused socio-politically in Queer Black film, and through a Homoerotic reading of Chiron and Kevin's final embrace, I unearth the director's usage of **intimacy** between homosexual characters to *humanise* them. Evident across the decades, is that Black film is not simply reproducing an already established (White) form, but is continually seeking to develop its own Black Queer aesthetic.

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