

**“I am not running, I am choosing”:  
Black Feminist Empowerment and the Continuation  
of a Literary Tradition in Julie Dash’s *Daughters  
of the Dust* (1991) and Dee Rees’ *Pariah* (2011)**

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**Abstract**

*This essay argues that contemporary films by Black American women filmmakers should be seen as cinematically carrying on the literary tradition that began in the 1970s and has prepared the path for this group. Since then, one has been able to observe a growing number of Black women writers who differed from preceding authors by providing visions of Black women who found the self-esteem and self-empowerment necessary to overcome negative circumstances. The filmmakers offer a continuation of this tradition; dealing with the challenges of the often condescending gaze of mainstream productions, they turned their own cinematic Black women into active agents of change.*

*Keywords: Black women writers, Black film, Black women filmmakers, African American literature, African American filmmakers, Julie Dash, Dee Rees*

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*We can take our pain, work with it, recycle it,  
and transform it so that it becomes a source of power.*

bell hooks (*Yearning* 203)

*Heartbreak opens onto the sunrise for even breaking is opening and I am broken, I am open. Broken into the new life without pushing in, open to the possibilities within, pushing out. See the love shine in through my cracks? See the light shine out through me? I am broken, I am open, I am broken open. See the love light shining through me, shining through my cracks, through the gaps. My spirit takes journey, my spirit takes flight, could not have risen otherwise and I am not running, I am choosing. Running is not a choice from the breaking. Breaking is freeing, broken is freedom. I am not broken, I am free.*

Alike (*Pariah*)

In her 1998 essay about Black women filmmakers, Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson argued that the necessity of creating their own, empowering cinematic images became of fundamental concern for Black women in the latter half of the twentieth century. According to Gibson-Hudson, throughout film history, all too often, Black women had to observe that their image as

[...] the Black woman, as presented within mainstream cinemas, [was] a one-dimensional depiction. Black women [were] shown as sex objects, passive victims, and as “other” in relation to males (black and white) and white females. Worldwide, Black women’s images [were] prescribed by narrative texts that reflect patriarchal visions, myths, stereotypes, and/or fantasies of Black womanhood. Consequently, these representations limit[ed] the probability of an audience seeing Black women as figures of resistance or empowerment. (43)

Out of this necessity, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Black women in the United Kingdom, Canada, the U.S., and the Caribbean began to make their own films, thus offering themselves the empowering images of Black women that had been missing. Among them were filmmakers such as Julie Dash, Alile Sharon Larkin, Monica Freeman, Camille Billops, and Daresha Kyi, with Dash being the most well-known among them.<sup>1</sup>

In their own films, these directors picked up those limiting and often condescending presentations of mainstream productions which had either portrayed the Black woman as a passive, often naïve supporting sidekick to white protagonists or had used her presentation as an excuse to gaze at the Black female body. Black women filmmakers took this mainstream gaze as an inviting challenge for their starting points, but now they turned the passive Black woman who was being gazed at into the active agent, who transformed the condescending gaze into a loving and accepting look, thus offering herself her own empowerment.

However, the idea of empowerment through their own cultural productions began earlier, with the Black women writers of the 1970s. Since then Black women writers have presented empowered Black women in their texts, allowing later filmmakers to follow in their footsteps. Turning this once-degrading gaze into a loving look still offers one of the

most appealing challenges for Black women writers and filmmakers today. To demonstrate the continuation of the literary tradition in film, I have chosen to discuss two films, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) by Julie Dash and *Pariah* (2011) by Dee Rees.

Concerning literature, many theorists have pointed to the content of healing, hope, and agency in Black women writers' texts that began in the latter half of the twentieth century. The Black feminist theorist Cheryl Wall, for example, points out that the protagonists of these later texts partook in a mood of righteous anger and triumphant struggle that enabled them to undertake a psychological journey that took them from victim to survivor. According to Wall, these characters defined and "position[ed] themselves respectively as potential and active agents of social change" (3). The concept of the individual's journey to agency can be found in many texts by African American women writers since the late 1970s, such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Maya Angelou, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Sherley Anne Williams, Ntozake Shange, Bebe More Campbell, and Terry McMillan. These writers differ significantly from their predecessors because they do not limit their fiction to descriptions of reality and mere criticism of negative societal circumstances. Previous writers such as Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Ann Petry, and Dorothy West depicted spiritually broken Black women who were unable to liberate themselves from oppression. In comparison with these earlier African American women's texts from the Harlem Renaissance or the Naturalist and Modernist periods, the later texts allowed struggling protagonists not only to recognize their negative circumstances but also to find the mental and spiritual power within themselves to often change those circumstances. They have provided visions of Black women who, with the help of some form of sisterly communities, have found the self-esteem and self-empowerment necessary either to overcome racist, sexist, and economic oppression or at least not to allow these circumstances to crush them. Speaking of Morrison, for example, Barbara Christian argued that in her novels, Morrison "makes an attempt [...] to figure out the possibilities of healing and community for her women characters" (180). Joanne V. Gabbin, too, claimed that because of these writers, a transformation had happened in African American literature; for the first time, African American women were "cleansing, healing and empowering the images of themselves" (247). Furthermore, Susan Willis saw the unifying contribution of these texts in the writers' capacities to imagine "the future in the present, [a] future born out of the context of oppression. It produces utopia out of the transformation of the most basic features of daily life" (159).

The move from passive victim to active survivor and agent in these African American women authors' texts is often connected to an initial process of a spiritual or psychological awakening and subsequent journey. Deborah McDowell emphasizes that the motif of the psychological journey represents a major modifier for these texts; she writes:

Though one can also find the [journey] motif in the works of Black male writers, they do not use it in the same way as do Black female writers. For example, the journey of the Black male character in works by Black men takes him underground [...] It is primarily political and social in its implications [...] The Black female's journey, on the other hand, though at times touching the political and social, is basically a personal and psychological journey. (437)

Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) serves as an example for this claim. The novel's protagonist, Velma Henry, after trying to commit suicide, is asked by Minnie Ransom, her spiritual healer, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (3). Minnie asks the question because she realizes that Velma can overcome her breakdown only when Velma herself first decides that she wants to heal psychologically, too. Minnie Ransom's question about the self-activated healing points to the idea of self-empowerment in African American women writers' texts. The image of the psychological journey—the protagonist's growing awareness of his or her own spiritual powers and agency—is essential in the process of empowerment because it serves as the foundation for the next step. Furthermore, their initially struggling and finally succeeding protagonists all improve, to a greater or lesser extent, their immediate surroundings. Empowered by their spiritual attitudes, they work on communal improvements, which allow the reader to imagine what a possible future in these fictitious communities could look like. Sandi Russell's explanation of Alice Walker's texts, for example, illustrates how the "move from loss to hope" causes the protagonists to participate in the "transformation of society" (122). Joanne V. Gabbin, too, observes the literary protagonists' active participation in societal changes in these texts. She claims that because of an "unabashed confrontation with the past and [a] clear-eyed vision of the future," the texts move from "protest toward revelation and informed social change" (249).

When trying to locate the nexus between individual empowerment and collective survival, one is able to find a critical engagement of Black women artists not only in literature, but also in film adaptations and original film scripts. Since the 1980s, one has been able to point to a growing body of cinematic empowerment narratives that depict individual journeys toward healing, which are accompanied by communities of sisterhood. Film adaptations and films with original scripts can be regarded as the visual continuation of the written text.

In her essay on Black feminist visual theory, Judith Wilson argues that these late twentieth-century Black feminist cultural productions and interventions became necessary because of "feminists and poststructuralists and the emergence of visual theory in Europe and the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s," which far too often again made the mistake of reducing Black spaces to a preoccupation with the Black female body intersected with the gaze (21). As I stated earlier, throughout the history of cinematic productions, the Black female body had always been intersected with the gaze; yet now, unfortunately, mainstream feminism addressed the gaze and the female body in an all-embracing discourse without paying any attention to particular circumstances in regard to class or race. Such a one-dimensional discourse simply asked for the intervention of two disciplinary locales, Black feminist artistic productions and Black feminist critical film studies.

In addition, Black women had to struggle with another stereotyping gaze in visual cultural productions during the same period. Since the 1970s, one could also observe the arrival and subsequent success in mainstream of a growing group of Black male filmmakers such as Melvin van Peebles, later his son Mario van Peebles, Charles Burnett, Ernest Dickerson, Spike Lee, John Singleton, and the brothers Albert and Allen Hughes. Yet, as John Williams argues in his review of Black filmmakers, as laudable as their advent was on the commercial film industry scene, their "homeboy style" did nothing to counter the existing stereotypical images of Black women found already in the media. It was in her 1977

manifesto "*A Place in Time and Killer of Sheep*: Two Radical Definitions of Adventure Minus Women" that Black filmmaker Kathleen Collins claimed that earlier Black films, such as *Shaft* and *Superfly*, simply reproduced stereotypical images of Black women. Williams maintains that the same critique should also be applied to the later Black male filmmakers (n.p.).

According to Judith Wilson, the long-overdue intervention came with a group of Black women filmmakers who have emerged since the late 1980s because they "frequently engaged aspects of current body/gaze discourses. But in doing so, they often push these preoccupations into unfamiliar territory—invoking the intricate, aesthetic [...] their art points to another universe of questions around black self-esteem, cultural heritage, and aesthetic preferences" (21). In her analysis of Black women filmmakers, Jacqueline Bobo calls this the genesis of a tradition (3).

In her 2012 essay "Tuning into *Precious*: The Black Women's Empowerment Adaptation and the Interruption of the Absurd," Erica R. Edwards points to an additional format for Black feminist cultural productions that have shifted their focus from mere literary texts to the wider realm of pop art. To find empowerment narratives, one should now also look to the film and television adaptations of novels by Black women writers. Edwards writes, "Adaptations have thus provided the language for the collision of black feminist literary culture and mainstream black popular culture" (75). Naming the adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982/1985) the starting point, Edwards sees a steady continuum with Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983/1989), Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992/1995), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987/1998), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937/2005), and finally, Sapphire's *Push* (1996) as the film *Precious* (2009). Edwards claims, "Understanding adaptations as a practice and a genre corresponding to the emergence of pop feminism from the 1970s to the 2000s is necessary for understanding how the narrative logics and technologies of salvation in the film contain black women's empowerment within a compensatory frame of individual success and eschew a radical ethos of collective survival" (74). With her theoretical suggestions about film adaptations, Edwards echoes the nexus between literature and visual cultural productions.

The 'gaze' as a theoretical substructure has been of essential importance for Black feminist discourse from the very start. As bell hooks already maintained in 1992 in her groundbreaking essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," racist U.S. history taught Black people not to look; during the time of slavery, for example, "the politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze" (107). The slaves very well understood the power dynamics of constantly being gazed at and simultaneously being denied the right to gaze. Referring to Michel Foucault's contemplation of domination and relations of power, hooks argued that the slaves knew that "even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of dominations that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" ("Oppositional Gaze" 107).

Locating the gaze and its power dynamics in later twentieth- and twenty-first century Black feminist theory, Farah Jasmine Griffin advances this idea by adding the concept of the erotic to power relations born out of the gaze. In her analysis of late twentieth-century novels of slavery and their use of the erotic as resistance and a means of healing, Griffin

observes that while “white supremacist and patriarchal discourses construct black women’s bodies as abnormal, diseased and ugly, black women writers seek to reconstitute these bodies” (“Textual Healing” 521). Griffin argues that Black women writers who started to “explore female bodies as sites of healing, pleasure, and resistance [were] engaged in a project of re-imagining the black female body—a project done in the service of those readers who have inherited the older legacy of the black body as despised, diseased and ugly” (“Textual Healing” 521). Griffin regards Audre Lorde’s earlier call for nominating the erotic as a resource for empowerment as a vanguard action for later Black feminist theory. In her pioneering essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde had encouraged women of color in general and lesbians of color in particular to celebrate the erotic as sensual as well as political resource, a tool for empowerment.<sup>2</sup> While Griffin cautions one to see the essentialism in Lorde’s claims—indeed, many scholars have criticized Lorde’s text as too essentialist—Griffin, nevertheless, notes the importance of Lorde’s contribution by pointing to the historical legacy of Black women bodies. Griffin writes, “The burden of a historical legacy that deems black women ‘over-sexed’ makes the reclamation of the erotic black female body difficult. Unless the way that body is constructed in history and the continued pain of that construction are confronted, analyzed and challenged, it is almost impossible to construct an alternative that seeks to claim the erotic and its potential for resistance” (1996: 526). Therefore, it is important, as Griffin insists, to “return to the site of the most formidable violence for black women as slaves” (1996: 526).

The best example for a cinematic return is offered by Julie Dash and her well-known film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).<sup>3</sup> Here, too, women learn to empower themselves by confronting the physical and psychological violence done to their bodies since slavery. Dash allows and enables her women to finally come to the understanding that the gaze at the female slave’s body had caused violence not only during the times of slavery but had created for them a sense of unworthiness and ugliness of their own bodies. The film takes place on a small island off the Atlantic coast of South Carolina in 1902. Here we meet an African American extended family, the Peazants, on the eve of their departure from the sea island in the South to a big city in the North. Although the setting of the movie is in 1902 and seems at first to be unrelated to the Black community of the 1990s, Dash nevertheless deals in *Daughters* with problems that, according to her, Black people in general and Black women in particular still face today in American society. Like Walker, Morrison, and Naylor, Dash hopes to influence her own community toward questioning current attitudes and circumstances and considering possible changes. In fact, Dash claims that one of her main objectives with *Daughters* was to influence her own community toward political agency. In her interview with bell hooks, she agrees with hooks that the film intends “progressive political intervention” (32).

With *Daughters*, one can claim that the film succeeds with one of the necessities Black feminists have desired to see as a major concern for Black women—the struggle with self-love. One of *Daughters*’ main concerns deals with the self-destructing denial of physical and spiritual beauty by Black women. With her film, Dash intends to convey to Black women that the strength they need for survival in a society that is still hostile toward them lies in each other and in their unity, yet instead of realizing this necessity, most women in *Daughters of the Dust* are busy hating oneself and each other. Yellow Mary, for example, one of the Peasant women, who left the island many years ago and returns now to attend

the reunion, experiences a tremendous amount of ostracism and hatred by her own family because she has returned as a prostitute. Yellow Mary indeed stretches her family's tolerance to the extreme because she not only comes home as a well-to-do prostitute, but additionally brings with her another prostitute with whom she seems to have a lesbian relationship. Encountering Yellow Mary, all the other Peasant women suddenly seem very eager to show off their own spotless and righteous lives. They greet her with degrading and hateful remarks such as "All that yellow, wasted"; "The heifer has returned"; "The shameless hussy." When Yellow Mary offers cookies as a homecoming present, the reactions range from "I wouldn't eat them anyhow, if she touched them" to "You never know where her hands could have been. I can just smell the heifer."

All these Peasant women are so blinded by their own dreams of success in the North that they do not want to comprehend that Yellow Mary's dreams of financial and personal success failed because of the mainland's racist and sexist society which ensured that Yellow Mary and her husband did not see the fulfillment of their dreams. For example, when Yellow Mary worked as a wet nurse for a family, she was treated without any respect or rights; in addition, her employer raped her repeatedly. Now, during her visit to her family, she tells Eula, one of her cousins, that this was the way she "got ruined" and that the experience turned her into a prostitute. But the Peasants do not allow themselves to see any possible connections between Yellow Mary's failed dreams and their own high hopes, because such a realization would carry a dangerous implication for the fulfillment of their own dreams. Instead, they choose to blame Yellow Mary herself for her failed life. Even when Yellow Mary tells them that "the raping of colored women is as common as the fish in the sea," they still claim that it was all Yellow Mary's own fault. They still believe that their own new life in the North will be completely different from Yellow Mary's and that, of course, their daughters will not face any similar problems.

Dash believes that such self-hatred can be overcome and that unity can be established through the memory of Black history and culture. Emphasizing Dash's ideas on memory in regard to a group vision, Jacquie Jones explains that in *Daughters*, "Dash authenticates the collective memory as essential and as necessary" (21). To illustrate her point, Dash uses the image of the ancestors. According to her, the Peasants can succeed in any society, be it Southern or Northern, only if they begin to remember their ancestors' spirit and their determination to overcome any negative circumstances together as a united group. They should realize again their uniqueness as a group by remembering their recent African American history, their ancient African heritage, and the beauty and richness of their own culture. In his discussion of *Daughters*, Manthia Diawara explains that the movie urges African Americans in the 1990s "to know where we came from, before knowing where we are going" (14). Toni Cade Bambara supports Diawara's thesis when she lauds the movie's potential by saying that "the film, in fact, invites the spectator to undergo a triple process of recollecting the dismembered past, recognizing and reappraising cultural icons and codes, and recentering and revalidating the self" ("Reading" 124).

The Peasants' ancestors could not afford to dream about womanhood in the same way that white women could dream about their virtues and their true womanhood. Of course, they could be angry and frustrated about the Black woman's situation and hope that justice might be served to her in the future, but they knew they could not afford to blame the victim because it would have destroyed their unity as Black people. If they had started to

blame the victim, they first would have had to blame the woman who got ruined, and then the man who did not protect her, and then they would have been busy blaming each other for their failures.

The change in family members' attitudes toward Yellow Mary happen when Eula, who was raped and 'ruined' by a white man herself, observes so much hatred among the Peazant women that she breaks down and cries:

As far as this place is concerned, we never enjoyed our womanhood. Deep inside, we believed that they ruined our mothers, and their mothers before them. And we live our lives always expecting the worst because we feel we don't deserve any better [...] You think you can cross over to the mainland and run away from it? You're going to be sorry, sorry if you don't change your way of thinking before you leave this place [...] If you love yourselves, then love Yellow Mary, because she's part of you [...] We carry too many scars from the past. Our past owns us [...] Let's live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds.

In this scene, Eula proves that she fully understands the Peazant women's dilemma with the past and the present. Using the example of the Black woman's situation in American history, Eula attempts to show her family that they have tried for too long to ignore their past and have somewhat blinded themselves with some other fabricated ideas. Therefore, she tells them about their dilemma: "Deep inside we believe that even God can't heal the wounds of our past or protect us from the world that put shackles on our feet."

Because of Eula's urging, most members finally realize how far their hatred and disrespect have already carried them. They now understand Eula's insistence on seeing how the past really happened rather than how most of them have tried to invent it by simply erasing certain negative memories and events. The specific example of the Black woman's situation in American history helps the Peazants to understand Eula's insistence that "we've got to change our way of thinking." They finally realize that they have to see themselves as a particular group with a specific history, thus enabling them to truly find the love and respect for oneself and each other.

Dash's *Daughters* can be regarded as a cinematic foundation for the later Black feminist filmmakers who took Dash's ideas of self-love to another level. Analyzing and comparing the work of second-wave and of contemporary Black feminist theorists, Jennifer Nash argues in her essay of 2013, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality," that the insistence on providing images of self-love has always been one of the most urgent, but also most powerful aspects of Black feminist theories. However, self-love as theoretical concept has undergone a change. While earlier scholars such as bell hooks, Ntozake Shange, or Patricia Hill Collins, for example, saw love politics as "claiming, embracing, and restoring the wounded black female self," contemporary Black feminist theories insist that love-politics transcends "the self and produc[es] new forms of political communities" (Nash 3). By calling this *affective politics*, Nash sees a departure from earlier Black feminist political works and their association with identity politics; *affective politics* describe how "bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism," thus producing political movements (3).

With *Pariah*, the 2011 film by Black filmmaker Dee Rees, one finds the cinematic execution of Nash's ideas. Originally a 28-minute short film (2007), Rees expanded it into a full-length feature film with Spike Lee acting as her mentor and the executive producer for the 2011 film. In *Pariah*, one can claim, a contemporary Black feminist insists on providing a mind map for self-love. Dee Rees reclaims the Black woman's body as her own by addressing the topic of lesbianism in the Black community, thus entering the still very small group of Black lesbian filmmakers.<sup>4</sup> Rees does not shy away from dealing with the homophobic attitudes still widespread in Black communities; through her protagonist, seventeen-year-old Alike, Rees shows the mental anguish such hatred and denial can cause for young Black women who are trying to define their places and identities in their respective Black communities.

The topic of Black lesbianism and Black homophobia has been part of the Black feminist discourse from the very beginning, albeit grudgingly over the last few decades. Farah Jasmine Griffin demonstrates that early Black feminist criticism provided a forum for this particular discourse from the very beginning; indeed, "brilliant black lesbian feminists have been central participants in the articulation of black feminism" ("That the Mothers" 500). Referring to Black queer studies scholars Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, Griffin notes that their vital contributions to earlier Black feminist discourse in the early 1980 came with the fact that they criticized other Black feminist theorists for their failures to adequately address issues of sexuality; by engaging these other Black feminists in their arguments, early Black feminist criticism "offered insight into the relationship between sexuality, race, and gender [...] a conversation [that] was not yet taking place in the broader field of African American studies" ("That the Mothers" 500). Yet, subsequent Black feminist theoretical debates seemed to ignore the specific focus of these earlier debates. Joy James echoes this critique of Black feminist studies; according to her, the scholars of later decades were more concerned with the critique of white feminist racism and mainstream Black sexism to which they indeed offered important contributions. Only recently, one can observe that Black feminism has been expanding and redefining liberation politics and rhetoric in order to address "the issues of power that reflect black women as an outsider group and outsiders within this grouping such as lesbians/bisexual/ transgendered women, prostitutes, the poor, incarcerated, and immigrant women" (James 27).

In the field of Black feminist media studies, while issues of representations of the female Black body have, according to Kara Keeling, been of growing recent concern, the difference in sexual orientation has complicated the consolidation of the category "Black woman"; for this reason, Keeling calls for more engagement of feminist scholars with Black lesbian media studies as Black lesbians "become increasingly visible in the media—or rendered invisible within a new (white) queer visibility" ("Black Feminist" 338). Simultaneously, Keeling warns of a trend she also observes in already existing scholarly discourse which mainly reduces contributions to "commonly deployed binary oppositions between 'visibility' and 'invisibility,' 'giving voice' and 'silence'" ("Joining" 213).<sup>5</sup> As laudable as these attempts are, Keeling argues that these positive images "produced as counters to stereotypical and negative images of blackness" reduce their subjects to the mere politics of representation ("Joining" 214). The discourse once again reduces, wittingly or unwittingly, Black lesbianism to the gaze of the audience. To avoid the danger of the simple gaze, cinematic representations should offer multi-layered and complex

depictions. Keeling suggests mining the terrain of the invisible for ways of “transfiguring currently oppressive and exploitative relations” that are interconnected, including homophobia, racism, classism, and sexism (“Joining” 219).<sup>6</sup> By trying out this new approach, one is able to create the new category of the “Black lesbian” which should not be confused as simply being another hybrid construction.

The film *Pariah* offers such a new reading. Alike, the seventeen-year-old protagonist who lives with her family in Brooklyn, struggles to live up to her parents’ ideas of a lovable, pretty, and femininely behaving young Black woman while simultaneously trying to discover her identity as a lesbian and as a poetess. At the same time, she is also struggling to live up to the expectations of her close friend Laura, herself a lesbian, who introduces Alike to the local gay club scene, hoping that it will help Alike in her search for her identity.

A one-dimensional reading of the film would be to read it as a coming-out story of a young woman who overcomes the obstacles thrown into her path by her parents and her community. Such a reading would reduce Alike’s representation to the simple gaze and the binary structure which Keeling criticizes. However, *Pariah* is more complex than that. The title suggests the different and intertwined aspects of the film. While a superficial viewing might suggest that Alike is the pariah, the different characters are entangled in such a way that several of them cause each other to be pariahs. The most obvious ones are Alike, Laura, and Audrey, who is Alike’s mother.

Alike’s best friend Laura is desperately trying to win back her own mother’s attention and love. Laura lives with one of her sisters because their mother threw Laura out of the house after her coming out. Laura’s class background is such that any form of higher education is still considered a very special accomplishment. Since Laura knows she will not change her sexual identity, she hopes that she can win back her mother’s love by studying for her GED and then going on to a community college. In fact, it seems that whenever one watches Laura studying, her only motivation for receiving a higher education is her desire to regain her mother’s love. When she eventually earns her GED, she goes home to her mother, hoping that finally, she will be accepted again as a daughter. When she shows her certificate, she desperately states to her stone-faced mother that she accomplished something in her life, that she finally is doing something with her life and will continue to do more. However, the only reaction Laura receives from her mother is continued hatred and cold-blooded rejection.

Unfortunately, Audrey also openly displays her negative feelings toward Laura whenever Laura comes to Alike’s house. Audrey senses that Laura has a greater influence on her daughter than Alike admits to her parents. Therefore she openly disproves of this friendship and tries to actively destroy it by suggesting a new friend to Alike.

Audrey herself can be read as another pariah in her loneliness among her own family members. At first sight, one could read her as a very self-centered and very homophobic person. Not only does she disapprove of Laura and tries to destroy the friendship between Laura and her daughter; she also tries out all motherly ideas of grooming a teenage daughter into feminine adulthood—for example by buying her girly-type clothes. She constantly urges Arthur, her husband and Alike’s father, to talk to Alike about her suspicions. Her worst and most truly homophobic action seems to be the one when she tells Alike that God does not make mistakes.

Yet such a reading of Audrey is superficial. A more complex reading allows one to see that she herself is struggling with the question of who she is and who she would like to be and what position she should grant to her struggling daughter. For instance, instead of interpreting her statement that God does not make mistakes as a homophobic warning to her daughter, she could as well have stated this as a reassurance to herself as she is a very religious person and needed to remind herself that, whatever her daughter turns out to be, it will be fine as God does not make mistakes.

In addition, Alike seems to have a closer relationship with her father than with her mother. However, that too is only true at first sight, because one realizes that her father appears to be almost desperate in his denial of his daughter's sexual orientation. He refuses to see any signals that Alike sends to her family members during her struggle and desire to let her family know about her sexual orientation. Although he seems to accept her more for what she tries to be—he plays basketball with her and clearly favors her over her girly-type sister Sharonda—he finds Alike's tomboy style rather funny and considers it a phase that will pass. In addition, he is so caught in his own web of lies to his wife that he does not display any interest in Alike's attempts of being another person than her family wants her to be.

At some point, Alike understands that nobody can or will help her to determine who she wants to be. She has to find her position herself. Therefore, she decides to leave home when she learns that she has been accepted at UC Berkeley. Her farewell messages to her parents show that she has found her place and her peace; she tells her father that "it's not a phase; there's nothing wrong with me" and asks him to let her mother know that, indeed, "God does not make mistakes."

As I argued earlier, contemporary Black feminist theories, according to Jennifer Nash, insist that love-politics transcends "the self and produc[es] new forms of political communities" (3). With *Daughters of the Dust* and *Pariah*, one can indeed see that the Black feminist filmmakers have continued the tradition of the earlier Black feminist theorists and writers while simultaneously transcending them by offering new forms of political communities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a short discussion of their individual films, see John Williams, "Re-creating Their Media Image," *Cineaste* 20.3 (April 1994): n.p.

<sup>2</sup> For the entire argument, see Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider* (1984), reprinted (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007): 53–59.

<sup>3</sup> Parts of my discussion of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* in this essay have been published before in my monograph *The Utopian Aesthetics of Three African American Women (Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Julie Dash): The Principle of Hope*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Other Black lesbian filmmakers include Cheryl Dunye, Tamika Miller, Debra Wilson, Shari Frilot, and Yvonne Welbon; see Ari Karpel, "She's Gotta Have It," *Advocate* 1055 (December 2011/January 2012): n.p.

<sup>5</sup> For earlier scholarship, see, for example, Michelle Parkerson, "Birth of a Notion: Towards Black Gay and Lesbian Imagery in Film and Video," *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, eds. Martha Gever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1993): 234-237; David Van Leer, "Visible Silence: Spectatorship in Black Gay and Lesbian Film," *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997): 157-181.

<sup>6</sup> In her essay, Keeling offers such a reading of Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). Dunye's film is partly a feature film, partly a documentary.

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