Everybody's Protest Cinema: Baldwin, Racial Melancholy, and the Black Middle Ground

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Abstract

This article uses Baldwin's 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" to consider that literary mode's corollary in the 1990s New Black Cinema. It argues that recent African American movies posit an alternative to the politics and aesthetics of films by a director such as Spike Lee, one that evinces a set of qualities Baldwin calls for in his essay about Black literature. Among these are what recent scholars such as Ann Anlin Cheng have called racial melancholy or what Kevin Quashie describes as Black "quiet," as well as variations on Yogita Goyal's diaspora romance. Films such as Barry Jenkins's adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) and Joe Talbot and Jimmy Fails's *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* (2019) offer a cinematic version of racial narrative at odds with the protest tradition I associate with earlier Black directors, a newly resonant cinema that we might see as both a direct and an indirect legacy of Baldwin's views on African American culture and politics.

> The "protest" novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene … Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all.
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> James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel"[1]

Spike Lee's films have a penchant for powerful opening and closing sequences. While we likely expect this of any provocative or purposeful director, Lee's pictures show this tendency in particularly vivid ways, often as a result of his utilizing found footage of events that he understands to have an unsettling effect. He opened his 1992 *Malcolm X* with George Holiday's video of the Rodney King beating by the LAPD that had occurred the year before. During the final minutes of his 2019 *BlacKkKlansman* appears digital media coverage of the "Unite the Right" rally that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, including the impact of the car that killed Heather Heyer.

The reasons for Lee including this material are clear. In the case of his biopic, he sought to remind viewers that the biases surrounding Malcolm X's life, and that of Martin Luther King, Jr., which resulted in both men's assassination, were still prevalent in 1992. Nearly thirty years later, telling the story of Ron Stallworth infiltrating the Ku Klux Klan, Lee telescopes from his protagonist in 1978 to the same white supremacists' return to the contemporary political landscape—including former Klan Grand Wizard David Duke, who is portrayed fictionally in the movie but who appears in the Charlottesville footage at its end.

The opening of Lee's breakout feature, *Do the Right Thing* (1989), is different in that nowhere in the film does he avail himself of the public digital archive (other than the glancing appearance at the film's close of the famous photo of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X together). Notwithstanding the fact that in 2014 Lee rightly claimed that the picture's ending anticipated the death of Eric Garner in a police chokehold, the film's account of Radio Raheem's murder and its other events are staged.[2] The particular stylization of the film's *mise-en-scène*, like that of Lee's movies generally, is important to this discussion, and I return to it below. At the outset I mean to note only that Rosie Perez's duly celebrated appearance in the opening titles dancing to Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" is of a piece with Lee's urge toward engaging audiences with urgency and, as here, with a direct, frontal challenge to their political awareness.

This is not to say that Lee's films in any way lack artistry. Indeed, his cinema includes filmic images as powerfully rendered as those of any practicing director and as aesthetically accomplished as the classical *auteurs*.[3] As is well known, Lee's appeal is different from some of his earlier contemporaries in the New Black Cinema, the 1990s movement that included directors like the late John Singleton,

the Hughes brothers, Mario Van Peebles, and Gary Gray. Singleton's *Boyz N' the Hood* (1991), released two years after *Do the Right Thing*, was notable for its direct account of violence, police surveillance, drug use, and loss in the Black community of South-Central LA. Both films were considered part of a then-vanguard of what critics dubbed "hood cinema" that showed viewers Black urban life in ways US film never had before. Yet unlike Lee, Singleton's style was not self-conscious or overtly artful, possessing a realism that impressed contemporary reviewers and influenced other directors who followed him.

To note that a filmmaker can be both political, even strident, while at the same time pursuing such aims with artistic subtlety is not a particularly new observation. Yet as my title means to imply, and as James Baldwin's observations about protest fiction help me argue, something important happens in the example of Spike Lee's films by way of this combination. Or rather, something *appears* to happen on the surface of the viewers' encounter with the film that agitates her or him, but that ultimately, Baldwin would suggest, leaves viewers with less than what Lee hopes to offer them, or even what some scholarly defenders see as his films' value.

I take up particular aspects and assertions from Baldwin's 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" below. At the outset, I mean these remarks to highlight the humanist, but always political, element of his thinking. Baldwin urges readers to see the striking, in his view often lurid, appeal of works that, however important or necessary their moral argument, appeal to a sense of outrage that renders their narratives, characterization, or even their language alien to what Baldwin calls "that truth, as used here, [which] is meant to imply devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment."[4] Lest we confuse this with a bland, increasingly discredited classical or Enlightenment tradition defined by virtue of its whiteness, I point to Baldwin's own clarification of his terms. His argument "is not to be confused with a devotion to Humanity which is too easily equated with a devotion to a Cause; and Causes, as we know, are notoriously blood-thirsty." Baldwin points to the elusive figure (what literary theory might posit as the subject) he means us to seek as writers as well as readers of fiction: "He is … something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity," as Baldwin claimed the writers of the protest tradition did, "we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us."[5] It is this blend of the political, imaginative, and decidedly lower-case humanism Baldwin extols that I see more recent African American film demonstrate.

My consideration of Lee's films relates to the ongoing role of Baldwin in our broader understanding of Black-themed and -produced art. I offer Lee's particular example of an aspect of Black cinema that I associate with Baldwin's critique of the protest tradition because it helps me describe a quality that Lee's films lack, but that Baldwin's enormously sensitive thinking helps me identify as an element of other recent Black films. Of particular note is Barry Jenkins's 2018 adaption of Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), which I treat at length. I close my discussion with a turn to 2019's *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, a film that, with

Figure 1 Screenshot from *Malcolm X* (dir. Spike Lee, USA 1992)

Jenkins's *Beale Street* and other recent pictures, shows a vital dimension in the contemporary cultural landscape of race that I trace to Baldwin's ethos.

Two moments from Lee's films serve to make my ancillary point. Oddly, they each involve the presence of a phenomenon that marks the Southern landscape and its history by which Lee is understandably troubled but which, as these examples suggest, holds a powerful visual fascination for him. Two of the most ravishing images in Lee's corpus involve the Ku Klux Klan. The earlier appears in the early section of *Malcolm X*, the flashback to Malcolm Little's childhood when he narrates the scene of the attack on his family. After an invading Klan set fire to the family's home and threaten Malcolm's father, a scene Denzel Washington narrates in flashback, the marauders flee on horseback "into the moonlight as suddenly as they had come." Accompanying this voiceover is the shot shown in Figure 1. Enveloped by the haunting choral voices on the soundtrack, this image is arresting, and its visual and aural splendor, appearing at the end of the Klan's violent attack, come as something of a surprise.

A later instance of this same kind of imagery is even more striking. It appears at the end of *BlacKkKlansman*, when Ron and Patrice are interrupted in Ron's apartment by an ominous knock on his door at night. Transitioning by way of one of Lee's signature rear-projection tracks, with the motionless couple appearing to move through space toward the viewer with their guns drawn, the sequence ends with a closeup on one of the Klansman contemplating his and his fellows' symbolic burning cross. Lee's camera lingers on the shot of the Klansman conspicuously, and the meticulous constructedness of its image compels our attention, as does the shot's duration. Seeing the detail of the burning cross reflected in the Klansman's eye, viewers are as mesmerized by this image as is he by the swirling conflagration. An image of pure hate, it is also groundless, in that we don't know

Figure 2   Screenshot from *BlacKkKlansman* (dir. Spike Lee, USA 2019)

where exactly the Klan gathering is taking place. Not purely fantastical, as we have encountered the Klan's activities earlier in the film, it is unclear what actual spatial or temporal link this image and the sequence of the cross burning has to the action of the film at this point. Such a free-floating image thus further captivates viewers who are encouraged to invest, we might even say cathect, in its reifying of white supremacist evil.

We might say that these shots exemplify what Todd McGowan, following 1970s and 1980s film theory, calls Lee's "cinema of excess" in his book-length study of the director. McGowan refers explicitly to the work of Stephen Heath, Roland Barthes, and Kristin Thompson.[6] Allowing for differences in their approaches, he nevertheless sums up their ways of conceiving filmic semiosis. "For each of them, filmic excess opposes itself to narrative and to signification; it is what doesn't have a clear function in the filmic narrative or a clear meaning for the film's signification."[7] While the Klansmen's action is part of the diegesis, Lee's rendering of it as a highly aesthetic spectacle is, indeed, in excess of its narrative function. As Baldwin wrote about the protest novel, the "dazzling pyrotechnics of these current operas" keep them from engaging with humanity in the terms he valued.[8] Though he writes about literature, such terminology is relevant to moments like these and others in Lee's cinema. At issue with them is, indeed, their momentary quality. Highly wrought and strikingly pictorial, they in fact extend their temporal moment and impede the film's narrative flow. Tom Gunning's early but widely influential model of the cinema of attractions described this spectatorial quality of early film, and other scholars have shown how it persists in particular genres or aesthetic gestures. Supercharged with the director's energy and Lee's visual flourish, such moments and the general mood of outrage they subtend are galvanizing. They are not, however, to again borrow from Baldwin, what he considers fully engaged in "devotion to the human being," either that of the work's characters or the reader/viewer's response to them.[9] As Baldwin says in "Everybody's Protest Novel," the "fulfillment"

of a character, as of our response to them, depends on their "freedom" in becoming or change. Divested of narrative temporality as many moments in Lee's films are, they lock their images—and their subjects—into a languorous stasis, inhibiting the unfolding or developing self Baldwin sees as key to narrative art.

In this sense it is important to note that for *Malcolm X*, Lee worked from Baldwin's own original screenplay for Columbia Pictures about the civil rights icon. He credited Baldwin at certain points (though not at others), but when Baldwin's family saw the finished film years after the author's death, they asked Lee to remove any reference to him.[10] And this fact furnishes ground for other ways to distinguish Lee's filmmaking from Baldwin's ideas about Black culture and the protest tradition. Among other points I suggest below is the irony surrounding the fact that, despite Lee working from a Baldwin property, he departs significantly from the ways Baldwin sought to portray the civil rights leader. While there is little surprise in the fact of any screenwriter altering a script to her or his own creative vision, it is worth noting the ways that vision is at variance with the particular aspects of Malcolm that Baldwin worked hard to emphasize in his working script and, as he describes in his nonfiction, that he sought in general in his art.[11]

Baldwin wrote of his frustration with his Hollywood experience and his protracted and acrimonious conflict with the studio; it was a time he regretted bitterly. He refers to this singularly frustrating experience in *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) as "a gamble which I knew I might lose, and which I lost—a very bad day at the races: but I learned something."[12] The gamble Baldwin made was that he could depict Malcolm in the ways he wished and in a screenplay that was complicated, nuanced, and true to his vision of the civil rights icon. What he learned was that the studios then, as perhaps even now, were not interested in such an approach to narrating a Black subject.

Several critics have described Baldwin's work in Hollwood as well. Erica Edwards succinctly describes the nature of Baldwin's and Columbia's tensions, saying, "The source of conflict during what Baldwin calls his 'Hollywood sentence' was the incompatibility between Baldwin's fidelity to a multifarious, multilayered vision of Malcolm's life and [the studio's] desire for the sensationalistic story of charismatic leadership and interracial betrayal," and she refers to Baldwin's Hollywood clash as the

> conflict … between the demands of realism and Baldwin's kaleidoscopic depiction of Malcolm's life. Baldwin mobilizes the flashback and the placement of mirrors throughout the script to produce a narrative that attempts to render Malcolm out of linear representation, disrupting the reader's—or viewer's—expectations for political leadership or cinematic closure.[13]

D. Quentin Miller makes similar observations about the differences between Baldwin's script and Lee's version of Malcolm's story. He shares Edwards's view, but he goes further, making some of the points I offer above about the tendentiousness

of Lee's film and the ways they are at variance with Baldwin's whole approach to the screenplay.

In ways that Miller elaborates, Lee's film, produced and released twenty years after Baldwin published his Malcolm screenplay as *One Day When I Was Lost*, in fact realized the studio ambition. Miller relies heavily on Baldwin's description of his Malcolm script as a "confession," citing David Leeming's 1994 biography for this declaration.[14] Contrasting Lee's and Baldwin's sensibilities, Miller states, "Baldwin's use of the word 'confession' signals something crucial in his vision that cannot be accommodated by Lee's, or by any film. Confessions are public declarations of personal insights. Lee speaks of the Malcolm he *sees*, but Baldwin's Malcolm is *felt* as well as seen."[15] These claims echo my emphases above on Lee's cinema's supreme visuality, notable perhaps most troublingly in his elaborately constructed images of the Klan as part of his extended "vision" of Malcolm's life, indeed of the civil rights and Southern history Lee recounts across several films. Miller describes Baldwin's script in the ways Edwards does, contrasting "Baldwin's temporal experimentation" with the script against "Lee's relatively straightforward three-stage structure" and claiming, piquantly, that "Baldwin's inability to function within the Hollywood context and Lee's resistance to making a film true to Baldwin's vision are two sides of the same coin."[16] As Miller implies, that coin has Lee on one side, more closely aligned with the commercial imperative for a highly dramatic, forward-thrusting film with high production values and, on the other, an approach like Baldwin's, which we would more readily associate with the experimental or art cinema or even the essay film. Elsewhere Miller refers to Lee's film's "polemical excess" versus the way Baldwin's approach to Malcolm "is insistent, critical, and powerful, [but] without resorting to shouting" in the ways Lee's films so often do—recall Baldwin's account of the protest novel's "dazzling pyrotechnics."[17]

Recent approaches to racial narrative and Black-produced texts help illuminate this difference with an eye on Baldwin's relevance for our contemporary context. What my discussion will emphasize next is a tone that we find in Baldwin's thinking about Hollywood and the protest novel that also animates recent African American cinema, one that offers a decidedly different—but no less powerful—claim on Black agency than did the New Black Cinema. If the tone of such films is at odds with Lee's or others' more overt politics, there is still much to gain by attending to the ways these films register the concerns Baldwin raised in his "Protest Novel" essay as well as his fiction. Above all what they proffer is a version of African American subjecthood and experience that is no less insistent than Lee's, but they do so in a manner that acknowledges loss and longing as well as love in a timbre that differs from New Black Cinema in its vanguard.

As we've noted, Lee's movies and the imagery in them are disturbing. But this is true in ways that insist on their political meaning, or their political as well as aesthetic "positioning" with a stridency that prevents what Anne Anlin Cheng, in her book *The Melancholy of Race*, calls an "ethics" of response. Cheng is at pains to delineate politics and ethics. She opens her book by asking readers to ponder the question, "How does an individual go from being a subject of grief to being a

subject of grievance?"[18] Availing herself of examples from two very different artists, Cheng meditates on Whitman's 1851 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' and Anna Deavere Smith's 1993 *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, and claims that they each pursue rhetorical modes that are exploratory and questioning about the premise of American conflict and union.[19] They both

> reveal from two historical vantages the fundamental history of loss and retention that finds and continues to sustain America. Smith's concluding urban vision … delineates a momentary negotiation, rather than erasure, of the past and future ravages of racial antipathy. In a world defined by sides, where everyone speaks in the vocabulary of 'them' vs. 'us,' not to take a side means to exist in an insistent, resistant middle ground that is also nowhere.[20]

Cheng's sense of a "resistant middle ground" is not an anodyne, timid non-position vis-à-vis the racial landscape. In her account of it as a "negotiation," she recalls Baldwin's insistence in "Everybody's Protest Novel" on the "void" from which "our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation" as that "which can save us."[21] Lee's image of the Klan or his use of the most incendiary images from the racial archive—Rodney King's beating, the Charlottesville riot—present the "ravages of racial antipathy," as Cheng puts it in the passage above, in their baldest form. There is no negotiating with such images or with those in which Lee embeds them. Particularly in their aestheticized, spectacular aspect, they construct a rigidly demarcated space of separation between their content and the viewer. There is nothing "unknown" about this imagery and our relation to it or anything in it that would relate, as Baldwin avers, to "our unknown selves." Nor can such a cinema "save us" or allow or what Cheng calls an ethical response to a racially concerned art.

Cheng's question about grief versus grievance is important, and it allows me to turn to the recent adaptation of Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* and to other examples of racial melancholy they offer. Cheng avers that this shift

> from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury, has always provoked profound questions about the meaning of hurt and its impact. Although it may seem that the existence of racial injury in this country is hardly debatable, it is precisely at such moments when racial injury is most publicly pronounced that its substance and tangibility come into question.[22]

What Cheng and Baldwin's earlier challenge to the protest tradition suggests is that the "ravages of racial antipathy"—such as Baldwin saw in the protest novel and I describe in Lee's films—do not proffer a view of ourselves in relation to the larger world, one that includes seeing ourselves as (racial) subjects differently or in a way that we did not already.

Barry Jenkins's *Beale Street* operates differently from films like Lee's. The film is frankly, unapologetically romantic, opening on a lush overhead shot of a

pastoral-seeming New York while Fonny and Tish walk hand in hand and kiss, a memory of hers from earlier in their life that segues by way of her voiceover to a contemporary scene when she tells Fonny of her pregnancy while he's in jail. Fonny's expression of concern at the news conveys the most elemental truths of his predicament, the simplest human fact of the challenges of impending fatherhood. That this fact is compounded by his circumstances—wrongly incarcerated due to his race—is the film's central concern, as it is the novel's. Yet Jenkins's manner of initiating the story does not create space between his characters and the viewer, but rather seeks a ground for them to share, "an insistent, resistant middle ground" in Cheng's formulation.

Among the ways Jenkins does this is by creating a particular kind of cinematic encounter for viewers. One way to describe this would be to say that, unlike Lee, who offers provocations and images before which viewers stand at a distance (and in awe), Jenkins's cinema draws viewers in. This is a banal-seeming observation and one that admittedly does not allow for the vast differences between subject matter or genre—the fact that Lee's epic biopic of Malcolm X or his dramatizing of Ron Stallworth's undercover infiltration of the Klan do not purport to offer intimacy with their protagonists. Yet Jenkins's choice, not only to present romance across a range of pictures including the *Beale Street* adaptation but also in *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008) and, in a different but no less plaintive way, in *Moonlight* (2016), is entirely to the point. Like other contemporary Black film artists—as well as many scholars working in critical race studies—Jenkins tarries with the elegiac or mournful in ways that 1990s Black directors wouldn't let themselves.

My account of *Beale Street* follows from the evocations and implications of Jenkins's use of cinematic time. For example, in an early scene of the couple's lovemaking, Jenkins offers a two-minute long single take of them in Fonny's apartment. The shyness and vulnerability they both feel is supported or "held" by this scrupulous editing, as Jenkins offers an intimacy and humanity that is the opposite of Lee's spectacular optical constructions. In a cinematic language that expresses one of Baldwin's precepts in his essay, Jenkins's film in these ways shows how "our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it."[23] Jenkins "does" very little in such depictions of his characters; he accepts them and their life as lovers. In so doing he does what Baldwin does for his characters in his novel.

The extended take of the lovers' gentle touching is redolent of much. In the shot's duration and its closeness to the characters, it enacts what film theory calls "haptic" cinema, a practice that solicits viewers' full sensory engagement with the medium.[24] There is no nudity or anything exploitative or prurient; we don't exactly, or merely, "watch" the scene voyeuristically. In ways that are respectful as well as intimate, Jenkins allows viewers to share a spatiotemporal experience with his characters, to encounter their vulnerability and perhaps relive our own.

This quality of Jenkins's film is evident in other moments. The sequences of Fonny in his studio naturally seek to convey his engagement with his medium as a sculptor. In another extended take while he works on one of his pieces, we see

Fonny work on the woodblock from a camera angle that encompasses the entire space of the studio while he chisels. True to the period of the story's events, Fonny, like other characters throughout the film, smokes, and the wispy clouds he exhales, along with the sawdust he blows, suffuse the shot with another sensory element; we can practically touch or smell the atmosphere—or be touched by it.[25]

Baldwin himself refers to such a mode indirectly in his commentary on film in *The Devil Finds Work*, focusing on the matter of touch and its impact within film viewing that I emphasize here. He does so while speaking about an earlier picture, Lawrence Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958), which starred Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis as escaped convicts who must overcome their mutual racial enmity as they escape from prison. The film has long vexed scholars owing to its shallow liberalism and its strained ending, when Poitier's Noah gives up a chance to escape the sheriff's posse in order to help his ailing, newly embraced white "buddy." The film's muted account of what gender scholars would call its evident homosocial subtext prompted Baldwin to remark of the film, "I doubt that Americans will ever be able to face the fact that the word, homosexual, is not a noun. The root of this word, as Americans use it—or, as the word uses Americans—simply involves a term of any human touch, since any human touch can change you."[26]

Baldwin's focus is on the close of *The Defiant Ones*, which depicts the white and Black men in a literal embrace that is as sentimental as it was soothing to a burgeoning civil rights era audience. More recently Michael Boyce Gillespie comments on Baldwin's remarks about the film and refers to his claim for "the connotative capacity of touch" and the "mutuality and change that Baldwin" sees in it.[27] In the ways I've described *Beale Street*, in the long take of Tish and Fonny's lovemaking or of Fonny in his studio, in our encounter with the film as a form of touch—these aspects of it allow for a "mutuality" between its spectator and for change that, I use Baldwin to suggest, the visual adamancy of a director like Lee cannot.

Lee's visual acuity is among his art's accomplishments. And far be it from any scholar to impugn a cinema of powerful, evocative imagery. All films are supremely, if not above all, visual in their appeal, of course. And Jenkins's picture is no exception. His particular visual *mode*, however, including key elements of *mise-en-scène*, differs meaningfully from those examples in Lee I've cited. In my reference above to the quality of mutuality between viewer and film that defines *Beale Street*, I mean to refer to the combination of the personal, the "human," and the political—what Cheng might term "ethical"—that defines Baldwin's thinking about writing and race. This is Cheng's "middle ground" as well as that "something resolutely indefinable" that Baldwin posited against the surety of the protest novel and that, in Lee's example, I see in a cinema that proffers great beauty, but which often does so in the service of a strict separating of the viewer from the horror as well as grandeur of what is viewed. This is not a function of Baldwin's queerness, per se, or of Jenkins's sexuality as a cis director. Critics have, in fact, referred to Baldwin's "intersectional imagination" and to Jenkins's sensibility in rendering it onscreen. It is what Tre'vell Anderson, writing in *Out*, attributes to the filmmaker. He quotes Tarall Alvin McCraney, the author of the play *In Moonlight Black Boys*

Look Blue (the source for Jenkins's *Moonlight*), describing as an aspect of Jenkins's approach:

> It's profound how much [directors] don't pay attention to what's on the page … but Barry pays attention to what's there, to what the feelings are of how the words come together to make a thing happen. He does deep dives into the nuance of language and that, in truth, is where the queer imagination lies. Because everything is how one sees the black and the white, but also the purple and the green.[28]

As Anderson goes on to say about Jenkins's ability to convey a queer subject, identity, or aesthetic, "It's this attention to detail that allows Jenkins to capture the essence of an experience unlike his own and transpose it in a way still authentic to its source."[29]

One way of defining Jenkins's "cinema of nuance" is by attention to color. Chromatic density varies across film stocks, including the many variations that a constantly evolving digital landscape includes. Jenkins's "palette" for *Moonlight*, for example, which he developed with his cinematographer James Laxton—who also shot *Beale Street*—and his colorist Alex Bickel, was decidedly diaphanous and shimmering, as critics have noted. Some of this undoubtedly owed to the film's approach to its subject, its novel account of Black masculinity on screen expressed in its title and in one character's memorable line (the source of the title of McCraney's play), "In moonlight black boys look blue." Jenkins's and Laxton's approach to *Beale Street* was different. There they used the digital intermediate (DI) process of restoring to their footage some of the properties of the Technicolor celluloid stock used in the 1950s melodramas that the movie emulates. The film's creators' enormous sensitivity to such modulations is evident in every shot, particularly in the dense chromatic richness of costuming, location, and the film's overall pictorialism. The matching yellow of Tish's dress with the autumn leaves in the opening and its reappearance standing out in subsequent dark, evening sequences; the teal green of Fonny's sweater; the predominance of a pattern like paisley; the deep red of the vinyl seats at the Greenwich Village restaurants where the couple and, later, Tish and her sister eat—these surfaces, textures, and materials of dress or décor are rendered in extraordinary depth and tacticity by the film's material workings. Telling Tish and Fonny's story, Jenkins does so in a manner similar to other directors such as David Lynch, whose own films' *mise-en-scène* has been described as effecting neuro-emotive responses in viewers that are like the sensations one feels upon falling in love.[30]

Scholars have commented on the uniqueness of Black screen romance. And their remarks are helpful to thinking through the particular aesthetic properties of Jenkins's film in relation to Baldwin's young lovers. Yogita Goyal writes in *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* about the dislocations of transnationalism but also the ways in which "the sign of Africa," whether referenced directly or proffered as a utopian "phantasm" of a racial future, features in Black art.[31] Her focus on the romance genre allows her to claim for it a quality that, I suggest,

Jenkins expresses in his film. She refers to romance as "a form that … helps black Atlantic writers collapse distances of time and space to imagine a simultaneity of experience."[32] Elsewhere, Goyal cites Baldwin directly as evidence of the writer's felt need to overcome isolation and the search for a sense of home. She refers to his essay "Encounter on the Seine" and "this depthless alienation from oneself and one's people [that] is, in sum, the American experience."[33]

The "whole" of what Goyal terms diasporic romance appears in the love scene with Tish and Fonny and in Fonny's studio in the means by which Jenkins renders them: the long take, the 360-degree spatial rotation.[34] In ways Goyal outlines about time, the novel and the film's displaced temporality allow Baldwin's narrative its "progressive history read backwards from a future point of redemption."[35] That futurity is intimated in the film's ending. Set in a prison visiting room, with Fonny having accepted a plea bargain and still incarcerated, the final scene might seem to undermine hope. Yet its tone is otherwise. Alonzo Jr. is drawing happily, his parents' love is still strong, and the Black family, which the film has exalted throughout its story by way of the Rivers' deep commitment to one another and to Fonny, will clearly flourish. Appearing at the end of a disjointed, often desperate narrative, this ultimately hopeful ending comports with Goyal's account of Black and diaspora romance. *Beale Street* may not recall the Middle Passage in the particular ways Goyal implies about African American literary romance. But the film's temporal breaks and discontinuities are, if anything, more dislocating of typical narrative "progress" than even those of the novel. And Goyal's reference to the Jubilee is implied in Jenkins's singularly bright outlook for his young couple.[36]

The nuclear family is not often the focus of African American film. Nor was it, we know, the specific subject of the protest tradition Baldwin questioned in his essay. But it is among the points of Baldwin's novel that Jenkins emphasizes. Tish ends her narration in the book lamenting the endless crying of her new baby. Here the writer seeks and finds a common humanist ground. The film's plot and its ending, especially, replay the novel's focus on generational ties, the "Jubilee" of its main characters' future life together after Fonny's release from prison—Jenkins's nod to contemporary enslavement in the prison-industrial complex. The prison sequence that ends the film plays out quietly, with the family saying grace together over the snacks Tish brought and Fonny teasing his son affectionately about the job he has so as to pay for them. If it is notable that Jenkins shows such regard for the characters Baldwin conceived, that is because it is only now that he finds himself able to do so. The success of *Moonlight* clearly played a role here, allowing the director to turn to material and to ways of presenting it to viewers that he might not have been as free to do prior to his film receiving the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2017. But to be able to adapt Baldwin's novel for the screen in the ways he does says much about changes in Black film in the most recent years.

One of those ways includes another notable break from not only other Black cinema, but from Baldwin's novel itself. Reviews of the picture were often strong. Some, however, took issue with Jenkins's notable departures from his source.

These critics felt that the director softened the novel's realism in several ways, including omitting Fonny's father's suicide and his friend Daniel's story of having been raped in prison. These are fair objections. Yet some of the same reviewers who pointed them out allowed that, notwithstanding these omissions, Jenkins's film offered something important in their stead.[37] I suggest that that something can be found in Jenkins's film and in a release that followed it, one that shares the political value of what Kevin Quashie calls Black "quiet," and whose thinking helps me draw the lines of my discussion together.

I turn in closing to another recent film, one released after Jenkins's *Beale Street* that bears no direct link to Baldwin. Yet its manner and its tone are close to aspects of Jenkins's film and to the questions I've sought to raise about the place in contemporary Black cinema for the nature of Baldwin's temperament as evident in some of the works I've mentioned. In particular it extends the note of melancholy and reflectiveness I've meant to stress in Baldwin's art and his legacy for recent African American cinema.

The film I refer to is Joe Talbot's *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*. Released in 2019, it received far less fanfare than Jenkins's *Beale Street*, his Oscar-winning *Moonlight*, and certainly than Lee's 1992 *Malcolm X* or most of Lee's films since. Talbot, who is white, wrote the screenplay based on a story by his Black childhood friend Jimmy Fails, with whom he grew up in San Francisco and who plays the lead character of the same name. Clearly the finished film is a collaboration between the two and is based on their shared experiences. And while there are no interracial relationships in the all-Black story, the fact of Talbot and Fails's shared investment in the film's story and its production allows a version of what some scholars have recently called for in defining African American film. Michael Gillespie, for example, calls for an entire redefinition of what he calls "film blackness" rather than Black film. In particular, he urges a turn toward the aesthetic and formal properties of film art that he describes as following, not from direct accounts of the Black "lifeworld," but from the variations in approaches to narrative, medium, image-making, and the film industry (with an eye on independent production) that have determined notions of "cinema" since its advent.[38] Gillespie's approach is enormously capacious while also extremely rigorous, and he offers the most compelling account for an approach to scholarship about African American cinema and art that we have. To do justice to his subtle yet vigorous recasting of a term such as "Black film" is beyond the scope of this discussion. Yet some of his key assertions are salient to Talbot and Fails's film as a legacy of Baldwin's call for an alternative to protest writing.

One way Gillespie orients his discussion is by way of earlier attempts at just such a reframing as his. Referring to Mark Reid's *Redefining Black Film* (1993), Gillespie sees great value in Reid's own call for a "guiding attention to polyphony" as well as to films made outside the commercial mainstream.[39] Yet he distinguishes his own approach from what he terms Reid's "prescriptive prerogative," asking, "Does any good really come from refusing to let art exceed your expectations?"[40] Gillespie's apostrophe, as I take it, addresses an interlocutor like Reid and other

Black scholars who define Black cinema by way of strict attention to its creators' race as determinative of a work's value. As he puts it,

> Black film offers a vast array of possibilities for conceiving race in creative terms, and film blackness follows through on that promise without devaluing a lifeworld or over- valuing an art. Film blackness restages the conceptual casting of blackness as equal parts thought, élan, aesthetic, and inheritance. This is not a simple matter, nor should it be.[41]

If we allow that Lee's artistry is formidable in his treatment of certain tropes—like the Klan—we can also say that such examples demonstrate "overvaluing an art" in his lavish, extravagant productions.

In something of a felicitous turn, Talbot and Fails, neither of whom had any filmmaking experience before the movie, got their start on making the picture after soliciting advice from Jenkins, who they knew had shot *Medicine for Melancholy* in San Francisco.[42] What specific input he offered is not known. What is clear is that the younger artists found something in Jenkins's approach to his filmmaking that imbues their own picture.

Gillespie does not discuss this affinity or Talbot and Fails's exchange with Jenkins. He does, however, refer to the city as Black *topos* in ways that describe elements of *The Last Black Man* that I mean to extol as an avatar of Baldwin's artistic and political ethos. He speaks, first, about San Francisco as a place in which the characters in *Medicine for Melancholy* experience "the rhythmic traces of histories and cultures" and "that produce the city as an affective phenomenon."[43] *The Last Black Man* is expressly about the city's histories: Jimmy spends the film trying to restore the home he believes his father built and where he grew up, but from which gentrification has displaced him. Gillespie's use of de Certeau's account of urbanism as a narrative space speaks directly to Talbot and Fails's story of Jimmy's displacement. De Certeau's musings on perambulation, loss, and urbanism offer terms that are suggestive of the dislocations Talbot and Fails trace in their film.

> [T]he geometrical space of urbanists and architects seems to have the "proper mean- ing" constructed by grammarians and linguistics in order to have a normal and normative level to which they can compare the drifting of "figurative" language. In reality, this faceless "proper" meaning … cannot be found in current use, whether verbal or pedestrian.[44]

Elsewhere de Certeau puts it concisely in ways that apply clearly to Fails's character: "To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper."[45]

Talbot and Fails open the film with its two main characters waiting for the bus after witnessing a young Black girl confront a white sanitation worker in a HazMat

suit, then a local speechifier holding forth about racial inequity. They then effort-lessly glide to a neighborhood miles away, traversing well-known parts of San Francisco and encountering the range of ethnic, class, racial, and mental health conditions of the city's denizens. (Seeing the two men riding a skateboard together, one addled former hippie chases them while undressing and says, "Take me with you!") The San Francisco we see at the outset foregrounds what the dispossessed Jimmy has already experienced as what de Certeau calls "an immense social experience of lacking a place," a fact that his hostile encounters with the white occupants of his former home later in the film make clear.[46] The film's sorrowful, tuba-accompanied rearrangement of Scott McKenzie's 1960s anthem "Are You Going to San Francisco?" further layers the city's history into Talbot and Fails's depiction of its wandering protagonist.[47]

Perhaps more important is the role in the story of Kevin Quashie's notion of "quiet." In his *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, Quashie begins by urging readers to see the inexpressed interiority of iconic moments of Black resistance that are often overlooked. Referring to the endless repetition of the photo of Tommie Smith's and John Carlos's raised fists at the 1968 Olympics, Quashie asks us to note the fact that both men are also at the same time praying. "In truth the beauty of the protest is enhanced by noting the intimacy, in reading Smith and Carlos not only as soldiers in a larger war against oppression but also as two people in a moment of deep spirituality, in prayer, as vulnerable as they are aggressive."[48] Echoing the tone and very nearly the language of Baldwin's "Protest Novel" essay, Quashie writes of the athletes, "what is compelling is their humanity on display, the unexpected glimpse we get of the inner dimensions of their public bravery."[49] Most relevant to my earlier discussion of Spike Lee, and in ways that point a way forward to my final observations about Baldwin's legacy in contemporary film, Quashie asserts:

> As an identity, blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph over poverty and hopefulness. The determination to see blackness only through a social public lens, as if there were no inner life, is racist … But it has also been adopted by black culture … it creeps into the consciousness of the black subject, especially the artist, as the imperative to represent. Such expectation is part of the inclination to understand black culture through the lens of resistance.[50]

If such views seem apt for thinking about Lee in the ways I have suggested, they also clear a path for the heretofore anomalous character of Jimmy Fails in his and Talbot's film. Such quiet "vagary" as Quashie calls for defines Jimmy throughout. He rarely raises his voice; often scenes reveal him looking at his surroundings rather than acting on them or with others. His very name carries the sense of melancholy or disappointment that seems etched in, not only his face, but his movements and an unspoken, but nonetheless movingly conveyed interiority.

Yet Jimmy's quiet should not be mistaken for quietude, as least not in a political sense. His performance and the film's understated mood are the opposite of Spike Lee's or other protest directors' version of "public Blackness," fully formed positions and subjectivities that they pit against forces of oppression or specific white or same-race antagonists (as in the "hood" pictures). Very little happens in his and Talbot's film. It includes scenes of Jimmy and his friend Monte, an artist and aspiring playwright, watching movies with Jimmy's blind father, and its "climax" is Monte's late mounting of his long-gestating play, staged in Jimmy's old Victorian house. It is here, finally, in Jimmy's striving, his state of "becoming" rather than an active, decisive, oppositional *being* that he offers what Baldwin sought long ago in questioning the long protest tradition that extended from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through *Native Son* and, I suggest, Spike Lee's early films, including his "breakout" picture *Do the Right Thing*. Jimmy Fails, Monte, and the forlorn scene they inhabit in San Francisco conjure what in the protest essay Baldwin calls the "void, our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation."[51] That new act includes the making and collective viewing of Talbot and Fails's and Jenkins's films, as well as those of many others who furnish glimpses of Black melancholy or becoming: Jordan Peele with *Get Out* (2017), Lee Daniels with *Precious* (2009), Jenkins's earlier films, including *Medicine for Melancholy* as well as *Moonlight*, and Regina King's *One Night in Miami* (2020). This is a cinematic tradition at odds with earlier films such as those that defined New Black Cinema but one which, I suggest, emerges from Baldwin's example and his work.

Talbot and Fails made a deeply personal movie. Despite Talbot's role, it can hardly be accused of "devaluing [the] lifeworld" of its Black characters, including Fails, playing a version of himself as a displaced, wistful young man confronting gentrification in one of the world's most expensive cities. In addition to his friend Monte, there are other characters present on the film's—but not the city's—margins, notably a group of young men who have appeared as seminal types in cycles like the 1990s films of the New Black Cinema. In one of the movie's many willful subversions of Black film and its capacity to "let art exceed your expectations," these tertiary figures appear initially as they have in other representations: menacing, sullen, confrontational. Jimmy interacts with them at points throughout the movie. They are familiar with one another, and he and Monte communicate in both the group's street vernacular and in their own uninflected, standard locution. At one moment, we see Monte in an exchange with the nameless men he and Jimmy encounter periodically on the street. "You're doing marvelous work," he tells them, commenting on the performative nature of their "street theater" personae. "Remember Stanislavski, Gratowski," he urges. "I believe you. But we can go deeper."

In an astonishing sequence late in the film, the two friends come upon the group as described above. And in it, they and the film "go deeper" indeed. They gang-like members are silently milling; something bad has clearly happened. When Jimmy queries them with a powerful demand that they explain what's going on, we glean the cause of their sullenness: one of their members has been shot and

Figure 3 Screenshot from *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* (dir. Joe Talbot, USA 2019)

killed. What ensues is what appears initially as a standard male challenge, one the filmmakers structure deliberately to elicit foreboding and suggest incipient violence. When Jimmy calls out angrily that it was "your fault" that their mutual friend died, one of the group's members approaches him while Monte looks on uneasily. While each character directs vitriol and the n-word at the other, with the gang intoning off-screen "You going to let him say that?," Jimmy confronts his antagonist in close up. The next moment in the sequence stuns. Recalling Anne Cheng's question, "How does an individual go from being a subject of grief to being a subject of grievance?", the film here reverses the question, as Jimmy's challenger suddenly collapses on his shoulder, weeping. The subject of grievance (or anger or of demanding redress) becomes a subject of grief, a mournful, weeping intimate.

Embracing the sobbing man, with the others in the group emoting and Monte bowing his head, Jimmy's position and the sequence are ultimately more faithful to the Black "lifeworld" than we had been led to expect by the editing, the content, and the backdrop of what I began this essay calling a kind of protest movie in the New Black Cinema and the films of Spike Lee. These characters change before our eyes in that they defy convention and what we—or they themselves—expect of certain screen personae or types. This is also the *temporal* becoming and what in the essay Baldwin calls a human "fulfillment" that a cinema of spectacle or protest would deny.

This moment is not the ending of the film. I close with it, however, because it offers a way to see *The Last Black Man* revise aspects of race relations and racial solidarity that in Baldwin's work remained vexed—such as his meeting the French Algerian man in "Encounter on the Seine" or his troubled time in

Hollywood working on the Malcolm X script. An important element of this sequence, and part of the Baldwinian echoes of Talbot and Fails's film, is what it allows for mutuality, for recognition, for what Baldwin in the "Protest Novel" essay called characters' as well as our "freedom." The "gangsters" in the film are not bound by their partial resemblance to similar characters in earlier movies or their counterparts in US cities. And unlike what Tom Gunning might call Spike Lee's use of a cinema of "attractions" in his films' reliance on spectacle, Talbot and Fails offer a film that, in moments like this, literally relies on the sense of touch, on a conjoining of its characters and, with them, the spectator who partakes of their physical and spatial intimacy. Like the interracial male bonding at the end of *The Defiant Ones*, this moment shows a reconciliation. Unlike in *The Defiant Ones*, the intraracial moment of unity here is plausible—if we follow Baldwin's call for an art that renders its subjects in their most basic human state. Jimmy's anger at the start of the scene that led to the seeming confrontation is evident, and it is the only moment in the movie when he expresses a "grievance." But it is not one based only on a racial subjectivity. As he declares, asking for an answer to what happened, "He was my friend too!" That claim demands a response. And the reaction he gets involves a moment of Black sympathy and affection rather than outrage.

That response involves our own encounter with a moment of affect and mutual support. Finding ourselves again in intense proximity to the characters, as we were in Tish and Fonny's love scene in *Beale Street*, lingering with them as they absorb and respond to the other's presence, we become imbricated into the characters' spatial awareness in San Francisco, the scene of so much displacement in the film's diegesis and in Talbot and Fails's experience—like that of so many of the city's denizens. The scene in *The Last Black Man* essays a unity between its characters, who arrive in the diegetic space from very different backgrounds. Yet through the film's workings, they manage a profound connection, despite other than racial differences (here class and, potentially, education). They strike, that is, a positive diasporic note that was missing in *Beale Street*. When Sharon travels to Puerto Rico to confront Victoria Rogers about her false accusation against Fonny, she fails; cross-racial unity in Baldwin's vision for his novel world was not fully possible.[52] While the scene in *The Last Black Man* is not interracial, its evidence of overcoming class and educational distinctions allows it a meaningful hope. The diaspora romance Baldwin imagined for the novel version of *Beale Street* extended into Jenkins's adaptation, as we noted. It also recurs here, though, in the later film's vision of Black connectedness. At the close of "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin writes, "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."[53] Baldwin's fiction showed such a transcendence for his Black women and men. So too do examples like Jenkins's and other recent films, including *The Last Black Man* and its tarrying with both grief and grievance. In the work of film artists who followed Baldwin, both those who were directly influenced by his work as well as others who shared his

convictions, we see what is real about the Black lifeworld and what aspects of it—and of its earlier representation in film—can be transcended, both within the worlds of the films and, with Baldwin's urging in mind, possibly without.

Notes

1 James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Clinton, MA, The Colonial Press, 1955), p. 19.

2 Lee made this claim in a 2019 interview in the *New York Daily News*, among other places. See Leonard Greene, "'We Had the Crystal Ball': 30 Years Later, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* Stands the Test of Time," *New York Daily News*, 23 June 2019, www.nydailynews.com/new-york/ny-spike-movie-anniversary-20190623-sa5ocpsmgfht-de4nnnuzx7wzqm-story.html (accessed 4 April 2021). Following the death of George Floyd in 2020 he also released a 94-second video titled "Will History Stop Repeating Itself" that splices footage of Garner's and Floyd's deaths into the sequence of Radio Raheem being killed from his film.

3 Paula Massood describes this aspect of Lee's films, saying, "This formal experimentation, influenced by global cinema movements, remains one of the characteristics of the director's filmmaking and explicitly marks some of his films, such as *Summer of Sam*, which is just as much about Scorsese's New York from the 1970s as it is about the Son of Sam murders from 1977." Massood, "Introduction," in Paula Massood (ed.), *The Spike Lee Reader* (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press, 2007), p. xvii.

4 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 15.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Others have written insightfully about film spectacle and theorized its impact on viewers' encounter with narrative content. See Yvonne Trasker, *Action and Adventure Cinema* (Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), including her remarks about the various kinds of spectacle that appear in different genres such as the war film or the musical. Carol Clover's considerations of victimhood in horror films relevant to viewers' positionality and the "politics of displacement" in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015) are apposite here, as are Linda Williams's observations about the Lumiérè brothers' *actualités* evoking a spectacle "bordering on terror" in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1995).

7 Todd McGowan, *Spike Lee* (Champaign, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. 4. Mary Ann Doane, too, in her theorizing of spectatorship, emphasizes moments such as this that draw specific attention to themselves as imagery in ways that arrest/suspend narrative temporality. See Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London, Routledge, 1991), particularly her chapter on G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, "The Erotic Barter."

8 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 19.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

10 Ashley Clark, "The Devil Finds Work: James Baldwin on Film," *Film Comment*, 11 September 2015, www.filmcomment.com/blog/the-devil-finds-work-james-baldwin-on-film/ (accessed 4 April 2021).

11 Reginia King's *One Night in Miami* (2020), from Kemp Powers's play of the same name, offers a portrait of Malcolm X that allows excesses and genuine vulnerability in his

personality and interactions (emphasized movingly in Kingsley Ben-Adir's performance), elements of the film that Baldwin might have admired. I am thankful to this special issue's editor, Robert Jackson, for urging me to highlight the ironies attending Lee's use of Baldwin's script.

12 James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976) (New York, Vintage, 2011), p. 99.

13 Erica Edwards, "Baldwin and Black Leadership," in Michele Elam (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 160.

14 Quentin D. Miller, "Lost and … Found?: James Baldwin's Script and Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*," *African American Review*, 46:4 (2013), p. 672.

15 *Ibid*.

16 *Ibid*.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 673, 672.

18 Ann Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 3.

19 It is worth noting that Deavere Smith's play opened the year after the Rodney King beating. Yet, unlike Lee's *Malcolm X*, it is closer in tone or approach to what I mean to attribute to Baldwin's Malcolm script or to later African American cinema that, I suggest, more closely evinces Baldwin's ethos.

20 Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 194.

21 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," pp. 20–1.

22 Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, p. 3.

23 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 23.

24 See Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in her *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2004), and Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1999).

25 An inveterate smoker himself, Baldwin flourished his cigarette as part of his own artful rhetoric in his appearance on the *Dick Cavett Show* in May of 1969 and in many other public arenas in the same period as the film and his novel's events. In these ways his presence may be said to infuse Jenkins's highly sensuous movie.

26 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 69.

27 Michael Boyce Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press), p. 113.

28 See Tre'vell Anderson, "How a Straight Man is Telling Well-Rounded Queer Stories in Hollywood," *Out*, 14 December 2008, www.out.com/entertainment/2018/12/14/how-straight-man-telling-queer-stories-hollywood (accessed 15 June 2021).

29 *Ibid*.

30 The chromatic intensity of Lynch's *mise-en-scène* in films such as *Mulholland Drive*, as well as his films' emotional intensity, has also been seen as the director's debt to 1950s cinema, a point of contact or affinity, then, between Lynch and Jenkins's work on *Beale Street*. For more on the emotive visual design at work, see Justus Nieland, *David Lynch* (Champaign, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. 96.

31 Yogita Goyal, *Romance, History, and Black American Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 8.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

33 James Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York, Library of America, 1998), p. 89, quoted in Yogita Goyal,

"Introduction: The Transnational Turn," in Yogita Goyal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 3.

34 Goyal, *Romance, History, and Black American Literature*, p. 10.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

36 Brian Norman describes Baldwin's effort in *Beale Street* to restore "an African American family destroyed by the practices of the US judicial system," an aspect of the novel I see Jenkins take up in particular ways. See "James Baldwin's Confrontation with U.S. Imperialism," *MELUS*, 32:1 (2007), p. 132. Michael Gillespie cites Goyal in terms that are relevant to the temporal disjunctions of *Beale Street* and to my point about the film's end (*Film Blackness*, pp. 134–5).

37 Doreen St. Felix asks whether including a scene relaying Fonny's father's suicide would have made it a "vastly different, and perhaps, better film," and says that Jenkins might have "shave[d] away the spikes of the original text." Yet she allows that even Baldwin himself wrote that the adaptations were necessary in *The Devil Finds Work* and sees Jenkins convey the novel's darker details while not inflicting "more of the pain we've already endured." Doreen St. Felix, "Can We Trust the Beauty of Barry Jenkins's *If Beale Street Could Talk*?," *The New Yorker*, 21 December 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/can-we-trust-the-beauty-of-barry-jenkinss-if-beale-street-could-talk (accessed 4 April 2021).

38 See Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, introduction and *passim.*

39 *Ibid.*, p. 10. Reid's book was contemporaneous with the New Black Cinema of Lee, Singleton, and the Hughes brothers, and it shared with some films of the movement a limited approach to gender, evident in Black feminists' ire over Lee's treatment of women in his early films.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

42 See Lindsey Bahr, "The Newcomers Behind *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*," *AP News*, 13 June 2019, https://apnews.com/article/24f15b705fb84e8da325868c96045311 (accessed 4 April 2021).

43 Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, p. 120.

44 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1984), p. 100.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Talbot solicited the singer Michael Marshall to perform the vocals and, in a particularly purposeful addition, commissioned the Norwegian jazz musician Daniel Herkedal to play the tuba in a manner that resembled the foghorns on San Francisco Bay near the Black Hunters Point neighborhood, where Talbot and Fails spent time together growing up and where many of the film's events take place. See Eric Ducker, "How *The Last Black Man in San Francisco* Soundtrack Reshapes the City's Hippie Nostalgia," *Pitchfork*, 17 June 2019, https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/the-last-black-man-in-san-francisco-soundtrack-reshapes-the-citys-hippie-nostalgia-joe-talbot-interview/ (accessed 4 April 2021).

48 Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2012), p. 3.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

51 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 20.

52 Norman notes that Tish does experience something of this aim on her prison visits, where she encounters Puerto Rican mothers of inmates who are quite warm to her and call her "Daughter" (Norman, "James Baldwin's Confrontation with U.S. Imperialism," pp. 123–6).

53 Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," p. 23.

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