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**‘Everything About Being Indie Is All Tied to Not Being Black’: Indie Music, Race and Identity in *Medicine for Melancholy* and *Pariah***

Indie music has been licensed for films as far back as the 1980s, but its use has grown through the 1990s and into the new millennium.<sup>1</sup> The 2000s in particular saw indie music used extensively and prominently within some commercially successful American ‘indie’ films, including *Garden State* (Braff, 2004), *Juno* (Reitman, 2007), and *500 Days of Summer* (Webb, 2009), in which the music reinforced a self-consciously quirky, indie aesthetic (King, 2014, p.52). While these films all had studio involvement – the latter two in-house productions by Fox Searchlight – they were nevertheless received predominantly as indie films in reviews and articles. Indie music is not, however, used in many American indie films made by and/or focusing on people of colour. There has been, in particular, a substantial number of black American indies during this period, even if such productions are still far outweighed by indie production created by/centred on white people.<sup>2</sup> One factor contributing to this situation is that indie music is often considered a predominantly white mode: while there are some black people involved in indie music production and in other areas of indie music cultures, they are often considered marginal to indie music scenes, despite some notable black indie artists, one of whom – Kimya Dawson – contributed to the majority of *Juno*’s soundtrack.

In this article I engage with issues around indie music and race, before analysing the function of indie music within two African American indie films, *Medicine for Melancholy* (Jenkins, 2008) and *Pariah* (Rees, 2011). I have chosen to analyse these two films in detail because

they incorporate indie-rock music explicitly and link such music to black identities positioned as non-normative. This is still quite unusual within African American filmmaking, which I focus on in this article. While many African American filmmakers have directed feature films over the past two decades, not too many of these films feature indie-rock music. One other example is Rick Famuyawa's *Dope* (2015), a film which links black nerds' tastes to whiteness, and which features the main character Malcolm (Shameik Moore) occasionally performing in a band, Awreeoh, who play indie-rock style music. However, *Dope* largely features a hip-hop soundtrack and while Malcolm's interest in playing rock is an important signifier of his geekiness, his preferences for older hip-hop are more consistently connected to such traits. *Medicine for Melancholy* and *Pariah* use indie-rock more overtly to delineate eccentric African American personalities, even if *Pariah* does also rely on other forms of music to explore its main character's identity.

### **Indie Music, Classification, and Race**

Indie music is a mode that has proven difficult to define in any straightforward fashion, which stems partly from its dual status as a mode of production on the one hand, and as a loose generic category on the other. Indie initially denoted the industrial status of music: for example, music that was released on independent labels or distributed independently. In short, indie was merely an abbreviation of independent. Over time, though, and particularly from the 1980s onwards, it has accrued generic associations, and is now often employed as a generic designator. It has tended to denote certain forms of guitar-rock – occasionally pop – considered slightly alternative to more mainstream rock, through, for example, lo-fi production techniques and/or a slightly experimental approach to conventional rock-pop music. As a generic term, it might be better understood as a meta-genre, incorporating as it does a vast range of subgenres – such as punk, goth, shoegaze, grunge, post-rock – and is

often informed by extra-musical factors, including its industrial status and the anti-mainstream values that are espoused by musical artists (Kruse, 2003, pp.5-12; Fonarow, 2006, pp.51-6).

Indie film shares many similarities to indie music in stemming from the broader term independent but accruing generic/aesthetic connotations over time, so that ‘indie’ films – like some forms of ‘indie’ music – can be released by major companies. Both indie music and indie film denote, albeit rather broadly, difference from the ‘mainstream’ in terms of aesthetics (i.e. works that experiment with form), and how they are promoted, distributed and understood. One major difference between indie film and indie music, though, is that indie music is more associated with whiteness than indie film. In this article, I will largely focus on *indie-rock*, as this is still the most dominant type of music referred to within critical journalism in discussions of indie music. However, I will also discuss modes of ‘indie’ music outside of rock, as the imbrication of indie and rock is one factor that has tended to reinforce the whiteness of indie.

Many critics and artists have argued how indie is a very white mode: while there are black artists who are described as indie, they are far outweighed by white artists and over the past decade there has been increased scrutiny of racial issues and biases within indie music scenes. In 2015 Sarah Sahim attacked what she considered to be the ‘unbearable whiteness of indie’ within a *Pitchfork* article, writing:

In indie rock, white is the norm. While indie rock and the DIY underground, historically, have been proud to disassociate themselves from popular culture, there is no divorcing a predominantly white scene from systemic ideals ingrained in white

Western culture. That status quo creates a barrier in terms of both the sanctioned participation of artists of color and the amount of respect afforded them, all of which sets people of color up to forever be seen as interlopers and outsiders.

In its generic guise, indie has largely divested itself of blackness. This process was occurring as far back as the 1980s in the UK, when indie started to designate generic musical features in addition to its status vis-à-vis the mainstream industry. As the 1980s unfolded guitar-driven music – in particular punk and post-punk modes – became the most common staple of these charts, which led to indie becoming more frequently associated with guitar-driven rock-pop than other forms of music. David Hesmondhalgh (1999, p.35) has argued that by the mid-1980s, indie had started to refer to a ‘white’ sound with prominent use of ‘jangly’ guitars, emphasis on clever and/or sensitive lyrics, accompanied by a tendency to reject making music videos, ‘dress down’ and spurn upward mobility. Matthew Bannister (2006, p.86) has also contended that as the 1980s progressed, ‘indie’ became more frequently associated with alternative guitar rock largely practised by, and catering to, white people.

A range of music across different genres was released independently in the 1980s and 1990s, including hip-hop, soul, and techno, but such music was marginalised within indie music discourse and not considered properly ‘indie’ by some fans committed to indie guitar music. Hesmondhalgh (1999, p.51) has contended that such exclusionary processes were extended further in the early 1990s, as many industry insiders started to campaign for the independent charts to be based more firmly around musical values. One factor influencing such developments was the increasingly blurred lines between ‘independent’ and ‘mainstream’:<sup>3</sup> major companies were themselves, by the early 90s, establishing ‘indie’ imprints that they distributed via independent companies which could then qualify for the independent charts

(similar to how major studios can distribute or release films that gain indie status). Yet it is also evident that certain existing musical modes were being constantly prioritised over others, with rock music the most privileged form, and modes of dance music often considered illegitimate.<sup>4</sup> While indie was established as a broad generic term most frequently in the UK, it was occasionally used in similar ways in the US, but the terms ‘alternative rock’ and ‘college rock’ were used more regularly to refer to such music. It was in the early 1990s that indie became more widely used in a loosely generic sense in the US (Hibbett, 2005, p.58).<sup>5</sup>

Indie music’s predominant identity as a mode of rock music is a core factor in its whiteness. Despite being rooted in black cultural forms – emerging as it did from R&B, with black artists such as Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Bo Diddley considered key musicians in the development of rock and roll – rock music has since become largely known as a white mode of music. Maureen Mahon (2004, p.6) has argued that, following the death of Jimi Hendrix, black people were increasingly marginalised from rock music:

until the late 1980s when Living Colour released their first album, *Vivid*, African American musicians had been relegated to rhythm and blues, dance, and rap music. The prevailing view was that no one – not black audiences, not white audiences, and not black musicians – had an interest in black rock.

The Black Rock Coalition (BRC) was formed in 1985 to counter racial biases prevalent in the music industry, which tended to categorise music into ‘white’ and ‘black’ modes. Such raced thinking meant that it was often difficult for black musicians playing rock music to establish themselves, as they did not fit into restrictive expectations of ‘blackness.’ These systemically racist perceptions and practices have also influenced how many black people categorise

music, and this sometimes led to black fans of rock music often facing hostility from their own families and friends. Mahon (2004, p.35) describes how many members of the BRC faced opposition to their embrace of rock: ‘BRC members were told – by friends, family, and music industry representatives – that they were not “acting black” or, worse, that they were “acting white”.’ While Mahon is writing about rock generally, her argument is also applicable to indie and alternative modes of rock. In the feature documentary *Afro-Punk* (Spooner, 2004), many interviewees also discuss being considered odd by their peers and family because punk music was largely considered white, despite the importance of black punk bands such as Bad Brains. Leila Taylor (2019, p.132) has discussed the raised eyebrows she often elicits from people because of her love of Goth, and how this has led to her questioning her own identity at times:

I used to feel a cheat for my inability to latch on to R&B, my dislike of saccharine love songs, my general indifference to hip-hop and rap, and my utter disdain for gospel music somehow made me less black. I thought perhaps I was missing some genetic predisposition to melisma and that not liking “Black” music was somehow a sign of self-loathing and betrayal of my race.

Stephanie Phillips, member of the all-black, all-female indie-punk band Big Joanie, has discussed how black people tend to be marginalised within indie-rock/punk:

The indie rock and punk scenes I experienced in the 2000s were predominantly white, in terms of people who took up space and were celebrated in the scene. It does not mean that there were no people of color there, but I highlight the fact that many

people of color were often pushed to the sidelines and very rarely on stage. (Phillips, 2021, p.76)

While music is often categorised racially, such categorisation tends to be more restrictive for black people. White people engaging with music that is more broadly codified as black may occasionally also meet resistance in certain quarters, but not to the same extent, a situation that is undeniably connected to broader social factors. Both in the US and in the UK, for example, white social dominance has led to a far more complex set of white representations being disseminated within forms of media such as film and television, in contrast to black representation, which has been characterised historically both by marginalisation and a delimited set of stereotypes. These limited stereotypes certainly do not determine perceptions in a straightforward sense, but they do influence understandings of black identity.

The greater limitations that are socially inscribed around black identities are evident not just across rock music, but also inform the ways that ‘indie’ as a category is applied to music. Since the millennium, indie music has arguably become more diverse, as digital technologies have impacted on production and led to increasingly hybrid forms. If much indie music in the 1980s was antithetical to electronic music, this is less true today as many electronic artists are categorised as indie, a factor further complexifying any straightforward, generic definition of indie music. Despite these shifts in music culture, white artists are still more commonly labeled indie, a point Noah Berlatsky (2015) outlines in the following quote:

Genres like rock and indie are for many people defined by whiteness—that is, white skin becomes the genre marker, rather than the music itself. There are few artists of color in the indie scene because artists of color who make what could be called “indie music” get classified as something else. ... Performers like SZA, FKA Twigs, or



Dawn Richard all work with spacious, off-kilter beats and psychedelic electronica flourishes—they sound like peers of Bjork, not Beyoncé. But Bjork is considered central to indie, and SZA, FKA Twigs, and Richard are all R&B with an asterisk.

In the remainder of this article, I will explore some of these issues within two low-budget, American independent films: Barry Jenkins' debut feature *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008), and Dee Rees's debut feature *Pariah* (2011). These films, in different ways, highlight racial issues within indie music, and both use different modes of indie music to explore black identities that do not conform to more stereotypical tropes. The two films – through drawing on a mode of music encoded commonly as white – employ music as a means of expanding representation *and* reflecting on the racial biases evident within indie music institutions. Yet they do so in different, albeit complementary, ways: *Medicine for Melancholy* features mostly songs by white indie artists as part of a broader examination of black erasure within San Francisco; *Pariah* moves beyond *Medicine*'s critique and broadens notions of indie to include a range of black music, including but not limited to rock.

### **Medicine for Melancholy**

*Medicine for Melancholy* is an intimate, low-budget film, which follows Micah (Wyatt Cenac) and Jo (Tracey Heggins) exploring San Francisco the day after they have had a one-night stand. The film blends everyday realism with a broader, symbolic dimension: it is both a low-key, observational drama spanning twenty-four hours, and an interrogation of race and identity. The film's unusual colour palette – markedly desaturated in many scenes – reinforces the film's symbolic dimension and alludes to the decreasing black population in San Francisco. While the two characters conceive of their identities differently in relation to race, they are both marginal 'black hipsters' living in San Francisco. Micah is a San

Franciscan native who, while friends with many white people, is highly conscious of racial, and class-related, issues; Jo has moved to the city more recently and is committed to seeing the world beyond race.

Discussions around race begin as soon as Micah enters Jo's apartment, after he has picked up the purse she left in a cab and returned it to her. He assumes correctly that Jo's partner is white (he is an art dealer) and they begin to discuss racial issues. Micah's concerns about race are reasonable, though his interrogation of Jo's blackness is also slightly aggressive and is undoubtedly affected by his desirous feelings towards her and his accompanying jealousy of her absent white partner. He is also corrected by Jo on his incorrect assumptions about why Black History Month is in February, while his interrogation of her white boyfriend is somewhat hypocritical considering we later discover – via Jo's later glimpse at his MySpace page – that he was formerly in a relationship with a white woman. His questioning of her colour blindness, though, is important in generating a discussion of black experience and identity in a contemporary city that has increasingly gentrified. At the time of the film's release the African American population in the city was less than half than it was in 1970 (Lim 2009). Micah's greater knowledge of San Francisco's history enables him to introduce issues of class in relation to race, while his and Jo's walk around various areas of San Francisco reveal 'a place impacted by redlining, urban redevelopment, gentrification, displacement, and a dwindling African American population.' (Gillespie, 2016, p.122) As someone married to a white art dealer, and who herself makes t-shirts honouring female filmmakers, Jo is positioned as the more middle class of the two. In contrast to her partner's spacious if somewhat bare apartment, Micah's space is cramped: he lives in a tiny studio apartment and his vocation – aquarium installer – is more manual. He is nevertheless more intellectually questioning than Jo. For her, his constant discussion of race limits who he is

and how he can live; for him, it is crucial to remain keenly aware of race and how it structures life.

The presence of music in the film is often quite subtle, largely used as low-key background, except for two tracks by Casiotone for the Painfully Alone, which are prominent at the beginning and conclusion of the film, and in a key sequence where Micah and Jo visit a nightclub, during which loud musical extracts burst to the foreground of the soundtrack. Following a number of scenes that are relatively static, quite long, and talk-heavy, the nightclub sequence presents a marked contrast. Several sections of indie-rock songs are played when Micah and Jo are in the club, commencing with lo-fi, minimal romantic pop from Au Revoir Simone ('Through the Back Yards') which accompanies their cab ride to the club. Inside the club, a montage of different moments is edited together with mostly fast-paced indie-rock songs, which draw on garage rock and punk, and mostly consist of guitar, bass, drums and vocals. There are occasional exceptions, such as the jazz-rock of Tom Waits ('Lie To You') and Oh No Oh My's 'I Have No Sister', though the latter – which is underpinned by a repetitive keyboard rhythm – is still a recognisable indie-rock track, albeit less frenetically paced than other tracks, featuring a rather nasal vocal delivery. This sequence, lasting around only four minutes, is busier than other moments in the film: not only is the soundtrack noisy and mostly fast-paced, so is the editing – which switches between different times in the evening – camera movement, and the movements of Micah and Jo within the frame when they are dancing.

**Figure 1. *Medicine for Melancholy*: Jo and Micah share an intimate dance in the nightclub.**

While Micah and Jo both appear to have a good time at the club, indicated by their laughter dancing, and intimacy, their subsequent walk home belies such harmony. It is obvious from how the nightclub scene is presented that Jo and Micah stand out as rare black presences within an extensively white space. While both characters enjoy themselves, their post-club discussion signals how Micah is acutely aware of the racial factors at play, even if his outburst is fuelled partly by his jealousy of Jo being in a relationship with a white man. The talk between the two characters at first is friendly, but Micah starts to become more aggressive after Jo speaks to her boyfriend on the phone. After making a slightly incoherent comment about black people dating outside of their race, Micah then moves onto the indie scene and race: ‘Everything, everything about being indie is all tied to not being black.’ Jo states that she does not want to talk about it, but he continues, noting at one point: ‘Friends who are indie? White. Bands who are indie? Like, okay, you got TV on the Radio. But the rest of them are white.’ This leads him back to the topic of interracial dating, but Jo wards off his increasingly aggressive attack by exclaiming ‘you think because I’m black and you’re black that we should be together. You’re so fucking crazy.’

**Figure 2. *Medicine for Melancholy*: Tensions arise after Jo and Micah leave the nightclub.**

As mentioned, gentrification is posited as a major factor that has hastened San Francisco’s dwindling black population, a point emphasised when we see Jo and Micah observe a Housing Rights Committee meeting, where the displacement of poorer residents is discussed. In the context of the film’s themes – racial identity, class, gentrification – indie music’s function is partly symbolic. Not only is it a mode of music that has been connected to whiteness, but it is also sometimes connected to hipsterism, which itself has been associated increasingly with whiteness despite its rootedness in black experience. A vague term that has

shifted in its meanings over the years, hipsterism is now associated with a certain kind of fashion and style, with links to alternative and indie cultures, particularly indie-rock (Greif, 2010, p.23); it is also identified with primarily white, middle-class listeners, and linked to gentrification (Maly & Varis, 2016, pp.648-49). Such categorisation does overlook, of course, how hipsterism can cross class and racial borders, and in the 2000s there was an increased discussion of the ‘black hipster’ or ‘blipster’ (see Olopade, 2009).

*Medicine for Melancholy* engages with the more commonly cited features of hipsterism, but it also delves beyond such stereotypes. As Michael Gillespie (2016, p.150) has argued:

the brand of hipsterism that Micah and Jo seemingly subscribe to negates the assumption that all hipsters are white poseurs or aesthetes, and they are certainly greater than the pithy overtones of “blipster.” Cool and hip, their style praxis might wrestle with enduring veracity critiques, but it remains an indisputable source of nonprescriptive pleasure.

Certain aspects of Micah’s identity and social relations position him as a black hipster: it is implied he has a lot of white friends (the party is at a white friend’s house, his ex-girlfriend is white), and other moments align him with hipsterism, such as telling Jo that he will fix the breaks on her bike and trying to persuade her that she should switch to a fixed-gear bike (the fixed-gear bicycle has become associated with hipsters, and Micah himself uses one). Jo is also associated with hipsterism through her love of indie music as well as her interest in art. If Jo and Micah are positioned as non-typical hipsters, they are also non-typical exemplars of blackness, at least its more stereotypically codified features.

Jenkins had initially planned to set the dancing scene at a Northern Soul club (Gillespie, 2016, p.147). Northern Soul refers to cultures in the North of England (hence the name) that emerged from the Mod scene in the 1960s, which were devoted to tracking down rare American soul records. It has, though, continued to be popular in some areas, with San Francisco a specific city in which Northern Soul has more recently enjoyed avid interest. Jenkins would have likely selected a Northern Soul club night because it links to racial, national, and classed exchanges: stemming from largely white working-class British hipsters congregating around a mode of music primarily performed by black Americans, and later taken up in America by white middle class hipsters. Within this mix of cultural exchanges, Jo and Micah's blackness adds to the complexity of their situation, in which identity negotiation is often fraught due to the sometimes prescriptive, occasionally proscriptive, notions around taste, race, and class. According to Gillespie (2016, p.147), the scene eventually employed indie music for reasons of cost. In some ways, though, indie music is more appropriate because of its connections to whiteness. Within filmmaking historically, indie music has been frequently associated with white characters, and we should consider film as a medium that both reflects and reproduces indie music as a white cultural form. Through self-consciously drawing attention to the connections between indie music and whiteness, *Medicine for Melancholy* opens the way for a more black-centric approach to indie music, an approach that is more fully explored within *Pariah*.

As a mode of music with links to hipsterism and whiteness, indie music offers pleasures that are nonetheless jarring to Micah, whose political concerns clash with his personal enjoyment. The club scene is key in condensing these elements into a charged moment: while Jo and Micah are visibly enjoying themselves in the club, their subsequent argument is indicative of the issues underpinning how such pleasures are more broadly informed by political forces

beyond one's immediate control. Though Micah is politically aware of racial issues and more specifically the historical gentrification of San Francisco, he also feels a sense of powerlessness. He does have a framed poster of a 1962 San Francisco redevelopment programme announcement with 'LIES' superimposed over it pinned to his apartment wall, but whether he is actually involved in wider political actions to oppose gentrification is open to question. The indie club scene and its aftermath seems to encapsulate tensions and contradictions that run through the film, without offering any simple answers. Jo wants to transcend the confines of race in contrast to Micah's insistence on making connections between race and broader social issues. Her ideals might in some respects represent a more comfortable and sensible negotiation of experience considering Micah's tendency to rage, but such idealistic aspirations can run the danger of overlooking very real injustices and inequalities. In one scene at Micah's apartment, after they have shared a joint, Micah discusses how being black is the foundational category with which he identifies over all others (more so than being a man). Jo refuses to explain herself in one word in the same manner, stating that 'people aren't that simple,' and later tells him: 'You feel you have to define everybody. You limit them to the point that they're just a definition and not people.' She is correct to remind him of the complexities of any individual's identity, but when she discusses how he is much more than his blackness, he responds with 'that's not how society sees it.' Despite her response of 'fuck what society thinks,' his point is valid: individuality is not a transcendent outcome of self-creation but is shaped in many ways by socio-historical factors, and a black person cannot just wish systemic racism away. The indie club scene is presented as a predominantly white space within which Jo and Micah can freely enjoy themselves without any harassment. That they are not harassed does not, however, indicate the absence of racial tensions and issues. The indie scene is very white; while this is not necessarily related to explicit racism, or to 'essential' connections between race and music,

indie music is imbricated within racist structures and systems. Micah's concrete knowledge of the city, alongside his hipster tastes and many white friends, infuse his keen awareness of such connections. He both enjoys participating in such a 'scene' yet frequently adopts a critical stance towards such enjoyment.

The music used on the soundtrack of *Medicine for Melancholy* represents a diverse range of indie-rock and pop, with a couple of exceptions such as Yesterday's New Quintet and Tom Waits. Even these tracks, though, are related to indie and 'alternative' music: Waits himself now records for an independent label and is also considered non-mainstream; Yesterday's New Quintet create jazz-infused hip-hop and is an alias of Madlib, one of the most acclaimed indie hip-hop artists to have emerged in the late 1990s. Many of the artists who feature on the soundtrack are relatively obscure, such as Gypsophile, The Changes, Bloodcat Love, and the local San Francisco act Casiotone for the Painfully Alone. Much of this music shares lo-fi production qualities, and includes modes such as power-pop, jangle-pop, and more low-key, synth-based pop songs, which tend to appear briefly to underpin intimate scenes between Micah and Jo. Such qualities, along with the relatively sombre nature of many tracks (excepting the music played in the club), contribute to the film's reflective tone. In particular, Casiotone For the Painfully Alone tracks – 'New Year's Kiss' and 'Tonight Was a Disaster' – which accompany the beginning and end credits of the film, set the melancholy, reflective tone of the film. Characterised by slow, repetitive bass, drums and guitar, they are dominated by singer Owen Ashworth's deep, almost spoken word confessions about thwarted romantic desires. These tracks thematically indicate two themes of the film: firstly, they link to the melancholy nature of the narrative trajectory, which does not culminate in Micah and Jo forming a relationship; secondly, they link to the broader themes of the film, in which romantic possibilities are impacted by the complexities of racial politics. The music in the



credit sequences emphasizes such issues, in that it points to how these characters are associated with music more commonly linked to whiteness; Micah's 'white tastes' in particular reveal a character who is striving to work through issues that Paul Gilroy analyses in his work on postcolonial melancholia.

For Gilroy, 'postcolonial melancholia' relates to the ways in which colonial and imperialist legacies have not been properly worked through, resulting in hostility towards multiculturalism and ethnic minorities. He uses the term melancholia in a Freudian sense, as a pathological, unacknowledged response to loss. Gilroy warns against the use of essentialist conceptions of race, contending that being resigned to 'natural' racial characteristics 'supports enabling analogies and provides legitimation in a host of historical situations where natural difference and social division are politically, economically, and militarily mediated.' (Gilroy, 2005, p.8) This does not, however, entail the disavowal of racial difference; instead, he insists on an openness to other identities as well as historical and geographical understandings of how racial discourse 'generates a field of ethics, knowledge, and power that contributes its unique order of truths to the processes that produce and regulate individual subjects, conditioning the intimate consciousness through which they come to know and understand and indeed constitute themselves as racial beings.' (Gilroy, 2005, p.12) *Medicine for Melancholy* grapples with similar issues: of the need to acknowledge difference whilst not being bound by natural, essential ideas of race, yet also highlighting how racial discourse and historical factors have produced systemic inequalities. Micah himself is extremely aware of racial issues and how they have fed into his identity. We sense, through his conversations with Jo, that he is conflicted about his identity and slightly guilty that he has many white friends. As Jo has similar tastes to him and is black, he overinvests emotionally in her. By the

end of the film he is left disappointed; Jo leaves his apartment without any indication that she will return.

### **Pariah**

Dee Rees's *Pariah* also employs indie music to explore racial identity and relationships. It follows the character Alike (Adepero Oduye), a black lesbian adolescent who conceals her sexual orientation from her parents, particularly her strict, religious mother. In line with her conflicted identity ties, music on the soundtrack is split between more beat-driven hip-hop and R&B on the one hand, and modes of indie-rock and spiritual soul on the other; all the music used, though, can be considered broadly indie through being released on independent record labels. As with *Medicine for Melancholy*, the film's low budget results in lesser-known acts being licensed for the film. Whereas *Medicine for Melancholy* employs music from mostly white artists, *Pariah*'s compiled music is from black, female artists. This is important because *Medicine for Melancholy* was focused partly on the question of black erasure. *Pariah* does not bemoan the whiteness of indie but instead expands ideas of indie to include more black musical modes. It therefore posits, implicitly, new ways of conceiving indie music beyond its predominant whiteness (and maleness).<sup>6</sup>

In *Pariah* Alike is distanced from 'normative' black identities in two major ways: firstly, and most significantly, through her attraction to other women and, secondly, through her interest in alternative styles of music. While her musical interests are not divulged immediately, her sexuality is. The film opens on close-ups of anonymous bodies outside of a nightclub, with sounds of people speaking and distant musical beats from the interior of the club. After we are shown tickets being stamped, we are introduced to the inside of the club, with a salacious, bass-heavy rap track – Khia's 'My Neck, My Back (Lick It)' – dominating the soundtrack.

Alike, however, who is at the club with her lesbian friend Laura (Pernell Walker), is not comfortable within this highly sexualised environment. It transpires that she is a virgin, unlike her sexually experienced friend.

Music in the film is a core means by which Alike's difference is expressed. On the bus ride home from the club, she seems visibly irritated when Laura wants to remain on the bus until Alike's stop. After Laura reluctantly alights the bus, non-diegetic music starts to accompany Alike as she divests herself of a rather masculine outfit consisting of baseball cap, loose-fitting shirt, trousers and do-rag (we later see Laura advising her on clothing, suggesting that some of the clothes may be Laura's). A gently strummed guitar appears on the soundtrack as Alike removes her outfit, revealing underneath a more stereotypically 'girly' top – a pink t-shirt with the word 'Angel' prominently displayed – and puts on earrings. She is at this early point in the film seeking her own identity beyond the restrictive identities being imposed on her from Laura on the one hand, and her strictly religious, homophobic mother on the other. A prominent reflection of her face in the window emphasises how her identity is at this stage split between two modes of being female. The music which emerges reinforces this point: the track is Sparlha Swa's 'Doing My Thing' and the lyrics directly relate to Alike's subjective turmoil, expressing the need to keep going through troubled times: the repeated line of 'got to keep on doing my thing,' whose insistent repetitions are sometimes undermined by doubts such as 'sometimes I feel like I just won't make it' express Alike's inner turmoil, and her inner desire to forge her own, more integral identity. 'Doing My Thing,' like most other non-diegetic music in *Pariah*, is linked to the subjectivity of Alike. This subjective musical dimension is important in indicating Alike's feelings as she often conceals them to friends and family, even Laura. The song itself contrasts greatly with the bass-heavy hip-hop heard in the club – a sparse solo acoustic guitar is the sole accompaniment to Swa's soulful, emotive

vocals – and indicates how Alike is more concerned with spiritual and romantic desires than with the physical and highly sexualised emotions expressed by Khia.

**Figure 3. *Pariah*: Alike’s reflection highlights her conflicted identity prior to her changing outfit.**

Although Laura has helped Alike to come to terms with her sexuality, and attempts to mentor her, the two are very different: Alike is intellectually gifted, does well at school, has a flair for writing poetry, and is growing up in a middle-class family; Laura, on the other hand, has dropped out of school early after becoming estranged from her mother, works at a restaurant whilst studying for a GED in her spare time, and is struggling financially. Such differences are further indicated by their music tastes. Their shared commonalities – sexual orientation and difficult relationships with their mothers – have nevertheless helped them to forge a connective bond. At a later point in the film, Alike reluctantly befriends Bina, whose tastes are more aligned with her own. She is introduced to Bina by her mother, mainly because she wants to steer Alike away from Laura (as she knows she is a lesbian). The two eventually become closer, overcoming initial hostility through listening to and speaking about music. Bina starts discussing music with an initially disinterested Alike, asking if she likes certain commercial R&B and hip-hop, such as ‘Destiny’s Kids’ (supposedly Destiny’s Child), ‘Jay-Z’ and ‘50’ (Cent). Irritated, Alike replies ‘no, I don’t really like any of that commercial bullshit.’ Pressed further by Bina on what music she does like, she states ‘more underground stuff, none of that crap they play on radio.’ Pushed to name specific artists by Bina, she is again dismissive of her, saying ‘People you probably never heard of. Conscious stuff.’ When pressed again, she does finally list some artists that she likes: she mentions acts which sound like ‘Trees’ and ‘Black Circle,’ though it is unclear who she is referring to here considering there are several musical artists with these names.<sup>7</sup> What is established is that, whilst she does

like hip-hop, she does not like the same types of hip-hop that Laura likes. When Bina actually starts demonstrating enthusiasm for some of this cited music, and herself notes if Alike knows of Bahamadia<sup>8</sup> – a ‘conscious’ hip-hop artist – Alike starts to become engaged in the conversation for the first time, and the two girls’ initial assumptions about each other are challenged. After a pause, during which Alike finally stops looking at her phone, Bina asks if Alike likes rock. ‘It’s cool,’ replies Alike, before getting up to leave, but Bina stops her to listen to some music that she plays. The aggressive, punk-rock of Tamar-Kali’s ‘Boot’ is played briefly, with a solitary expression of ‘wow’ from Alike, followed by a cut to the next scene.

Music functions to forge connections, as well as erect barriers, between characters in *Pariah*. Rees has herself stated how she wanted different genres of music ‘to heighten the character’s voices,’ arguing that ‘Alike’s voice is kind of acoustic soul. And then the punk is kind of Bina’s voice; this kind of alternative music [represents] an alternative way to be. And then hip-hop is Laura’s voice.’ (Harris, 2011) These musical signifiers aren’t entirely fixed, though. Alike may be associated primarily with the acoustic soul of Sparlha Swa – which non-diegetically accompanies moments of her journey – but she also discusses her passion for alternative hip-hop and displays an interest in rock. If the non-diegetic music indicates elements of Alike’s personality beyond her external presentation to others, some of the diegetic music – particularly the music played in the presence of Bina – functions as a means of extending and exploring her identity. Listening to rock music brings the two together; a later scene shows Bina and Alike listening to Honeychild Coleman – another black, female punk singer – and they then attend a live performance by Kali, who is performing ‘Pearl’. The increased closeness between Bina and Alike rises in intensity after Kali’s live performance, and eventually they sleep together in the evening. Yet while musical affiliation

has drawn Alike to Bina, she is soon rejected by Bina, who it transpires is merely experimenting sexually.

**Figure 4. *Pariah*. Bina plays a Honeychild Coleman record for Alike.**

Simon Frith has argued that ‘identity is mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being’ and that ‘our experience of music – of music making and music listening – is best understood as an experience of this self-in-process’ (2016, p.294) and further claims that music does not merely reflect existing identities but also *constructs* them (2016, pp.295-6). In *Pariah*, music is used as a crucial shorthand to express and explore identities, but unfortunately for Alike she invests perhaps too much into her musical connections with Bina. Rees draws on some stereotypical ways that musical modes can be connected to personality types – indicated in her comments on the music – but she avoids equating musical preferences to characters straightforwardly. If the characters tend to be connected to certain sounds, they can also extend their tastes into new realms, as Alike does. Alke’s rejection from Bina, meanwhile, underpins how sharing similar musical preferences does not necessarily equate to personal similarities, due to the ways that ‘processes of identity formation in and through music occur in uneven ways, mediated by relations of power.’ (Connell and Gibson 2003, p.15) While music does function as a crucial factor through which identity can be constructed/negotiated in *Pariah*, it co-exists with numerous other factors. It is merely one symbolic identity strand amongst many, and in this instance has created a false alignment between Alike and Bina. It nevertheless provides Alike with a confidence to express herself more openly. While this leads to a harrowing scene in which she is beaten by her mother after telling her that she is a lesbian, the film ends on a more hopeful note.

At the end of the film Alike travels to Berkeley, having attained an early scholarship. The final shot of the film mirrors the aforementioned scene on the bus near the beginning of the film. In that scene, set at night, Alike is grappling with her own identity: she is returning home to a repressed environment in which she has to hide elements of herself, and hence has to remove her outfit, only to reveal another outfit that is not of her choosing. The final shot also sees Alike on a bus but this time, notably, it is the daytime. Rather than returning to a dark place where her true self is verboten, she is now on her way to a new life where she can hopefully express herself more independently. In contrast to the earlier scene on the bus, we do not see a visible reflection of Alike in the window as she is no longer concealing a fundamental aspect of her identity.

As *Pariah* centres on an African American who does not adhere to broad stereotypes of blackness, music functions partly to expose what Mahon describes as ‘dominant, flattening stereotypes of blackness’ prominent in media representations (Mahon, 2004, p.8). Alike herself can be considered a ‘post-soul eccentric’ (Royster, 2012) through her musical tastes, her queerness, and her nerdish qualities; her more bookish inclinations align her with the figure of the ‘black nerd’ or ‘Afro nerd’. Francesca T. Royster has noted how novels featuring black nerd characters – such as Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, Paul Beatty’s *The Whiteboy Shuffle*, and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* – tend to ‘explore coming of age in a global Post-Soul landscape of shifting racial, gender, and sexual identity. In each of these novels, recently integrated schools and blurring neighborhood color and class lines, as well as the ghostly return of histories of racial violence, become the backdrop for the production of nerdy, eccentric, or “strange” selves, forged between the cracks of family and community.’ (Royster, 2012, p.5)

Unlike *Medicine for a Melancholy*, which features black characters exploring their identities within a predominantly white landscape, *Pariah* is mostly focused on black communities and spaces: the lesbian club, the school, and the Tamar-Kali performance, are all dominated by black characters. Alike rejects normative expectations in many ways: not only sexual identity, but specific modes of lesbian identity, as well as musical tastes. The soundtrack therefore presents to viewers a range of non-typical black music. While the raw, sexual hip-hop associated with Laura is closest to stereotypical assumptions about black music, such music is still 'eccentric' in the sense that it is performed by females and is embraced by a lesbian community. The alternative modes of 'conscious' rap that Alike mentions are also often distinguished from the norms of mainstream production (as they are by Alike); while the rock sounds that she latches onto are symptomatic of non-normative black cultural production. Rees's choice of Tamar-Kali as a key artist representative of black rock is important in that she is both connected to 'Afro-punk' (and was a key figure documented in James Spooner's *Afro-Punk* documentary) and is also female. Of course, rock music itself has long been considered primarily masculine due to ingrained assumptions and sexism, but if it is difficult for white women to become rock artists it is even more so for women of colour: 'For black women rockers,' Mahon has argued, 'the challenges increase exponentially. Their gender and race mark them as doubly outside of rock 'n' roll's white male club.' (Mahon, 2012, p.208) *Pariah*'s soundtrack therefore highlights diverse modes of black, female eccentricity: its inclusion of a range of music by black female artists points to the heterogeneity of black experience, particularly that of women. Its licensing of mostly indie music also is notable: while this may to an extent be linked to the film's low budget, which would have made licensing mainstream music difficult, the more marginal artists employed nevertheless chime with the film's themes of deviating from norms, and its main character's need to embrace otherness. The music also points to how indie music – particularly if we consider indie as an



abbreviation of independent – contains a diversity of black music and is far from limited to white indie-rock.

## **Conclusion**

Both these films use pre-existing ‘indie’ music to reflect on black identity, but consciously choose music that is often associated with whiteness. In this, they link to comments about compiled pop music more generally, particularly its tendency to create intertextual associations. As Jeff Smith has argued:

much of the compilation score’s expressiveness derives less from its purely musical qualities than from the system of extramusical allusions and associations activated by the score’s referentiality. In other words, because of the compilation score’s heavy reliance on pop and rock tunes, its meaning within a film is often dependent upon the meaning of pop music in the larger spheres of society and culture. (Smith 1998, p. 185)

Anahid Kassabian has also argued that the pop songs in film are more likely to generate external associations outside of the film text. As such, she broadly distinguishes the composed score, which she argues aims to draw spectators into the film world, and compiled scores, which ‘open outward’ (Kassabian 2001, p. 141). For Kassabian, the composed score is more likely to generate ‘assimilating identifications’, which ‘attempt to draw the viewer into the film’, while the compiled pop score will more commonly lead to what she calls ‘affiliating identifications’ because they ‘bring the immediate threat of history’; if a spectator knows a song, then they will ‘bring external associations with the songs into their engagements with the film’ (Kassabian 2001, p.3).

*Medicine and Melancholy* and *Pariah* both use modes of indie music in ways that deliberately ‘open outward’ to broader issues of identity. Tim McNelis has noted how film music ‘participates in identity construction through the cultural connotations it brings to a film’ and that music ‘can also evoke ideas related to deeply ingrained stereotypes in various forms of popular media and discourse’ (McNelis 2017, p. 15). Barry Jenkins and Dee Rees both, in different ways, draw on the stereotypical whiteness of indie music, but also challenge more rigid assumptions about indie music on the one hand, and black identities on the other. These representations can also – to refer back to Frith’s argument – help *construct* identities through disseminating ‘eccentric’ black identities which refute more conventional depictions of blackness in favour of ‘understanding blackness as multiaccultural and multidisciplinary’ (Gillespie, 2016, p.6).

*Medicine for Melancholy* features a range of music that would more commonly adhere to dominant perceptions of indie music – lo-fi, mostly guitar-driven, often confessional – to interrogate issues such as racism and hipsterism in a city with a dwindling black population. The whiteness of indie music is foregrounded in Micah’s rant, and it serves to both construct, and probe, ‘non-normative’ black identities and question culturally engrained stereotypes around black selfhood. Micah and Jo evade stereotypical black identities, but Jenkins’ seems to ask at what cost such liberation comes, particularly via the character of Micah. While Jo seems relatively comfortable with her own being, Micah is more conflicted and worries about his predominantly ‘white’ tastes and white friends, conscious of how his cultural habits and networks are shaped by intersecting forces in a city undergoing black erasure. In this sense, his experiences have similarities to some of the noted issues raised at the beginning of the article, in which black people who embrace rock music – particularly indie-rock – sometimes

feel as though they are marginalised both from the white communities that they participate in, but also from other black people.

Within *Medicine for Melancholy*, indie music functions as a broad genre, a subset of rock music. Indie, though, is also as an abbreviation of independent and can function as an adverbial modifier of other genres rather than a self-contained genre. This has happened to an extent within some musical genres more regularly connected to blackness: for example, there has been increased use of ‘indie hip-hop’ more recently. Spotify hosts numerous indie hip-hop playlists, *Fact Magazine* published a ‘100 best indie hip-hop records of all time’ list in 2015, and the term can be used in record titles: an example stretching as far back as 2005 is the compilation album *Wu-Tang Clan Meets the Indie Culture*. As with other forms of indie music, indie hip-hop is often linked to a broader DIY, anti-corporate aesthetic, and released on independent labels (Vito, 2019, p.3). ‘Indie R&B’ is also a term that is in use. Though not adopted as frequently as indie hip-hop, it tends to connote either R&B artists who record on smaller, independent labels and/or are considered as ‘alternative’ to mainstream R&B in terms of their sound. The former tends to be the primary way that ‘indie R&B’ is used, as it is, for example, in the ‘indie’ section of online magazine *This RNB*.

Categorising indie through an adverbial, rather than generic lens more frequently could help to alleviate the overwhelming whiteness of indie music. *Pariah* is interesting in this respect as it incorporates a range of black indie music which spans different genres. Its main character is drawn to certain forms of black indie music (though not all), particularly rock and hip-hop. And while rock music itself is linked to whiteness, *Pariah* demonstrates that black (indie) rock exists and can be enjoyed communally by a predominantly black crowd. Rather than accepting and exploring the connections between whiteness and indie/rock, the film

intervenes in the broadening of stereotypical assumptions. It therefore chimes with Berlatsky's arguments about needing to redefine our ideas around indie if we are to move beyond its predominant whiteness:

If indie wants to stop being unbearably white, its musicians, fans, and critics should stop defining the genre through whiteness. If indie means independent music, then all those hip hop mix tapes should count. If it means Bjork, then it should mean Dawn Richard. If it means guitar rock, then Valerie June should count. And if these changes shift indie's center in the direction of new, unfamiliar sounds or subgenres, all the better. Diversity isn't just a cosmetic change; to open your community is to change your community. And who knows what indie music could be if it were to allow itself to see, or hear, all the ways it isn't white? (Berlatsky, 2015)

If black indie music is to become more fully encouraged and recognised, then there needs to be greater acknowledgment and discussion of black indie-rock on the one hand, and more openness to other modes of independent black music as 'indie' on the other. *Pariah* is a film that points towards a more black-centric approach to indie, demonstrating examples of black indie-rock alongside a range of other black indie music. Such a shift can only happen if cognitive ideas of indie are modified, which requires structural change across indie music institutions – such as music publications, record labels, music clubs – that are far more open to, and supportive of, black participants. As indie label manager Matthew James-Wilson (2020) has stated, 'once the indie industry confronts its complacency in upholding racist traditions, it can create a more equal future for everyone.'

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous indie films in the 1990s featured indie music prominently on their soundtracks, including *Slacker* (Linklater, 1990), *Pump up the Volume* (Moyle, 1991), *Clerks* (Smith, 1994), *Amateur* (Hartley, 1995), *Kids* (Clarke, 1995), and *Nowhere* (Araki, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the two filmmakers discussed in this article and Fumiyawa, a number of African American filmmakers have emerged to direct feature films during the 2000s and early 2010s, such as Lee Daniels, Ava DuVernay, Ryan Coogler, Shaka King, Gina Prince-Bythewood, and Justin Simien. While some of these filmmakers have worked in Hollywood – DuVernay and Coogler having directed two big budget Hollywood films with *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018) and *A Wrinkle in Time* (DuVernay, 2018) – they have all directed independent/indie films.

<sup>3</sup> Another important factor would have been its status as a specialist music chart. Other specialist music charts were organised generically and included Rock and Metal, R&B, and Dance, and this would have influenced some to closely align the independent chart with particular types of music (so as to establish a clearer indie identity). It should be mentioned that while rock was privileged within conceptions of indie, this was a mode of rock that was distanced from heavy metal and some forms of mainstream rock, and more associated with punk, folk and psychedelia.

<sup>4</sup> There were some exceptions, and in the late 1980s/early 1990s there was also a confluence within the UK between some forms of indie-rock and dance music; however, the major contours of indie were not challenged in a significant manner by such developments, and by the mid-1990s, following the emergence of ‘Britpop,’ the dominance of rock was once again evident.

<sup>5</sup> Hibbett claims that the huge success of Nirvana and subsequent mainstream status of much grunge music was a key moment marking the increased use of ‘indie’ within US music discourse, because ‘alternative’ was now considered by many to be suspect following its commercial success and exploitation. The US specialist singles chart most similar to the UK independent charts are the ‘Alternative’ charts: originally named ‘Modern Rock Tracks,’ it began in 1988; its name changed to ‘Alternative Songs’ in 2009, and more recently renamed ‘Alternative Airplay.’ Unlike the UK Independent singles chart, these charts are based on radio airplay rather

than record sales. In album charts, there has been an official Billboard 'Independent Albums' chart (based on record sales) since 2000.

<sup>6</sup> The gendered nature of indie music is another important issue as indie music scenes are overly controlled and policed by men. Rees' decision to use music only produced by black *female* artists is also very important within a film focused on queer, black female subjects. Rees adopts a clearly intersectional perspective in merging race, gender, sexuality and class issues, but I have only the space to fully investigate race and music within this article.

<sup>7</sup> The script seems to list some slightly different artists than mentioned in this dialogue. I have not ascertained the exact reason for this, but in the script there is a clearer sense that Alike's listed artists are broadly related to alternative modes of hip-hop (more political and 'progressive' than the type of music played at the nightclub she frequents with Laura) and include The Roots, Black Star, Asheru, BlueBlack, and Pharcyde .

<sup>8</sup> It actually sounds as though they say Mahmabadia, which again is a play upon an actual artist name (like Trees being substituted for Roots, Black Circle substituting for Black Star).

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