# African American Culture and Society After Rodney King

## Provocations and Protests, Progression and "Post-Racialism"

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ASHGATE

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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East
Union Road
Farnham
Surrey, GU9 7PT
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
110 Cherry Street
Suite 3-1
Burlington, VT 05401-3818
USA

www.ashgate.com

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 9781472455390 (hbk)
ISBN 9781472455406 (ebk – PDF)
ISBN 9781472455413 (ebk – ePUB)

Printed in the United Kingdom by Henry Ling Limited,
at the Dorset Press, Dorchester, DT1 1HD

Chapter 7

# The Rebirth of Queer: Exile, Kinship, and Metamorphosis in Dee Rees's *Pariah*[1]

Aneeka A. Henderson

Compelling its audience to sit erect, widen its gaze, and lift its collective brow, Dee Rees inaugurates her first feature-length film, *Pariah* (2011), with the rapper Khia's lyrics from her famous 2002 song, "My Neck, My Back (Lick It)."[2] We watch the protagonist's excitement in slow motion in this scene, but we do not know who she is. Nonetheless, her queer desires are as clear and unadorned as the female dancers who contort in front of her. As the camera pans a dusky room interspersed with flesh and skin, Khia's brazen voice barrels into the scene with aplomb, rapping, "My neck, my back, lick my pussy and my crack." In no uncertain terms, Khia maps her sexual demands across her body. Her requirements, without the shelter of euphemism, are registered as both destinations as well as sites to be conquered, but also function as an introduction to, and frame for, *Pariah*'s 17-year-old protagonist, Alike (Adepero Oduye).

*Pariah*, a "semi-autobiographical" tragicomic coming-of-age story, centers on Alike, a young, middle-class African American lesbian who is unequivocal about her sexual identity and emotional and sexual desires, but is constantly denied the opportunity to experience intimacy and claim her sexual identity.[3] Alike's most explicit hindrance is her mother, Audrey (Kim Wayans). She both finalizes Alike's exile at the end of the film and flagrantly interrupts her access to an African American lesbian identity. Audrey is initially uncertain about Alike's sexual identity, but also in fear about the possibility of her daughter being a lesbian. Her fear prompts her to regulate Alike's clothing and peer group in an attempt to sculpt a more feminine and heterosexual Alike out of the masculine excess she sees her daughter inhabiting. Sharonda (Sahra Mellesse), Alike's younger sister, offers the occasional sympathetic shoulder, but also exacerbates the rift between Alike and Audrey through her incessant tattling. Alike's father, Arthur's (Charles Parnell) absence and infidelity do not

1 I want to thank Jo Metcalf, Carina Spaulding, the University of Hull, and the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation (WISE) for helping to bring this collection to fruition. A debt of gratitude goes out to early readers of this essay including L. Kevin Jeffries, Amrita Basu, Michele Barale, Frederick T. Griffiths, Martha Saxton, Joo Ok Kim, Ashvin Kini, Candice M. Jenkins, James Ford III, Khary O. Polk, Sahar Sadjadi, Imani Marshall, and Stella Temitayo Oyalabu.

2 *Pariah* (dir. Dee Rees: Focus Features, 2011); Khia, "My Neck, My Back (Lick It)," on *Thug Misses* (Epic Records, 2001).

3 Ernest Hardy, "Interview with Dee Rees, Director of *Pariah*," *The Village Voice*, December 28, 2011, http://www.villagevoice.com.

offer Alike adequate support to thrive at home and in school, but he is less punitive in his criticism of Alike than Audrey. Illustrating this dynamic, Rees explains that she often positions "Audrey behind Alike, always reaching toward the camera," while Arthur and Alike are often shown "in the same plane, in the same space."[4] Arthur plays basketball with Alike and teaches her to parallel park, but Audrey must take on the role of disciplinarian. Arthur skirts the most challenging duties of parenthood, while his mistress gives him the emotional and physical intimacy that both Audrey and Alike seek. Nevertheless, by the end of the film Alike's writing is what inevitably offers her escape and assuages her exile. Hence, this chapter will contend that the film's interrogation of black female subjectivity is underpinned by a tension between homosexual and heterosexual identity that realigns queer and heterosexual alliance and constructs a new paradigm for radical queer politics.

## An Abject Kinship

One of the film's most widely circulated promotional posters underscores Alike as the central figure of exile. Drowned in muted indigo tones, Alike's melancholy face is echoed on the left and right side of the poster. Dual images of Alike's face leave no room for Audrey, Arthur, or Sharonda to share the role of pariah or enter in as an agent of Alike's exile. Alike is the film's pariah. On the right, only a small portion of Alike's face appears in the margins of the poster, looking out of a city bus window. A full shot of her face is revealed on the left side, though it is an ethereal reflection from the bus windowpane. Neither image offers a full and vivid picture of Alike's face, but both images frame white text at the center of the poster, which outlines a brief definition of the word "pariah," along with its pronunciation and part of speech. Emphasis on the textual definition of "pariah" reinforces Alike's abjection and evokes the importance of writing and text for Alike, who eventually uses poetry as a vehicle for her independence.

The film's title and promotional materials highlight Alike's alienation, but *Pariah* is not solely about Alike's exile. As it exposes Alike's ostracism, *Pariah* also underscores Audrey's exile. In revising her original 30-minute short to a feature-length film, Dee Rees admits that she realized that it is Audrey who is "not being listened to. It's Audrey who everybody's pushing away, so she's the one who's isolated."[5] Emphasis on Audrey's heterosexual isolation and privilege runs the risk of eclipsing Alike's isolation as well as diminishing the distinct challenges linked to Alike's black lesbian identity. One can imagine that this twin queer and heterosexual exile is tinged with a Hollywood motivation to appeal to a wider audience, rather than illuminate the complexities of an identity that is rarely cast in film. The pressure for broad appeal is not completely lost on Dee Rees. In responding to a racist and rather trite GLAAD interview questioning *Pariah*'s so-called "universal appeal," Rees reminds hesitant viewers that *Pariah* is about "identity, friendship, family and love. Whether you are gay, straight, black, white, male, or female, the film invites you to connect with one

4 Peter Martin, "Interview: *Pariah* Director Dee Rees Talks Character Arcs, Camera Language, and Class Structure," *Twitch*, January 5, 2012, http://twitchfilm.com.

5 Hardy, "Interview with Dee Rees."

or more of the characters in the story."[6] While Rees's all-encompassing response fails to give specificity to Alike's character, identity, and conflict, *Pariah* refuses to do what Rees is urged to concede to in her reply. *Pariah*'s nuanced characterization of Alike and Audrey argues for a radical queer politics, rather than simply aspiring for a box office smash. Dee Rees's film maintains the boundaries of heterosexual and queer identity through its depiction of Alike's and Audrey's vitriolic relationship, sustained by Audrey's respectability politics and Alike's alleged "deviant" sexuality, but it also simultaneously binds queer and heterosexual identity together through exile. This link forces viewers to position Alike and Audrey as heterosexual and queer adversaries as well as political kin through their negotiation of power. In her groundbreaking essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," Cathy J. Cohen argues for dismantling a queer political agenda that simply privileges a "homogenized identity."[7] Though Queer Theory forcefully emerged in the early 1990s as an academic discipline, in outlining a new dynamic and radical queer politics in 2005, Cohen maintains the boundaries between heterosexual and queer identity, but insists on an intersectional analysis of oppression that draws on "one's relation to power," connecting, for example, disenfranchised black heterosexual "welfare queens" with African American lesbians.[8] Bolstering accord across and between non-normative and marginal identities, such as Alike's and Audrey's, not only problematizes the spurious claim that all queers are political allies and disassembles what Charles I. Nero calls "gay white ghettoes," but also constructs progressive coalition building that calls greater attention to power, privilege, and oppression.[9]

As I argue in "Black Political and Popular Culture: The Legacy of Richard Iton," in the national imagination, black lesbians and black "welfare queens," just like Alike and Audrey, are both non-heteronormative disruptions to the nuclear family, a mythical kinship unit that ostensibly never fails to serve as a "solution" to the nation's leading social and economic problems.[10] It is telling that Alike's moniker reads and underscores how she and her mother are "alike." Though Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama have not been as overtly heterosexist as the Clinton Administration's policies ("Don't Ask Don't Tell" in 1993 and the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996), both Mitt Romney and President Barack Obama have used the decline of the nuclear family as a cause for the increase in gun violence. For example, when asked about the assault weapons ban during the October 2012 presidential debate, Mitt Romney admitted that he did not favor making some guns illegal, but then insisted in the same breath that we have to "tell our kids that before they have babies, they ought to think about getting married to someone—that's a great idea because if there's a two-

6 Amita Swadhin, "GLAAD interviews 'Pariah' director Dee Rees," December 29, 2001, http://www.glaad.org.

7 Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (eds), *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 22.

8 Ibid.

9 Charles I. Nero, "Why are Gay Ghettoes White?," in Johnson and Henderson (eds), *Black Queer Studies*: 228.

10 Aneeka A. Henderson, "Black Political and Popular Culture: The Legacy of Richard Iton," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* vol. 16 (2014): 200–201.

parent family, the prospect of living in poverty goes down dramatically. The opportunities that the child will—will be able to achieve increase dramatically."[11] In his reply, Romney's political legerdemain supplants a conversation about gun control with a lecture about the need for patriarchal family. At a Chicago high school in February 2013, President Obama, son of a single mother, said, "For a lot of young boys and young men, they don't see an example of a father or grandfather who are in the position to support families and be held up and respected."[12] He went on to claim that "strong stable families" would help prevent the skyrocketing homicide rate in Chicago, quite a different speech than the one he gave in Newtown, Connecticut, replete with tears, after the 2012 Sandy Hook tragedy.[13] Obama and Romney's fantastical remedies exemplify the need for Cohen's radical queer politics that assumes, rather than overlooks, broader networks of power in the post-Civil Rights era. Following Cohen, *Pariah* utilizes identity categories for their important political work, but also initiates a rebirth of radical queer activism by illuminating Alike and Audrey's exile in order to link identities through "shared experiences of oppression and resistance."[14]

## Sociopolitical, Literary, and Cinematic Culture

*Pariah* focuses on Alike's school and familial relationships, but it also exists within a larger social context of United States anti-gay sentiment. In "'Joining the Lesbians': Cinematic Regimes of Black Lesbian Visibility," Kara Keeling rightly asserts that scholars need to be cautious of celebrating "black lesbian and gay film" simply because it resists black lesbian and gay marginalization, but it is important to note how *Pariah* contests the invisibility of countless victims of LGBTQ hate crimes such as Sakia Gunn, an African American lesbian who was fatally stabbed in a 2003 hate crime in Newark, New Jersey.[15] While Sakia Gunn's murder triggered protests, it received little media attention in comparison to Matthew Shepherd's murder, with 659 major news stories published about Matthew Shepherd compared to 21 articles about Gunn.

Time and again, mainstream media reveals its apathy about black and brown LGBTQ hate crimes. In their 2012 report, CNN boasted that the "LGBT Community [is] More Accepted than Before," clearly building on the fairytale of a post-racial America, but the dramatic increase of anti-gay groups from 17 in 2000 to 27 in 2010 and the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Program's discovery that transgender people of color are three times more at risk for anti-LGBT violence from police officers are sobering reminders of the growing

11 2nd Presidential Debate (President Barack Obama and Former Governor Mitt Romney participated in a candidates debate, Hofstra University, Hempstead New York, October 16, 2012), http://abcnews.go.com.

12 Trymaine Lee, "In Chicago, Obama Talks about 'the Work that Remains Unfinished,'" MSNBC, February 15, 2013, http://www.msnbc.com.

13 President Barack Obama, "Speech at Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil," (speech given at Sandy Hook Prayer Vigil, Newtown, CT, December 16, 2012), http://blogs.wsj.com.

14 Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens": 38.

15 Kara Keeling's "'Joining the Lesbians': Cinematic Regimes of Black Lesbian Visibility," in Johnson and Henderson (eds), *Black Queer Studies*: 217.

ring true for black female film directors and black lesbian protagonists in popular as well as independent films. Certainly, there are films featuring black lesbian protagonists, such as *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), which I discuss later, but the film industry as a whole persists in its marginalization of black lesbian protagonists on screen and directors behind the camera.[22] Even with *Pariah*'s widespread critical acclaim, premiere at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, screening at the Toronto Film Festival, and "Excellence in Cinematography Award," this struggle for black lesbian visibility will undoubtedly continue. Through Alike's writing, *Pariah* connects the silence around black lesbian writers that Smith exposes to the cinematic silence of black lesbian characters.

Like many other novels within the African American literary tradition, Alike's writing, specifically her poetry, functions as a crucial mode of self-expression and survival. It is both a space of safety and vulnerability. She is able to write and express herself without her mother's condemnation, but her writing is also characterized as risk. When eating lunch with her English teacher, Alike shares some of her most recent poems, expecting unmitigated praise. Unimpressed, her English teacher replies that her poems are "good, not great" and pushes a crestfallen Alike to "go deeper." Her teacher's "tough love" approach revives Alike's once-stilted metamorphosis, which progressively manifests in Alike's writing and actions. Ultimately, her poetry and writing offers her an escape from home and school, as it provides Alike an opportunity to leave her family to attend an early college program in California. *Pariah*'s characterization of Alike as a black lesbian writer pays homage to the previous era's black lesbian writers who were silenced and ignored in academia and simultaneously asserts the continued importance of black lesbian characters in film.

Directed by Dee Rees, with Spike Lee as executive producer, *Pariah* enters a cinematic terrain of "African American lesbian" film most notably claimed by Cheryl Dunye's 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, which is one the most popular feature-length films centering on a black lesbian protagonist. Nonetheless, there are several other important films that include black lesbian characters, such as Michelle Parkerson's *Storme: The Lady of the Jewel Box* (1987), Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), F. Gary Gray's *Set it Off* (1996), Spike Lee's *She Hate Me* (2004), Campbell X's *Stud Life* (2012), and Patrick Ian-Polk's *The Skinny* (2012). Featuring African American lesbian protagonists, both Dune and Rees take on underexplored characters navigating courtship, intimacy, and sexuality. Cheryl (Cheryl Dune), the main character in *The Watermelon Woman*, is a filmmaker living in Philadelphia and researching Fae Richards or the "watermelon woman," an African American actress who played "mammy" roles in popular Hollywood films. Cheryl discovers, by happenstance, that Richards was in a relationship with her white female director, Martha Page, affording an opportunity for Cheryl to tie her own interracial lesbian desires to Richards's affair. Upon her discovery, Cheryl says, "I guess we have a thing or two in common, Miss Richards: the movies and women." Although both films feature African American lesbian protagonists, the explicit attention to interconnection in *The Watermelon Woman* contrasts the refrain of exile in *Pariah*.

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22 *The Watermelon Woman* (dir. Cheryl Dunye: First Run Features, 1996).

## Mise-en-Scène

Audrey's first scene, set on the threshold of Alike's bedroom in their Brooklyn Fort Greene home, quickly establishes her as a stern parental figure and Alike's chief antagonist with her scolding Alike about her late night out. Audrey's position on the perimeter of Alike's bedroom, while Alike remains inside it with the door ajar, is the first hint of Audrey's fear and uncertainty about Alike's sexuality. Her inability or refusal to enter the private confines of Alike's bedroom demonstrates her anxiety about seeing "proof" of her daughter's sexuality. Their discussion, transpiring across the pseudo barrier to Alike's bedroom, further establishes the imagined ways they construct themselves in opposition to one another. Finding little common ground between them, Alike and Audrey constantly argue about everything from Alike's high school homecoming, wardrobe, and friends, to her sexuality, further highlighting Alike's exile. In one of the few scenes where Alike and Audrey are affectionate toward one another, with Audrey sitting between Alike's legs as she tends to her mother's hair, their harmonious interaction is short-lived. They eventually begin quarreling about Alike's plans for the weekend. Their inimical exchange contrasts the more amicable relationship between Audrey and Sharonda, her younger daughter. Dressed in her plaid school uniform throughout much of the film, Sharonda is cast as the "good girl" of the family. It is Sharonda who alerts Audrey that Alike has arrived home after her curfew and Sharonda who also bursts into Alike's bedroom to find her trying on a strap-on dildo in the mirror, much to Alike's embarrassment. Over dinner, Audrey's memories of high school echo Sharonda's experiences, rather than Alike's. Sharonda's excitement about prom, the "snowball dance," homecoming, and the plethora of boys she has access to affirms her heterosexuality and prompts Audrey to ask Alike about her date to homecoming, with Alike declaring that she has no plans to attend the dance. Compulsory heterosexuality at most US high school homecoming dances is a likely obstacle for Alike, but Audrey refuses to pursue that line of inquiry. Compared to her recent jaunt to the strip club, a high school homecoming dance is also, perhaps, now rendered a sexual opiate. Nonetheless, disappointed in Alike's disinterest, Audrey reminds Alike that the homecoming dance is an important opportunity to create high school "memories," just as *she* did in high school and as Sharonda will. She and Audrey affirm their heteronormative kinship and privilege, as they are able to make and share high school memories about "crushes" and dates, but Alike is left isolated, on the periphery of these conversations and experiences. Alike is most clearly marked as the film's figure of sequestration, underscoring the "specific historical [...] stigma of 'queer'" and the film's refusal to "equate the experiences of marginal heterosexual women and men to the lived experiences of queers."[23]

The iconography of clothing marks another important way Alike is the film's central exiled character. In her solemn retreat home after a late night at a strip club, Alike begins shedding her baggy shirt and fitted hat on a city bus for a pink top and delicate earrings so as not to incite her mother's ire. Once home (with Sharonda's help), Alike rouses her mother, who upbraids Alike about violating her curfew but is temporarily distracted from

23 Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens": 44.

her scolding when she notices Alike's clothing. Pardoning Alike's transgressions when she sees Alike dressed in drag or her costume of "femininity," Audrey demonstrates the importance she consigns to Alike's gender performance and Alike is made to feel like an imposter. Again, the next day, Alike discards her sanctioned outfit for baggy clothes in the bathroom at school, but her new butch ensemble fails to offer her refuge. She overhears her peers identify her as gay, but the majority of them make their attraction to boys explicit while one admits her impatience with Alike occupying the "middle," i.e., not butch or feminine enough. It is also a liminal space that Rees confesses to occupying, much to the chagrin of her queer community who wanted her to choose a "side."[24] Both Rees and Alike's supposedly intermediary status affirm that inclusion in the "gay community" is not axiomatic and thus necessitates new modes of envisioning radical queer politics. Furthermore, the assessment by Alike's peers, albeit problematic for its adherence to narrow sexual boundaries, illuminates Alike's recurring aborted metamorphoses in school bathrooms and city buses. In trying to please two gods, her mother's conservatism and her own burgeoning "deviant" sexuality, Alike is repeatedly exiled, always shifting and changing, and never given an opportunity to fully be.

*Pariah* beautifully illuminates Alike's exile, but it also challenges the queer political focus on a "homogenized" sexual identity by characterizing Audrey through exile, though heterosexuality and parenting obscure her as a clear victim of exclusion. Her chastisement of Alike for coming home past her curfew characterize her as an unremarkably stressed mother of a teenager, but her admonishment in this scene is not extraordinary. The first hint of Audrey's "shifting" occurs at the dinner table with Alike, Sharonda, and Arthur. Fresh flowers, an exquisitely set table, and Audrey's carefully prepared meal in the dining room welcome the audience as they are introduced to the handsome and well-dressed Arthur for the first time, but it is almost as if it is Audrey's first time meeting him as well. The seams and cracks in their dinnertime performance begin to surface when Sharonda says, "I don't see why we can't just watch TV as usual!" Nervous about her husband's presence and her daughter's behavior during their meal, Audrey sharply whispers to Sharonda and Alike, "It's your father's night off. Straighten up!" Audrey's "straighten up" connotes an imperative to be on one's best behavior, but "straight," with all its heterosexual baggage, also gestures toward a demand for Alike to correct her queerness. As the TV begs to be turned on during their awkward dinner, Audrey's "first date jitters" and uneasy performance reveal that her home does not function as a sanctuary for her. Moreover, this dinner scene, with its veneer of perfection, illustrates how Obama and Romney's assertions that the patriarchal family, as a tonic for everything from poverty to gun violence, undergirds respectability politics and serves as a mere façade for larger, systemic issues in Audrey's home as well as the nation.

Audrey's exile at home is similarly echoed at her job: her coworkers refuse to talk to her or even exchange pleasantries and upon entering the break area, Audrey's jovial coworkers go silent and immediately disperse, underscoring Audrey's physical alienation. She is left to eat her lunch alone, until Mrs Singletary, a sympathetic coworker dressed in a pristine white lab coat, appears and "saves" her from complete isolation. Audrey

24 Hardy, "Interview with Dee Rees."

cautiously abandons her steely disposition for a rare display of excitement, showing Mrs Singletary a newly bought fuchsia sweater for Alike. Audrey's caution is filled with anxiety about Alike's refusal to dress in "feminine" clothing and her rejection of the lip-gloss and haircare her sister embraces. Upon seeing the sweater, Mrs Singletary instantly assumes the sweater is for Sharonda, rather than Alike, intensifying Audrey's unease. Her angst is not caused by inadvertently picking the wrong shade of pink, but it is bubbling with the fear that Alike is indeed a lesbian and that she is the only one who continues to believe her daughter may be heterosexual. Audrey cannot help but press Mrs Singletary on her assumption, but she skirts the obvious issue about Alike's queer style of dress. Not only is Audrey being forced to come to terms with the increasingly conspicuous signs of Alike's sexuality, but Audrey's denial and Mrs Singletary's evasion ruins the potential for a sincere friendship, reconfirming Audrey's alienation.

From Khia's first sonic introduction to Alike, the film remains focused on Alike's alienation by structuring its climax on Alike's desire for physical intimacy and subsequent exile. Audrey pushes Alike to form a friendship with Mrs Singletary's daughter, Bina (Aasha Davis), as a way to deter Alike from hanging out with the "wrong" (lesbian) crowd. Ironically, the physical and emotional intimacy that Alike craves is satiated with Bina, making Audrey a conduit of Alike's first lesbian encounter. Alike is temporarily separated from her confidante, Laura, and she continues to be alienated at school and at home, so her relationship with Bina is a high-stakes one. Their friendship begins awkwardly, but eventually blossoms into sharing music, poetry, clothing, and an attraction to one another. Pushing a bit further, they begin courtship ambiguously, without a clear identification of their actions or relationship, but their failure to adopt a relationship status does not deter them from making plans to spend a night together under the auspices of a girl's "sleepover." Bina ostensibly becomes the refuge that allows Alike to finally complete her metamorphosis. The morning after their first sexual encounter, Alike watches Bina frantically clean and "straighten up" her bedroom, gesturing toward Bina's desire to cleanse herself of the previous night's sexual activity. Not fully recognizing Bina's icy demeanor, Alike breathlessly remarks that their night together was "amazing," and Bina corrects her, curtly stating, "last night was playing around." The "play" that Bina insists on subsequently denies Alike the refuge she sought in their relationship. Alike's astonishment pushes Bina to announce that she is not "gay *GAY*" at the same time that she asks Alike not tell anyone about their "not gay GAY" night together. Right at the cusp of Alike's much-needed inclusion and belonging, Bina's cruel retort banishes Alike to the nearby sidewalk, toppling garbage cans and bellowing screams, leaving her to confront her alienation again, amidst tears and heartbreak.

Audrey also experiences sexual exile, but Arthur foments her exclusion, though it similarly ends in frustration. Arthur and Audrey share scant moments of love and tenderness; their interactions include arguments about his infidelity, erratic work schedule, finances, and finally, Alike's sexuality. Audrey's embodiment of the "strong black woman" stereotype and Arthur's detachment as well as his own denial about Alike's sexuality, further precludes an affable partnership. Yet, Audrey's "strength" is temporarily muted when she unexpectedly, but subtly, invites Arthur's sexual advances. When sitting on the couch reading a book in a red satin negligée, with painted face and her hair uncharacteristically

down, she hears Arthur arrive home and shifts her position on the sofa. She quickly relinquishes her book, pretends to be asleep, and contorts her body into a come-hither position. It is a clear moment of reckoning for Audrey. Nonplussed, Arthur both sees and does not see Audrey, turns on the television (rather than Audrey), lies about the length of time he has been home, and in a clear act of protest, unceremoniously refuses the plate of food she has carefully prepared and set aside for him. This highly staged scene evokes the dinner scene, but also renders Audrey's vulnerability strange and uncomfortable. Refusing to surrender her battle for affection and love, Audrey asks Arthur to sit beside her on the couch and he again refuses her plea, amplifying Audrey's ignominy and exile. Audrey is not only denied the kind of climax her daughter experiences with Bina during their night together, but *Pariah* also forecloses the opportunity for Audrey to usurp a more central and privileged role in the film by refusing to build the climax around Audrey's (failed) intimate encounter, as it continues to highlight and dramatize Alike's. In doing so, *Pariah* challenges heterosexual privilege as it simultaneously argues for understanding Alike and Audrey as bound together through exile, marshaled by stereotypes categorizing black women as unworthy of being loved.

In her essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," black feminist literary critic Hortense Spillers contends that the "unsexed black female and the supersexed black female embody the very same vice, cast the very same shadow."[25] Vice, in this instance, signifies an imprisonment that disallows sexual emergence and is overdetermined by historical myths about black female sexuality. Popular discourse renders the "supersexed" and the "unsexed" black woman as conflicting positions, but Spillers and *Pariah* rightly construct them as congruent. The film's introduction to Alike through the sonic backdrop of Khia's "lewd" song and local strip club casts Alike as "supersexed." When Alike evaluates how well her new strap-on dildo conforms to her body in her bedroom mirror, her alleged hyper-sexuality is confirmed. Alike's "supersexed" position is ostensibly juxtaposed to Audrey's "unsexed" role, which is partly indebted to her enactment of the "Cult of True Womanhood" or "Cult of Domesticity," a nineteenth-century ideology defining womanhood by piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. Audrey attends church, is married and chaste, keeps a clean home, habitually leaves plates of dinner in the refrigerator for Arthur despite his infidelity, and styles her hair in accordance with his aesthetic taste, but these practices do not protect her from exile or repair her marriage. With all of Audrey's efforts to invigorate her sex life, Alike closes the film with more sexual experiences on screen than her mother. The contrast of Audrey's limp body strewn across the sofa waiting to be penetrated against Alike's stance in the mirror with prosthetic penis (albeit the wrong size and color) and arms akimbo amplifies their dissimilarity. Nonetheless, *Pariah* quells the sexual dissonance of "unsexed" and "supersexed" between Audrey and Alike by thrusting them into an analogous struggle of exile. At their most vulnerable state, it is Alike and Audrey's lovers who shun them and intensify their exile. Alike has a temporary moment of intimacy with Bina, one that we can imagine Audrey and Arthur once had before bills and stress at work, but neither Alike or Audrey are able

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25 Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 164.

to recapture those moments. Although Audrey is not a "welfare queen," she and Alike's struggle of abjection buttresses Cohen's demand to reimagine a radical queer politics that hinges on aligning two supposedly distinct expressions of sexuality in order to expose broader axes of power as well as initiate coalition building.

## The "Bad Black Mother"

In drawing the link between Alike and Audrey's exile, *Pariah* highlights Audrey's non-heteronormativity, but also falls back on the stereotype of the "bad black mother" used in film over the past two decades, including Lee Daniels's *Precious* (2009), Tyler Perry's *Daddy's Little Girls* (2007), *The Blind Side* (2009), *Big Momma's House* (2000), Marguerite (Loretta Devine) in *Kingdom Come* (2001), *Monster's Ball* (2001), and *Losing Isaiah* (1995). Rees hints that she may have characterized Audrey as the "bad black mother" as a marketing strategy; she confesses that Arthur was depicted as the violent parent in the original short film, but she completely revised his character and made Audrey more cruel and brutal in the feature-length film.[26] Audrey regulates image and propriety by demanding that Sharonda mute her lip-gloss but also by requiring Alike to doff her khaki pants for a skirt and fuchsia sweater meant to compliment "her figure." In one of the most explosive and gut-wrenching scenes, she yells at Arthur for his sporadic presence at home, warning him, in front of Alike, that his daughter is "turning into a damn man" right before his eyes. Alike confirms their fears that she is, in her mother's words, "a nasty stinking dyke" and the scene ends with Audrey hitting and kicking Alike as she lay on the living room floor. Alike is only given a reprieve from her mother's assault because Arthur physically removes Audrey from the room. Audrey's violent parenting is echoed in a slew of films depicting villainous African American mothers and is often portrayed without question. Such a representation supports E. Franklin Frazier and Senator Patrick Moynihan's infamous and specious characterizations of African American women as emasculating, causing fathers and husbands to desert their families as well as precipitating racial inequality.[27] Audrey's focus on preventing her daughter from "turning into a man" quite plainly validates Moynihan and Frazier's counterfactual indictments of black women's emasculation.

Albeit a philanderer, Arthur's transgressions are excused because of his father–daughter bonding on the basketball court and behind the steering wheel, bonding which rarely materializes for Audrey and Alike. Audrey declares several times that Arthur and Alike are just "alike" because of the way they both sneak around at night, creating a bond between Arthur and Alike through their sexual transgressions. Arthur is emotionally wounded at work when his male coworkers taunt him about Alike's sexuality, but Audrey is not given the same full characterization. Audrey's brutal treatment of Alike further

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26 Josh Welsh, "Filmmaker Interview: The Making of *Pariah*," *Film Independent*, December 6, 2011, http://www.filmindependent.org.

27 See E. Franklin Frazier's *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1957) 221; and Senator Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965), http://www.dol.gov.

justifies Arthur's infidelity. As a stoic matriarch, she fails to emotionally connect with Alike, signaling a callousness that potentially bleeds into her marriage, driving Arthur away. This overpowering representation of African American mothers leaves little room for their offspring to be more than victims. Their misbehavior is tied to their age, lack of maturity, and strict, overbearing mother.

Audrey's treatment of Alike magnifies her non-heteronormativity, is deplorable, and is supported by a social and political context, specifically one in which racism, sexism, and capitalism shape African American family dynamics. Hoary accounts of how Audrey's religious beliefs motivate her treatment of Alike overshadow how African American characters such as Audrey historically use vexation, cruelty, and strategic thinking, à la Cleo Jericho Judson in Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy* (1948), in order to shield their children from the threat of rape, homicide, and assault, as well as the mundane experiences that range from health inequalities and accidental drowning, to car accidents, which often occur without justice.[28] Moreover, the dismal statistics reflecting an African American infant mortality rate that has long been double that of white infants begins the perpetual terror about African American children dying as soon as they are born.[29] African American writers repeatedly expose how racism and sexism construct "abnormal" parenting methods. Lutie, in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), slaps her young son for trying to supplement her meager income by shining shoes because of her fear about the danger that lurks in their New York City neighborhood, which eventually claims her 8-year-old son.[30] In Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Hannah earnestly asks her mother, Eva, if she ever loved her and Eva replies that her love is clearly demonstrated by her daughter's sheer survival, bluntly declaring that "1895 was a killer [...] Niggers was dying like flies."[31] In various ways, all of these texts expose the ubiquity of African American mortality.

Alike's sexuality, for Audrey, is another way, in addition to her race, class, and gender, that Alike is made vulnerable to danger and, potentially, death. For example, in 2012, 73.1 percent of all anti-LGBTQ homicide victims in the United States were people of color and LGBTQ people of color were 1.82 times as likely to experience physical violence vis-à-vis white LGBTQ people.[32] Homosexuality becomes an added layer of oppression that Audrey feels she must negotiate in order to protect her daughter. Because of her respectability politics, Audrey fails to recognize compulsory heterosexuality as another threat to African American women. In one of the final scenes, Alike makes a final attempt to reconcile her relationship with her mother and Audrey's brusque reply, "I sure hope you've been keeping yourself safe," with the subtext of "deviant" sexuality and sexually transmitted infection, reinforces the racialized anxiety about keeping African American children alive and free from danger. Again, *Pariah* reveals Audrey's desire to protect her children in the dramatized concluding scene featuring Alike and Arthur. He begins by

28 Dorothy West, *The Living is Easy* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 1948).

29 "QuickStats: Infant Mortality Rates, by Race and Hispanic Ethnicity of Mother—United States, 2000, 2005, and 2009," http://www.cdc.gov.

30 Ann Petry, *The Street* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).

31 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Knopf, 1973): 69.

32 King, "Hate Violence."

recounting Alike's naïve fear of autumn leaves, which seemed to come alive on the ground as children ran through them, when she was a young child. Arthur assured Alike that they were "just leaves," but Audrey always protected her by picking her up. Alike's fear of inanimate foliage and Audrey's tireless concessions to her daughter's pleas for protection demonstrates the high value placed on carving out small spaces of safety for African American children in the midst of the high probability of their death.

## Exile and Isolation

After Alike makes the final decision to enroll in an early college program and leave her "family" (Laura, Sharonda, Arthur, and Audrey), she affirms in her poetry, to her class, and to her father that she is not "running" away, but "choosing" to leave. Her choice transforms her once-painful exile into a self-imposed sequestration from her mother. It is important to note that just as Alike chooses to leave, Audrey chooses to dissolve her relationship with Alike. Nonetheless, Alike and Laura enact a female bonding that Audrey does not have. In the final scene before Alike departs, she visits Audrey at work and Audrey is still sitting alone without the camaraderie of Mrs Singletary or any other coworkers. Audrey is left to stew in her disillusionment as Arthur, Laura, and Sharonda all collectively bid Alike farewell as she leaves for college, signifying Alike's belonging and kinship and Audrey's self-imposed isolation. Alike's impending experiences at college function as another opportunity for relationships and kinship. Evoking Barbara Smith's contention, Alike also departs New York with her poetry, which functions as a vehicle for her self-expression, whereas Audrey is left to express herself through the constraining boundaries of her precarious and non-normative heterosexuality. Tethering Alike and Audrey through their exile upholds Cohen's call for a new radical queer politics that develops from "one's relation to power," exemplified by *Pariah*'s characterization of "queer" and "heterosexual" and "supersexed" and "unsexed" identities, while the film's final depiction of Alike's choice to escape and Audrey's ongoing isolation represents the work that still needs to be done to create political allies across non-normative identities and marginal positions of power in the post-Civil Rights era.

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