

Black Girls Queer (Re)Dress: Fashion as Literacy Performance in *Pariah*

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ABSTRACT

As the many works on the vast scholarly landscape of fashion studies has shown, we underestimate the significance of fashion and style as a tool at our peril. Fashion has much to tell us in an analysis of and intervention into systems of power and domination historically, sociologically, economically, and rhetorically. Merging this claim with another, that the sociopolitical stakes of fashion deepen within a Black queer context, this article employs literacy theory, fashion theory, Black feminism, and Black queer theory to examine how the adornment performances of Alike Freeman, a Black queer girl who is the main character of director Dee Rees's *Pariah*, disrupts rigid representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Such interventions, I argue, show how fashion functions as a literacy performance toward the pursuit of protection and desire. Through analysis of these literacy performances I demonstrate that the intersections of literacy and Black queer identity in the film require an understanding of literacies that are inclusive of, but not exclusive to, writing, reading, and traditional forms of literacy. Through dress, and in some instances undress, Alike refashions representations of Black girlhood and racialized masculinities that have held discursive prominence. Alike's use of dress is situated on a genealogy of Black girls' literacies actualized for self-definition, self-affirmation, self-love, and other pursuits and expressions of freedom.

In the last thirty-one years, narratives of literacy and black women's racial, gender, and sexual subjectivities have been the central story of multiple films.

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Among those films are the 1986 film adaptation of Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple*, the 2007 film *Akeelah and the Bee*, and *Precious*, a 2009 film adaptation of the novel *PUSH* by Sapphire. Although these cinematic representations of black girls' literacies are related to a longer history of black girls' uses of language uncovered in the scholarly tradition we might call black feminist literacy and rhetorical studies, the films have not been treated as part of the larger theoretical, historical, and pedagogical examinations of black women's literacy learning and development.

Numerous scholars, specifically black women, have documented and theorized the deep tradition of black women's literate and rhetorical traditions through which black women have employed literacy as a tool within various rhetorical forms and strategies in the pursuit of sociopolitical and cultural transformation across generations.¹ The significance of these cinematic narratives is that they illuminate various dimensions of black girl literacy and language practices, from their ability to expand constructions of literacy itself, to their continued articulation of the valuable role literacy plays in demonstrating the efficacy of analyses centered on race, gender, and sexuality, to expanding conceptions of literacy. My specific interests in these cinematic literacy narratives is in the literacies of black queer girls whose literacy work is especially treated as inaudible and invisible in the larger conversations about literacy theory and history—including, at times, when non-LGBTQ black women and girls are the focus. What's at stake for the fields of queer studies, literacy studies, black studies, and gender, women's and sexuality studies, is a critical blindness to the politics of representation in cinematic portrayals of black queer girls' literacy lives when thinking about black women and girls' employment of literacies for self-making, critical citizenship, and social change.

A recent film in this vein is Dee Rees's 2011 debut feature film, *Pariah*. *Pariah* tells the story of Alike Freeman, a seventeen-year-old black girl who lives in Brooklyn's Fort Greene neighborhood with her parents, Audrey and Arthur, and her younger sister, Sharonda. Alike "has a flair for poetry, and is a good student at her local high school. Alike is quietly but firmly embracing her identity as a lesbian."² In her social and romantic life, with the "sometimes boisterous support of her best friend, out lesbian Laura, Alike is especially eager to find a girlfriend."³ However, "at home, her parents' marriage is strained and there is further tension in the household whenever Alike's development becomes a topic of discussion."⁴ Rees's depiction of Alike never shows her buying in to the belief that she is wrong in terms of her sexuality or gender identity and expression. Instead, a primary struggle for Alike is negotiating how to take her truth and affirmatively show that to people on the outside. Part of the work of this negotiation is that Alike must determine by discerning who is and is not worthy of an

invitation to this experience of her complete sense of self. This discernment is a literate act, as it is a way in which Alike is making knowledge.

Drawing upon key scenes in *Pariah*, my analysis illustrates how Alike's persistence to define and affirm herself through literacy comes into focus through her fashion. Here fashion, I contend, is an example of Alike's "literacy performance," to borrow a phrase from literacy education scholar Mollie Blackburn. Citing Judith Butler's theorization of identity as a set of repetitious performances that simultaneously solidify and destabilize identities through variations upon it, Blackburn conceptualizes "literacy performance" as "various literacy practices [that] take shape in and over time—past, present, and future . . . any one performance is among innumerable other performances, each of which is both similar to and different from all others, both conforming and disrupting one another. Integral to literacy performances is the agency of readers and writers and the potential for transformation—something not highlighted in either literacy events or practices."⁵ The labor of this article is to expand literacy performance through the exploration of fashion and literacy as interlocking systems of expression, while also exploring literacy performances and the agency of the literate subject as inclusive of but not exclusive to reading and writing through my attention to adornment as a literacy and rhetorical practice. By doing so, I aim to drive scholars, teachers, and activists to think more seriously about the role of dress in literacy history, theory, and praxis as fashion is a useable surface on which to explore the seamlessness between "the word and the world," to use literacy activist Paulo Freire's definition of literacy.⁶ Dress is also, especially for youth, a more accessible material through which to self-create, to self-affirm, and to adorn oneself into a sense of belonging or community, among other practices of self-conceptualization. With this in mind, I argue that cinematic narratives of fashion as a dimension of black queer girls' literacies highlight the corporeal, emotional, and spiritual labor of black queer girls' literacy work both on the page and in the world—both interrelated and distinct literacy landscapes.

Attending to this literacy work, I not only contend that traditional forms of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and less commonplace literacy performances (fashion) are not only linked in the ways they all operate with literate and rhetorical consequence, but that they are also part of the aesthetic enterprise of black queer girls' lives that is embedded in their literacy work. The literacy work most relevant here includes the creation and affirmation of self, the construction and sharing of knowledge, and critically questioning, resisting, and disrupting regimes of power, domination, and literal and symbolic violence in everyday life. For example, in *Pariah*, Alike's corporeal, emotional, and spiritual labor in this aesthetic enterprise is evidenced by her will to self-definition and self-affirmation despite various acts by others that threaten to constrain or

erase her joy, sexual desire, gender expression, and self- and communal connection. Alike's persistence to live on her own terms displays her literacy work as acts of self-invention, self-love, and self-care. Through *Pariah* we see one way that cinematic representations of queer black girls' literacy performances intersect with fashion and beauty to disrupt simplistic conceptions of youth, black gender and sexuality, and aesthetic hierarchies of style and beauty so that they are confronted with their limitations and remade for the good.

To track the role of fashion as literacy performance in the film, my analysis centers on two primary themes: 1) fashion as a literacy performance for protection, and 2) fashion as a literacy performance of desire. In *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*, Tanisha C. Ford notes that "Black women have used their clothing, hair, and style not simply to make a fashion statement but as a powerful tool of resistance," thus illuminating the "importance of style both as a response to social and physical violence and as a source of pleasure."⁷ Taking Ford's claim to heart, my examination of fashion as black queer girls' literacy work in *Pariah* is an exploration of responses to violence and as a site of pleasure. We see this exploration through my analysis of fashion as a literacy performance for protection, wherein we see Alike making meaning of other people's expectations of her adornment. As for fashion as a literacy performance of desire, attention to style as a site of resistance and of pleasure is evident in Alike's negotiation of the unstable ground within and between identity disclosure and concealment through fashion. The focus on protection, disclosure, and concealment are motivations underpinning Alike's literacy performances on the page (her poetry) and in the world (her fashion). Cutting across scenes of Alike's home, school, and social life, *Pariah* shows how Alike negotiates the meaning and expression of her identities with others, amid heteronormative and cisnormative spaces that threaten to regulate and constrain her desire to live on her own terms. Throughout the film we see how Alike develops and employs literacy as a praxis of self-definition, self-affirmation, self-love, and freedom. Despite the onslaught of people, environments, and incidents that present roadblocks on her path, she breaks free and ultimately charts a new direction for herself. Through her efforts we see how "Alike strives to get through adolescence with grace, humor, and tenacity—sometimes succeeding, sometimes not, but always moving forward."⁸

Before examining scenes from the film to ground my analysis, I will first present the conceptual framework that drives my analysis: a framework that threads literacy studies, black queer-feminist theories, and fashion studies. My analysis will conclude with a brief discussion of additional interventions and implications available to us when being attentive to cinematic narratives of queer youth of color literacies, including fashion, across a cluster of related fields including critical pedagogy, black queer-feminist studies, and popular culture.

))) Literacies, Black Girlhood, and Queerness

Merging the lenses of literacy theory, black feminism, queer of color critique, and critical fashion studies, my analysis of *Pariah* pursues this central question: *What does Pariah teach us about black girls, black girlhood, and how does fashion as a literacy performance intervene into dominant narratives of race, gender, and sexuality that have circulated historically and continue to the present?* This question emerged as I first observed the role of literacy in other recent films about the lives of queer youth of color, such as 2009's *La Mission*, 2011's *Gun Hill Road*, and 2015's *Blackbird*. Each film contributes to a wide and complex array of narratives in which to engage this question. In each of these films about queer youth of color, including *Pariah*, there are a number of literacy performances where queer youth of color operate with consequence and toward personal and collective transformation—including writing, spoken word performances, and dance. My interests in *Pariah*, however, are in dress and the ways that the adornment of queer black girls in the film show fashion as a locus by which queer black girls' literacies express black girlhood as a practice of freedom first and foremost for themselves, with implications ultimately also for others to also get free.

The centerpiece of *Pariah* is black girlhood, which Ruth Nicole Brown, a trailblazing scholar in the field of black girlhood studies, defines as "the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female" that "is not dependent, then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity."⁹ Placing focus on black girlhood is essential, and this focus means that one bears the responsibility to hear "what it means to be a Black girl marginalized with so much to say yet lacking formal mechanisms to be heard."¹⁰ Confronting the lack of formal mechanisms to be heard, Elaine Richardson writes that black women and girls' literacies are an imperative in their self-definition, self-affirmation, self-love, and the expression of that love. "African American female literacies," writes Richardson, are those "ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts" through which black girls "protect and advance themselves."¹¹

In protecting and advancing themselves through literacies, black girls employ literacies as a praxis of freedom, and black girlhood as the beingness of that praxis for, as Brown asserts, "Black girlhood is freedom, and Black girls are free."¹² In *Pariah* we witness Alike's writing and recitation of two poems. One poem she reads standing before her classmates in their English class, and the other a poem she reads to her teacher, Mrs. Alvarado, at the film's conclusion.¹³ Alike's fashion as well as her poetry are, as stated previously, an interconnected continuum of

her larger literacy work. Her fashion and writing are linked not only through her intention for her self-expression, but also in the aesthetic enterprise that informs and is informed by her uses of literacy as a practice of freedom at large. Through this literacy work, Alike, like generations of black queer people before and contemporaries, is drawing upon literacies in both commonplace and expansive understandings of the term in ways that illustrate Richardson's claim that literacy is not only how Alike protects and advances herself, but also the means through which she narrates her struggle and pursues a vision for her life on her own terms. Being a young black queer woman invites us to consider Alike's writing as situated in the longer tradition of black queer women's literacies.

Alike represents a larger historical and contemporary practice of queer black women who repurpose their literacy to complicate conceptions of identity, agency, citizenship, and intellectual heritage. Through their writing, Jewelle Gomez writes, black lesbians persist in "telling their own stories" in the face of "the quicksand of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and consumerism" that often "sucks down the authentic voices of lesbians of color."¹⁴ My analysis of Alike's literacy work evidences what I have theorized elsewhere as "restorative literacies," a concept that codifies the ways literacy is (re)appropriated by black queer people as a praxis of an ethics of self- and communal love.¹⁵ Through this ethic, black LGBTQ people assert an ideology of nonnormativity as central to having control over one's life, and employ literacy through this ideology not simply for resistance, but for one's own joy, pleasure, fantasies, desires, hopes, and dreams in the midst of and after struggle. The range of restorative literacies are fluid and simultaneous, dissolving the distinctions between what are deemed traditional literacy activities and nontraditional literacy activities, instead emphasizing a definition of literacies as what Richardson calls "a particular way of making sense of the world" and a form of "knowledge making."¹⁶ Referencing the work of Jacqueline Jones Royster, Richardson notes that "African American women's consciousness, shaped by historical memory and social conditioning, informed their literacy and rhetorical practices."¹⁷ This is evidenced in *Pariah* in that Alike's literacies are not only situated in the larger reality of black queer girls' literacies in everyday life, but her literacies also dovetail back to a rich tradition of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer women's literacies in U.S. public culture, as exemplified in the poetry and prose of trailblazing black gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer writer-activists, including Barbara Smith, Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Cheryl Clarke, as well as contemporary writers such as Sharon Bridgforth, Samiya Bashir, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Andrea Jenkins, and Janet Mock.

As mentioned, multiple scenes in *Pariah* feature writing, which suggests its central role in the film. Rees imbues writing with a sense of urgency in the film

through her presentation of Alike's everyday life. For example, at school, when we might expect a student to be in the cafeteria socializing during lunch, Alike spends her lunch break in a classroom with her teacher, Mrs. Alvarado, sharing her poetry and listening intently to her teacher's feedback. In another scene, Alike sits alone in a nook of the school hall, writing within earshot of a group of her peers who talk loudly about whether Alike's gender identity is masculine, feminine or "in the middle."¹⁸ Each of these scenes, occurring almost from the beginning of the film, are there to tell us writing holds great importance for Alike, particularly within Rees's presentation of Alike's story as a coming-of-age narrative.

Writing also figures further in the film's exploration of Alike's literacy life when the film demonstrates the role of writing in incidents that Alike experiences as harmful in some way. One example is the relationship Alike establishes with her first romantic partner, Bina. Alike and Bina are, at first, curt and uninterested in being friends, having been forced to hang out together by their mothers. This forced friendship is initiated by Alike's mother Audrey, who seeks to keep Alike away from her lesbian best friend Laura, and tries to force Alike to befriend Bina, who she clearly believes to be a better influence on Alike—who she assumes is a lesbian—than Laura, who she knows is a lesbian. Alike and Bina do not gel at all until one day, while discussing Alike's writing, Bina comments how much she likes Alike's poems and Alike is eager to share more (Figure 1). Their initial connection is made possible through the sharing of writing,

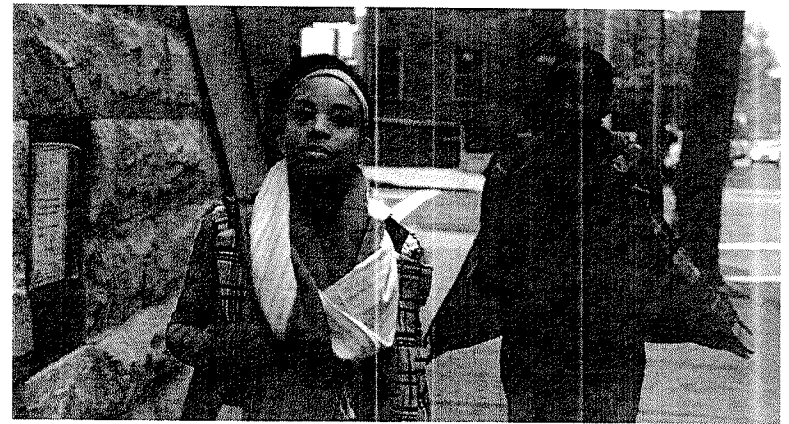


Figure 1. Bina (left, Aasha Davis) and Alike (right, Adepero Oduye) are initially forced by their mothers to spend time together and are reluctant to do so.

and it blossoms into a mutual sexual attraction, with Bina ultimately becoming Alike's first sexual partner (Figure 2). The morning after, Alike awakens to a visibly annoyed Bina, who becomes more frustrated when Alike says "no one has to know we're together," which Bina immediately rejects.¹⁹ Bina's rejection of a relationship with Alike leaves Alike hurt and angry, she must ultimately repurpose writing away from that experience of establishing her connection with Bina so that it is available as a tool for her continued development and survival as we see in the film's end. That is, when Bina hurts her we can see how writing is implicated in her being hurt and feeling betrayed by Bina. But, in the film's end, when Alike pens and reads a poem that discusses her determination to subvert the repressiveness and violence of her family, what she is simultaneously doing is remaking her relationship to writing in a way that is affirming.

Alike wants a romantic and erotic connection with someone. And one of the main ways she is able to do so is through her writing. In this instance, it is through her writing that she is able to make the connection she seeks and get on the path to achieving the kind of self-autonomy we see her heading toward at the end of the film. This scene is also important because her relationship with Bina, built through their mutual love of each other's writing and Alike's writing being "real," falls apart.²⁰ As a result, by the film's end we see Alike as not just using literacy to counteract the harm of her family constraining her identity, but employing it against the hurtful relationship she has with Bina.



Figure 2. Bina and Alike begin to bond over writing and music.

The function of writing here links to the concept of "literacy normativity"—which elsewhere I describe as incidents when literacy is used to damage or inflict harm—as theorized by my analysis of the literacy life stories of sixty black LGBTQ people across the United States.²¹ Alike's experience of literacy normativity is visible through the ways writing is associated with pain. Literacy is implicated in this attempt to discipline Alike as a black queer girl, in which literacy functions as what feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander calls a "technology of control."²² We can see this in the forms of normativity she confronts because, as will be shown in my analysis of fashion as a literacy performance in the film, they often occur in and through literacy institutions Alike is surrounded by in her everyday life (home, school, and the black queer club).

In addition, as meaning making is a hallmark of literacy, literacy is implicated in the normativity Alike confronts because, deploying an ideology of nonnormativity is, in effect, reading one's social world. It is in these moments that we witness Alike using literacy as a critical intellectual tool through which she asserts her right to and sense of a complex black lesbian girlhood, and eventually engages in self-love and care. As I will show with her fashion, writing functions as restorative literacies in Alike's life, as it becomes a balm to soothe some of the pains of life in general and of those she experiences or expresses through writing.²³

Although the most legible part of *Pariah's* literacy story is Alike Freeman's uses of writing, I focus on this writing as part of a continuum of Alike's literacies that includes, but is not exclusively focused on, print or alphabetic script. Within this continuum, fashion is another such literacy performance. This reflects, again, Paulo Freire's description of literacy as "reading [and I would add writing] the word and the world."²⁴ In fact, it is imperative to note that the roots of this view of literacy may also be attributed to a black woman, Sojourner Truth. Though recorded in history as illiterate, through her deft literate and rhetorical competence she is recorded to have proclaimed: "I don't read such small things as books. I read men and nations."²⁵ Truth's conceptualization of literacy invites us to consider those connected to reading and writing in its most literal sense, as well as those acts of reading and writing in a metaphorical sense, as we give meaning to and navigate our social and political worlds. Conversant with Freire and Truth's claims about literacy, as well as those of other scholars of the new literacy studies who have defined and shown literacy to be a culturally situated practice in which meaning is made and understood, my analysis of *Pariah* centers on those literacy performances—namely fashion—that occur off the page as a continuum of reading, writing, and other literacy work. Such literacy performances are just as useful to exploring the confluence of literacy, identity, self-definition, self-affirmation, and self-love.

Fashion as Literacy Performance

To connect literacy and fashion theory with my focus on a cinematic commentary on gender and sexuality in the experiences of a black queer girl, I offer *critical black sartoriality*. I define critical black sartoriality as “a constellation of Black sartorial performances that . . . disrupt rigid [notions] and representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality.”²⁶ Tapping just this vast archive presents infinite possibilities for a deeper engagement with the sartorial in African American literacies and rhetorical practices. Maxine Leeds Craig argues that fashion and style have always been crucial within individual and collective black expression, from associations with asserting self- and communal autonomy over how one is represented to the simple pleasures of dress.²⁷ Implicit in this sense of fashion politics in African American life is a belief that fashion and style are far more than the frivolous and oversimplified that many treat it. As you will see in my analysis of fashion in this cinematic coming-of-age story of a black queer girl, fashion and style have much more to offer for the ways they have and do operate with consequence. They offer us much in the analysis of rhetoric’s associations with power and structure.

The central role of fashion to *Pariah* is clearly established by the film’s director, Dee Rees, in a DVD bonus featurette, “Trying Out Identity: *Pariah*’s Wardrobe.” The featurette focuses on the ways Alike’s clothing changes over the course of



Figure 3. Laura (far right, Pernell Walker) with Alike as she is trying on clothes.

the film, including the masculine style Alike and her best friend Laura wear in the film’s opening scene, to her adopting what I will discuss as a completely different style midway through the film and a more personal style change at its conclusion. In the featurette, Rees says Alike’s clothing demonstrates that she is “trying on different personas, so she is trying on different clothes. So she just feels, kind of in this tug of war. She’s got her openly gay best friend and wants to be one way that’s not quite her personality, but this is what she does to go along”²⁸ (Figure 3). Speaking further on the crucial role fashion plays within Alike’s self-definition and self-affirmation, Adepero Oduye, who plays Alike in the film, says that “as a teenager clothes are really important. Clothes kind of determine who you are, what group you’re in, everything’s got to be just right. Yeah, so clothing was a big, big, big part of just feeling that—it’s kind of like her, like her cover. Like things she could put on to feel comfortable or try to feel comfortable in her skin.”²⁹ Oduye’s discussion of clothing as a kind of skin resonates with what Mimi Thi Nguyen calls their own kind of “epidermalization”—which Nguyen describes as the skin of our public body.³⁰ In this skin, individuals are often targeted for social harm via norms and normative processes manifesting through dress. What I want to call attention to are not only the specific systems of power and structures underpinning the forms of epidermalization evidenced in scenes of a black queer girl’s fashion in *Pariah*, but I also want to point to this film and others as examples of how characters engage with sartorial politics on their own terms as a mode of survival, self-making, and an implicit critique of those systems and structures. Thus, both Rees and Oduye’s sense of the labor of fashion to Alike and other characters informs the ways fashion—and in particular personal style—embody a form of literacy performance through which Alike narrates her self-definition and the challenges faced in that identity work.

Fashion and literacies also intertwine in the ways each rely on situatedness in being defined, understood, and in praxis. For literacy, this situatedness is evident in, again, the new literacy studies articulation of literacies as a sociocultural situated practice in which meaning is made. Through this, the context in which literacy is developed, transmitted, and practiced is what gives meaning to literacies. For fashion, one way in which situatedness matters is in the relationship between the body and dress. Fashion theorist Joanne Entwistle reminds us that although the relationship between the body and dress may seem obvious, as “dress cannot be understood without reference to the body and while the body has always and everywhere to be dressed, there has been a surprising lack of concrete analysis of the relationship between them.”³¹ To parse out the complex dimensions of this relationship, Entwistle offers the notion of fashion as a “situated bodily practice,”³² in order “to highlight how our body is embedded within the social world and fundamental to micro-social order. ‘Rules’ governing how

we present our bodies are critically important and we risk shame, ridicule or simply discomfort if we do not present ourselves appropriately for the setting.”³³ I contend that, in addition to being its own embodied practice (reading, writing, speaking, listening, performing), literacy is implicit to Entwistle’s theorization of fashion as a situated bodily practice in that it is a relationship between embodiment, identity, and fashion that one slips outside of, acquiesces with, rejects, or disidentifies with these rules. All these actions require a discernment and creation of meaning from the social, political, and world context, which is, in effect, a fashion literacy.

Fashion as a literacy performance also speaks to scholarship that explores literacy in ways that push past reductive grand narratives that depict literacy as solely for resistance to or defiance of oppression and marginality, and instead show literacy as a practice of healing as well as pleasure, play, and love, not as a flattened anti-oppressive act. In such instances, the effect of the literacy practice may indirectly defy or resist, but the emphasis here is on those desires of the individual that precedes or belies resistance or defiance. By centering literacy performances where Alike uses dress and undress in ways that are pursuant of self-definition, self-affirmation, and self-love, I highlight how these literacy performances have a broader social and political impact that grow out of an ethics of black queer survival.

Centering Alike’s self-definition, self-affirmation, and self-love in relationship to her literacy, *Pariah* provides some insight through the character’s writing, but along with the poems, one must consider Alike’s other literacy performances to access additional insights about the poem and literacy work in the film generally. Consider, for example, a scene in which Alike shares her writing with her teacher Mrs. Alvarado. The scene is a moment where writing is positioned as the literacy work most relevant to identity formation and affirmation—and specifically the issue of identity disclosure. But, I contend that fashion as a literacy performance that is also taking up that identity work is decentered as part of the literacy work for identity formation and affirmation in the scene. In the scene, Alike skips lunch with her peers and presents her notebook of poems to her teacher, Mrs. Alvarado. Their dialogue before and after Alike shares the book shows this is a familiar practice for both, and that there is a relationship of mutual trust and care. When the teacher finishes reading Alike’s book, she has an uninspired expression on her face and says, among other feedback, that Alike needs to “go deeper.”³⁴

Unfortunately, Mrs. Alvarado’s feedback is not the impetus for this self-exploration and affirmation by Alike. Rather, the feedback is ambiguous and susceptible to interpretation as containing expectations around identity that are exactly what Alike must subvert to achieve self-expression. The teacher’s

comments sound like, as many, many critical pedagogy and writing studies scholars across multiple generations have noted and critiqued, the still too-common response that students from historically and contemporarily marginalized groups receive from teachers who read their work and send them off with piecemeal feedback to go find and come back with some authentic self. This self is often one predetermined by the teacher’s identity-based assumptions about the student and their background. So many people of color, in speaking to their experiences in writing classes, recall incidents of being told the language used in their essays was inauthentic because they were not colloquial enough, because they did not turn in a paper written in Ebonics or Spanglish, or did not write about race, ethnicity, and class from a perspective that reflected the teacher’s sense of that race, ethnicity, or class. Likewise, some LGBTQ people will often recall teacher’s using writing assignments to coax them out of or push them into “the closet,” with teachers offering overt and covert feedback on writing assignments designed to pull a specific kind of identity disclosure or nondisclosure from LGBTQ students. To be fair, we do not know what Mrs. Alvarado means by “go deeper.” We do not know what Alike has or has not shared with her about her identities or her home life. Does she want Alike to present a stereotypical “coming out” piece? Does she look at their shared identities as women of color and assume that Alike’s writing should be more recognizable or legible to her because of this perceived identity-based sameness? Does she look at the difference in their gender expression, and perhaps even assumptions about Alike’s sexuality, and want to be educated by her student? We do not know.

Regardless of her intentions, the teacher’s suggestion to “go deeper” does not reflect the experience of Alike Freeman. What the teacher fails to consider is that Alike Freeman, like many youth, already has some sense of self, she is just navigating the minefield of unsafety, oppression, and rejection reflected in other’s regulation and constraining of that self-expression. Her parents don’t get her, and when she comes closest to experiencing that community it is with Laura and their friends, but shows signs that she feels pressure and discomfort among them whenever she must dress, talk, and desire the same ways they do. Going deeper, for Alike, comes at a much higher and traumatic cost than the teacher may imagine, but still there are places where Alike is doing this meaning-making work—this literacy work. One of the places where Alike is exploring what the teacher is looking for is not on the pages the teacher reads, but in a literacy performance occurring off the page—Alike’s fashion.

Fashion as a Literacy Performance of Protection

Literacy is implicated in Alike's fashion through its requirement that she read and makes sense of the social world to make choices around dress, choices that I attribute to Alike's use of fashion as a literacy performance of protection. Alike is acutely aware of how the world—her family, classmates, friends—respond to external representations, including fashion. She clearly feels their assumptions and expectations based upon dress prevalently, as shown in her resistance to their attempts to dress her according to their sense of who she is or should be, especially her mother. We also see that she is aware of these expectations people have about her involving dress when she appears to acquiesce in those moments where she is not comfortable with the style she takes on, but does so to achieve some sense of belonging or to try and find herself. Her ability to discern the meaning others are creating in and through their expectations about her adornment is literacy work. In all, fashion is not just relevant to Alike's developing sense of self or dressing to the perception of others. Rather, it is a literacy performance that illuminates the element of survival. Alike's fashion choices show the context of the choices she makes to navigate the consequences of how the meaning others give to dress affect her ability to fully express her own complex sense of self.

We first see the role of fashion as a literacy performance of protection, and Alike's awareness of others' expectations of her based on dress, in the film's opening scene, where Alike and her friend Laura are enjoying a night out at the club. In this scene, Alike and Laura each wear du-rags under baseball caps, oversized jeans, and polo shirts or tank tops.³⁵ Alike and Laura's style of dress corresponds to the gender identity and expression they are labeled by a classmate later in the film, who calls the queer women Alike socializes with "A-Gs," an abbreviation for "Aggressive." Elisa Norris describes A-G as a gender identity and expression wherein black and Latinx women "adopt and perform a Black/Latino masculinity that is informed by hip-hop culture and urban aesthetics. The Aggressive identity is one that is exclusive to queer women of color, and Black and Latina women almost exclusively. . . . In these individual's lives, race intersects with sexuality, gender, and class to produce a unique identity that is separate from that of Black/Latina lesbian as well as white lesbian."³⁶ Norris notes that among the many ways some A-Gs "mark their membership in this subculture through their rhetorical decisions about the visual representations of their identities," dress is especially significant. A-G attire is "made up of some combination of the following: baggy graphic t-shirts and jeans, team jerseys, hoodies, Timberlands, tennis shoes, and/or baseball caps. Aggressives often have tattoos, and, sometimes, gold fronts (permanent or removable) that cover their teeth."³⁷

In an interview about her role in *Pariah*, actor Pernelle Walker, who plays Laura, refers to Laura's dress and calls Laura an A-G. Walker briefly discusses the distinction between Laura's style of dress in the film and Walker's own style of dress—including hair and make-up—during the interview in order to highlight the distinction she is making about Laura and Alike's gender expression and dress in the film.³⁸ Like Alike, Laura's attire locates her along a specific spectrum of gender identity and expression among queer women of color in the club and in the social worlds that seep through the club and into other areas of everyday life, and vice versa.

Norris likens the A-G identity to the "B-boy stance," a typified expression of hip-hop masculinities, which she sees reflected in a *Village Voice* photograph accompanying an article about a subculture of Aggressives in New York City. In the photograph, Norris notes, A-Gs effect the B-boy stance "posing with their girlfriends or standing alone, and their folded arms, legs-apart stance, and expressionless faces are part of the iconography that contributes to the hip-hop aesthetic." This stance, she says, is seen in hip-hop dance clubs and the album covers, music videos, and live performances of popular hip-hop artists including Lil' Wayne and 50 Cent. However, less an exclusively glamourized depiction of A-G identity obscure the realities of gender and sexual normativity—including cisnormativity, cissexism, heteronormativity, homophobia, transphobia, and anti-queer violence in general—Norris notes that A-Gs are still vulnerable to identity-based street harassment, violence, and death that so many queer people of color—and especially transgender people, nonbinary people, and queer women of color, are victim to with regularity in everyday life. Norris discusses the murder of Sakia Gunn, a fifteen-year-old black queer youth who was killed coming home from a night of clubbing with her friends by Richard McCullough, who targeted Gunn and her friends when they rebuffed his advances, with Gunn proclaiming that she preferred women sexually.³⁹ In the aftermath of her murder, some news reports identified Gunn as a black butch lesbian, whereas other news reports describe Gunn as an A-G or Aggressive. Though we do not know if Gunn identified as A-G, Norris notes that her attire and that of many people in the nightlife she was coming home from attending, are adorned in the clothing associated with those who do identity as such.⁴⁰ In addition, as we saw with the murder of forty-nine people—the vast majority of them Latinx and other queer people of color—at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016, even the queer dance club or any all-queer social space like Alike and Laura attend at the film's beginning is no guarantee of safety or safer space.⁴¹

Continuing with the scene at the queer dance club, we may take Alike's clothes in the club as an articulation of the role of fashion as a literacy performance in general. This performance is critical in examining her gender and

sexual subjectivity intersectionally as a race and class performance as well. That Alike uses fashion to define her textures of self is also a form of resistance. Fashion is employed to do violence to Alike, and therefore by refashioning her dress Alike queers these incidents as a praxis of freedom. The function of fashion as a literacy performance here is a queer performance of oppositional aesthetics.

This brings us to a crucial juncture in the exploration of fashion as a literacy performance of protection in the film, where I contend that if we are to critically engage the role of fashion as a literacy performance wherein Alike subverts the regulatory gender and sexual oppression by others, then we should be looking also at scenes where Alike is not only dressing, but also undressing, as a way to fashion herself. In fact, a scene of undress is among the first in the film. In the scene, Alike is on a bus with her friend Laura after leaving the club. Whereas Laura wants to remain on the bus to ensure Alike gets home safe, Alike becomes annoyed and somewhat angry and insists that Laura leave (Figure 4). In the following scene, after Laura gets off the bus as Alike demanded, Alike takes the rest of the ride home to do as she planned, hence her urgency in making Laura exit the bus. After sitting pensively for a little bit, Alike begins to remove her hat and du-rag, change her jewelry, finally placing her clothes from the club in a bag she stashes out of sight outside and then enters her family home and goes to her bedroom.⁴²

It is in this scene, which occurs within the first few minutes of the film, where Dee Rees is saying to the viewer to be attentive to fashion. However, it is not dress, but undress on the bus ride home that gives the first introspective look



Figure 4. Alike and Laura aboard bus after a night at the club.

at Alike through fashion. Undressing on the way home appears to be a ritual, given the commonplaceness with which Alike engages in it, and her annoyance and frustration that Laura would remain on the bus after her stop and disrupt her ritual. The look on Alike's face as she undresses, pensive, even worried or anxious, suggests the weight of her attention to dress. Fashion is attached to meaning, her own meaning and the meaning others create about her. Dress and undress show that Alike is acutely aware of this fact. The meaning is contextualized by what is at stake for not changing her clothes, but also for changing them. We see the stakes of wanting to not change in the clear shame Alike has in her resistance to Laura being present for her ritual; changing clothes is something she feels bad or conflicted about.

On the other hand, the stakes of Alike's choosing to shed her fashion is made clear when she arrives home and is met with another ritual, as her gender and social life are policed because of the gender, sexual, and racial anxieties of her mother Audrey. Navigating the minefield of her mother's gender normativity and black respectability, and the discomfort of the A-G attire she sports and then takes off on the bus, both requires and demonstrates that Alike employs fashion as a protective literacy performance. The literacy performance is equally important to Alike achieving a black gender and sexual selfhood on her own terms.

Although the opening scene shows Alike in a scene where she is somewhat comfortable among other black queer people and dressed according to the conventions of that space, throughout *Pariah* dress is not simply a tool of beautiful self-expression. Alike and others also experience dress in relation to regulation, oppression, and violence. The scenes that most clearly demonstrate this are those focused on Alike's mother, Audrey.

When Alike is in her bedroom after returning home from the club, Audrey approaches Alike to discipline her about missing her curfew and inquiring where she had been. Audrey also compliments Alike on a tee shirt she wears that says "Angel," a shirt she changed into clearly to please her mother before entering the home and after curfew, removing her baseball hat, du-rag, and changing her top. When she compliments Alike on the outfit, and Alike looks uninterested in the compliment, Audrey's demeanor changes into a tirade wherein she chides Alike for coming home late and hanging out with Laura, saying "I don't like that girl you been running around here with," signaling some anxiety about Laura. She instructs Alike to wash the make-up off her face before going to bed. When Alike says she isn't wearing any make-up, Audrey pretends Alike never said it and says "fine, it's your face," doubling down on the assumption that Alike is wearing make-up or that she should be.⁴³ By instigating this argument about

make-up despite the fact that Alike is not wearing any, Audrey exposes that she is in pursuit of the normative narrative of the parent who argues with their teenage daughter about wearing make-up or other materials that are seen as being too adult. Despite the fact that Alike is clearly not wearing make-up, and has confirmed that, Audrey is persistent in telling her that not taking the make-up off will ruin her skin because it continues the narrative Audrey would like and ignores the truth she cannot abide—that her teenage daughter, who she knows is queer though Alike has not voiced it, is not wearing make-up. Make-up, or its absence, crashes through Audrey's heteronormative and gender normative idea of black girlhood, which is represented by how much more aggravated Audrey appears when Alike first refuses to engage in Audrey's fantasy mother-daughter conversation about dress, and then says she is not wearing any make-up. Audrey resents Alike for refusing to acquiesce with the mother-daughter performance Audrey is initiating.

In another scene, Audrey shows a coworker a pink sweater she bought for Alike to wear. The coworker, who we later learn is named Mrs. Singletary and is Bina's mother, assumes it is for Alike's sister, Sharonda. When Audrey corrects her and says the shirt is for Alike, the coworker seems first confused then honestly surprised, and says "Ohhhh, ok. Yeah, this will compliment her figure."⁴⁴ The coworker's demeanor is first one of surprise, and then one of acquiescence to Audrey's perspective. Unlike Alike, who refuses to participate in Audrey's ritual, though the coworker doesn't see Alike in the look from the beginning, she goes along to get along and finds some way to associate Alike with the garment to appease Audrey and continue the ritual of mothers talking about their daughters without much disruption. Later, when Alike chooses not to wear the pink sweater to church, Audrey forces her to put it on anyway. In this same scene where Audrey tells Alike she is not dressed feminine enough, she tells her youngest daughter Sharonda to remove some of her make-up, chastising her for this femme excess or for "acting grown" as is said in the black vernacular. When Alike returns to the room wearing the shirt, Audrey says how nice she looks whereas Alike's father, Arthur, laughs at Alike in the shirt, signaling that he too knows this shirt is not Alike's look.⁴⁵ Alike, however, is clearly miserable (Figures 5 and 6).

These scenes between Alike and Audrey provide ample details through which we can explore how fashion functions as a literacy performance for protection. In these scenes, Alike reads the social world and does anything she can to be comfortable in her clothing choices, while doing her best to circumvent Audrey's oppression of Alike's personhood through forced dress. Alike, through such actions, enacts an ethic of black queer survival, because she places self-care at the center of her actions, despite Audrey's power over her as her parent. Audrey's

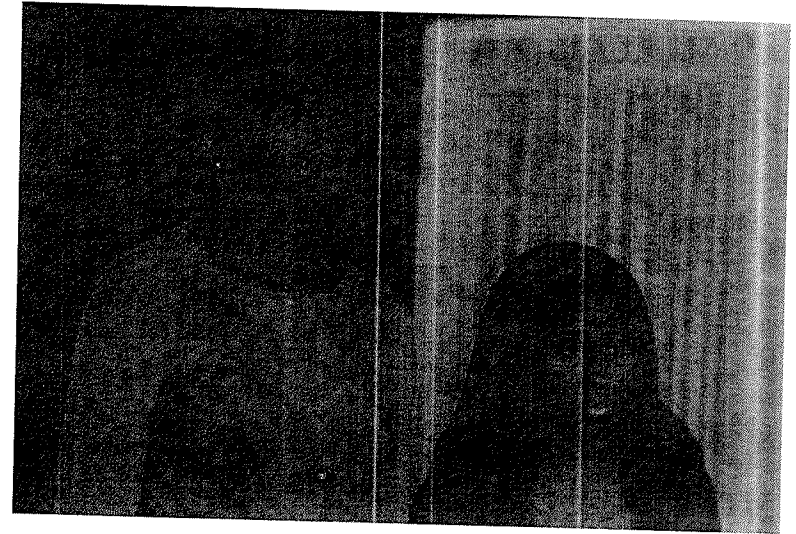


Figure 5. Alike, standing beside her sister Sharonda (right, Sahra Mellesse) wearing the pink sweater she is forced to wear to church by her mother, Audrey.



Figure 6. Audrey (right, Kim Wayans) and Alike, following their argument about the pink sweater.

obsession with Alike's dress illustrates the ways dress is policed by Audrey to force Alike to dress according to the gender and sexual politics of her mother. Her father's awareness witnessing of Alike's discomfort and refusal to intervene, also implicates him in the violence of this episode of forced dress.

In these same scenes, we see how Alike shows her awareness of this dynamic when she uses fashion to navigate or subvert its regulatory function by others. This is evident in her use of dress to attempt to circumvent Audrey's surveillance by changing clothes before she enters the home, and in her attempts to wear clothes to church that make her feel somewhat comfortable though not the oversized shirts, baggy jeans, baseball hats, and du-rags we see her wear at the club with her friends. The latter is still not sufficient for Audrey, because she forces Alike into the pink sweater she bought for her, despite the fact that Alike doesn't choose this shirt in the first place and instead goes for something that makes her more comfortable. This demonstrates Alike's discernment of how dress functions in her interaction with Audrey and others. With this information, she proceeds in the best possible way to navigate the violence of forced dress while attempting to mitigate participating in its harms by fully acquiescing with the expectations of normatively gendered dress held by others. It is imperative to also note that Audrey's use of the pink sweater, although oppressive of Alike, may also be read as a literacy performance of protection too. The pink sweater, a tool of Audrey's homophobia and cisnormativity in these scenes, are intertwined with her broader performance of respectability, which functions to protect her from what she sees as negative judgment of her as a mother or her family as being abnormal and thus vulnerable.

7.1 Fashion as a Literacy Performance of Desire

The sounds of rapper Khia's song "My Neck, My Back," where she sings about the pleasures of cunnilingus, provides the soundtrack to the opening scene of *Pariah*, which, again, takes place in a Brooklyn club. With the song playing loudly, the cameras pan to people kissing one another including women kissing other women, and others dancing on tables, as a stripper on the stage glides down a pole upside down with Alike staring at her in awe.⁴⁶ If this scene of desire—that is not normative, respectable, or in line with codes of propriety—does not already mark the moment as queer, the director uses fashion to make the queerness more visible, as femme women of color dance alongside those dressed masculine, butch, A-G, genderqueer, and nonbinary.

The centrality of dress in this scene provides a touchstone to key details that illustrate fashion's function as a literacy performance in *Pariah*. In this scene, we

see Alike in the club dressed almost identically to other masculine queer women of color. This dress, and a scene so centered on desire, places Alike in a particular space on the spectrum of gender identity and expression in the club. What we learn in scenes that follow is that Alike's dress in the opening scene is her trying on a persona to find a place among her peers. It is not necessarily a complete expression of who she is. Alike is, in fact, struggling with the expectation of her peers so she adopts the same form of A-G identity and masculinity that Laura and others have in order to be seen as desirable. Fashion is a means through which Alike appears to conform to this expectation. Thus, Alike's style of dress demonstrates fashion as a literacy performance of desire in that the clothes she selects is a response to what she perceives as the codes of identity and expression that govern desire and desirability in this queer of color space. The scene also establishes the assumption about Alike's gender identity and expression, even though it shifts throughout the film, is an affirmation she chooses to take up on her own. It is not the same as when her mother uses dress to try and impose an identity on her, as she does in the scene with the pink sweater. However, Alike's fashion choices challenge any reductive assumptions about her attitude toward being A-G identified or toward a more stereotypically feminine gender identity and expression. By doing so, Alike's fashion functions as a literacy performance that informs and is informed by desire, sexual and otherwise, in that her adornment practices are shifting just as her literacy of gender identity and expression relative to desiring and being desired by others shifts spatially, temporally, and relationally. In these shifts, desire also demonstrates how the literacy work of fashion navigates the thin line between disclosure and concealment inside and outside of queer of color space.

Fashion as a literacy performance of desire is depicted in multiple scenes where Alike's gender expression is not one that she accepts in the neat packaging assumed or imposed by others who she desires or who desire Alike. In one scene, Alike sits in the halls of her school listening to a group of black girl classmates talk about their crushes and sexual attraction to queer women. One woman sees Alike sitting nearby within earshot of her conversation, and purposefully inquires about Alike, saying to her friends that Alike is cute but that she would like Alike more "if she was a little harder."⁴⁷ The young woman then leaves saying she will be at the club with her friends on Saturday, glancing suggestively and smiling at Alike. Overhearing this conversation, Alike asks her friend Laura to help her get a strap-on to wear to the club. We are left to think she does this to answer back the classmate's wish that she be "harder" or more masculine. However, when Laura brings Alike the strap-on, Alike is anxious and says it "looks stupid" because of its erectness and because the strap-on is white and not black or brown in color. It is interesting that it is in this same scene that Alike's

sister, Sharonda, comes to her room asking for her make-up case. Alike says she borrowed it, and returns it only after Sharonda agrees not to say anything to their parents about the strap-on. Having Sharonda's make-up case suggests that make-up, something antithetical to masculinity in normative binary representations of gender, is something that Alike apparently does try, or at least pretends to try.⁴⁸

We may read Alike's response to the strap-on as a refusal of its functionality for her life and for the conditions under which she is desired. Alike's resistance to the strap-on is a resistance to the idea that her gender and sexual subjectivities can only be legible within the context of a masculine gender expression typified by Laura and other A-Gs. Yes, though an A-G identity is easily taken for granted as Alike's own because of her blackness and masculinity in the opening scene of the film, and as Elisa Norris shows its frequent use as a category of some black queer women's gender identity in New York City, this is not the case for Alike. In actuality, for Alike, as the film progresses, "A-G" is depicted as not an appropriate identity label for others to use as they make assumptions about Alike. It is also insufficient for her own use to define herself.

Still, it is through Alike's reading and performance of gender identity and expression that Alike makes sense of the A-G identity within the social world she inhabits. Her use of fashion demonstrates how she constructs and gives meaning to her own gender identity and expression outside of the masculine and feminine gender binary. Instead, Alike queers the gender her mother aspires for her to present, as well as the seemingly more liberating, though limiting, expectations that she perform A-G identity to be desirable or legible in queer of color social spaces, too. Contrary to this, Alike's fashion choices push back on both the rigidity of Audrey's expectations and those of her peers who ascribe A-G identity to Alike based on their own desires and assumptions. As such, Alike's fashion becomes a way of placing her own identity and expression at the center of her narrative of desire. Thus, Alike makes herself the subject of desire in her life and not simply focused on being desired by others. An example is Alike's progression from the binaries imposed by others, and those her adornment operates within for the first three-quarters of the film, to the gender nondescript attire she wears in the remainder of the film. The latter observation about Alike's gender and dress seen certainly in the last scene as Alike boards a bus to an unknown future. In the scene Alike is wearing mostly dark colors accented with a bright yellow, plaid scarf she first wears while reading a poem in class midway through the film. The look is gender nondescript, but one that—as she states in the film—she chooses.

As noted in the earlier discussion about fashion as a literacy performance for protection, although dress is so central to the ways Rees stories black queerness

and desire, it is again attention to undress that deepens the meaningfulness of fashion as a literacy performance of desire in *Pariah*. Undress is crucial in a scene in which Alike rejects the clothing others use to outfit their idea of who she is, and therefore clears the space for a use of style that is on her own terms. At the beginning of the film, we see Alike in the club dressed in ways that express masculinity, however, midway through the film, there is a scene where Alike recites a poem standing in her English class. In that scene, she has adopted a different style of dress than at the start; from dark colors, baggy shirt and jeans, and a durag under a baseball cap, to braids pulled into a ponytail, and less baggy clothes in bright colors of various patterns. We do not see her in this style until she engages in conversations with her first sexual partner, Bina. In fact, the way she is dressed in the scene when she recites this poem is a style of dress that is like Bina's, though Alike's take on this look is much more gender nondescript than Bina's a bit more femme style (Figure 7).⁴⁹

The difference in Alike's fashion is reflective of her mood, because she is in the glow of this new relationship with Bina, donning vibrant, ethereal pastels. One might easily interpret the scene as a reflection of Alike having finally outfitted her identities in a way that is satisfying to her sense of self. However, as previously mentioned, the morning after Alike and Bina's first sexual encounter, Bina rejects Alike. When Alike senses Bina's discomfort, she says, "no one has to know we're together," to which Bina responds, "Together . . . I'm not gay, I'm just doing my thing." Alike hurriedly leaves Bina's home, attempting to escape the hurt, anger, resentment, even confusion about Bina's comments.⁵⁰

Here we have another scene featuring undress: Alike runs home, and once in her bedroom, removes her clothes by ripping them off her body until she is only

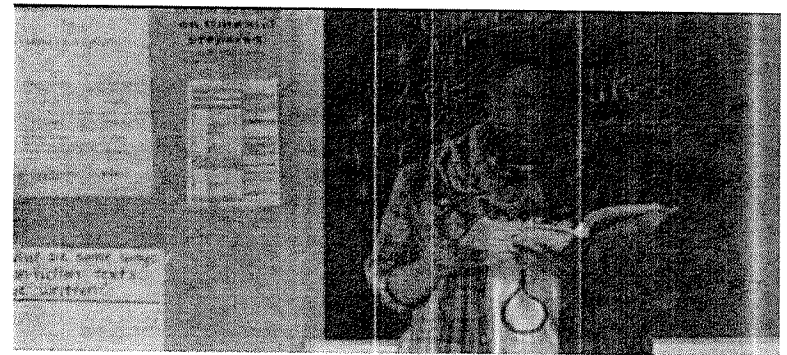


Figure 7. Alike, adorned in bright plaid shirt and scarf, recites poetry in English class.

in her undergarments while angrily throwing things around the room. Given that the clothes Alike rips off are so stylistically similar to Bina's dress, one we see Alike trying on at the same time the story shifts to an exploration of their relationship, we might read the removal of these clothes as Alike removing the relics of a failed relationship. We can also read this scene as Alike removing the accouterments of a failed attempt to wed her comfort in her identities with a style of dress that she reads as potentially affirming and eliciting desire from others to affirm and form herself. Removing her clothes signals that, along with her discomfort with being A-G and the style of dress associated with her mother's desire for hegemonic femininity, these clothes also no longer fit Alike; they do not offer the love, care, or affirmation she holds for herself or her desires. This failed attempt to outfit that self, I argue, is partially a result of misreading on Alike's part. She assumes that the queerness of Bina's dress, music tastes, and sexuality will provide the space to be completely herself. Instead, she discovers in Bina, as she did with her mother, and the classmate that wanted her to be "harder," that the cost of this acceptance is the regulation of her self-expression. As Alike tears off her clothes until she's almost naked, and rips down the curtains in the room letting sunlight into the almost completely dark room, exposing her almost bare body to the light, she is left only with her self to define herself. The burden of the meaning others give according to dress is gone, and her continuous disappointments leave the possibility of looking for community, but adorning herself with only her own care in mind.

Conclusion

In *Movement in Black*, poet Pat Parker discusses the challenges to black queer identity formation and affirmation relationally, writing: "If I could take all my parts with me when I go somewhere, and not have to say to one of them, 'No, you stay home tonight, you won't be welcome,' because I'm going to an all-white party where I can be gay, but not Black. Or I'm going to a Black poetry reading, and half the poets are antihomosexual, or thousands of situations where something of what I am cannot come with me. *The day all the different parts of me can come along*, we would have what I would call a revolution."⁵¹ Parker describes the challenges of creating, sustaining, and transforming spaces where black queer folks can bring all their different parts along. Parker's commentary, particularly her comments on all the parts of one's self coming along, resonates with Alike's fashion as a literacy performance and trying to bring all her parts along—blackness, girlhood, masculinity, youth, artist, and the sum of her parts.

Neither the masculinity of the A-G identity and expression, nor the femininity preferred by her mother, are wholly edifying for Alike. Her shifting style of

dress calls us to investigate the internal gaze that exists in fashion. It is through this outward expression of Alike's self-dialogue that we are best positioned to access fashion as a literacy performance in the film. Through this, we are also exploring literacy as occurring off the page and its role in subverting the expectations of others as she forms and affirms herself.

The film's use of Alike's fashion also requires a multidirectional look. The view of her dress by others and the view of her dress as she fashions herself for others is not all there are for her to consider. Alike is clearly aware of each of these gazes, and it is the internal gaze that does not exist solely to communicate with others but with the self. Alike is clear about her sexuality in terms of her attraction to women. In the film, as is often the case in real-life, the expression of one's sexuality is always and already misrecognized as a reflection of gender identity or expression. The film provides this multidirectional gaze, and Alike's more introspective look through being attentive to the role of literacy performances that provide a snapshot of Alike's sense of self that cannot be fully engaged by looking at one mode of literacy alone or overlooking the complexity that shifts spatially and temporally.

We can extend this analysis beyond *Pariah* with recent contributions to the canon of black girls' literacies on film. There are a growing number of coming-of-age films about or featuring black girls who either are or believed to be queer, or who possess ways of creating and being that are dissident or function queerly. Among these films is director Rick Fumiya's *Dope* (2015), and in particular the film's character, Diggy (played by Kiersey Clemons), as well as the 2014 French film *Bande de filles/Gang of Girls* (released under the title *Girlhood* in the United States), directed by Céline Sciamma. In each of these films, some attention to the specific ways in which identity development characteristics can be codified and the ways literacy figures into these stages of development would be a useful exploration. Indeed, in both films and others, my conceptualization of fashion as a literacy performance would make for useful theorizing in relation to these newer films.

Lastly, a subtext underpinning my analysis is that a cinematic portrayal of the ways a teenage black lesbian employs literacy to subvert gender and sexual normativity, while also affirming herself, owes much to the specific vantage point the film provides. As a nonprint genre of black queer cultural production, cinematic portrayals of black lesbian literacies are especially well-positioned to provide a glimpse of literacies occurring on and off the page, allowing for a multidimensional depiction of literacy practices that is not dependent exclusively on print. In film, we can see through visual representation the ways that print is present, the character reads and writes. But, because it is a visual representation we can also see nonprint ways one makes meaning out of everyday life more clearly, and

so our understanding of literacy then is not completely dependent upon print. As a result, such insight from these films would inform and hold accountable instructors and researchers formulating conceptions of identity, agency, and literacy, which could prove transformative in future approaches to pedagogy and scholarship in literacy, rhetoric, and composition, which has given insufficient attention to queer youth of color literacies. I must also note, for those who may hold the belief that the interventions through such an analysis are only relevant for queer youth of color, that the pedagogical shifts that must be made to accommodate queer youth of color in the ways that they deserve would bring about a pedagogy of liberation for the multitudes.

To close, I return to the very first seconds of *Pariah*. The film begins with a screen displaying words from Audre Lorde's "biomythography," *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*: "wherever the bird with no feet flew, she found trees with no limbs."² These words speak to the journey of self-definition, self-affirmation, self-care, and self-love. Alike navigates through her literacy performances as she resists the belief systems and actions others use to police and constrain her, eventually exploring and expressing her truth in her writing, as I have shown here, through fashion. Alike's dress at the end of the film is an expression of that introspection and emerges into her self-definition, as Alike does not wear the clothes of her days at the club, nor her mother's sweater, nor Bina's style. Instead, she appears in an amalgamation of those things, existing at the apex of a style that explodes what is constantly being categorized as something masculine, feminine, or any fixed notion of gender identity and expression (Figure 8). She is, at last, embracing the complexity of herself as she sees fit. Through her literacies, as she says in the poem that concludes the film, Alike does not run, but chooses: chooses to leave the oppressiveness, chooses to make her own way, chooses her own home, chooses her own dress, chooses herself.

NOTES

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2. "About the Film," accessed September 2, 2012, <http://focusfeatures.com/pariah>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Mollie Blackburn, *Interrupting Hate: Homophobia in Schools and What Literacy Can Do About It* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012), 24–25.
6. Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1987), 35.
7. Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), dust jacket flap and 6.
8. "About the Film."
9. Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 1.
10. Ibid., 3.
11. Richardson, *African American Literacies*, 77.
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