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.[4] 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).[5] 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).[6] 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

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

[2] 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.

[3] 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.