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“Humid Time” in the *Moonlight*

In his 2016 film, *Moonlight*, director Barry Jenkins takes his audience through the youth, adolescence, and early-adult years of queer, African American protagonist, Chiron. The Academy Award-winning coming-of-age film takes place in Miami, Florida, placing the narrative in a location that is hot, and humid, while also allowing it access to the ocean. The film’s deliberate setting allows it to operate according to a trend in many other Southern films linked to oppression: “Humid Time” (Brassel 294). Coined by theorist R. Bruce Brassel in his 2011 essay, “Humid Time: Independent Film, Gay Sexualities, and Southernscapes,” “Humid Time” can be described as a chronotope (an “interconnection” of space and time into a “concrete whole”) in Southern literature and film where both the environment and society give off “insufferable heat (294). One way that *Moonlight* captures this environmental heat is through James Laxton’s cinematography which gives the picture a saturated look. Throughout daytime scenes, colors such as blue and green are vibrant as if they are constantly being exposed to a large amount of natural lighting. These saturated colors are apparent, for example, fifteen minutes into the film when Juan, driving his Cadillac, pulls into his driveway to find a young Chiron waiting for him. Here, the green Miami foliage and teal vehicle are lit up by the sun (*Moonlight* 0:17:01). The sky, on the other hand, is often covered in clouds during the day so that it appears in different shades of white and gray. The Miami sky, which gives glimpses of a light blue, gives off a sense of humidity as if ready to cover the landscape in rainfall. This

environment, which feels sticky and constricted, provides locations perfect for showing “stifling society” cause Chiron’s “spirit” to become “physically tired” (Brassel 308). In the second act of the film, for example, Chiron is attacked by Terrel who has forced Kevin into a sort of hazing ritual. In this scene, the concrete that Chiron lies on shines white in the sunlight, suggesting immense heat, and his skin is covered in sweat and blood (*Moonlight* 1:02:07). Here, like other scenes, viewers see that both the environment and society work together to produce physical fatigue, as suggested by the sweat, and spiritual fatigue, as suggested by the blood.

This burden of weather and society, Brassel suggests, has often taken the direction of a strong “Humid Time” in Southern film. This strong “Humid Time,” Brassel states, “assumes a fatalistic stance towards societal oppression” (311). *Moonlight*, however, breaks the trend of Southern queer films that came before it such as *Red Dirt*, by taking the direction of weak “Humid Time.” This weak “Humid Time,” which “maintains that justice will eventually prevail,” is established in part through its use of the ocean (310). Throughout the film, Jenkins uses the ocean and the beach as a place of renewal for Chiron. This can first be seen early in the film when Juan teaches a young Chiron how to swim. Contrasting the hot, humid Miami environment elsewhere, the ocean seems cool and full of motion instead of stagnant and sticky. In this scene, Chiron also receives important advice as Juan tells him, “At some point you gotta decide for yourself who you gon’ be” (*Moonlight* 0:20:33). This use of the ocean as a place of hope and transition is also seen in the second act of the film when Chiron sits on the beach with Kevin. Here, Chiron experiences the only intimate contact in up until his early-adult life and takes a step towards accepting his sexuality. In Kevin, Chiron is able to find companionship and friendship while normally surrounded by people who alienate him (*Moonlight* 0:49:33). Through these scenes, Jenkins separates the viewer from the torrid climate of the rest of the film and

provides a sense of hope that Chiron will find acceptance not only from others, but within himself.

Barry Jenkin's critically acclaimed film *Moonlight* follows the trend of many Southern narratives before it by using both a hot, humid environmental climate and social climate. This chronotope, which theorist R. Bruce Brassell describes as "Humid Time" allows viewers to see how the Southern United States often wears out the socially oppressed in both a spiritual and physical manner. While many southern films in the past have been nihilistic in nature, suggesting a fatalistic conclusion to the narrative, *Moonlight* manages to inject its narrative with optimism alongside its many doleful scenes (Brassell 312). The ability to have both types of scenes stems largely from Barry Jenkins's decision to have the film take place in Miami, Florida. The area, one that is known for its hot, humid climate, is also located by the ocean. The two components of the environment juxtapose each other, as torrid Miami land often serves as the setting for Chiron's oppression while the ocean serves as a place for his growth. As a result, the film takes the direction of weak "Humid Time," suggesting eventual justice. Brassell, in his 2011 essay, questions whether or not more films will begin to take this approach as the Southern United States' LGBT community grows in size (312). If more films follow in the footsteps of Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* the answer to Brassell's question certainly seems to be yes. Other Southern film genres will certainly evolve as the South becomes a more cosmopolitan society. It will be interesting to see how elements of Brassell's "Humid Time" such as the weather and pacing of Southern film may appear in these new and emerging narratives.

Works Cited

Brassel, R. Bruce. "Humid Time: Independent Film, Gay Sexualities, and Southernscapes."

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