

*If Beale Street Could Talk, What Would It Say?*  
Comparing James Baldwin's Novel and Barry Jenkins' Film

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Thesis Bachelor Comparative Literature

02-07-2019

Utrecht University

Wordcount (including footnotes): 7077

Style of reference: MLA

### Abstract

This research is a comparison between James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) and Barry Jenkins' film adaptation with the same name that premiered in 2018. Positioning itself within literary- and adaptation studies, this project offers separate analyses of the novel and the film that engage with these works' medium-specificity, before comparing Baldwin's version to Jenkins' version. Both works tell the same story of Tish Rivers and the attempts of her family to get her wrongfully imprisoned boyfriend released from jail. However, the endings to both works are different, and the genres ascribed to the novel and the film also differ. This research is an investigation into the correlation between the different endings and the different genre classifications, arguing that by omitting certain parts of the ending to Baldwin's *Beale Street*, Jenkins decreases the ending's ambiguity, allowing for an easier categorisation of the film as a romance. However, even though the endings are drastically different, this research argues that both works focus on the same themes of hope and the importance of the black family, only in different, medium-specific ways. This decrease of ambiguity allows for Jenkins' version to end on a more positive note, while still expressing the same concerns and the same message. Tying this to the historical and cultural contexts the works were produced in, the argument is made that it is the temporal distance between the two works that created the urgency to adapt this story to a new medium while at the same time this distance is what allowed Jenkins to romanticize the story unproblematically.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter One	
Theoretical Framework: Adaptations, Endings, and Genre Conventions	5
1.1 Adaptations	5
1.2 Endings	5
1.3 Genre	6
Chapter Two	
James Baldwin's <i>If Beale Street Could Talk</i>	9
Chapter Three	
Barry Jenkins' <i>If Beale Street Could Talk</i>	13
Chapter Four	
<i>Beale Street</i> in Comparison: Romance, Protest, Hope, and the Black Family	17
Conclusion	21
Appendix	23
1. Novel (including a description of the novel's ending in 1.4)	23
2. Film (including a description of the film's ending in 2.2)	28
Works Cited	30

## Introduction

December 14 2018 marked the US premiere of Barry Jenkins' (1979–present) new screenplay *If Beale Street Could Talk*, an adaptation of James Baldwin's (1924–1987) 1974 novel with the same name. While both works tell the story of nineteen year old Tish Rivers, who finds out that she is pregnant while Fonny, her boyfriend, is imprisoned for a rape he did not commit, both works have been ascribed to different genres: Baldwin's novel is primarily seen as a social protest novel, and Jenkins' film is seen as a romance. The film almost entirely follows the novel's plot, and only its ending is drastically different. Whereas the novel ends with the suicide of Frank (Fonny's father), and the coinciding birth of Fonny and Tish' child, the film does not feature Frank's suicide, and ends four years *after* the birth of Fonny and Tish' child with Fonny still in prison. Jenkins commented on this difference in an interview, mentioning that he *did* film Frank's suicide, but decided to omit it from the final cut because that was “necessary for the story he wanted to tell” (Jenkins; *IndieWire*). This suggests that Jenkins' film conveys a different message than Baldwin's novel. This project is an inquiry into this difference, that takes as its premise that a change in content—the deletion of Frank's suicide and ending the story four years in the future—leads to a change in the meaning ascribed to *Beale Street*. In order to investigate this new meaning, the current project's readings are informed by genre studies, arguing that the different endings constitute the different genre classifications. Paying attention to medium-specificity, this research interprets the novel and the film separately in chapter two and three respectively, before comparing them in chapter four.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the academic field has engaged with Baldwin's “neglected last three novels” (Scott xiii), of which *Beale Street* is one. Therefore, this research' analysis of Baldwin's novel is informed by the already existing readings of *Beale Street*. Jenkins' film, however, is relatively new, and has not been engaged with in academic discussions. Since this project is the first to do so, its reading of the film will be steered by critical reviews, and rely on Andrew Dix' analytical toolkit offered in *Beginning Film Studies* (2008). First, however, a base understanding of adaptation analysis, the role of endings in interpretations, and genre conventions must first be established in chapter one.

## Chapter One

### Theoretical Framework

#### Adaptations, Endings, and Genre Conventions

#### 1.1 Adaptations

While adaptation studies' past has been marked by a bias for the written word over visual imagery, in contemporary theory there is a consensus that film has greater resources for expression because of its "multitrack and multiformat" nature (Stam 21). This relates to the fact that literature is text-only, while filmmakers have an array of cinematographic and editorial options available to them (Dix 9). Cinematography refers to the decisions taken during the recording of the film image and the processing afterwards, entailing options such as camera angle, camera distance, focus, and the specific colour schemes used. Aside from this, filmmakers also make decisions in regards to the use of decor, soundtrack, costumes, make-up, and lighting, and they can choose to let these tracks either complement or contradict each other.<sup>1</sup> The accumulation of these decisions leads to adaptations giving *body* to the former textual story, fixing and concreting aspects (e.g., setting, dress, appearance) that can be left unaddressed in a textual medium. In this, adaptations *interpret* the narratives they are based on. This research presumes that there is no fixed "semantic core" (Stam 10) to a text, but that meaning can be *ascribed to* a certain work, and that adaptations can choose to convey this meaning in another medium. This array of available choices leads to the necessity of a *specificity* of critique, that recognizes adaptations as separate works of art, aware of the medium's specifics (Stam 21; Lake 408). Analyses of film adaptations must be aware of the cinematographic and editorial options available to the filmmaker, and an interpretation must in part be able to account for the decisions made in the adaptation in question.

#### 1.2 Endings

In *Before Reading* (1987), Peter Rabinowitz lays out the ground rules that steer a reader's interpretation of a text. These "Rules of Notice" entail, but are not limited to, the "privileged

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., slow music over accelerated imagery, a soundtrack that refers to a historical period to align with/contrast the visual imagery.

positions,” intra- and extratextual disruptions, and genre conventions (58). Privileged positions are parts of texts (e.g., beginnings and *endings*, titles, epigraphs, descriptive titles) that catch the reader’s attention and tend to be remembered more frequently because of their placement (58). Further reading is guided by what is found in such a position, and our understanding of any text is influenced by the expectation that our interpretation of the text renders the details found in these positions more meaningful and logical (59). In *Ending in Progress* (1999), Onno Kusters notes that in order for the ending of a text to make sense, the ending must be prefigured in other, seemingly unimportant instances in the work (5). These instances are usually ignored when one gives an account of a text, but their accumulation leads to an understanding of the ending that is cohesive with the rest of the story, and therefore allows for an interpretation of the story that accounts for its ending. While Rabinowitz’ and Kusters’ theories focus specifically on written endings, the role of endings in the process of interpreting is similar in film. Andrew Dix notes that there is a “traditional expectation” that a narrative’s structure and significance will be made explicit in the ending (116). As in literature, film endings are thus expected to play an important role in the making of meaning. However, in regards to the nature of endings, there is a difference in that novels are more accommodating of open endings because they are purely verbal. Film endings are traditionally more concrete since film necessarily materializes or embodies what it represents (Stam 6), and especially in Hollywood cinema, conclusive and positive endings that are “preoccupied with warming or consoling” the audience are preferred (Dix 116).

### 1.3 Genre

Endings are also inextricably connected to genre conventions. Useful for this study is the concept of genre as indicating content in regards to both literature (e.g., romance, science-fiction, detective novels) and film (e.g., westerns, romances, comedy [Neale 7]), because Baldwin’s novel and Jenkins’ film both play with genre conventions of this sort, and the (un)ease with which these works can be ascribed to a certain genre informs the interpretations of the works offered by this research. In order to ascribe a work of art to a certain genre, it must consist of a set of characteristics specific to that genre (OED “Genre”). The characteristics to the genres

important to this study—romance and the social protest novel or social problem film—are briefly explained in the following passages.

While historically romance does not have a fixed definition (Fuchs 2), the modern understanding of the romantic genre defines romance as “literature which consists of love stories” (OED “Romance”). This is the definition that Joyce Saricks adopts in *The Reader’s Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* (2000) as she lists the key characteristics of romance fiction. According to Saricks, romance plots revolve around love relationships and their *happy ending* (ch. 8). The modern romance invariably consists of obstacles that the protagonists have to overcome in order to be together. These obstacles are usually grounded in the specific (historical, social, and cultural) context the narrative situates itself in, and therefore often determine the romance’s subgenre (Percec 6). Since the plot revolves around overcoming these obstacles, in the ending, the romance is to be fulfilled. While these definitions address the romantic genre as it exists in literature, these characteristics also define the genre of romance in film.

In social protest literature and film, the focus lies less on the ending. Rather, this genre is characterized by a specific narrative focus: The central conflict in the narrative revolves around the interaction of the protagonist with social institutions, such as the church, the government, or businesses (Neale 105). This genre engages with social problems in the real world and voices critique through the depiction of protagonists who are at odds with authoritarian systems—whether these are institutions such as the government or *institutionalized*, systemic, and internalized systems such as racism—and through highlighting the amorality and injustice done to the protagonists by these systems. As Lynn Scott argues, in deriving its critique from a conception of morality, traditional protest literature critiques a part of society without questioning that society’s established morale; in this, protest literature adheres to normative ethics (114).

Endings are thus inextricably intertwined with genre conventions: Genre conventions can prescribe the sort of ending a text or film has, and, similarly, the ending may be what in- or excludes a text or film from a certain genre. These rules and conventions, however, need not be strictly followed by every author or filmmaker. Not adhering to (genre) conventions falls in the category of textual disruptions, and almost exclusively serves a purpose (Rabinowitz 57).

Authors and filmmakers can only play with genre conventions if the reader or watcher is aware of these conventions in the first place (58). Because genre alerts readers to the background of a text and thereby shapes the audience's expectations of what is going to happen in a certain narrative, breaking these conventions calls attention to itself, and thereby these disruptions often guide interpretations of texts.

## Chapter Two

James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*

While in the *Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (2015) Michelle Elam notes that Baldwin's works are unable to be "comfortably housed" (3) in traditional narrative tropes and genre conventions, critics have ascribed *Beale Street* to two specific genres: Either to protest literature (Burks 84), or to romance (Leeming 323). In this chapter both these categorizations are examined in the light of the novel's ending, and following from this, an interpretation of the novel is offered.

Baldwin's *Beale Street* was published in 1974, just after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, that spanned across the 1950s and '60s, and that responded to generations of persistent systematic, institutionalized racism and segregation prevailing even after the abolishment of slavery in the late 19th century (Burson 36). While the Civil Rights Movement led to the abolishment of legislation upholding segregation and the implementation of laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964—that illegalized discrimination—and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—that finally allowed all Americans to vote—systematic, institutionalized, and internalized racism remained a part of America's everyday reality. This is the world in which the characters of *Beale Street* live, and to which they, and in extension the novel, respond and voice their critiques. It is within this context that *Beale Street*—and indeed, the entirety of Baldwin's oeuvre—is to be understood, and insofar as *Beale Street* responds to America's condition in the '70s, the novel adheres to the generic conventions of protest literature in several ways: Its plot revolves around characters (Fonny, Frank, and the Rivers family) that are all at odds with authoritarian institutions, and all these characters' lives are marked by social injustice. In the world of *Beale Street*, the educational system only teaches "kids to be slaves" (Baldwin 36), the legal system is supported by racist policemen, and works to "perpetuate the suffering" (Scott 106) of people of colour, while the church is described as a loveless place (Baldwin 26), and is embodied in the character of Alice Hunt (Scott 98) (Appendix 1.1). Since all social institutions fail the characters in the world of *Beale Street*, they are only able to rely on one another, on the black family that sticks together.

At the same time, the elements that qualify this novel as a protest novel—its depiction of a family that does everything to see their loved one released from jail and the difficulties imposed upon them by the juridical system—are also what align this novel with the romantic genre. Because Tish is the novel’s narrator, the whole narrative revolves around Fonny and Tish’ relationship and the efforts made to get Fonny released (Appendix 1.2). Flashbacks are used to strengthen the feeling of urgency in their reunion and the injustice done in tearing them apart (Appendix 1.3), causing the narrative to work *towards* Fonny’s release. In this, the novel adheres to conventions of the romantic genre, thereby raising the expectation of a happy ending. However, *Beale Street* does not live up to this expectation, since the novel’s ending is ambiguous on several levels. This ambiguity is found most notably in the question of Fonny’s release itself, as well as in his father’s suicide. The novel’s ending describes Fonny as “working on the wood, on the stone” (Baldwin 197) (Appendix 1.4). However, we cannot assume this passage to be part of reality (Scott 88), since these words echo the opening of part II of the novel, “Zion,” that similarly starts with “*Fonny is working on the wood*” (177; italics in original). In the opening of the second part, this exact image of Fonny working on the wood belongs to a dream Fonny has in prison. The repetition of “Zion”’s opening sentence in the ending draws a parallel between these two instances, and thereby hints at the possibility that Fonny “working on the wood, on the stone” (197) in the ending is part of a dream as well. In addition, the language of the final paragraph is “more poetic than mimetic” (Scott 88), for while the sentence is grammatically correct, it is difficult to imagine someone working on wood *and* stone simultaneously. Since the reality of the final passage is questioned, the question of Fonny’s release remains unanswered. A romantic happy ending exists in the reunion of the lovers after having overcome the obstacles put in the way of their romance. The novel’s inherent ambiguity on Fonny’s release, then, problematizes the reading of the ending as a happy ending.

The raised expectation of a happy ending is further and more definitively rejected through the occurrence of Frank’s suicide. Even if the final passage is interpreted as Fonny having been released from jail, Fonny would be released into a world where his father has just killed himself. Through this event, a happy ending is questioned, because the narrative does not give an insight into how Fonny would respond to the news of his father’s death, but we can

assume that it will influence his mental state in a negative way. Throughout the novel, all members of the Rivers family stress the importance of hope, of *believing* that they will be able to get Fonny out if they are to succeed (Appendix 1.5). Frank's suicide, in this sense, then represents the literal death of *his* hope. On a textual level, Frank's death is juxtaposed to the presence of hope in the ending as well. The fact that both the mention of Frank's disappearance and the mention of his death directly follow instances in the text where hope for Fonny's release is raised (Appendix 1.6), point to the function of his death as a nuance to the theme of hope. However, while at first glance Frank's loss of hope and his subsequent death might seem to contradict the novel's premise of the importance of hope, in fact his suicide still upholds this premise in that it signals that hopelessness means death, and therefore *reinforces* rather than contradicts the importance of hope. In this it also shows what is needed to remain hopeful: A supportive ground for hope, that, in the world of *Beale Street*, can only be found in the black family. The Rivers stick together, and are driven by their love for each other and for Fonny, who is now an official part of their family because of the child in Tish' belly. The mutual support that constitutes their strong family bond, is what gives them the courage to keep fighting against systemic racism and to keep believing that they will succeed in getting Fonny released. In contrast, all the women in the Hunt family believe that Fonny's imprisonment is deserved, and therefore none of them believe or hope that their efforts will lead to Fonny's release. In the Hunt family, a mutually supportive ground for hope in Fonny's future is lacking, and as a result of this, Frank eventually loses the hope he had (Appendix 1.7).

This importance of hope in the future, that is located in the family and embodied in Frank's death, is then equally embodied in the birth of Fonny and Tish' child. Both events are presented as coinciding in the novel, not only because Tish goes into labour directly after she is informed about Frank's death, but also because this means that Fonny will learn about these occurrences in one conversation (Appendix 1.8). The birth of their child, then, juxtaposes Frank's death: At the moment Fonny loses his father, he becomes one himself. The child signifies hope in that it embodies the continuation of the family line, and thus of family and the future more broadly. The child is born, and regardless of where Fonny is—released from prison

or not—he now has a new family, and the existence of this new family increases the urgency for everyone involved to remain hopeful in regards to Fonny’s release and subsequent future.

Coincidentally, the objections voiced to *Beale Street*’s classification as a protest novel, are also grounded in this theme of the black family as a supportive ground for hope. Because the black family fuels hope, and hope is what gives one the power to resist oppressive authoritarian systems, in the world of *Beale Street*, the black family is a site of resistance. The message that there *is* an opportunity to resist the workings of racism contests the premise of the traditional protest novel (Scott 114). Rather than being a novel about racial conflict and the immorality of racism itself, social injustice in *Beale Street* is a given, assumed but not demonstrated, and the novel is about how one *responds* to this social injustice. Portraying a variety of possible responses through the conflict between the Rivers and the Hunts, the novel favours a specific form of resistance embodied in the Rivers’ stance on Fonny’s release that goes directly against the moral framework of the protest novel (Scott 114). In the traditional protest novel, those oppressed by racism are victims even of their own actions, as transgressions of sexual, social, and legal codes are portrayed as something the protagonist is *forced* to do as a result of racism.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, *Beale Street* presents its “good” characters—Fonny, the Rivers, and Frank—as defining their own ethics rather than appealing to those of a white middle-class: Violence, premarital intercourse and pregnancy, and theft are deemed unproblematic. Violating these conventions is a *choice* these characters make: They consciously decide not to adhere to society’s norms, for they are the norms of a society that actively oppresses them.

In short, in the instances where *Beale Street* defies categorization as a romance—most notably in Frank’s suicide—the novel’s themes of hope and the importance of the supportive black family are reinscribed. Coincidentally, these themes are also what problematize the novel’s categorization as a protest novel, as it depicts hope as a form of resistance, and places this resistance within the black family. In the case of Baldwin’s *Beale Street*, where the narrative breaks with the genres it has been ascribed to, the novel’s message is thus foregrounded: There lies resistance in hope, and hope in the black family.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) that presents the protagonist’s crimes (of murdering and decapitating a girl) as inevitable results of systemic racism.

## Chapter Three

Barry Jenkins' *If Beale Street Could Talk*

Headlines such as “*If Beale Street Could Talk* Review - A Heart-Stopping Love Story” (Kermode), “*If Beale Street Could Talk* Review: Trusting Love in a World Ruled by Hate” (Dargis), and “*If Beale Street Could Talk* is Romance on Top, Despair Beneath the Surface” (Edelstein) describe Barry Jenkins' *Beale Street* first and foremost in terms of romance. Indeed, all articles ascribe Jenkins' film to the genre of romance, and this classification is examined in this chapter.

Jenkins' *Beale Street* opens with Fonny and Tish walking hand in hand through a New York city park, wearing matching outfits with pastel colours, as violin music plays in the background (00:01:23). The haziness and warmth of the sepia filter makes the imagery appear vintage, sentimental, and romantic, thereby improving the overall look and feel of the shots.<sup>3</sup> The romantic conventions invoked by the violin music are complemented by their matching outfits, that literally present them as the perfect match. As Fonny and Tish stare into each other's eyes, focus is placed only on them through the bright and blurred out background (00:03:05). The accumulation of these cinematographic and editorial decisions taken in the first minutes of screen time serve to convey that Fonny and Tish *belong* together. Directly after having established their bond, however, the obstacle to their romance is introduced: As we see them still looking into each other's eyes, Tish speaks as voice-over: “I hope that nobody has ever had to look at anybody they love... through glass” (00:03:13). A jump-cut and the sound of a buzzer show Tish sitting opposite of Fonny, in a dimly lit room, separated by glass. Fonny wears a blue jumpsuit: He is in prison. This abrupt change from the matching outfits, beautiful music, and the warm lighting to the dark and cold prison, their pained eyes, and the forced distance between them invokes a sense of injustice. Tish' carefully delivered news that they are “gonna have a baby” (00:04:00) then, both reinforces their bond—even though they cannot touch, they are still connected through the baby—and strengthens the sense of injustice and the urgency in seeing

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<sup>3</sup> In Jenkins' *Beale Street* sepia-effect thus serves two purposes; it indicates time—New York in the '70s—and genre—romance

them reunited. Throughout the film, flashbacks to their past continually emphasize their bond, and thereby add to this drive for a happy ending in which they will be reunited (Appendix 2.1).

The opening and the expectations it raises for the film's ending, then, adhere to the genre of romance. And indeed, in the ending, Fonny and Tish are depicted together again (Appendix 2.2). From the birth of their child, a flash forward in time shows the now four year old Alonzo Jr. accompanied by Tish, as they visit Fonny in prison. While the age of Alonzo Jr. and his expressed desire for his father's return serve as reminders of the length of time Fonny has been imprisoned, Tish's words that Alonzo Jr. makes drawings of his father's release "ever since [she] told him" (01:51:09) indicate that a definite date for Fonny's release has been set. In this, the ending focuses on Fonny and Tish's reunion as a young family: Fonny and Tish are no longer separated by a glass wall, they are together *with* their child. The familial bond is highlighted by the fact that the specifics of Fonny's release date are withheld from the viewer, keeping this information exclusively *within* the family (Appendix 2.2). Their gathering around a table recalls Fonny's promise, right before the birth of their child, that he is going to build them "a great, big table" off of which their family will be eating for a "long, long time to come" (01:42:53). This table is located in the prison, and is not built by Fonny, but they *are* gathered around that table as a family. While Fonny is still in prison, his freedom and in extension the definite reunion of Fonny, Tish, and their child is fixed in the future. The look in their eyes when they stare at each other is still the same as in the film's opening: Their love for each other has never changed. In this, they have overcome the obstacles in the way of their romance. The focus on this powerful love and their existence as a family indicates hope for the future: While we do not get to *see* this future, we see the young family anticipating their future, we *know* the family line continues because of Alonzo Jr.'s existence, and we know that this family rests on a foundation of mutual and powerful love.

While the movie adheres to romance conventions, *Beale Street* is not *just* a romance. The film's setting in '70s New York does not serve to grant plausibility to Fonny and Tish's separation and thereby facilitate a classic romantic story arc (love → obstacle → overcoming obstacle → happy end). Rather, the setting forms an inherent part of the film's social critique, and their love story is a vehicle to express this critique just as much as the setting is a vehicle to

express their love story. In narrating their story, voice-over Tish addresses the racist system they find themselves in. This happens most clearly in the ending, as Tish's voice states that "the game has been rigged and the courts see it through," while a jump cut moves from Alonzo Jr.'s face to black and white images of police violence against people of colour (01:48:38-01:49:09). In this, the film directly addresses racism in our tangible world: The images are actual historical photographs. Contrasting these historical black and white images to the fictional colour-film shots that shape *Beale Street*'s narrative serves at least two purposes: One, it ties Tish and Fonny's story to instances of racism and police violence in the real world, which calls attention to the fact that theirs is a plausible story that could well have taken place in New York in the '70s because these photographs *show* that Fonny's experience with the police was a reality people of colour lived—and still live, but this will be discussed in chapter four—in the US in the '70s, and two, by making these images still and black and white instead of vibrant, with the same soft sepia filter that is put over the rest of the film, attention is equally called to the fictive nature of Tish and Fonny's love story. In these black and white images, the romantic aesthetic that pervades the rest of the film has been erased, highlighting that our tangible world's history does not lend itself to such romanticisation.

These black and white images are positioned between those instances of the film that focus on and highlight the importance and beauty of the black family (Appendix 2.3). In this, the film quite literally places protest or social critique *within* the family. This positioning of resistance within the family does not just happen on a cinematographic level; it also takes place on a narrative level, when, for example, Tish tells their lawyer that he cannot address Fonny as Alonzo, because "when you call him Alonzo, I see the judge and the bars and the chains ... if you're gonna do this, you *gotta be family*. So call him Fonny, please" (00:40:25; own emphasis). Those who are on their side, who help them free Fonny and fight against systemic racism, are thus family. Again, resistance is incorporated in family bonds. The final shot, then, strengthens the idea of the family as a site of resistance one last time in the visual depiction of the young black family sitting around the table. They are depicted as an island in the midst racist system they are fighting against. The fact that the audience, just as the policemen patrolling the visitation room, do not get to know the family's secrets (e.g., what is on the drawing or when

Fonny gets out) helps to build and uphold this unit of resistance. The very fact that they are there, together, and in love—the fact that there *is* hope for them—is an act of resistance: The system did not succeed in breaking them and could only temporarily tear them apart. Their resistance, then, exists exactly in their focus on and hope for a better future; in that they choose to “live the life [they have] been given. And live it so [their] children can be free” (01:48:23).

## Chapter Four

### *Beale Street* in Comparison

#### Romance, Protest, Hope, and the Black Family

In chapter two and three, the novel and the film are discussed and interpreted as separate works of art. In this chapter, these works are investigated in relation to each other, establishing the differences between the versions of *Beale Street*, so as to ascribe meaning to these differences.

As has been discussed in chapter two, Frank's suicide plays an integral part in the ending to Baldwin's *Beale Street*. Rather than contradict the novel's theme of the importance of hope (in Fonny's release and in the future), Frank's death adheres to this premise in that it signifies the destructiveness of hopelessness, because it is his *loss* of hope that means his death. Insofar as his suicide represents hopelessness, it then also signals what is needed to be hopeful: A loving and supportive family. Because the Hunt women are indifferent to Fonny's situation, Frank lacks the support to remain hopeful, and this lack of hope results in his death. The Rivers *do* have this supportive familial bond and this allows them to raise Fonny's bail in the end. In this context, Frank's death is another testament to the importance of the (black) family as mutually supportive in the face of oppression exactly because it signals the failure of the black family. At the same time, his death coincides with the birth of Fonny and Tish' child on two levels (Appendix 1.8). The coinciding of these events emphasizes the existence and *persistence* of family, especially blood relatives, because the lack of a loving family that Frank's death represents is inherently juxtaposed with the birth of a new blood relative. Through Frank's death, hopelessness makes way for new hope: The birth of this child represents the future of Fonny and Tish as parents, but also of new life, literally. Read in this context, Frank's suicide functions as a reinforcement of *Beale Street*'s important themes of hope and family.

Jenkins' rendition of *Beale Street* does not feature Frank's suicide, but, as is set out in chapter three, the same themes of family and hope are equally present in the film's ending, only conveyed differently: The film does not end with the birth of Fonny and Tish' child, but jumps forward in time to show Tish and Alonzo Jr. visiting Fonny in prison. In contrast to the novel, the film is unambiguous about their reunion: The film's ending is a literal depiction of the young

black family, joined around a table. Their familial bond is stressed through withholding the information they have on Fonny's release from the viewer. Their strength lies in the fact that they did not allow the system to break them up: They are still together, and they managed to have the family they would have had if it were not for the rigged system that took Fonny away. In this, their existence and the loving nature of their family is a powerful form of resistance against the system.

Both Baldwin's and Jenkins' *Beale Street* thus place focus on the black family in different, medium specific ways, but the role of the family is the same in that it functions as a supportive ground for hope, and that this makes the family a powerful site of resistance in the face of oppression. Interestingly, the film's ending is far more concrete than the novel's ending. The accumulation of Frank's suicide and the question of Fonny's release render the novel's ending highly ambiguous. The film's ending *shows* the new black family together, and while the viewer does not know when Fonny will get out or how long exactly his sentence was, the viewer does know *that* Fonny gets out and the age of their child gives us some sense of the time Fonny spent in prison. While in chapter one it is noted how film traditionally has more concrete endings because it necessarily materializes what it represents as opposed to novels that are purely verbal, the difference in the extent to which Baldwin and Jenkins' endings are open should not merely be ascribed to medium. Instead, this difference also gains meaning when it is read in the light of genre classification.

In this thesis' second chapter, it is argued that what excludes Baldwin's *Beale Street* from the classification of romance is the ending's ambiguity because this ambiguity problematizes a happy ending. In this sense, Jenkins' film is more open to the classification of romance: *We see* Fonny and Tish are still in love, together with their child. Focus is placed on their strong family bond, which is what helped them overcome the obstacles put in the way of their romance. Furthermore, Fonny's father did not die, and in this sense Fonny's future is not questioned. Rather, their future is celebrated and hope for this future is visualized by the existence of their child. However, while the ending to the film is more concrete than the novel's ending, both complicate the matter of Fonny's release—and thereby the romantic happy end—in a similar way: As in the novel, where we know that Fonny's bail is raised but we do not know *if* he is

released, the film lets us know *that* Fonny will be released, but refuses to let us know *when* exactly. In both these instances we know that the romance will be fulfilled *somewhere* in the future, but we do not know when. While the film omits some of the original ending's ambiguity through letting Frank live, it still denies a full sense of satisfaction.

Baldwin's novel is housed more comfortable in the social protest genre than in romance: Its important characters are all at odds with oppressive authoritarian systems and the narrative revolves around the lengths they go through to undo the injustice bestowed upon a loved one by these systems. The novel's ambiguous ending fits within the genre of social protest because, for Baldwin, the aim was precisely *not* to leave the reader with a sense of satisfaction, but rather to disturb the peace (Elam 2). In line with the social protest genre's aim of spreading awareness to injustice, the open ending invites reflection on the critique voiced in the work. In chapter two it is explained that *Beale Street* not only protests racism, but also the prescribed response to racism in traditional protest literature by showing how one must *react* to racism rather than merely showing the immorality of racism and consequently portraying its protagonists as victims. In this, Baldwin's *Beale Street* argues against victimhood, and presents change as originating in resistance, in hope, and in the black family (and a loving, supportive black community more generally). In Jenkins' film, then, certain scenes and elements that most clearly expressed the novel's social critique are omitted or altered: First, the harsh realities of Harlem life in the '70s are romanticized through the use of a soft sepia filter, pastel coloured outfits, and beautiful actors and music. Second, scenes such as the tense confrontation between a highly pregnant Tish and the racist policeman who constituted Fonny's imprisonment are not translated to the screen. Jenkins thus literally *romanticized* the novel's social protest by rejecting Baldwin's realist representations of New York in the '70s and by erasing the scenes in which Baldwin's critique was voiced most clearly. However, the film does show awareness to its romanticisation of the story through contrasting black and white photographs of police violence against people of colour in the '70s to the sepia-filtered scenes of Fonny and Tish. In chapter three it is argued that this contrast works as a reminder that the *reality* of the world *Beale Street* addresses does not lend itself to such romanticisation.

Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* was released just after the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the problems that it addresses were contemporary issues. The system was truly so rigged that the testimony of one white cop was enough to imprison an innocent man, purely because they were of colour.<sup>4</sup> The Harlem Baldwin describes is the Harlem he grew up in, and the necessity for criticism, change, and hope for a better future was urgent. The ending to the novel *needed* to leave the reader unsatisfied so as to invoke reflection on the *reality* of Fonny and Tish' situation, and consequently, on the need for change. Baldwin's novel was published in the same era that its characters lived in, whereas Jenkins' film was released 44 years *after* the story of *Beale Street* took place. Understood in this light, it then makes sense that Jenkins' version of *Beale Street* is romanticized and fits more comfortably within the genre of romance. That the present exists at a temporal distance from the world depicted in *Beale Street*, is what *allowed* Jenkins to romanticize the story to the extent that he did unproblematically, and at the same time it is what created the urgency to adapt the story to another medium and shine new light on its contents: As the existence of the Black Lives Matter Movement<sup>5</sup> (2013-today) proves, while our world is 44 years removed from the world of *Beale Street*, the injustices it depicts still persist. Through the use of historical photographs, Jenkins' *Beale Street* calls attention to the absurdity that, even though so many years have passed, in reality nothing has changed: Racism in the police force is as much a reality today as it was in 1974, and the historical photographs in the film are a reminder that the world today is a result of the past, and that existing injustices now are a result of existing injustices then.

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<sup>4</sup> e.g., Fonny's story was inspired by the imprisonment of one of Baldwin's friends (Scott 66).

<sup>5</sup> The BLMM originated as a response to the acquittal of white policeman George Zimmerman after he murdered the unarmed Trayvon Martin in 2012, and addresses all forms of violence against people of colour, especially institutionalized racism in the form of racial profiling and unequal punishment through the juridical system (Day).

## Conclusion

This project had as its premise that the deletion of an important aspect of Baldwin's *Beale Street*'s ending—Frank's suicide, that signified hopelessness, and through this the importance of the supportive black family—would lead to the meaning ascribed to Jenkins' *Beale Street* to be different than that ascribed to Baldwin's. Guided by the stance that film is a multitrack medium that must necessarily be investigated as such, it became clear that while Jenkins decided to omit certain parts of Baldwin's narrative, the film displayed and explored the same themes that were prevalent in Baldwin's novel: Hope, and the importance of the black family in upholding this hope. Both works present being hopeful as a form of resistance, and through the placement of hope within the black family, the black family (and the black collective more broadly) is depicted as a site of resistance. Departing from the difference in genres ascribed to Baldwin's and Jenkins' versions of *Beale Street*, this research examined the correlation between the different endings and the different genres, arguing that the decrease of ambiguity in the film's ending—through concreting the length of Fonny's sentence, depicting Fonny and Tish as a family, and omitting Frank's suicide—constituted a more happy and hopeful ending, thereby allowing for a classification of the film as a romance. Since Baldwin wrote his work in the time that *Beale Street*'s story took place, this research tied the ending's ambiguity to the novel's function as a social protest novel, arguing that the intended ambiguity served to invoke reflection on the world the novel situated itself in and subsequently voiced its critique on. What allowed Jenkins to romanticize the story unproblematically, is the temporal distance that exists between the world *Beale Street* depicts and the world Jenkins published his film in. However, in these 44 years of distance also lies the urgency to adapt *Beale Street*'s story once more, because the social injustice depicted in the novel still exists today. In the context of *Beale Street*'s message of hope as a form of resistance, that these same problems still exist means that the necessity to remain hopeful is greater. This, then, explains why the film's ending depicts a more concrete and hopeful future, embodied in the visual representation of the black family and the reunion of the protagonists. This is what Jenkins meant when he said that the omission of important scenes of Baldwin's *Beale Street* was necessary in order to tell the story he wanted to tell: In his own words, this decision was a reflection of his own positivity, as well as the message that he hoped

to convey to his audience that there “is hope in the scenario that the characters go through—and the strength that they found to endure” (Jenkins; *Slant*).

As this research positions itself primarily within literary and adaptation studies, it took as its main interest the novel and film’s different endings and brought this into relation with the different genres it has been ascribed to. As such, this project only engaged with the historical and cultural contexts the works were produced in, in order to offer background in support of the interpretations offered. Detaching Baldwin’s and Jenkins’ works from their contexts in this manner is somewhat artificial. Therefore, further research into the relation between the novel and the film that takes the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement respectively as its starting point will provide new insights into and a deeper understanding of both these works separately, as well as in relation to each other. Because Jenkins’ *Beale Street* has only recently been released, this project is the first to engage with Jenkins’ film in academic fields and necessarily also the first to investigate this contemporary film in relation to Baldwin’s novel. Therefore, the current project recognizes that there is much more to be said on both these artists, and as such it does not presume to offer a conclusive, definite answer to the questions put forth in this research. Rather, this undertaking should be perceived as a first move towards a consideration of these artists and their works as they stand in relation to each other, and as a broadening of the field of Baldwin studies, as an encouragement for further engagement with Jenkins’ film adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

## Appendix

### 1. Novel

- 1.1. Critique on the church is expressed in *Beale Street* through the embodiment of the church in the character of Fonny's mother, Alice Hunt. She is described as a "Sanctified woman" (15), but it is her religiosity that causes her to be unable to love her family, especially her son and her husband. When Tish has to tell both her and Fonny's family that they are going to have a baby, everyone *but* Alice Hunt is happy for Fonny and Tish. Tish' parents are understandably concerned, but this only relates to the fact that Fonny is in jail. They know that Fonny and Tish love each other, and that they would have been married by that time if it had not been for Fonny's imprisonment. Alice Hunt is the only one who responds to this news in outrage, fueled by the fact that Tish' pregnancy is premarital, and that Fonny and Tish thus must have had sexual intercourse before being married: "I guess you call your lustful action love. ... I don't. I always knew that you would be the destruction of my son. You have a demon in you—I always knew it. My God caused me to know it many years ago. The Holy Ghost will cause that child to shrivel in your womb. But my son will be forgiven. *My prayers will save him*" (68). She is also the only one who believes that Fonny's imprisonment is just. While she prays for him to be released, or rather for her Lord to "bring [her] boy to the light" (64), she also admits that she thinks that Fonny's imprisonment is the "*Lord's way of making [her] boy think on his sins and surrender his soul to Jesus*" (64). In this, Mrs. Hunt's religiosity is presented as standing in the way of supporting, believing, and loving her son, and at the same time it stands in the way of her being able to love her grandchild, as well as of supporting her husband in the fight for Fonny's release.
- 1.2. With Tish as the novel's narrator, the novel is a homodiegetic narration. The narration switches between flashbacks and the present (see 1.2), and tells the story

of Fonny and Tish' past, as well as of the lengths the Rivers and Frank Hunt go through in order to get Fonny released from jail. Because Tish is the narrator, all events and characters are presented to the reader in relation to Tish. We cannot view the story from another perspective, because we do not have any other information outside of Tish' experience.

- 1.3. The narrative is built up of a present timeline, in which Fonny is imprisoned and in which the Rivers and Frank are doing everything they can to get Fonny released, that is interwoven with flashbacks to *before* Fonny's imprisonment. These flashbacks go back to the time Fonny and Tish met while they were still little children, and describe how, from that moment on, they were inseparable. In these flashbacks, the reader also learns about how Fonny and Tish made love for the first time, how the workings of racism made it almost impossible for them to find a house to buy, and how happy they were when they finally did find a house. This entanglement of the past, in which they were together and could rely on each other in a world that systematically worked against them, with the present, in which they are forcefully torn apart, serves to strengthen the urgency to see them reunited. The contrast between these timelines highlights the injustice done in tearing Fonny and Tish apart. Because we get to know Fonny through Tish' remembrance of him (Appendix 1.1) we *feel* that he is not guilty, and that his imprisonment is unjust.
- 1.4. In part II of *Beale Street*, the narration accelerates as we learn everything that happens leading up to the birth of Tish' child. Sharon, Tish' mother, had been sent to Puerto Rico to find Victoria, the woman who wrongfully accused Fonny of rape, in an attempt to convince her to change her testimony. Returning from Puerto Rico, Sharon reports that Victoria has gone mad after having a miscarriage. The effect of this news on Fonny's father, Frank, is in Tish' words, "absolutely disastrous" (186), as he is sure that it will be used against Fonny in court. However, Tish' father, Joseph, insists that they cannot give up because "that's our [Frank and Joseph's] flesh and blood, baby" (189). No matter *how*,

they will have to get Fonny out, because the “cunt-faced white-assed motherfuckers” (189) that are the racist police and juridical system cannot get away with “killing our children” (189) any longer.

Eventually, the possibility of bail is arranged and everyone is working hard to gather the money. In one of Tish’ visits to Fonny in prison, Tish tells Fonny that they “almost got the money to bail [Fonny] out” (193). This is the first time in the narrative where it seems that Fonny will actually get out, and thus this is the first time where a sure hope in his release is raised. Directly after this, a phone call from Fonny’s sister to Tish reveals that Frank has disappeared after being fired for stealing. Two days later, as the Rivers are gathered and Sharon tells Tish that “Ernestine’s got the rest of the money” (196), Joseph comes home to share the news that Frank’s body is found “way up the river, in the woods, sitting in his car, with the doors locked, and the motor running” (197). The news of Frank’s suicide is the last thing Tish hears before going into labour. Tish cannot respond to the news because “all [she] could see was Fonny. And then [she] screamed, and [her] time had come” (197). Separated from this sentence with a double space is the last paragraph of the novel: “Fonny is working on the wood, on the stone, whistling, smiling. And from far away, but coming nearer, the baby cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries, cries like it means to wake the dead” (197).

- 1.5. Tish hopes that by sharing the knowledge of her pregnancy, the thought of the baby will give Fonny the strength and the will to keep believing in his release, “[a]nd that might help him” (4). And indeed, not only Fonny, but the entire Rivers family as well, come to perceive this baby as their drive to keep fighting the unfair juridical system, even when the odds are not in their favour. As Sharon puts it when urging Tish to stay strong: “[T]he only way *anything* ever gets done is when you make up your mind to do it. ... You got that child beneath your heart and we’re all counting on you, Fonny’s counting on *you*, to bring that child here safe and well” (112). A direct link is drawn between Fonny’s life and being

hopeful as Sharon says: “You *can’t* give up. We got to get Fonny out of there. *I don’t care what we have to do to do it*—you understand me, daughter? . . . You start thinking about it any other way, you get sick. *You can’t get sick now*—you know that—I’d rather for the state to kill him than for *you* to kill him” (96; emphasis in original). Losing hope, it is insinuated here, means death.

- 1.6. In Appendix 1.4 it is described that the novel presents the news of Frank’s disappearance right after a first hint of tangible hope in Fonny’s release is raised. Right after Tish tells Fonny that they “almost got the money to bail [Fonny] out” (193), Tish receives a phone call from Adrienne, Fonny’s sister, asking Tish if she has seen Frank, mentioning that she is worried because no one had seen Frank ever since he was fired from his job for stealing. This raising of hope, that is done through the message that Fonny’s bail is almost gathered, is immediately and inherently contradicted through the news of Frank’s disappearance. These instances in the text are brought in relation to each other because up until the moment Tish mentions that she is “alone” (194) and that “the phone rang” (194), the text gives no indication that Tish is no longer in prison talking to Fonny. The news of Frank’s death nuances hope in the same manner, for in the same conversation in which Sharon lets Tish know that they “got the rest of the money” (196), Joseph enters the room to tell Tish and Sharon that “Frank had been found” (197). Again, this form of hope that gives us a firm reason to believe in Fonny’s release, is immediately nuanced by the news of Frank’s death. That the good news that almost definitely secures Fonny’s release only comes after Frank has lost his life due to the loss of his hope, serves to strengthen the message that hopelessness is destructive, and that being hopeful is a difficult, but important and necessary task that requires strength.
- 1.7. Scott suggests that Frank’s death should be read as the result of his marriage to Mrs. Hunt (100). Meant by this is that Mrs. Hunt never believed that Fonny’s imprisonment is unjust. Rather, she believes that his imprisonment is the Lord’s way of bringing her son to the light (Appendix 1.1). Because Mrs. Hunt does not

believe Fonny should be freed, and simply does not care enough for his release to actually *do* something (as becomes clear from the fact that she is the only one who has not visited Fonny's attorney because she "just [has] not had the time" to do so [64]), she, and in extension the Hunt family, do not have any hope for Fonny's release. In this, the Hunt family serves to contrast the Rivers family. In the Rivers family, everyone believes in Fonny's innocence and does everything they can to get Fonny freed from jail. In this way, the Rivers family is mutually supportive. As soon as someone threatens to lose hope, another family member makes sure this does not happen (e.g., Appendix 1.5). The Hunts do not have this kind of mutual support, and where the Rivers family is a breeding ground for hope, the Hunts lack this hope. Mrs. Hunt does not attempt to fuel Frank's hope in his son's release, and instead makes sure Frank *knows* she in part blames Frank for Fonny's imprisonment (Baldwin 65). This, then, is what Scott means when stating that Frank's death is the result of his marriage to Mrs. Hunt: Her blame towards him, as well as the lack of hope in their family, and the lack of hope Frank has as a result of that, is what eventually leads to his suicide.

- 1.8. Right before Tish goes into labour, she learns that Frank's body has been found. Upon hearing this, her first question is whether Fonny knows. Joseph answers that Fonny does not, and Tish responds with "I've got to tell him" (197). Joseph then tells her that she will not be able to see Fonny until the morning, and this is the moment when Tish goes into labour. By highlighting that Fonny does not yet know about his father's suicide, and will only get to know about it in the morning, the narrative calls attention to the fact that Fonny will not know about the birth of his child until the next morning as well. Frank's death and the birth of Fonny and Tish' child is thus presented as coinciding on two levels: First, Tish goes into labour at the moment she learns of Frank's death, and second, Fonny will learn of these events simultaneously—he will be informed about his father's suicide in the same conversation that he will be informed about the birth of his child.

## 2. Film

- 2.1. The film mixes flashbacks of Fonny and Tish's past—their childhood, the first time they made love, their search for a house—with the present. These flashbacks to their past contrast and highlight the struggles of the present, where we see the whole Rivers family doing everything they can to get Fonny out of jail in the face of all the setbacks they encounter as Tish's belly grows bigger and bigger. The flashbacks give an insight into how Fonny and Tish met each other, and how their friendship evolved into a relationship. At the same time these flashbacks gradually clarify what lead to Fonny's imprisonment, for example by depicting the first time Fonny and Tish met Officer Bell, the racist cop who is responsible for taking Fonny away, or by depicting the reunion of Fonny and Daniel, one of Fonny's old friends who just got out of prison because he was framed for stealing a car even though he could not drive.
- 2.2. What this research perceives as the film's ending starts with a flashback to the moment where Fonny and Tish celebrate that they found a house (01:46:02). The sound of their laughter is muted, and instead Fonny's voice is heard, repeating the words he said to Tish in the previous scene: "I wanna be in your arms. I wanna hold you in my arms." A straight cut shows the back of a baby, being lifted from water, and Fonny's voice continues: "I gotta hold our baby in our arms. It's gotta be. It's gotta be." The baby is placed in Tish's arms, and another straight cut shows a flashback of Fonny and Tish standing opposite of each other, staring into each other's eyes. Tish narrates: "We're still not married. After all this happened neither of us cares what this means. Fonny was once 22, I was 19." A cut shows another flashback, of Fonny and Tish as young children. The voice-over continues: "But neither of us is young anymore. Can't afford to be. Instead we gotta live the life we've been given." The shot changes and we see another child, a young boy of around four years old, looking into the camera. "And live it so our children can be free." A jump cut shows a compilation of black and white images of police violence against people of colour (01:48:38-01:49:09). Tish's voice

sounds again: “There aren’t enough hours in the day or judges on the bench to try all the cases brought against these men. The game has been rigged and the courts see it through: a trial is your *right*. But to bury you beneath the prison for forcing the judge and prison is the court’s right to.” The screen fades to Tish and Alonzo Jr. entering the prison visitation room and taking place at a table (01:49:09).

Tish’s voice-over continues: “And so, like many of these poor men, Fonny took a plea.” They are joined by Fonny at the table. In close-up, the camera shows Tish and Fonny’s faces, focusing again on the way they look at each other and how this has not changed over the years. Fonny asks Alonzo Jr. what he is drawing, and the answer is: “That’s when you come home, daddy.” Upon hearing this, Fonny falls silent and lowers his eyes. Tish adds: “Ever since I told him, he just writes it everywhere.” Alonzo Jr.’s age and his expressed desire for his father to come home invite reflection on the length of Fonny’s sentence and, correspondingly, the injustice in the fact that he had to spend so many years of his life away from his lover and his child. However, this sense of defeat is nuanced exactly because Alonzo Jr. has been looking forward to his father coming home “ever since [Tish] told him,” meaning that a definite date has now been set for Fonny’s release.

Fonny picks up some food and announces that he is hungry to lighten the mood, but before he takes a bite, Alonzo Jr. warns him that he has to say grace first. The three of them hold hands, Alonzo Jr. says a prayer, and as they are holding hands, the camera starts zooming out, revealing the prison visitation room and the patrolling police guards. Jazz music starts playing and the screen cuts to black.

- 2.3. These photographs are positioned in between the two depictions of the young black family: Before the montage, coupled with Tish as voice-over highlighting critique on the American juridical system (Appendix 2.3), we are for the first time shown Alonzo Jr.’s face, staring right in the camera. After the montage, we are shown Tish and Alonzo Jr. visiting Fonny in prison. In this way, Jenkins’ *Beale Street* thus literally positions social critique within the family.

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