***Pariah* (2011)**

**Film background:** *Pariah* is a drama directed by Dee Rees, who has described the film as semi-autobiographical. *Pariah* was Rees’ first narrative feature film. Following *Pariah,* Rees went on to direct *Bessie* (2015), *Mudbound* (2017), and episodes of television shows including *Empire* and *Philip K. Dick’s Electric Dreams.*

**Plot summary:** *Pariah* follows Alike (Adepero Oduye), a 17-year old Black girl who is growing up in Brooklyn, New York. She lives with her mother, Audrey (Kim Wayans), her father, Arthur (Charles Parnell), and her younger sister, Sharonda (Sahra Mellesse). Alike is in the process of coming to terms with her sexuality, but is not out to her parents at the start of the film. While her mother expects Alike to wear feminine clothing, she often wears more masculine clothes at school and when she is out with her friends and changes before returning home. Alike primarily spends time with her best friend, Laura (Pernell Walker), who is out, and who lives with her sister, presumably after being kicked out of the house by her mother. Audrey appears concerned about Alike’s friendship with Laura, and encourages her to spend time with the daughter of a friend of hers from church, Bina (Aasha Davis). While Alike initially resists this friendship, she and Bina develop a close bond and eventually sleep together. However, after they have sex, Bina rejects Alike, and claims that what occurred between them wasn’t meaningful and no one needs to know about it. Alike is heartbroken. She returns home and overhears her parents fighting. Alike intervenes in the fight and comes out to her parents. Audrey violently attacks her, and Alike leaves home to stay with Laura. While she reconciles with her father, her mother is unable to express love for her. She applies to an early college program at UC Berkeley and is accepted, leaving her past behind.

**Content warnings:** *Pariah* contains discussion of sexuality, including a scene that takes place at a strip club, and references to off-screen sex. There is also a scene in which Audrey beats Alike, although it is not depicted graphically.

**Running time:** 1 hr, 26 min.

**Materials for this week:**

* Lesson plans
* Unit response paper prompt
* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts
  + Day 2: Roach, Shoniqua. "Unpacking *Pariah:* Maternal Figuration, Erotic Articulation, and the Black Queer Liberation Plot." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 45, no. 1, 2019, pp. 201-225.
  + Day 2: Raphael-Hernandez, Heike. “I am not running, I am choosing:” Black Feminist Empowerment and the Continuation of the a Literary Tradition in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Dee Rees’ *Pariah* (2011).” *Ostrava Journal of English Philology,* vol. 6, no. 2, 2014, pp. 7-18. (Recommended excerpt: p. 15-17)
  + Day 3: Lorde, Audre. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life*, edited by Karen E. Lovaas and Mercilee M. Jenkins, Sage Publications, 2006, pp. 87-91.

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading Key Scenes:**

1. (7 min) Screening quiz.
2. (10-15 min) Student-led scene close-reading and analysis.
3. (5 min) Introduce unit response 2 paper. Review assignment and take student questions. (You could also build in time for students to brainstorm ideas with each other and cut some of the scene analysis.)
4. (6 min) Teacher led close-reading begins. Watch opening scene (approx. 0:00:45-0:06:29).
5. (6 min) Discussion prep. Students will jot down notes. If time permits, have students share with a partner before moving to whole group discussion.
   1. How does Rees develop Alike’s character through this scene? Consider framing, editing, costumes, lighting, etc.

*Inside the Catnip Lounge:*

* *Editing: In the Catnip Lounge, Rees cuts between shots of Alike and shots of the DJ and other patrons of the bar. By showing how other people are laughing and talking with each other, Rees emphasizes Alike’s discomfort.*
* *Cinematography: The first shot of Alike’s face is a slow-motion shot that slowly turns upside down, and we watch her face as she observes the dancer on stage, seemingly awestruck. There could be many ways to read this opening shot, but one element of it that is clear is Alike’s desire and wonder. This may be important for the rest of the film because although it addresses Alike’s ambivalence and discomfort with fitting in at home, school and in social settings, she is not really questioning her sexuality. She seems to know who and what she desires throughout the film. The rich hues of the lighting on stage emphasize the thrill of this moment. When Alike sits down on a couch, the camera zooms out to highlight her isolation, as she looks from side to side as she adjusts her clothing and exhale with tension. The title of the film emerges in this shot, highlighting her status as an outsider.*
* *Sound: The song “My Neck, My Back” begins as non-diegetic and becomes diegetic when the DJ starts speaking and the crowd starts cheering, perhaps suggesting that we begin within Alike’s mind, as she is enraptured by this performance.*

*Waiting for the bus with Laura:*

* *Blocking, lighting: Laura and Alike sit huddled close together, laughing and critiquing each other’s failure to get many girls’ phone numbers. Their hats are angled similarly, and their faces are similarly bathed in light and shadows. The blurred lights in the background highlight the fact that while there is a city beyond them, they seem alone together in this moment, unbothered by the concerns of others. In this moment, Alike seems truly comfortable and connected to her friend.*

*On the bus:*

* *Lighting: The bus has harsh, bright green lighting, as if the spell of the evening has been broken.*
* *Editing: While Alike is grinning even as Laura mocks her for being a virgin while they sit waiting for the bus, the cut to the shot of them on the bus highlights a change in Alike’s emotions. She frowns nervously and bites her lip, looking from side to side. She seems to be conscious of how close she is to home, and the transformation she needs to undergo in order to enter her family’s home.*
* *Dialogue: While moments earlier, Laura and Alike were enjoying each other’s company, they develop a conflict here over Alike trying to convince Laura to get off the bus and Laura hoping to ride till Alike gets off and walk back. “You got a problem. Yo, call me,” Laura tells Alike as she gets off the bus, highlighting both the momentary tension between them and her assurance to Alike that they will move past it.*
* *Blocking: After Alike peers out the window to be sure Laura has gone, she changes her seat on the bus before she changes her clothes, perhaps signaling a transition for herself emotionally as she steels herself to put on feminine clothing.* 
  1. Consider the epigraph at the start of this film, from Audre Lorde (whose writing we will read later this week): “Wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs.” Why do you think Rees opened the film with a quote from Lorde, and how does this quote relate to the film, and this scene in particular?

*This quote from an interview with Rees might be helpful to share: “I started the movie when I was going through my own coming out process. I was reading a lot of Audre Lorde and listening to Nina Simone, but Audre Lorde was who I latched on to and followed her life journey. I could really relate to her experiences about fitting in and always being the “other.” The quote: “Wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs.” For me, that means she has no place and there is no place for her and that’s how I interpret it. And that’s why I wanted to start the film with that because that’s what Alike’s journey is about. She feels like she doesn’t have a place.” This scene connects to this quote because Alike is not only out of place at home, she also doesn’t feel particularly comfortable in queer spaces like the Catnip Lounge.*

1. (20 min) Whole group discussion.
   1. How does Rees develop Alike’s character through this scene? Consider framing, editing, costumes, lighting, etc.
      1. Let’s examine the first few shots of this film, at the Catnip Lounge. What did you notice about the editing, cinematography, and sound? How did those elements establish Alike’s character?
      2. What did you notice about the moment that Alike and Laura share while waiting for the bus? How does the blocking (where the actors are positioned) shape this scene? How does Alike seem, compared to how she seemed at the Catnip Lounge?
      3. Consider the moment on the bus. What transition do you notice in Alike’s mood? How does the editing emphasize that transition? What do you notice about the lighting and blocking? Why do you think Rees chose to open the film with this moment?
   2. Consider the epigraph at the start of this film, from Audre Lorde (whose writing we will read later this week): “Wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs.” Why do you think Rees opened the film with a quote from Lorde, and how does this quote relate to the film, and this scene in particular?
      1. How might Rees be positioning Alike as a character with “no feet?” Where is she “flying?” What might represent the “trees with no limbs?”
2. (1 min) Before students leave, tell them that, as with their Day 2 readings on Moonlight, tonight’s homework involves two differing perspectives – in this case, on the character of Audrey. They should consider which perspective they consider more compelling, or whether they disagree with both authors and have an alternative perspective.

**Lesson 2: Examining Black Motherhood and the The Black Queer Liberation Plot in *Pariah***

1. (5 min) Personal reflection – choose 1:
   1. Did you relate to any of the characters in this film? Explain.
   2. Did you enjoy watching this film? Why or why not?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (7 min) Say, “today we’ll be discussing the character of Audrey and examining Raphael-Hernandez and Roach’s analyses of her, as well as your own. As we review these scenes, consider how you think they support or challenge Raphael-Hernandez or Roach’s claims, or how they could be used as evidence for your own claim regarding Audrey’s role in this film” Re-watch today’s clips. (Audrey at work: approx. 14:37-17:05; Audrey throwing away Alike’s sweater and at dinner: 1:13:52-1:15:50; Audrey and Alike’s final meeting: 1:19:14-1:20:51)
4. Discussion prep. Students will respond to the following questions. Teachers may want to provide a worksheet with the questions listed.
   1. What is Roach’s central claim? Provide evidence to support your response.

*Roach claims that* Pariah *casts Audrey as a “bad Black maternal figure” who Alike must take flight from in order to achieve queer erotic liberation. Roach explains that this is a common trope within popular media, and terms this the “Black queer liberation plot” (202). She argues that while flight from one’s home community is sometimes necessary for survival, popular media offers this narrative as the “only and inevitable choice that one must make in order to acquire Black sexual freedom” (202). She calls for a return to “historical Black lesbian feminist theorization of the ways in which staying in Black communities and struggling against homophobia potentially facilitate black erotic freedom” (202). She also argues that while Black queer liberation plots may appear to be a positive mode of storytelling because it increases Black queer representation in popular media, they also “reproduce hegemonic notions of Black erotic freedom as impossible to attain within most Black communities” (215).*

* 1. What is Raphael-Hernandez’s central claim (in this section of her essay?), and how does she address the character of Audrey? Provide evidence to support your response.

*Raphael-Hernandez argues that while a cursory reading of* Pariah *that only follows Alike’s challenges at home and her eventual overcoming of those challenges,* Pariah *ultimately follows several outcasts—Alike, Laura, and Audrey, along with perhaps others. In her reading of Audrey, she argues that Audrey 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” (17). She argues that Audrey is “another pariah in her loneliness among her own family members” (16).*

* 1. In considering the scenes we just watched (or other key moments in the film), where do you see evidence that supports or challenges Roach or Raphael-Hernandez’s claims? Use textual evidence from the articles and evidence from the film to support your response.
* *The scene of Audrey at work seems to support Raphael-Hernandez’ reading of Audrey as a pariah seeking acceptance. In the first shot of her, we see her bringing a clipboard from a nurse’s station to a doctor—neither woman particularly acknowledges her. She enters the lunchroom to hear two women gossiping, possibly about her, and sits alone to eat her lunch. A doctor enters the room and sits with her, asking about her shopping bag. When the doctor assumes Audrey’s sweater is for Sharonda rather than Alike, Audrey appears crestfallen; she seems to want the doctor’s approval and feels isolated by her response. Other women come in and interrupt their conversation, and Audrey is alone again. This scene may suggest that Rees intends to draw parallels between Alike and Audrey’s experiences, suggesting that in their inability to fit in at home/work/school/social interactions, they are “alike.”*
* *The scene of Audrey crying while she throws away the dinners she has saved for Arthur, as well as the pink sweater intended for Alike, can be read multiple ways.* 
  + *It could be used to support Raphael-Hernandez’ claim as a sympathetic portrayal of a woman who is isolated in her own home and feels rejected by her husband and children; in this reading, we might see her comment of “okay” and her throwing away of the sweater as a decision to move past her desires to change Alike, perhaps as the first step to recognizing who she truly is. The scene that follows of her chatting anxiously at the dinner table suggests a relentless desire for acceptance from her husband, and a hope that they can smooth over the explosive violence and exile that has recently occurred in their home.*
  + *It could also be used to support Roach’s claim that Audrey is positioned as a “bad Black maternal figure,” if one reads her throwing away the pink sweater and her comment of “okay” as coming to terms with a total rejection of Alike. Furthermore, the scene that follows, in which she seems to pretend Alike never existed while Sharonda looks longingly at Alike’s empty seat, seems to support this portrayal.*
* *The scene of Audrey and Alike’s failed reconciliation appears to primarily support Roach’s claim, since it highlights Alike’s heartbreak as her mother fails to be able to tell her she loves her, only that she’s “praying for her.” Audrey’s failure to recognize and connect with Alike is emphasized through close-up shots on her Bible, a shaky camera, and shots of Alike that appear slightly out of focus while shots of Audrey appear clear.* 
  1. Which argument did you find more compelling as an explanation of Audrey’s role in the film? Why? Do you have an alternative claim to these two authors that you think is more compelling?

*Answers may vary.*

1. Whole-group discussion.
   1. What is Roach’s central claim? Provide evidence to support your response.
      1. Additional questions if necessary: Review p. 202, from “I argue that” to the end of the page. What lines stand out here as significant? What lines are confusing?
      2. Review p. 215-216, from “Despite the presence of black queer protagonists” to “Black freedom and vice versa” on p. 216. What does Roach argue is the problem with “Black queer liberation plots?”
   2. What is Raphael-Hernandez’s central claim, and how does she address the character of Audrey? Provide evidence to support your response.
   3. In considering the scenes we just watched (or other key moments in the film), where do you see evidence that supports or challenges Roach or Raphael-Hernandez’s claims? Use textual evidence from the articles and evidence from the film to support your response.
   4. Which argument did you find more compelling as an explanation of Audrey’s role in the film? Why? Do you have an alternative claim to these two authors that you think is more compelling?
   5. **Extension question:** Consider Roach’s (and perhaps Raphael-Hernandez’) claim in relation to *Moonlight.* Do you think *Moonlight* follows the “black queer liberation plot” or challenges it? Why?

**Lesson 3: Applying Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic” to *Pariah***

1. (5 min) Compare/contrast reflection – Compare *Pariah* to another film we’ve seen so far in this course. What do the two films you’re considering have in common? What makes this one different?
2. (5 min) Discuss.
3. (7 min) Re-watch today’s clips. (Approx 1:06:45-1:13:52, from Bina’s rejection of Alike to Alike and Laura sharing ice cream on Laura’s rooftop)
4. (15 min) Study Groups: In small groups, students will review the essay “The Uses of the Erotic.” You may want to provide a worksheet for students to take notes on the following questions.
   1. Lorde defines “the erotic” differently from how it is normally spoken of in our society. How does Lorde define it? Where does it come from?

* *Lorde broadens the definition of “the erotic” beyond how society normally conceptualizes it. She explains that erotic power is fundamentally internal; it is a “resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling”(87). [Note: Students may have questions about Lorde’s claims regarding womanhood, since she conceptualizes woman/man as somewhat binary, which many queer theorists we have studied no longer do. It might be worth providing some context about 1970s and 1980s feminist movements, which were largely responding to patriarchal oppression but had not yet developed theories that engaged with transgender identity or thinking beyond the gender binary].*
* *Rather than suggesting the erotic defines sexual experiences, she argues that it is “an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (89).*
* *For Lorde, the erotic originates from “sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers” (89). She explains that erotic energy can be found in a variety of pursuits, such as “dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea” (89).*
* *Lorde defines the erotic in opposition to pornography, which she argues is “a direct denial of the power of the erotic” because it “emphasizes sensation without feeling” (88).* 
  1. What does Lorde explain are the “uses of the erotic?”
* *Refusing patriarchy’s diminishment of women’s power:* *Lorde argues that society, in erasing women’s erotic power, expect women to limit their engagement with their feelings and knowledge: “As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world” (88)…She argues that the patriarchal diminishment of erotic power is an intentional effort to limit women’s power: ”Of course, women so empowered are dangerous” (88). By refusing to be limited in this way, women develop a deeper sense of self and more power in their lives.*
* *Expecting joy and excellence in our lives: Lorde explains that when one is in touch with the erotic, they expect more joy and fulfillment for themselves in all aspects of their lives: “For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves…Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavor brings us closest to that fullness” (88).*
* *Developing empowerment and responsibility and rejecting powerlessness: Lorde argues that when people become attuned to the power of the erotic, we become “responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation…In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or othose other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (90).* 
  1. How does Lorde’s concept of the erotic and its power relate to Alike’s struggle, or the actions of other characters in the film? How does Rees highlight the significance of the “erotic [as] a resource?” (Lorde 87) Feel free to reference the scene we just rewatched or other scenes in the film.
* *One could argue that Alike’s first sexual experience with Bina (although Bina painfully rejects her afterwards) enables her to engage with the power of the erotic and reject her mother’s diminishment and erasure. After coming home the next day and fully feeling the weight of her attachment to Bina and Bina’s rejection of her, Alike is raw and outspoken in a way she has never been. She tells her mother, “I’m not dead,” runs up to her room, takes off her clothes, and rips the dark curtains off her windows. She lies on the floor, crying and illuminated by sunlight, seemingly connected to a deeper emotional plane than she has been in the past. Then, she intervenes in her parents’ conflict, saying “it’s not just a phase. There’s nothing wrong with me. Yeah, I’m gay. I’m a lesbian.” When she is choked and beaten by her mother, she leaves home, refusing to be part of a family that harms and silences her. This aligns to Lorde’s claim that as Alike “recognize[d] her deepest feelings, [she gave] up…being satisfied with suffering and self-negation” (90) that she experienced at home. The sequence that follows includes Alike sitting on the rooftop with Laura, drenched in sunlight, eating ice cream with Laura and smiling, despite the wounds on her face from her mother’s violence. While this sequence emphasizes the violence that Audrey has committed, it also highlights the new power that Alike has gained in expecting more from those around her and for her own life.*
* *Conversely, Bina’s actions suggest that she (probably due to messages she internalizes from those around her) is not in touch with the erotic. Lorde argues, “when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying” (91). Lorde argues that Bina’s life, and the lives of those she interacts with like Alike, could be strengthened by getting in touch with erotic power, if she were “brave enough to risk sharing the erotic’s electrical charge without having to look away” (91). Rees emphasizes Bina’s “looking away” from the erotic when Bina refuses to look at Alike as she tells her “last night was just playing around” while Alike looks directly at her.*

1. (15 min) Whole-group discussion.
   1. Lorde defines “the erotic” differently from how it is normally spoken of in our society. How does Lorde define it?
      1. Additional questions, if needed: Review p. 89 from “When I speak of the erotic” to “lessens the threat of their difference.” What does this suggest about Lorde’s definition of the erotic?
   2. What does Lorde explain are the “uses of the erotic?”
      1. Explain Lorde’s use of the analogy to “sealed, plastic packets of white uncolored margarine” on p. 90. How does this analogy help to explain the “uses of the erotic?”

*Lorde connects the “tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring” inside a packed of “white uncolored margarine” as the role of the erotic within a person’s life. By releasing the pellet into the rest of the bag, the color and richness of the pellet is able to spread into the entire contents of the bag. Similarly, Lorde explains, “when released from its intense and constrained pellet, [the erotic] flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experiences” (90).*

* 1. How does Lorde’s concept of the erotic and its power relate to Alike’s struggle, or the actions of other characters in the film? How does Rees highlight the significance of the “erotic [as] a resource?” (Lorde 87) Feel free to reference the scene we just rewatched or other scenes in the film.
     1. How could you connect the sequence we just watched to Lorde’s claim? Consider the moment where Alike comes out to her parents.
     2. Consider Bina’s treatment of Alike. How does that connect to Lorde’s claims on 90-91, from “This brings me to the last consideration” to the end of the essay?
  2. **Extension question:** Lorde envisioned “the erotic” as a “resource” that could specifically be used for women to empower themselves. Do you think this power can be extended to people of all genders? Consider *Moonlight—*how might we argue that Chiron or Kevin find power in the erotic?

*Kevin and Chiron seem to find power in the erotic in Act III of* Moonlight; *throughout “sharing deeply” (89) with each other, and connecting on a level that Chiron has rarely done as an adult, they “form a bridge between the sharers” that seems to be very significant for both of them in strengthening their capacity for intimacy, as the last shot of the film suggests.*