

Edinburgh University Press

Chapter Title: Pariah (2011): Coming Out in the Middle

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Book Title: US Independent Film After 1989

Book Subtitle: Possible Films

Book Editor(s): Claire Perkins, Constantine Verevis

Published by: Edinburgh University Press. (2015)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt14brwdj.17>

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Pariah (2011): Coming Out in the Middle

Patricia White

Early headlines from the 2011 Sundance Film Festival trumpeted Focus Features' acquisition of Dee Rees' *Pariah* after the film screened on the festival's opening night. The deal offered by the specialty division of Universal was reported to be in the 'seven figure range' (Fleming 2011). The film's executive producer Spike Lee, the launch at the hit-making festival and the studio-affiliated distributor put this case study firmly within the realm of commercial-independent cinema that has evolved in the US since the 1980s (see Perkins 2012). Yet *Pariah* is as oriented toward community as it is toward commerce, and festival buzz is only one dimension of its publicity. Made by first-time director Dee Rees for under US\$500,000, *Pariah* tells the story of a sensitive African American lesbian's coming of age and to terms with parental and peer expectations in current-day Brooklyn. African American lesbian feminist writers, thinkers and singer-songwriters are the film's cultural touchstones, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) youth of colour its ideal audience. The fact that a film whose subject matter and implicitly its creators were considered 'too black and too gay' by many in the industry grabbed the Sundance spotlight is a distinct sign of change in the independent film world for which the festival serves as brand name. But *Pariah* carries with it independent film legacies that are more black and more gay – and more feminist – than Sundance's. Cultures of US identity politics and the commercial-independent sector's institutional politics converge in the story of the film's production, distribution and reception.

Pariah's viability as a 'crossover' theatrical release owes a debt to a century-long history of African American independent film culture and to the more recent aesthetic and political challenges posed by the movement dubbed New Queer Cinema by B. Ruby Rich after the Sundance edition of exactly twenty years before (Rich 2013). But like feminist media activism, these cultures also comprised very different kinds of production and exhibition – community



Figure 13 Adepero Oduye in *Pariah* (2011)

video, experimental shorts, politically engaged documentaries and theoretically informed essay films, as well as identity-based festivals and community, museum and academic audiences. Informed at its core by the politics of intersectionality – defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) as the way that systems of oppression like race and gender interact – *Pariah* also demonstrates the intersectionality of these commercial and non-profit independent media traditions. The film's form and address register a number of resulting tensions – between assimilation and outsider identity; traditional art house and African American audiences; narrative clarity and formal experimentation; humanism and oppositional politics; universal themes and auteurist signatures – within US independent cinema.

Feminist, African American, LGBT and what Hamid Naficy (2001) calls 'accented' cinema by diasporic and exilic filmmakers have long emphasised the importance of self-representation in production and community affirmation in reception contexts. Made at the apex of AIDS activism, Marlon Riggs' *Tongues United* (1989) and Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989) were aesthetically challenging, paradigm-shifting works that explored black gay male identity and eroticism. Work like this and films and videos about African American lesbian histories and identities by Michelle Parkerson and Cheryl Dunye circulated largely outside theatrical exhibition circuits, energising queer theory, politics and community on the LGBT festival circuit. Rich had these in mind as well as feature films on Miramax's growing roster in the early 1990s, when she coined the term New Queer Cinema. But it was the theatrically released indie feature paradigm that gained authority in this

sector, and as in independent film more generally, the successful auteurs were mostly male.

Todd Haynes, Tom Kalin and Gregg Araki joined figures like Steven Soderbergh and Kevin Smith as Sundance success stories. Jennie Livingston was the exception among the first Sundance 'class' of New Queer Cinema successes; a woman, she made a documentary, *Paris Is Burning* (1991), focusing on poor queers of colour. Livingston's portrait of New York's African American and Latino/a queer ball scene was an important inspiration to *Pariah's* glimpse of the linked lesbian subculture. In 1996, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* became the first theatrically exhibited feature by and about African American lesbians. Significantly, the low-budget film takes on precisely the question of the representability of this identity and community in its story of a filmmaker (Dunye) researching the life of a fictional African American actress from the 1930s whose story uncovers histories of black lesbian bar culture and race movie production.

In sensibility and politics, *Pariah's* textured, rooted picture of African American community experiences of kinship and religion, homophobia and the sexual double standard is indebted to these and others. At the same time, *Pariah* displays a coming-of-age story honed with specialty-market sincerity at the Sundance Institute labs as well as the considerable visual talents of Bradford Young, an up-and-coming African American director of photography. For its African American lesbian director to access the Sundance publicity mechanism took a combination of identity-politics themes and the auteurist credibility of Rees' New York University (NYU) film school degree and Lee's patronage (she took classes from him and worked on several productions). The film thus delivers on a range of independent film histories and (sub)cultural scenes for the price of an artplex ticket. *Pariah's* story is an affirmative example of ways that feminist, queer and multicultural politics dynamically inform the culture of the Sundance Institute and festival and thus the wider sphere of independent cinema today. But as we shall see, its marketing is also a case study of how a commercial view of identity politics determines cinematic forms and distribution pathways, channelling aesthetic and political visions into narrative filmmaking with a humanist frame.

Pariah was a short before it was a feature, and it is testament to the filmmakers' tenacity that the film grew to receive such acclaim. In 2006 Dee Rees and producer Nekisa Cooper – the two met in marketing jobs for Colgate, one in toothpaste, the other in brushes – produced a twenty-eight-minute short derived from Rees' loosely autobiographical feature script as Rees' NYU film school thesis film. The short screened at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival and dozens of other festivals worldwide. Its enthusiastic reception by LGBT and African American audiences and allies (for whom it could never be too black or too gay) through community-based networks was an important source of

cultural capital. And the Sundance imprimatur plus Spike Lee's name as executive producer helped the filmmakers put together the financial capital to make the feature.

Both 'Pariahs' tell the coming-up and coming-out story of Alike, a sheltered, straight-A middle-class Brooklyn teen, played to great acclaim by newcomer Adepero Oduye. Navigating pressures and deceptions at home and expectations that she conform to the gender codes of the black and Latina lesbian scene in the streets and clubs of New York, aspiring poet Alike eventually finds her own voice, 'look' and way in the world.

This affirmative outcome isn't predicted by the film's title, however, which references those precarious subjects whom even niche marketing ignores. The film's publicity displays a title treatment incorporating a dictionary definition of the term pariah: '1. A person without status; 2. a rejected member of society; 3. an outcast'. The most obvious reference is to homophobia, the threat of being cast out of the family and the wider black community because of sexual and/or gender identity variance. This fear is enacted in the film in the story of Alike's butch best friend Laura (Pernell Walker), who, after being kicked out by her mother, dropped out of school and works long hours to support herself and her sister. The official website hosted by Focus includes a feature with testimonies from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or questioning (LGBTQ) youth participating in the Los Angeles group LifeWorks. These are the youth envisioned in the film's outreach, though perhaps not in its marketing plan. Thus homophobia and class divides are palpable forces in *Pariah's* world, but pride and community are stronger ones. The fact that the entire cast is African American is unremarkable; the history of racism is defied by the social ties in the workplaces, schools and churches of the film's Brooklyn.

The film's title also conjures the twenty-first-century indie's biggest threat: lack of box-office viability. The twenty years since the New Queer Cinema grabbed exhibition space in the early 1990s has seen a steady stream of US independent features by and about queers gain distribution, but with no guarantee of success. Black independent features struggle in the specialty market, where grass roots campaigns may be needed to build audiences. Setting superstition aside, Rees and Cooper were unwilling to negotiate on their film's title; instead *Pariah* announced the intention to make the film's outsider identity work on its behalf. In this regard the union with Focus was promising; in the distributor's hands the same-sex love story *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) became a box office sensation. But *Pariah* couldn't rely on the name recognition of literary source, stars or director, and it was about a black female teenager. As a modest, personal film, it can be seen both as a return to Sundance's early mission, and as a stretch for its constituency.

Pariah combines authorial vision and outsider status without defaulting to indie-individualist discourse. The editorial content on the film's website

includes a slide show called the 'Power of the Pariah' with profiles of forebears 'in the life'. Featured are queer rebel icons like Jean Genet and Cathy Opie alongside legendary but not necessarily widely known African American queer writers like Claude McKay and Audre Lorde. The web feature locates the film in terms of its political and cultural allegiances and its queer constituency, consistent with the film's having been funded by the Astraea Lesbian Foundation and Cinereach, among other sources. But a website hosted by Focus isn't exactly outreach. Too often a slippage from 'social issue' to 'social media' characterises the contemporary marketing of 'specialty' films.

The primary note sounded in the marketing campaign was instead the film's 'universal' theme of identity, which built on a variety of familiar realist and narrative strategies for consolidating Alike's quest as an individualist journey to fulfilment. Thus despite its title, *Pariah* does not champion the 'anti-social thesis' in queer theory. Formulated most influentially and eloquently by Lee Edelman in *No Future* (2004), this position argues that homosexuality resists sociality and forms of relationality based on reproductive futurity, and it embraces this outlaw position. There are many reasons to problematise the anti-social thesis, even if one agrees with its critique of gay marriage and assimilationist politics more generally. In *Pariah* family is an affective and narrative engine. While Alike's conflicts with her mother's Christian beliefs and her dad's reticence and misery in his aspirational life by no means glorify the middle-class intact family, the family members know the importance of having each other's backs. And alternative forms of sociality sustain Laura. Jose Esteban Muñoz argues, in redress to the anti-social thesis, that queers of colour cannot forfeit the future: 'We must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent' (2009: 30). Alike's supportive little sister Sharonda and the 'bi-curious' girl at school, who thinks Alike's cute and doesn't mind telling her clique so, represent a youthful promise of futurity. But the film also includes aesthetic correlates to Muñoz's idea of utopia as a way of transforming the present.

Alike finds figures of utopia in the LGBTQ youth of colour scene in the clubs and on the streets of New York in which Laura thrives and in the 'Afrofemcentric' music and spoken-word house party scene to which her flirtatious schoolmate Bina introduces her. These subcultural sites are sources of the film's vaunted authenticity, though the performance styles, slang-laced dialogue and cinematography are quite stylised. Alike's lonely after-hours bus journey home from the club near the film's beginning, which gives the film its poster image, is lit in a striking shade of green. Bina's room is draped with pink and orange fabrics and warmly lit. Rees and Young associate their use of colour in cinematography and *mise en scène* with Alike's 'chameleon' status before she fully defines herself. She's aqueous as she takes off her club gear to look like a dutiful feminine daughter by the time she reaches home; later, sunny

colours match her ebullience before she's emotionally blindsided by Bina. Elements of *Pariah's* aesthetic that go against realism – its saturated palette and roving camera – can be seen as a formal analogue of Muñoz's correlation between quotidian experience and queer utopia. They heighten the spectator's experience while showing the vividness of Alike's.

At the same time, the word 'universal' is all over the film, and not just in the logo of Focus' studio parent. The filmmakers repeatedly invoke the universality of the identity theme, and the word is picked up in anodyne mainstream reviews and passionate advocacy ones alike. *Pariah* is keyed as a coming-of-age/coming-out film with a predictable narrative arc and a liberal humanist message. The rhetoric of Alike's final speech 'I am not running. I am choosing' and poem 'I am broken. I am free' would be clichés were Aduye and Rees not so talented and sincere. The film's allegiance to 'crossover' codes of character and narrative turns subcultural styles into signifiers of authenticity for art house audiences. A governing tension in the film between what Alike's mother wants for her and what Laura thinks her friend needs to be loyal to echoes that between the film's universal themes and narrative elements and its stylistic and affective fidelity to LGBTQ or, and especially *and*, African American communities. When Alike leaves both Laura and Bina behind to achieve self-expression, the white light that marks the narrative's resolution pales in comparison to the hot lighting of queer sociality in the scenes with Laura and her friends. The film resolves itself as a universal story of emergent identity; however, Rees' authorial voice – her autobiographical and intertextual inscription and her connection to African American lesbian history, literature and sociality – remains singular.

Pariah opens with a quote from Audre Lorde, and elements of its story and Alike's vocation as a poet recall Lorde's *Zami* (1982), a classic memoir of coming of age as an African American lesbian in the New York of decades past. *Pariah* is bookended by a song the message of whose lyrics – 'I've got to do my thing' – is graspable by any viewer, but listeners to Sparlha Swa's music will find added resonance. The story's emphasis on individual identity may reinforce indie spectatorial habits that assimilate 'multicultural' content to a generic humanism, but that doesn't make the film any less poignant or powerful in its specific address (see Newman 2011).

The movie starts boldly: the uncensored lyrics of Khia's pussy-power paean to oral sex, 'My Neck My Back (Lick It)', blare out as we join Laura and a cool-but-uncomfortable looking Alike in a predominantly African American lesbian hip hop club catering to AGs – aggressives or studs – and their girlfriends. Interestingly, Alike moves *away* from this clearly marked contemporary New York queer scene to a much more tentative sexual exploration in the course of the film. Rees frames it this way: 'Her struggle is a more nuanced struggle of gender identity within the queer community' (Azzopardi 2012). While some

viewers will skip the nuance and see Alike as just choosing to be herself, others will see a connection to African American lesbian histories and definitions of gender presentation, among whom a few will draw out the class implications. *Zami* includes an important precedent in Lorde's account of being labelled as Ky-Ky – in the middle – faced with the role-playing codes of lesbian 1950s bar culture. Written in the early 1980s, *Zami* nods to the lesbian feminist repudiation of role playing, but also challenges white middle-class norms of decorum with its narrative of urban sexual adventure. In the case of *Pariah*, Alike's rejection of a 'stud' identity is available to be read in a humanist paradigm as a contemporary version of 'transcending' gender roles, but it is also indebted to *Zami*'s 'biomythography'.

The film does give more than glancing recognition to the codes of the urban African American lesbian scene depicted in the documentary *The Aggressives* (Daniel Peddle, 2005) and, peripherally, in *Paris Is Burning*. In one scene Alike is glimpsed through the school bathroom stall wrapping her chest; in another a confident AG tells off a homophobic man in the liquor store (and Alike's dad, a neighborhood cop, laughs with the proprietor at the bigot's comeuppance). Crucially, the film depicts black lesbian erotic styles as class as well as gender coded. Alike's family is solidly middle class and her mother is as threatened by Laura's having left school as she is by her butch style. Laura's milieu is shot with affective resonance: the kids hanging out on the piers, the glimpse of the club scene, the clothes Laura picks out for Alike, an especially endearing scene where Alike tries on a strap-on dildo. 'Didn't they even have *brown*?' Alike exclaims, horrified. Laura rejoins: 'The brown one was too big for you.' The film does not play to audiences' voyeurism (after the shock of Khia's lyrics rubs off) or treat the youth anthropologically. But after such scenes Alike's status as a never-been-kissed seventeen year old strains credibility. The film's inconsistencies speak to the divided address of contemporary independent films more generally. Like Alike, *Pariah* can't come across as too 'hard'.

At the dramatic centre of *Pariah* is Alike's coming out when confronted by her parents. This seemingly inevitable narrative 'beat' can also be read in terms of a demand that the film make its identity clear – even if that comes out 'in the middle'. Asked to deny that she's a dyke, Alike first invokes the logic of the open secret – '*you already know*', she addresses her dad, both disavowing the epithet and occupying its semantic field. There are several moments between daughter and father when it seems as if he recognises not only that she loves women but also that that fact doesn't say everything there is to say about her. Although Alike's mother has been treating her like she knows as well, when Alike spells out: 'I'm a lesbian, a dyke', her mother responds with devastating violence. Increasingly distraught by her husband's absences and suspected infidelity, she channels her anger at her daughter's masculinity.

As the dialogue just quoted indicates, *Pariah*'s emotional register builds to melodramatic tension and catharsis played out within the middle-class family. The penultimate scene, in which the mother withholds recognition of her daughter while clutching a Bible, is particularly devastating. The scene doubles an earlier one in which Laura appears at her mother's door proudly waving her GED results, only to be met with stony silence before being literally shut out. *Pariah*'s strongest affect is maternal rejection. In the scenes after the climactic confrontation a mark or lesion is visible on Alike's face. Presumably the scar from a wound sustained in her fall from her mother's blow, this mark functions symbolically, notably in the shot/reverse shot of mother and daughter during the rejection scene, as the mark of Alike's lesbian difference (see de Lauretis 1994).

The film, however, steers clear of the well of loneliness and traces an overall arc from 'pariah' to pride. Laura takes Alike in, and the film honours the kinship networks Laura has established even as it follows Alike's embrace of her class privilege and moves on with her. Alike reconciles with her father, never loses her sister's support and there is hope that her mother will come around. Finally, a somewhat implausible plot point has her receiving a scholarship for Berkeley that will begin supporting her immediately – and eventually, we surmise, deliver her into the world of the creative classes.

Arguably, the film itself rides on a similar discourse of potential – the implications of the film's success for black and/or queer cinema. What happens within the specific context and communities from which a film is launched as it makes its hazy journey to a symbolic 'west' defined by Indiewood? *Pariah*'s relatively high profile distribution deal and theatrical release are indicators of mainstream access, but unstable ones. Lacking stars with wide name recognition and intimately focused on women of colour relating to each other, *Pariah* did not perform as quite the chameleon Focus must have hoped. It won awards: the Independent Spirit Awards' John Cassavetes Award for features budgeted under US\$500,000; the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation/GLAAD's Outstanding Film-Limited Release; and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People/NAACP's Image Award for Outstanding Independent Motion Picture. Dee Rees won the Gotham for Director to Watch Out For. The film opened over the Christmas season and lasted eleven weeks in theatres; its widest expansion was to twenty-four screens; it earned less than US\$1 million. Two Philadelphia screenings I attended suggest that better outreach to African American audiences was needed. At a free preview at a multiplex in West Philadelphia, a mixed university and African American neighbourhood, the screening was packed. The young crowd, which included racial diversity and varied gender presentation, loudly cheered the film. A decidedly staid showing midway through its run at the Landmark-owned art house Ritz in the old money Society Hill

neighbourhood was at best half full. Domestic box office was disappointing, and Rees and Cooper were told outright that the film's foreign sales' prospects were not great – *Pariah* sold only to the UK market. It turns out that African American lesbian experience is deemed 'universal' only when the market supports it.

Rees was also unable to 'transcend' identity politics. The reception discourse around *Pariah* continually emphasised the authority of experience alongside the artistry of the auteur in touting the autobiographical resonance of the story. Rees was signed by a Hollywood agent and lined up future projects with HBO as a result of *Pariah*'s reception. But Focus passed on the script Rees showed them under their first look deal. In 2013, chief creative officer and indie-champion James Schamus was let go and Focus was moved to Los Angeles as part of Universal's plan to enlarge its slate to include more 'general interest' films.

Focus' reorganisation followed the closing of other studio specialty divisions in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and added to uncertainty about the future of independent film in the US. A 2011 *Variety* feature called 'New York: New Rules, New Indies' saw signs of hope in young producers like Cooper who had made lower-budget films in the city without depending on studio financing. Whether the state of crisis or the democratisation of opportunity is more characteristic of contemporary independent film culture is hard to say, but as the financial stakes are lower, there are signs of increasing diversity in what has been a male-dominated, white bourgeois sector.

What Michael Z. Newman (2011) calls the 'Sundance-Miramax era' of independent film – building on Peter Biskind's account in *Down and Dirty Pictures* (2005) – has been dominated by the story of Hollywood capital. Meanwhile, the Sundance Institute that presents the festival has maintained a commitment to gender parity and diversity in its feature film and documentary programmes, which sponsor labs and administer funds to cultivate emerging filmmakers. *Pariah* was a Sundance success long before its sale at the festival – Cooper participated in its inaugural Creative Producing Program, and Rees honed the film's script and look in the Screenwriters and Directors labs. In 2012, Sundance teamed with Women in Film Los Angeles to address a long-standing gender gap in the field, starting with a study of its own record and a mentorship programme that matched Institute participants with industry insiders. But intersectional identities like Rees' as a black, gay woman remind us that incremental change is not the answer. Moreover, diversity and inclusivity at Sundance don't necessarily change what some critics see as an Institute 'house style'. On a narrative level, *Pariah* resembles other Institute films. The fact that it won the festival award for Excellence in Cinematography for Bradford Young, who also shot the recent African American indies *Middle of Nowhere* (Ava DuVernay, 2005), *Restless City* (Andrew Dosunmu, 2011)

and *Mother of George* (Andrew Dosunmu, 2013) is some indication that having African Americans ‘in the house’ is shifting the Sundance aesthetic.

In 2012, Ava DuVernay became the first black woman to win Sundance’s Best Director for *Middle of Nowhere*, her second self-financed feature. At the same time, DuVernay, who established the distribution company AFFRM (the African American Film Festivals Releasing Movement), believes adamantly that African American independent cinema needs to cultivate its own institutions and audiences.

Focus had had significant success marketing to LGBT audiences and likely expected to position *Pariah* in this way. As the site of the New Queer Cinema’s breakthrough twenty years earlier, Sundance is a transfer point of political and community-based formations and industry attention. When Lisa Cholodenko’s third feature, *The Kids Are All Right*, took off at Sundance 2010 and never stopped – all the way to the Oscar nominations – it was a long-anticipated breakthrough for lesbian features. Astonishingly two lesbian films by US women of colour filmmakers – *Pariah* and Maryam Keshavarz’ *Circumstance* – appeared in competition at Sundance in 2011 and Aurora Guerrero’s *Mosquita y Mari* (2012) premiered at the festival the year after. All were funded by and cultivated in the Sundance Institute. Although clearly lifted up by Cholodenko’s success in 2010, they challenge *The Kids Are All Right*’s upper-middle-class white suburban American norm and movie star imprimatur. All three are debut fiction feature narratives of youthful sexual self-determination in the face of adversity – their heroines survive not by quiescence to the belief that ‘it gets better’, but by actively engaging the discursive terms in which they are seen.

Not only due to the vicissitudes of the independent film market, but also because the intersectional identities of its filmmakers warrant it, *Pariah* is not addressed univocally to an LGBT audience (as if that were a homogenous community). Instead, as we have seen, it is marked by differentiated, even conflictual address, and by contradictory affect; the ‘universal’ level of the film’s commodity form is host to particular and partial dialogues with the public cultures its story-world references and through which it moves.

Like other important limited release features by first-time directors invested with cultural as well as economic capital from institutions like NYU, Sundance and Focus, *Pariah* can ‘pass’ through the same public fields as more hegemonic artefacts of the culture industry on its way to new audiences. Besides the initial media coverage of *Pariah* in mainstream, feminist, queer and African American ‘outlets’, these include DVD, VOD and song downloads that are as important to queer kids of colour in accessing the film as they are to Universal in making back its investment.

The film’s final image is one of departure. Now Alike knows where she is going – but she’s also back on the bus, an arduous means of transportation for a

kid bound for California from Brooklyn. We don't see where she's headed, but if we could we would be prevented from imagining her destination ourselves. It is an appropriate image for the future of queer women of colour filmmakers, whose Hollywood dreams have yet to take final form, and who might head off in any number of other directions.

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