# Eclipsed: Darkness, Light, and Motherhood in the Sexualized Drug Economy of *Moonlight*


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***Abstract***

Since the debut of the 2016 Academy Award-winning film *Moonlight, scholars and critics have both praised the film for its focus on Black men and sexuality, critiqued it for eclipsing the Black women characters. This paper takes this eclipse as its point of departure and considers the nexus of Black motherhood and the sexualized drug economy. Drawing on black feminist scholarship, sociological frameworks, and film analyses, we address the tropes that characterize the mothers and mother figures in the main character's life, consider the possibilities for healing and transformation under the circumstances of structural injury that shape their fictional lives in Liberty City.*


We all on some level are damaged and we are all coming from this wounded place in our search for connection and love . . . just seeing that helps people understand their journey and each other. Now, more than ever, we need that reminder."

—Naomie Harris, *Paula,* Moonlight

For Paula, as for other black women on screen, love is and perhaps can only ever be that which survives. In the larger praxis of black diasporic otherworlding, that which survives is everything there is.

—Rizvana Bradley, "Vestiges of Motherhood:

The Maternal Function in Recent Black Cinema"

An eclipse is defined as any interference between the light of the sun and an object it illuminates. It is derived from the ancient Greek noun *ékleipsis*, which means "the abandonment," "the downfall," or "the darkening of a heavenly body." In many ways, working-class and poor black and brown communities live under a persistent eclipse. There is constant interference from economic, social, and political forces that block the freedom to thrive. While *Moonlight* is a powerful coming-of-age tale that beautifully centers the experiences of a black gay man as he navigates homophobia and his own questions about his sexuality, the film also instigates a meditation on the impact of community eclipse. In *Moonlight's* ironically named Liberty City, an anti-black political context and decades of systemic exclusion have left economic and social decay in their wake. In the absence of resources, a sexualized drug economy has taken hold, impacting family life in general and black


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motherhood specifically. Thus, *Moonlight* offers us an opportunity to think sociologically about the film, to consider the thematics operating in the greater political context of the contemporary moment and how a community responds to conditions of perpetual darkness.

In this article, we focus our discussion on the women of *Moonlight*—Paula, the mother of Chiron, and Teresa, who we argue becomes Chiron's "other mother" in the film—to examine the complexities of black motherhood bound by community eclipse. As the women of *Moonlight* are supporting characters and we are given limited information about their histories, experiences, and feelings, we use what is available about them to reflect on the wounds that black women experience in worlds that mirror Liberty City. We briefly consider how black feminist scholarship has grappled with the question of motherhood in the sexualized drug economy—an underground marketplace organized around the exchange of money, illegal drugs, and sex that shapes community norms and interactions. As Paula and Teresa represent differently positioned yet nevertheless symbiotic actors within this punishing economic and social structure, we challenge the simplistic tropes that seek to juxtapose the "depraved crack mother" against the "virtuous sacrificial mother." We conclude our analysis by imagining the possibilities that exist for healing and transformation under these circumstances of structural injury.

## Mothering under an Eclipse: The Seductive Trap and Devastating Injuries of the Sexualized Drug Economy

Injuries of inequality are large and small wounds to bodies, families, and communities resulting from systemic inequity as well as state, institutional, or interpersonal violence (Watkins-Hayes, 2019). Black communities have sustained decades of devastating injury along the historical path from slavery to Jim Crow to new forms of post–Civil Rights Era social control. In urban areas, black communities were dealt massive blows in the 1970s and 1980s with the decline of manufacturing jobs, the rise of a low-wage and less stable service sector, the movement of higher-paying jobs to predominately white suburban areas and overseas, public policies that eroded many community health resources, and persistent residential segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993; Sardell, 1989; Wilson, 2005). In a 1985 editorial, Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health Dr. Bailus Walker, Jr., wrote, "the much-touted 'safety net' of services for the poor turns out to be full of holes and to have a tendency to entangle those who do not fall through," (p. 601). Harsh fire from political leaders of that era such as President Ronald Reagan sparked renewed backlash over cash welfare assistance for low-income families, culminating in 1996 welfare reform policies signed by President Bill Clinton that installed time limits, sanctions, and work requirements that were rarely coupled with viable long-term employment opportunities (Edin & Shaefer, 2015). Black parents in working-class and poor communities saw few job prospects that could provide a living wage while experiencing limited support services such as adequate childcare resources, high quality schools, and safe neighborhoods in which to raise their children.

Faced with the absence of sustainable economic options, drug economies emerged in vulnerable communities throughout the United States, offering a potentially lucrative albeit highly risky financial survival strategy, a social elixir where things felt bleak, and an opportunity to self-medicate for those reeling from personal and political trauma (Rhodes et al., 2005). Although narcotics are present in some of the wealthiest corridors of society, poor communities, especially poor communities of color, suffer the worst of the deleterious community consequences of rising death rates, higher rates of illnesses tied to drug use such as HIV and hepatitis, and increased police surveillance and street violence. The influx of crack cocaine in the 1980s ushered in a highly addictive drug that destroyed families and neighborhoods and arguably escalated the physical and sexual risks that users were willing to take in exchange for the next high. What was a clear public health crisis driven by economic and social conditions was framed by political leaders as a crisis of criminality to be addressed through increased surveillance, policing, and incarceration (Alexander, 2012; Forman, 2017; Roberts, 1997). From the ubiquitous liquor stores on neighborhood corners to the dealers in the streets, the availability of mood-altering substances has fueled the eclipse of communities (Duck, 2015; Mackenzie, 2013).

How does one mother her children in these complicated crosscurrents? Hortense Spillers (1987) reminds us that the very possibility of *motherhood* as status has been denied black women since their forced entry into the hold of slavery, despite their active careers of *mothering* their children and the children of others. Jennifer Nash (2019) observes that "Black motherhood . . . is increasingly itself imagined as the space of the crisis. Not simply proximate to social death, black motherhood itself is a kind of metaphorical ground zero for black death, a kind of ur-text of black death" (p. 552). Black

motherhood is therefore cast—through news reports, public policy, and popular culture—under a language of death as mothers hold space "in the wake" (Sharpe, 2016). As gendered, sexualized, racialized, and classed bodies, they bear the cumulative markers and scars of the economic and social marginalization that has targeted black communities for centuries, and they have the nearly impossible task, as legal scholar Dorothy Roberts (1993) writes, "of guarding their children's identity against innumerable messages that brand them as less than human" (p. 5; see also Roberts, 1999). Their injuries of inequality are not happenstance or void of context. They are historical and political—producing and produced by—a compromised ability to protect themselves and their families from harm.

Nevertheless, black motherhood is also seen by black feminists as a site of power and possibility. "Motherhood," writes Patricia Hill Collins (2002), "can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment" (p. 176; see also Barnes, 2015; Collins, 2016). In this sense, motherhood is a radical act in a system that devalues black women and black children. Black motherhood and mothering are political, read as a Rorschach test for the health and functionality (or lack thereof) of entire communities.

To *Moonlight* playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney and screenwriter/director Barry Jenkins, these varied and complicated representations of black motherhood are quite personal. *New York Times* writer Nikole Hannah-Jones (2017) observes:

> Both men were born to mothers who had their first children when they were teenagers. Both saw their mothers become HIV positive after falling victim to the crack epidemic that overtook their community. Both were taken away from their mothers and bounced around; caregivers, related and not, took them in. They both knew what it was like to have the water turned off for lack of payment, to go to school without deodorant because there was no money to buy it (p. 4).

In fact, what *Moonlight* captures from its first scenes is the sense of abandonment that a community eclipse leaves in its wake, the untethering produced by deteriorating neighborhood conditions, the drug trade that has rushed in to fill the void, and the precarity of the health and social well-being of those who live in this environment. The *Moonlight* characters Paula and Teresa, played by Naomie Harris and Janelle Monae respectively, dwell in the shadow of this eclipse.

## Paula and Teresa: Making and Unmaking Black Motherhood Onscreen

Paula and Teresa operate against a complicated backdrop of stymied opportunity. Paula, the biological mother of the main character Chiron, is a single mother navigating a tightrope when we meet her. Early in the film, she protectively pulls her son away from neighborhood drug dealer Juan, wearing her nurse's uniform when they encounter him in Liberty City. When Juan later escorts Chiron home after finding him hiding from bullies in an abandoned drug house, Paula nervously questions her son, terrified by the prospect of what could happen in their neighborhood. "Mama just want to make sure you're okay, that's all baby," she explains to her son. For now, Paula will hold the sexualized drug economy at bay, determined to keep her family away from it.

Nevertheless, over the course of the film, this world slowly overtakes Paula. The deterioration shows up materially: the TV is gone and the apartment that she shares with Chiron begins increasingly to show signs of disrepair. The sexualized nature of the drug world infiltrates Chiron's domestic space, as men are now coming by to see Paula. "You cannot be here tonight, I got company coming," she barks at her son as she prepares to give herself over. We see Paula often bathed in a hot pink light, a fierce femininity that also frames her rage directed at Chiron. Given the need for additional currency beyond the relatively limited amount of cash available to her in their community, Paula is depicted using sex to access drugs and cash. The sexualized drug economy places the bodies of the less powerful disproportionately on the line in ways that diminish their agency and their ability to set the terms and parameters of their sexual lives. Women therefore play a subordinate role within this system, rarely assuming positions of authority and often subjected to gender-based violence (Richie, 2012; Watkins-Hayes, 2019). Chiron's classmates tease him about Paula's availability and low status in this structure, "Does she charge like Paula?" they ask about another woman in the neighborhood. "Paula's getting cheap," they joke, ridiculing his mother's apparently declining value in the sexual marketplace.

*Moonlight* therefore quickly builds a constant and forceful tension between Paula's grasp on "respectable" motherhood and the social distress that envelops her.

"I'm your mother," Paula frequently declares, as both assertion and threat. "Don't look at me!" she shouts at Chiron when she is in the throes of addiction, unable to accept his gaze and all that it signifies about her worth as a mother in turmoil. The sexualized drug economy steals the innocence and purity through which Chiron views his mother as well as his own childhood, as it seeps into the structural holes and vulnerabilities of both their family and the community at large. It is a hold from which neither of them can easily escape. When Chiron runs from bullies as a young boy, he finds physical refuge in a drug house. When Paula runs from traumas both visible and hidden throughout the film, she looks for emotional refuge in that same space.

As Paula struggles, Chiron eventually finds solace and a safe haven with Juan, who warns the boy that he "cannot run around in dope holes." In a now iconic scene, Juan teaches young Chiron to swim, reminding him to keep his head above water in this symbolic baptism in Liberty City. We later see Chiron as a passenger in Juan's car, peacefully waving his arm through the currents of the tropical Florida wind, an escape that had heretofore eluded him. In a place where we see few safety nets for the most vulnerable, Juan begins to play that role for Chiron.

### *Teresa's Rule: All love, all pride in this house, you feel me?*

It is Teresa, Juan's girlfriend, who becomes the backbone of Chiron's safety net. Their first interaction occurs when Juan brings Chiron to his home. We see Teresa gaze at Chiron as he nervously slouches in the passenger's seat of Juan's car. As they sit for dinner, Chiron is nourished by Teresa yet holds his silence. "That's alright, baby. You talk when you ready," she encourages. It would be the beginning of many nights which Teresa's home operates as a space of solace and protection for Chiron. It would also become a space of learning, as Teresa teaches him everything from how to make his guestbed to how to claim the power of his name. When a maturing Chiron refuses to be called by his nickname Little, Teresa agrees, "And you right, that ain't no name for you no more. That ain't you. But if you wanna be somethin' different, you gotta earn it, you gotta make your name true, understand?"

As Paula plunges deeper into addiction, Teresa becomes a surrogate mother for Chiron. She is an "othermother," to borrow a term from black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2002), one of the "many people [who] do the labor of mothering without the luxury of the status of 'motherhood'" (Gumbs, 2016, p. 109). Through their preservation and sustenance of others, othermothers operate alongside bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities in a context of fluid and changing conditions within ravaged communities (Nash, 2018; Collins, 2002; Stack, 1975). Although their community structure might struggle under the weight of conditions that erode trust, heighten violence, and often encourage social isolation, "even in the most troubled communities, remnants of the othermother tradition endure" (Collins, 2002, p. 181). Teresa's relationship with Chiron indeed endures even after. She continues to provide a buffer against the coldness of their community's eclipse, creating a sense of normalcy for Chiron. Both families and fictive kin offer homes and protection to the children left socially and existentially vulnerable by racialized, classed, and gendered processes such as incarceration, drug addiction, premature death, and the overall instability of parents struggling with a host of struggles and traumas. These relationships and networks are themselves intertwined with both vulnerability and protection, generating a complex reality for those who must hold loved ones both close and at a distance for fear of further loss.

As we witness Paula's domestic and physical deterioration juxtaposed against the polished beauty and care presented by Teresa, it would be easy for viewers of *Moonlight* to cast Paula as a "bad" mother and Teresa as a "good" mother. Well-worn tropes of the irresponsible and depraved crack mother reside alongside the virtuous sacrificial mother figure in many of these narratives. It would appear to the uncritical eye as though Paula's motherhood is sutured to pathology, while Teresa's is linked to respectability.

Yet *Moonlight* demands that we grapple with the complexity and messiness of life within the sexualized drug economy. Teresa in fact plays two important and common roles in that fraught economy—the romantic partner of a dealer and the "othermother" of a child caught in the crosshairs. "Do you sell drugs?" Chiron asks Juan, "And my mama, she do drugs, right?" Juan, head lowered, solemnly affirms the truth while Teresa holds Juan's hand, offering support to Juan as Chiron puts the pieces together.

Feminist scholar Robin M. Boylorn (2016) argues that if the film is to represent Teresa as a saving grace for Chiron, Paula's demise is required—an unfortunate (albeit common) filmic representation of black womanhood and black motherhood that further eclipses the possibilities of not only troubling "black masculinity and queer identity, but black womanhood, specifically

black motherhood in the face of progressive black masculinity." In short, while Teresa guards against some of the damage Paula's addiction has inflicted on Chiron, we cannot forget that Teresa indirectly and directly benefits from Paula's addiction. As Paula forfeits all of her resources to the drug economy, it is Juan and Teresa who receive them as he continues to sell to Paula. As an adjunct to the relationship between Juan and Chiron, Juan and Teresa can be read as both Chiron's critical safety net and facilitators of Paula's fall from stability into the abyss. Paula, aware of this contradiction, holds Juan accountable for his role as both protector of Chiron and toxic supplier to her in a particularly wrenching scene. In a confrontation in the streets when Juan attempts to rescue Paula from a man that he perceives as problematic, Paula angrily lashes out. The movie script captures both the dialogue and the feeling of indignation that Paula has reserved for Juan:

> PAULA: So . . . you gon' raise my son now?
>
> PAULA: Huh?
>
> PAULA: You gon' raise my son? . . . Yeah . . . that's what I thought. You gon' raise him? You gon' keep sellin' me rocks?
>
> PAULA: Motherfucker. And don't give me that "You gotta get it from somewhere shit" nigga, I'm getting' it from you.
>
> But you gon' raise my son, right?

While this scene reminds viewers of Paula's and Juan's co-dependence, Paula and Teresa appear also to recognize their co-dependence. Occasionally this recognition breeds hostility. In one of Paula's moments of withdrawal, she rails against Teresa to Chiron. "I'm your mama. That bitch over there ain't no kin to you, I'm your blood, remember?" She demands that Chiron give her all of the money in his pocket, "Teresa ain't give you nothing, huh? Your lil' play-play mama ain't put something in your hand? Now give me that damn money, Chiron." After handing his mother his last dollars, she retorts, "Uh huh, I know that bitch like a hooker know her trick. You my child, okay? And tell that bitch she better not forget it." Conjuring the language of sex work, we are left to wonder who is the exploiter and who is the exploited in the women's uneasy relationship.

In other moments, Paula concedes grudging respect for Teresa. There are two scenes in particular in which Paula asks Chiron, "How's Teresa doing?" In the first, in the throes of addiction, Paula asks about Teresa's well-being following Juan's presumed death. "I ain't seen her since the funeral," she observes as she builds to the moment in which she can ask Chiron for money. The second time Paula asks about Teresa occurs near the end of the film as she sits in a drug rehabilitation facility, attempting to connect with her son. In both scenes, Teresa is Paula's path to connection with Chiron. Even when Teresa is not in the frame, she is a crucial bridge between biological mother and son. One is left to wonder, during the meals and sleep-overs in Teresa's home, if and when she developed a sense of respect for Paula, for raising Chiron to the point she had as a single mother, before the addiction overtook her.

### Motherhood and the Transformative Healing Project

In preparing to play Paula, Naomie Harris told the ESPN-operated sports and pop culture website, *The Undefeated*, that she watched interviews with crack-addicted women on YouTube and documentaries about Miami in the 1980s. During her research, Harris found that many of the women had been sexually abused, leading her to realize that "[Paula's] addiction was about her wanting to escape this vast emotional pain that she was in." Harris continued:

> Then really understanding that she was not given the emotional resources to be able to go on to parent effectively and capably a child of her own. She was never given the love that she needed, so with an empty tank, how can you fill somebody else's? (McDonald, 2016).

When individuals struggle in the darkness and abandonment of an eclipse, are there any opportunities for healing and transformative life change? Arguably, for community mobilization and resistance to occur, its members are better prepared to confront the forces that hinder them if they themselves are operating from a place of strength and stability. What possibilities exist for black women who are operating under these circumstances of injury? The toll of addiction, the grief that comes with death and incarceration, and the damage to relationships can be overwhelming and paralyzing. How does one remake, not just rebuild, a life marked by trauma?

Rebuilding suggests a return to a prior state (Watkins-Hayes, 2019). It is where the same building plans remain in place, where the same constructs, assumptions, and visions are re-instantiated. Remaking is

much more dramatic; it is transformational. It is a multidimensional process by which individuals "fundamentally shift how they conceptualize, strategize around, and tactically address struggles related to the complex inequalities that affect everyday life" (Watkins-Hayes, 2019, 14). We often think of significant life transformations as highly personal and perhaps even spiritual experiences. Life transformations are in fact, however, deeply *social* events—negotiated processes influenced by the people, places, and public policies that we encounter. There is movement from *dying from*—a state of extreme physical, emotional, economic, and social distress—to *living with* and even *thriving despite*—in which one has radically reconfigured her strategies for physical, emotional, economic, political, and social survival and growth and achieved a new level of stability (Watkins-Hayes, 2019).

Near the end of *Moonlight*, we see a different Paula. Sitting with Chiron as he visits her in a drug rehabilitation facility, we might speculate that she is embarking on a project of transformative healing. We observe a movement away from *dying from* towards perhaps *living with* and even *thriving despite* community eclipse and the injury it has produced. We see glimmers of reconnection with her son. When Chiron, now an adult going by the name of Black, confesses to having trouble sleeping, Paula offers a helpful suggestion, perhaps produced from her own transformative journey:

> PAULA: You ever thought about talking about it with somebody? I mean. You know, not even like a counselor. Maybe somebody like, like your mama? Yeah it sound funny to me too. But I am your mother, ain't I? You can talk to me if you want to. Or at least somebody, you got to trust somebody, you hear?
>
> You talk to Teresa?

It is not clear from the film what the future will hold for Paula nor whether she will truly experience transformative life change in ways that are sustainable. But we note how the rehabilitation facility represents a safety net that seemed illusive in the past. In the scenes with Chiron, she is emotionally engaged. She is trying. The hot pink light and cramped apartment of her addiction have been replaced by a picturesque environment where Chiron visits her. We see her surrounded by trees and vegetation, a signal of new life, and the sun is shining. The eclipse, for now, appears to recede.

To be sure, Paula's progress in transforming her life does not inoculate her from the punishing health, economic, and social hurdles that will continue to confront her. As such, her process of remaking a life will not be rapid or linear. Rather, we expect it to be characterized by fits and starts, periods of marked improvement followed by crushing setbacks. We don't know what economic opportunities await Paula beyond the facility. We don't know if her access to other healthcare services will continue or whether she, like the real-life mothers of McCraney and Jenkins, will experience a subsequent diagnosis of an illness like HIV that is the direct result of operating in a context with few protective guardrails for health. For now, the facility will be home, "allowing me to stay and work as long as I like. I figured, you know, might as well help other folks, keep myself out of trouble." Chiron, now an adult, agrees:

> BLACK: That's good, mama.
>
> PAULA: Yeah . . . I think it is too. I really do.

What we see by the end of *Moonlight* is not only Chiron's slow and tentative transformation into manhood and sexual selfhood, but also Paula's movement from emotional and near physical death to a life in which she is presumably much more stable and better positioned to confront structural barriers in her path. She is moving away from the hold of the community eclipse that hobbled her. This protean dynamism comes when she receives the necessary support and sits in a place that nurtures her. Her survival represents a form of resistance that is central to the project of black motherhood, as she has cheated the life-threatening social and economic forces that were poised to destroy her. Such movements along life trajectories are grossly underanalyzed despite their frequent occurrence. Paula's story encourages us to recognize the agency of social actors living in disadvantaged contexts and analyze the support systems that facilitate life transformations. Her journey also demands that we highlight and account for the possibility of dynamic and significant change in the lives of stigmatized individuals, disrupting the narrative of the static actor in the urban-poverty landscape. As *Moonlight* plays out onscreen, Paula demonstrates a complex life, a complex femininity, one that does not allow us to affix easy stereotypes and controlling images on her. She demands that we see her in the larger context of the sexualized drug economy *and* the transformative healing that she seeks.

In their later scenes, Paula is also seeking to (re) establish her credibility and reclaim the moral "high ground" as a parent after years of being inconsistent, absent, or troubling. His mother is listed among Chiron's

phone contacts as "Paula," rather than "mom," signaling her alienation from her role as his mother and the slow road she has had (and will have) to travel to reestablish her relationship with him. An important part of her transformation involves deciding how to address the impact of her pre-transformation life on Chiron. This is a decidedly gendered phenomenon. While men may have to account for absenteeism or an inconsistent record of caregiving, women—especially black women—are likely subject to even greater scrutiny and judgment against the gendered expectations placed on them as mothers. That tension sustains the space between Paula and Chiron during his visit to the facility.

It is notable that *Moonlight* shows Paula in three registers: first, as a hard-working nurse responsible for taking care of patients before heading home to care of her son; second, as a drug addict who is selling her body in the sexualized drug economy and unable to parent her son in the way that he yearns to be mothered; and finally, as a woman in recovery who is slowly reclaiming her life and her role in Chiron's life. She will not fall easily into the tropes of the matriarchal "superstrong black mother" or Jezebel-like "crack mother," positioned as opposites in frames of black motherhood (Collins, 2002; Dance, 1979; Christian, 1985). Rather, Paula demands that we absorb her dynamism, her *movement* between registers of motherhood as the vicissitudes of a life of economic and social struggle wildly toss her about and leave her with devastating injuries of inequality. Writing on motherhood, and especially black motherhood, we must contend with the reality that motherhood can take many forms throughout one's lifetime and that injuries of inequality can inflict debilitating wounds in some moments and spark transformative healing in others.

We lose Teresa in the final act of the film. We don't know what wounds remain as she carries on without Juan. We wonder whether she has grappled with a process taking her from *dying from* to *living with* to *thriving despite* the grief that likely enveloped her as she processed Juan's death and watched her dream for that relationship die. We might question how she has continued to negotiate her own life in the umbra of the community eclipse.

While any individual may embark on a process of transformative healing, the experience for black mothers is likely to be particularly challenging given the structural forces and cultural messages that seek to confine them to the bottom rung of the societal ladder. Transforming black mothers must therefore revise their assumptions and challenge beliefs they may have held for decades. They must develop the ability to question the internal and external voices that tell them that their deaths are imminent and inevitable, that they are unworthy of love and care, and that silence is the best and only strategy for coping with pain. Transforming black mothers create new tapes in their minds, new messages to help frame and emotionally work through the injuries of inequality they have suffered and may continue to suffer. They do not condone the structural and interpersonal violence to which they have been subjected. Nor does transformation involve accepting blame for circumstances and events over which they have no control and which they are not responsible for creating. But Paula's journey suggests that, when black mothers are given opportunities to confront, process, rethink, and interpret injuries they have suffered, and to broker some level of peace with themselves and the events that have occurred in their lives, they may be better positioned to navigate future struggles.

In theorizing the black maternal in black cinema over the past decade, acknowledging films such as *Pariah, Get Out, Mother of George,* and *Moonlight,* interdisciplinary scholar Rizvana Bradley calls on us to focus less on the main character's autonomy that often undergirds or is amplified in these films and instead to remember the black mothers—whether they be present or absent onscreen—to "show how the protagonists in these films are constantly negotiating a difficult structure of black maternity and its attendant grammars of loss, abjection, and rejection." Of Paula, Bradley writes:

> In *Moonlight*, love for Paula, Little/Chiron/Black's mother, is not and perhaps can never be the fulfillment or idealization of the parental relation, but it is and will always be the real material outcome and quotidian expression of the struggle for black (female) existence. For Paula, as for other black women on screen, love is and perhaps can only ever be that which survives. In the larger praxis of black diasporic otherworlding, that which survives is everything there is (Bradley, 2017).

In a society that routinely traffics in anti-black and anti-female messaging, self-acceptance holds radical potential (Harris, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011). It is linked to self-love and self-care, which can be interpreted as acts of social and even political resistance in a population that has been maligned and regularly battles shame (Lorde, 1988). Self-acceptance is therefore a critical element of the transformative project. One's sense of worthiness lies at the heart of any healing effort. And it is this sense of worthiness that becomes particularly vexing for black mothers who battle intersectional

stigmas—both experienced and internalized.

## Conclusion

*Moonlight* is a chronicle of the childhood, adolescence, and burgeoning adulthood of a young, black gay man that we come to know as Little at nine years old, Chiron at 16, and Black in his twenties. He is struggling with identity and agency in an impoverished part of Miami ironically known as Liberty City, buckling under the expectations of masculinity placed upon him. The film takes place against the backdrop of the sexualized drug economy, a social, economic, and political ecosystem dedicated to the cultivation, manufacturing, distribution, and sale of illegal drugs. Although global in reach and impact, the sexualized drug economy affects individuals in highly localized ways, shaping their interactions, opportunities, and trajectories. The fundamental arc of the film is Chiron's journey as he grapples with his sexuality and the traumas that he has endured repeatedly throughout his life. We also however see in *Moonlight* another movement from death to life—away from the hold of a persistent eclipse—in the character of Paula. At the end of the film we are left with the question whether this transformation will be temporary or permanent.

*Moonlight* is deliberate in its focus on black boys and men navigating masculinity in a poor, anti-black, and anti-queer world. It is a powerful narrative choice and nevertheless leaves open space for us to explore the role of the women in Chiron's life—as maternal figures, antagonists, and as references for identity. Because women are supporting characters in the narrative, and we are given only limited information about who they are, what they experience, how they feel, what their desires and struggles might be, and their histories, we have embarked on a speculative discussion of the journeys of Paula and Teresa, drawing on black feminist literature and sociological analysis to ask questions and connect dots. Through this approach, we can continue to reflect on the wounds that black women and girls experience and navigate in worlds like Liberty City that exist off-screen.

From the truly disadvantaged to the "one percent," the structural scaffolding on which individuals craft new lives for themselves grounded in transformative healing is too often obfuscated, providing the false impression that the individual is the sole architect of the change we witness. The film demands that we wonder about the mothers who did not make it, who succumbed to the sexualized drug economy and its effects before they could remake their lives. Sadly, we do not distribute opportunities for redemption, remaking, and transformation equally in our society. In this sense, even the chance to change course in one's life is a commodity shaped by the vicissitudes of inequality.

Focusing on *Moonlight,* we meditate in this paper on how black mothers move from instability to stability, from silence to voice, from stigma to esteem in a context of community eclipse. Black mothers leverage agency to confront a number of challenges and to pursue their goals and interests to improve their well-being by working within the constraints of their circumstances or by challenging the associated barriers through their resistance. The characters Paula and Teresa enable us to witness the use of personal power, even if it is limited and restricted power, to create dramatic and positive change and to find stability in a highly turbulent context. As such, the transformative project is an active and constructive response to complex inequality.

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