

## Unpacking *Pariah*: Maternal Figuration, Erotic Articulation, and the Black Queer Liberation Plot

**B**oth mainstream and academic critics responded warmly to black queer film director Dee Rees's 2011 film, *Pariah*. Mainstream critics hailed it as a universal coming-of-age drama, "an African-American variation of a familiar story" (Holden 2011), and a salient addition to a new black film movement (George 2011). Academic critics praised the film's universal appeal, citing it as an important cinematic contribution to a wider genealogy of black lesbian image making and a complex depiction of black queer womanhood. Few critics mentioned the 2007 short film that Rees had made using the same title and basic story. Thus, they made no mention of the transformation of the protagonist Alike's mother, Audrey, between the two versions. Where Audrey is strict, religious, and overprotective but ultimately redeemable in the short, she is irreparably homophobic and the central impediment's to Alike's gender and sexual freedom in the feature. The addition of the homophobic black maternal figure raises salient questions about *Pariah* specifically and the terms and conditions of contemporary black queer women's popular cultural visibility generally.<sup>1</sup> What are some of the racialized sexual logics underpinning *Pariah*? What function does the homophobic black maternal figure serve in contemporary black queer critical and cultural productions? Is black queer women's popular cultural visibility predicated on the condemnation of black maternal figures, or of black communities more broadly, as sexually regressive?

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, I leverage the term "black maternal figure," rather than "black mother," to destabilize essentialist understandings of the relationships among sex, gender, sexuality, reproduction, and motherhood. Here, I am indebted to black feminist cultural studies scholar Marlo D. David's use of the term "black maternal," which, for David, signals "non-normative and gender-fluid depictions of black maternal figures as transgressive and subversive manipulations of dominant images and narratives of black motherhood" (2016, 7). Throughout the essay, I apply the term "black maternal" to black lesbian feminist theorists, fictive biological black mothers, and fictive black communal caretakers.

This essay takes *Pariah* as a departure point from which to examine the homophobic black maternal figure as an emergent archetype within contemporary black queer coming-out narratives, specifically in novels and films. I mobilize black lesbian feminist methodologies to suggest that this archetype serves as the basis for a literary and cinematic genre that I theorize as the black queer liberation plot: a neatly packaged narrative that predicates the protagonist's sexual freedom on her flight from a central black maternal figure who often functions as a stand-in for a black community. In this essay, I use the term "queer" capaciously. "Queer" denotes both a sexual identity and a nonnormative subject position in the context of intersecting structures of power. My use of "queer" in my conception of the black queer liberation plot speaks specifically to contemporary black sexual coming-out stories that premise sexual liberation on leaving black maternal figures and communities. I argue that such narratives script a move away from black maternal figures and communities as the only and inevitable choice that one must make in order to acquire black sexual freedom. This is sometimes a valid and necessary choice for black queer subjects. However, contemporary queer aesthetic productions represent this choice as essential and preordained, thereby foreclosing a whole range of black erotic possibilities. In the process, black queer liberation plots disavow historical black lesbian feminist theorizations of the ways in which staying in black communities and struggling against homophobia potentially facilitate black erotic freedom.

Through analyses of several contemporary literary and cinematic texts, I argue that the black queer liberation plot perpetuates contemporary queer critical and cultural impulses to position flight from black maternal figures as a necessary prelude to black sexual freedom. This both reinforces dominant narratives of black sexual regression and limits understandings of the generative ways in which black lesbian feminists confronting homophobia and black heterosexism have historically theorized and articulated black liberation. In the process, I expand a broader contemporary feminist effort to interrupt queer critical and cultural impulses that posit a break from black lesbian feminist foremothers as a necessary precursor to sexual citizenship and erotic freedom.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In this and other articles (Roach 2017), I join a cadre of black queer feminist scholars such as Audre Lorde, Lyndon K. Gill, Mimi Sheller, and L. H. Stallings, among others, to draw a distinction between sexual freedom/liberation and black erotic freedom. Unlike sexual freedom/liberation, black erotic freedom entails the liberation of the black embodied, spiritual, and political being (Lorde 1982). As I indicate in this essay, sexuality studies paradigms (e.g., queer studies and queer theory) have historically been invested in narrow conceptions of sexual freedom and liberation that often preclude consideration of and deny possibilities for black erotic freedom.

With Keeling's and Edwards's insights in mind, I query the ways in which popular queer aesthetic forms mirror queer critical productions' positioning of black lesbian feminist (fore)mothers as antithetical to contemporary sexual freedom projects. How does the aesthetic depiction of black lesbian feminist (fore)mothers buttress or interrupt dominant notions of black communities as sexually regressive, a presumption that has historically functioned to justify black erotic subjugation? In what ways do queer critical and cultural productions inadvertently reinscribe racialized gendered sexual inequalities? Through an examination of *Pariah* and other contemporary black queer cultural productions, this article maps the ways in which black queer cinematic and literary forms counterintuitively serve as vehicles through which black lesbian feminisms are disavowed and black erotic freedoms foreclosed via the aesthetic production of black queer liberation plots. In so doing, I demonstrate the ways in which some black queer coming-out stories paradoxically function to secure rather than challenge black erotic subjugation in the name of black queer sexual freedom.

### **The weaponization of bad black maternal figures**

Black queer liberation plots do not exist in a critical vacuum and cannot be divorced from the long history of weaponizing black maternal figures toward black erotic subjugation. This includes the colonial production of tropes of black female hypersexuality to justify the institutionalized rape of enslaved black women, which was central to the creation of a "sexual economy of American slavery" (Davis 2002). It also extends to early twentieth-century tropes of content black mummies who served to justify the violence of what Sarah Haley has characterized as "domestic carceral regimes" (2013, 66; see also Davis 1971; Morgan 2015). In the contemporary moment, black maternal figures continue to serve as discursive and embodied repositories for the nation-state's fears, needs, desires, and values. As Hortense Spillers famously articulates, black women constitute a "signifying property *plus*" (1987, 65). Black maternal figures "describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth" (Spillers 1987, 65). That is, social, political, and economic narratives and agendas that

have both everything and nothing to do with black women and mothers are often inextricably linked to their discursive and material manifestations in public culture.

A late twentieth-century example appears in sociologist-turned-senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965), also known as the Moynihan Report. Ostensibly investigating why, in spite of then-recent civil rights gains, "the Negro American community in recent years [had gotten] *worse, not better*" socioeconomically (preface; emphasis in the original), Moynihan ultimately concludes that single black mothers, rather than structural inequalities, impeded black social, political, and economic parity with whites. He condemns "the Negro family in the urban ghettos," specifically single, black female-headed households, as the "fundamental problem" of black freedom. He posits that "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well." Single black mothers' gendered and sexual deviance should be addressed through a "new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure" (preface). Here Moynihan draws upon the explanatory power of the bad black maternal figure to create a report that would justify the contraction of the welfare state. His suggestion to impose stable heteropatriarchal family structures posits patriarchy and heterosexuality as preludes to progress, which deligitimizes alternative kinship formations, precludes a consideration of black queerness altogether, and entrenches the state-sanctioned policing of black erotic life.

The bad black maternal trope cropped up again in late 1970s through 1980s sociological discourses and public policy narratives on the precipice of America's shift from a welfare state to a neoliberal imperial power. Politicians such as Ronald Reagan, for instance, operationalized the explanatory power of the bad black mother to construct the notion of a parasitic black welfare queen who leeches on national resources in ways that inhibited national progress for all Americans. This discourse reinforced his goal of drawing attention away from structural inequalities and radical shifts in capital to justify further contraction of the welfare state, even though most welfare recipients were not black.<sup>6</sup> Though Reagan's construct of the welfare queen

<sup>6</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 57) for a discussion of how the US state has marshaled "insidious" tropes of black womanhood to justify material violence against black communities. Collins famously characterizes these and other tropes as "controlling images," which she defines as visual and discursive representations of black femininity that are constructed by the dominant society to justify the sociopolitical and economic subordination of black women and communities.

had no empirical basis, it served to reinforce what Patricia Hill Collins calls a “matrix of domination” or the organization and production of intersecting oppressions such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins 2000, 18). This matrix infringed upon black women’s erotic freedom as workers, partners, caretakers, and community members.

Black feminist critical and cultural producers challenged such infringements through alternate presentations of black maternal figures. For example, Toni Cade Bambara’s 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* aimed to interrupt discursive depictions of black maternal figures as antithetical to black erotic freedom. Pieces in the anthology explicitly critique the Moynihan Report as well as coterminous black nationalist discourses imbricated with tropes of black maternity that facilitated the marginalization of black women. Similarly, Angela Davis’s 1971 “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” mounted an incisive critique of the Moynihan Report, contextualizing the report’s demonization of black matriarchal structures within a long history of black women’s resistance to racialized gendered sexual subjugation. These and other critical productions coincided with fresh cultural representations of black women in film and literature. Pam Grier’s blaxploitation films, for instance, valorize black maternal figures and mine black feminine erotic power for collective black erotic liberation (Roach 2017). Black feminist literary productions and activism invested in securing black erotic freedom proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s (Springer 2002; Edwards 2012).

However, black feminist challenges to the state-sanctioned weaponization of black maternity could not forestall the state’s co-optation of black feminisms toward antierotic ends. As Edwards highlights, “As black women’s activism became more explicitly radical in its articulation of black women’s oppression and reimagining of the world, the realm of the popular witnessed a contraction of possibilities for black women’s agency and politics” (2012, 80). Black feminist historian Kimberly Springer (2005) highlights this paradox when she observes that post–civil rights era black films frequently gave virulent expression to the bad black maternal trope. She writes: “With black film’s commercial success in the 1970s, black women were still caretakers, but now they cared for and gave unsolicited advice to black characters . . . for black women, cultural stereotypes presented a no-win situation” (40). Springer notes that such stereotypes served either to mask or justify black women’s oppression by depicting them as dangerously powerful, as potential threats to black male leadership of black communities. From Diahann Carroll’s performance of a welfare queen in *Claudine* (1974) to the ostensibly bad black mothers in early 1990s ghetto-centric films such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), post–civil rights era black films have demonstrated a marked investment in depicting black maternal figures as potential facilitators of or threats to black (erotic) freedom.

Post-civil rights era filmic representations have illustrated black mothers' symbolic function as barometers of black ideological and affective progress, and they potentially illustrate the purchase of the bad black mother trope within contemporary popular black queer cultural productions. And *Pariah* provides a unique opportunity to apprehend the ideological work that black maternal figures like Audrey perform in black queer films, which vitally serves to make these films more broadly appealing. Indeed, while a few critics have matter-of-factly posited Alike's conflict with Audrey as one of the central tensions within the feature film's narrative, they fail to fully contextualize Audrey within a critical, sociopolitical, and cultural genealogy of representations of black women and mothers. For example, popular critic Stephen Holden notes that Alike has "a much closer bond" with her father than she does with "her chilly mother, Audrey" (2011, para. 5). Critical ethnic studies scholar David J. Leonard maintains that "the film specifically focuses on the relationship between Alike and her mother, whose religious beliefs and adherence to traditional gender roles . . . ground her contempt for Alike's sexuality" (2013, para. 3). Leonard suggests that *Pariah's* depiction of Audrey's homophobia is nuanced because it locates black homophobia within the "confines of religious conservatism" rather than in one homogenous black community (para. 3). Similarly, in her comparative analysis of Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and *Pariah*, literary theorist Nancy Kang affirms that "the family—headed by a dominant and conservative mother—is the sociopolitical apparatus through which collective traumas manifest for [Audre Lorde and Alike Freeman] amid obvious differences in setting and character construction" (2016, 268). Thus, for Kang, "both Alike and Audre endure a painful break with their mothers as a means of reclaiming self-worth" (274).

Though I do not categorically disagree with all of these assessments, merely observing that Audrey is "chilly," "religiously conservative," and "homophobic" misses a critical opportunity to interrogate *why* black mothers like Audrey appear so frequently in contemporary black queer cultural productions. There are several plausible explanations for this phenomenon. For example, coming-of-age film scripts flight from maternal figures, and by extension natal communities, as a necessary prelude to erotic freedom. Rees also framed *Pariah* as a semiautobiographical work; the suggestion that Audrey is based on a real person has likely discouraged criticism of various characters in the film. Yet the distinction between Audrey's behavior in the original short and the feature-length film invites us to treat her portrayal, in this regard, as fictional. Further, the frequency with which bad black mothers appear in contemporary queer critical productions merits interrogation, especially in light of the long history of the weaponization of such figures toward anti-black erotic ends. Thus, I

seek to examine how and why contemporary black queer cultural productions “put particular images into widespread circulation and . . . package them for various modes of consumption” through *Pariah* (Keeling 2007, 3).

Before turning to *Pariah*, I will elucidate the ways in which some contemporary black queer cultural productions actively work to uphold and shape hegemonic notions of bad black maternal figures—often metonyms for black communities—as paradigmatic impediments to black erotic freedom. By mapping the operation of the black queer liberation plot through popular cultural productions, I offer analytical tools with which to understand how queer critical and cultural productions work in tandem to generate narrative and visual pathways to black sexual liberation. As an analytic frame, the black queer liberation plot sheds light on the ways that contemporary queer cultural productions counterintuitively negate collective black erotic freedom. By premising black sexual liberation on flight from black maternal figures and communities, black queer liberation plots negate a radical black lesbian feminist politics rooted in intracommunal collective struggle and staying in the community. In highlighting the problems inherent in the black queer liberation plots, I acknowledge that black homophobia and heterosexism inhibit black queer sexual freedom. I also recognize that the choice to leave a hostile community may be necessary. Sometimes we must leave and never return. Sometimes we must leave in order to return. Nonetheless, challenging the ways in which insidious racialized, gendered, and sexual logics underpin black queer liberation plots that script black queer flight from black mothers and communities as the *only* and inevitable way to acquire black sexual liberation amplifies our possibilities for theorizing, accessing, and enacting black erotic freedom.

The black queer liberation plot animates the narrative structures of even those contemporary black films that are not explicitly identifiable as black queer coming-out narratives. If we move beyond identitarian conceptions of queerness to include black girls like fictional character Claireece Jones who, because of their blackness, both structure and fall outside of the bounds of heteronormativity, which is racialized as white, we may locate the operations of the black queer liberation plot within a spate of contemporary black films, chief among them Tyler Perry's *Madca's Family Reunion* (2006) and Lee Daniels's *Precious* (2009).<sup>11</sup> These films differently chronicle the formative experiences of black girls and women who struggle and ultimately flee economically and erotically parasitic black mothers and communities to attain nominal sexual freedoms. Like *Pariah* (2011), these films depict black mothers as paradigmatic impediments to black girls and women's sexual freedoms. And black girls must flee these mothers, and often their entire black communities, to be sexually free. In this way, black queer liberation plots position black maternal figures and communities as irreparably sexually regressive, as emblematic markers of sexual unfreedom. Despite the presence of black queer protagonists, then, black queer liberation plots function to reproduce hegemonic notions of black erotic freedom as impossible to attain within most black communities. In so doing, black queer liberation plots contravene a radical black lesbian feminist ethos of intracommunal black struggle and sociality across differences, thereby ob-

<sup>11</sup> See Erica R. Edwards (2012) for a discussion of how Steven Spielberg's adaptation of *The Color Purple* (1985) undermines the novel's insurgent black feminist politics.

scuring black lesbian feminist articulations of black sexual freedom as black freedom and vice versa.

Far more than in the 2007 short, the black queer liberation plot is palpable in the feature-length film version of *Pariab*.<sup>12</sup> In the short, two co-occurring events precipitate Alike's coming out as a lesbian. First, she goes to school clad in what might be characterized as more femme-presenting attire, a hot pink, form-fitting sweater and dainty gold hoop earrings, after a period of modeling her gender presentation on that of her black butch lesbian best friend Laura. Laura confronts Alike about her clothes in the school hallway, demanding an explanation for the change. She considers the clothes Alike usually wears—fitted caps, baggy jeans, and loose polo shirts—to be more authentic to black (butch) lesbian gender performance.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Audrey is home gathering Alike's dirty laundry and preparing to wash the family's clothes. In the process, she stumbles upon a white dildo, wrapped in a polo shirt, which Alike had brought to a black queer women's club a few nights before to buttress her "image." Distraught, Audrey calls Alike's father Arthur, tells him about the dildo, and implores him to interrogate Alike about it.

Still reeling from her encounter with Laura, Alike returns home from school and finds both her mother and father awaiting her. Furiously clutching the dildo, Arthur appears to be ready for a showdown. He demands to know "where [Alike] got some freaky-ass shit like [the dildo]" and threatens to "rip [her] ass." In the ensuing shouting match, Audrey begs Arthur to calm down. Meanwhile, Alike refuses to deny her sexual identity, which prompts Arthur to become more verbally and physically violent. He shoves Alike against the wall and spews a series of questions that sound more like accusations. He roars: "You one of them nasty-ass dykes?!" Unable to escape Arthur's verbal-cum-physical assault, Alike verbally combusts, declaring "I am gay; I am a dyke; I'm a lesbian." Arthur beats Alike to the floor, hurling homophobic slurs and threats. Audrey attempts to pull Arthur from Alike, and he throws her against the wall.

<sup>12</sup> See Cathy Cohen (1997) for a discussion of how hegemonic conceptions of queerness and heterosexuality must be calibrated to other vectors of identity and oppression, including race, class, and gender. Cohen argues that racialized heterosexual folks, particularly heterosexual black women, are sexually nonnormative and, like queer folks, stand on the outside of heteronormative privilege.

<sup>13</sup> While this comparison implicitly suggests that the short film's open-endedness generates more expansive possibilities for nuanced depictions of black queer female sexuality and erotic freedom, it is important to note that open-ended conclusions are a structural component of the short film genre. Shorts are usually produced and left open ended to whet the appetites of potential film buyers and producers. Nonetheless, it remains important to examine the logics that underpin the crucial changes made in the shift from the short to the feature-length version of the film.

In the next shot, Laura and Alike lie in Laura's bed while Laura tenderly caresses Alike's bruised body. This scene precedes the final scene in which Alike and Laura happily share a box of ice cream on a rooftop. Arthur knocks on the rooftop door, and Laura answers. She searches Alike's face, evidently for permission to let Arthur onto the rooftop. Alike nods. Laura steps aside. Arthur tentatively approaches Alike. The short film culminates with the tableau of Arthur and Alike facing each other, their expressions suggesting they are on the precipice of reconciliation. However, the viewer is offered no additional insight into Alike's future. The film offers no dialogue, diegetic sound, or explicit narrative closure. The viewer is left pondering what comes of Arthur's ostensible attempt at reconciliation. Is Arthur successful? Does Alike stay with Laura or go home? Do Arthur and Audrey soften their resistance to cultivate space for Alike and the articulation of her sexuality? Does Alike continue to stay with Laura? Does she completely cut ties with her community?

The 2011 feature-length version of the film offers responses to each of these questions, only in this version, Audrey is both the central impediment to Alike's sexual freedom and the ostensibly violent parent with whom Alike must cut ties to be sexually free. In the feature-length version, Audrey consistently attempts to preempt Alike's disclosure of her sexual identity, urging her daughter to wear conventionally feminine clothes and attempting to restrict her social engagements with her best friend, Laura.<sup>14</sup> Audrey believes that her attempts will stymie Alike's burgeoning black lesbian gender performance and erotic desires. After church one day, Audrey introduces her coworker's daughter, Bina, to Alike, saying that she attends Alike's school and walks the same route Alike does to get there. Initially, Alike begrudgingly hangs out with Bina to appease Audrey. However, over time, they become friends, bonding over their shared interests in poetry and Afro-punk music. Bina affirms Alike's poetry and nonjudgmentally asserts that she notices that Alike dresses differently at school than she does on the way to and from it. Alike is initially wary and defensive about Bina's observations but begins to open up to her. On the walk home from school one day, Bina invites Alike up to her room to listen to music, where Bina teases Alike with a teddy bear before kissing her. The kiss startles Alike, who seems concerned that Bina would assume that she is interested in girls and surprised that Bina is attracted to girls herself. Alike bolts from Bina's room, later reconnecting with her in the school hallway the following day, where they briefly unpack the encounter before Bina invites her to hang out and spend the night at her home. Alike obliges.

<sup>14</sup> See Nneka Onuorah's *The Same Difference* (2015) for a discussion of hegemonic gender presentation and sexual pairing norms in contemporary black queer women's communities.

They attend an Afro-punk party and hang out with other queer youth at the pier before returning to Bina's room, where they have sex. When Alike awakens from their one and only night together and inquires as to the status of what she presumes to be their new relationship, Bina insists that "last night was just playing around," as she is not "gay, gay" but rather "just doing her thing." Alike asserts that Bina cannot just "deny that it happened," and Bina implores a now heartbroken Alike to keep their encounter a secret.

Alike flees Bina's brownstone, kicking down metal trash cans and screaming out in anguish. In the next shot, Alike arrives at home to find Audrey awaiting her, demanding to know where she has been. She knows it has been hours since Alike left Bina. Alike dodges, demanding to be left alone. She darts upstairs, where she trashes her room and strips off her clothes before falling asleep on her bedroom floor. The next shot features Alike waking up disoriented, jolted by the sounds of Audrey screaming at Arthur. Audrey charges Arthur with infidelity and poor parenting, blaming him for what she perceives as Alike's gendered and sexual transgressions. Hearing her name, Alike rushes down the stairs, but her little sister, Sharonda, pleads with her to stay away from their parents' argument, to stay in her room and resist the call to come out, as it were. Alike refuses, rushing headlong into her parents' argument. Audrey exhorts Arthur to ask Alike if she is gay. Arthur begs Alike to deny Audrey's accusations, and Alike confirms them, declaring that she is "gay," "a dyke," a "lesbian." In this version, Audrey strikes Alike and pummels her to the floor. The next few shots replicate the short version of the film, with Laura consoling Alike, Laura and Alike sharing ice cream on the rooftop, and Arthur coming to the rooftop to make amends.

In the feature, Alike does talk with Arthur on the rooftop. She informs him of her acceptance into an early college program at UC Berkeley, for which she needs parental consent. He gently tells her that "[she] doesn't have to do this," but Alike echoes a poem she had previously recited in class, saying that she is "not running," but, rather, "choosing." After agreeing to sign the consent form, Arthur convinces Alike to attempt a reconciliation with Audrey. Alike remarks that she agrees that "God doesn't make mistakes." This scene precedes a failed reconciliation with Audrey, wherein Alike tells Audrey she loves her, and Audrey will not say that she loves her back. In the final shot of the film, Arthur, Laura, and Sharonda drive Alike to the bus that will shuttle her to her new life in Berkeley.

Notably, in the short, Audrey is positioned as domesticated, caring, and pious. She washes the family's clothes, defers to her husband on critical issues such as talking with and disciplining their children, and attempts to intervene in physical violence against Alike. Her disapproval never manifests as violent control of Alike's sexuality. Meanwhile, Arthur embodies a host of dominant

mythologies about black masculinity: he is large-bodied, verbally intimidating, and physically violent, operationalizing his body to violently manage black femininity and sexuality. Yet even this trope of black masculinity is destabilized when Arthur finds his way to Alike to issue an apology on the rooftop at the end of the short film.

The feature-length film continues this nuanced depiction of Arthur, while villainizing Audrey by failing to grant her a similarly redemptive moment with Alike in the end. For example, in the feature, Arthur and Alike share a deep bond despite his unwillingness to recognize or affirm her sexuality. Though he talks roughly to and cheats on his wife, audiences are implicitly conditioned to understand, if not accept, his actions as an outcome of Audrey's general unlikability and erotic repression. Indeed, both Alike and Arthur experience Audrey as an impediment to their erotic freedoms: Alike's lesbian sexual subjectivity and Arthur's extramarital erotic engagements. And while it is arguably refreshing to witness Arthur's complicated performance of black masculinity, which disrupts insidious mythologies, the black queer liberation plot offers insight into why producers and consumers so readily endorsed and accepted the shift from Arthur to Audrey as the violent, sexually regressive parent.

The feature-length film reproduces a long critical, political, and aesthetic tradition wherein black women, especially black maternal figures, both exemplify and frustrate dominant notions of black sexual regression and deviance and function as impediments to black erotic freedom. *Pariah* narratively and visually predicates Alike's erotic freedom on her flight from Audrey, as well as other black maternal figures within her community, including Laura and Sharonda. The narrative structure of the feature-length film refuses Audrey a redemptive moment, even though Audrey is clearly a complex character with her own struggles to find acceptance within her family and broader community. Admittedly, failing to read Audrey's performance of black maternity likely reinscribes and exemplifies part of the point I am trying to make, which is that black queer liberation plots invalidate nuanced engagements with black maternal figures and, by extension, black communities as salient conduits for black erotic freedom, but this is beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless I will note that, like queer critical productions, *Pariah* premises black queer sexual freedom on the move away from black maternal figures in the interest of individual sexual freedom rather than collective erotic freedom for Alike as well as her community members.

*Pariah* thus exemplifies the black queer liberation plot—a set of sexual liberation narratives that predicate their protagonist's sexual freedom on her flight from black maternal figures, who often serve as stand-ins for the black community. It contravenes a black lesbian feminist politics that champions natal black communities as salient sites of black erotic freedom. In the process,

such plots reinscribe queer critical and cultural productions that limit our ability to mine what Edwards conceives of as the “the surplus energy of black feminism that remains available to contemporary viewers and cultural theorists” (2012, 84). For this reason, I remain compelled by the *Pariah* short film’s unresolved conclusion—the imaginative possibilities opened up by the refusal of closure, the refusal to extricate Alike from the people who love her, the fact that she does not board a bus to a prestigious university not unlike the ones that have slowly murdered the many black lesbian feminist poets who came before her.<sup>15</sup> I also ponder what it might have looked like for Alike to have stayed, to have “done her thing” despite and perhaps because of the black mother and community that made the very notion of doing so seem (im)possible.

### **Toward a politics of black erotic articulation**

In this essay, I have mapped black lesbian feminist and queer critical and cultural tensions between embodied black stillness within and flight from black maternal figures and communities. I have argued that there is an insidious queer critical and cultural impulse to represent black maternal figures and communities as spaces of sexual regression. This insight has animated my theorization of an emergent genre that I term the “black queer liberation plot.” Stories based on this plot epitomize the ways in which contemporary queer critical and cultural texts both gesture to and foreclose narrative and visual possibilities for radical articulations of black erotic freedom, specifically ones that challenge dominant presumptions of black communities as irreparably homophobic. I have mobilized this hermeneutic to engage *Pariah* as well as other contemporary black queer cultural productions that position flight from black maternal figures and communities as necessary precursors to black queer sexual liberation, at the expense of black erotic freedom. In so doing, I have posited that while the black queer liberation plot suggests fresh representational possibilities for black queer figures, it reproduces dominant narratives of black sexual regression in ways that limit understandings of the nuanced and productive ways in which black lesbian feminists have historically theorized and articulated black erotic freedom. In what follows, I briefly engage black lesbian feminist theorist Evelyn Hammonds to encourage more fine-grained examinations of black queer critical and cultural representation, imploring critics to investigate not just what is visible on screen but also the narrative tactics and visual logics that work to secure and sustain black queer visibility.

<sup>15</sup> See Christian (1994) and Hong (2015) for critiques of the ways in which the (neoliberal) university slowly murders black women in general, and black feminists in particular.

In her 1994 essay “Black (W)holes: Toward a Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Hammonds argues that queer studies’ presumption of “whiteness as the normative state of existence” has facilitated a failure to articulate a conception of racialized sexuality (128). Hammonds also implicates black feminists in the failure to articulate a conception of racialized sexuality. She posits that black feminists’ historical investment in the politics of respectability has contributed to the policing and silencing of black female sexuality in general and black queer female sexuality in particular. She suggests that while black feminists should articulate a conception of racialized sexuality to negate legacies of black sexual silence and invisibility, visibility in and of itself will not liberate black women. Hammonds explains that “an appeal to the visual is not uncomplicated or innocent. As theorists we have to ask how vision is structured, and, following that, we have to explore how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who *see* and *speak* in the world” (141). This we must apply to the ways in which black women are seen and not seen by the dominant society and to how they see themselves in a different landscape. But in overturning the “politics of silence” the goal cannot be merely to be seen: visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence, nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal should be to develop a “politics of articulation” (141). This politics would build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act.

Hammonds’s directives prove fruitful for contemporary critical and cultural engagements with black queer female sexuality and representation. As I have demonstrated, uncomplicated valorizations of black queer female representations—in theory and contemporary cultural production—often function to obscure questions around what must be present in a black queer female representation to make it universally palatable. In the academy, this has led to the positioning of black lesbian feminists as foundational for both queer and racialized sexuality studies projects, but not generative. In popular aesthetic forms, it has led to the depiction of black maternal figures as obstacles to black sexual liberation. These moves not only reinforce dominant logics of black sexual regression, which continue to justify state-sanctioned infringements on black erotic life, but limit theory and cultural productions’ capacity to interrupt existing asymmetrical social relations.

I am invested in Hammonds’s notion of articulation precisely because it is not a call for more positive black feminine representations. Indeed, in this essay, I am not calling for more ostensibly positive black maternal or black queer representations. If Hammonds’s notion of articulation is fundamentally rooted in a desire to locate more robust possibilities for black erotic freedom, it makes sense to advocate a politics of black erotic articulation

that can be calibrated to address the specific issue of the black queer liberation plot. In black queer liberation plots, black erotic freedom is stymied by a critical, political, and aesthetic disavowal of black maternal figures generally—and black lesbian feminist foremothers particularly. This impedes black erotic freedom because it dismisses those figures who continue to demonstrate their ability to teach us about the racialization of sexual citizenship and the polymorphous strategies we must mobilize to acquire black erotic freedom. A politics of black erotic articulation thus necessarily involves a critical and cultural reclamation of the black maternal as a conduit through which to access black erotic freedom. This is consistent with contemporary black feminist efforts to recuperate the maternal “as a mode of embodying the erotic” (Musser 2016, 356) and “to look back on other genealogies of black feminism and womanism cognizant of the tone, pitch, and mood of sovereignty of sexual desire—mama’s porn—if we ever want our own voices to be heard in political discussions of rights and sexuality” (Stallings 2015, 60). A politics of black erotic articulation is, fundamentally, a black lesbian feminist project invested in theorizing polymorphous possibilities for black liberation.

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