

VESTIGES OF MOTHERHOOD: THE MATERNAL FUNCTION IN RECENT BLACK CINEMA

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The scene is set: it is the middle of the night at the Armitage family home in upstate New York. Missy Armitage (Catherine Keener) places herself seductively in front of Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) in her dimly lit office. She pours herself some tea and places two sugar cubes in her cup, rhythmically clinking her spoon in a circular motion. Chris's smoking addiction is the initial subject of the conversation. But this proves to be a ruse, as Missy Armitage coerces him into answering a number of questions about his childhood. Gradually, he is forced to confront his eleven-year-old self in the moments leading up to and immediately after his mother's death. The camera shifts into soft focus as it frames the pivotal scene from Chris's past, revealing the hidden theme that will figure as this essay's central motif. The flashback here is structured by a high-angle shot and presents a hazy vignette of a young Chris sitting on a bed in a fetal-like position with his back to us in front of a television. The exchange between Missy Armitage and Chris achieves its sense of dislocation because of the work of the subjective camera, which heightens the distortion of Chris's mental and emotional state by enabling the spectator to inhabit the vision in his mind's eye.

At this crucial moment, Missy extracts a confession from her unwilling patient: Chris failed to act when he learned that his mother had been involved in a hit-and-run accident. Instead of calling for help or leaving the safety of his bedroom, he continued to watch television as she lay dying in the street. Missy Armitage seizes upon and exploits his vulnerability in this moment of disoriented recollection, and Chris Washington soon finds himself sinking into the floor. Welcome to slavery's psychic afterlife, the world of *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017).

Eventually, it is revealed that Missy Armitage's hypnotic session is a cover for a more elaborate and violent procedure

of black body snatching. Importantly, Peele's device of the "sunken place" visually conveys the force of the submerged black body as a graphic metaphor for subjection, which Sadiya Hartman has theorized as the singular imposition of violence upon blackness, as well as a humanizing demand that itself proves to be fundamentally inhumane.¹ Chris's act of sinking is expressed cinematically through an embodied slow motion that distinguishes the black body's symbolic ability to both descend and float above and below the camera's general depth of field. In this scene, Chris's postural depression (his "sinking into the floor") establishes blackness's resistance to certain techniques of framing and mise-en-scène, in particular the camerawork, the blocking of the scene and Chris's posture. This sinking and descent marks a momentary escape from the cinematic—a gravitational defiance of the synchrony and movement of the body in relation to the camera. Rendering this sunken body demands an aesthetic approach that reimagines the codes of the horror genre. *Get Out* exposes the crucial elision of black motherhood that sustains the film's immersive racial horror.

Chris's fall into this abyss has a symbolic function in relation to the absent black mother. It is not simply the literal haunting of Chris's mother in her neglected death, but more specifically, the abstraction of that death, which signifies an irretrievable grammar of black maternity that bridges the onscreen pitch-blackness of the "sunken place." The figure of the lost and irretrievable black mother alludes to the historic fact of the original crossing and the irreducible terror of the Middle Passage; Chris's mother functions as a premonition, as a foreboding omen of the historical continuity between the crossing and this moment of performative subjection.

In *Get Out*, the black maternal prefigures a return to the sea in the extended imagination of the womb. The symbolization of maternity in and as the space of the womb has been essential to the imagination of the horror film genre. Barbara Creed has argued that "the symbolization of the womb as house/room/cellar or any other enclosed space is central to the iconography of the horror film."² *Get Out* doubles down on its capacity for horror by defying the classic iconography

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11-year old Chris in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*.

of the horror film as one without limits. For it is not the enclosed space of the Armitage house, but the infinite darkness of the *sunken place*, mobilized by the specter of black maternal loss, that is the true source of the film's horror.

Teresa de Lauretis has conceived the maternal as "an obstacle that whatever its personification, is morphologically female and indeed simply the womb."³ As a quintessential depiction of black subjection on screen, *Get Out* points to black maternity's occupation of the position of the "unthought." The uncanny absence of Chris's mother and her partial haunting of the body of Georgina the maid point toward the figure of the black femme as an obstacle to the male hero's (Chris's) flourishing and is a crucial part of this film's investment in and potential reinvention of the horror genre.⁴

While the lack of a black femme presence is theorized explicitly with respect to film genres and the canon of American cinema in the work of Kara Keeling, the ontological position of the black femme (whom Keeling understands to be both visually impossible and interdicted yet full of cinematic possibility) has long been a point of interrogation in Black Studies with an extensive critical genealogy. In Saidiya Hartman's book, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, the loss of the black mother animates the historical imagination of transatlantic slavery, just as her loss is irreducibly felt in relation to its afterlife. In the work of Frank B. Wilderson III, there is an explicit rejection of the

potential of the black woman within film, specifically the viability of her maternal function, insofar as the black mother remains categorically essential to the construction of black (masculine) subjectivity.

In light of the contradictory arc of this genealogy, the current task is not only to theorize the black maternal as an extension of the black femme, but to bring that position into view as the unthought, "without making it a locus of positive value, or without trying to fill in the void."⁵ In the seemingly improvised encounter that is, in fact, a thoroughly calculated scene of manipulation and control, Missy Armitage and Chris, therapist and constrained patient, become ineluctably entangled in a drama of black maternal loss so central to the dystopian nightmare that infinitely extends the afterlife of slavery.

What is the drama of the mother? In Douglas Sirk's cinema, the drama and contradictory passions of mothers (both white and black) directly inform the substance of the melodramatic genre. But it is with respect to the peculiar materialization of black maternal figures on screen that one is compelled to ask what the inherent contradiction of her disappearance conjoined with her ubiquitous presence has to do with the evolution of cinematic form.

The black mother tends to be dramatized as the singular figure through which the cinema cultivates a distinctly black visual historiography. Even when placed under narrative erasure or withheld from view, the mother crystallizes a

cinematic black aesthetic that fashions and envisions diasporic culture and forms of black collectivity as tied to a speculative and fraught filial genealogy. An “undercurrent of filial disaffection” that is carried through the mother consistently points toward the way slavery and its aftermath have “wholly and pathologically tangled black genealogies.”⁶ This observation is crucial to understanding the antirepresentational structure of black motherhood in contemporary (black) cinema.

The warped absence of Chris’s mother in *Get Out* triggers a maternal genealogy that signals the difficulty of depicting black motherhood on screen. Chris’s lost mother is replaced by the violent rematerialization of a black mother figure split between the body of Georgina, the black maid, and white Grandma Armitage. In place of any clear image of Chris’s mother, *Get Out* offers a black mother who, betrayed by her own child and left to die, persists as an unconscious “phantasy.” In the film’s racial-prosthetic schema, the black mother is the original artificial body; she is accessible only through the body of another black woman (Georgina), who herself has effectively been emptied out and rendered partially insentient as a support for Grandma Armitage. The true horror of *Get Out* has less to do with the specificity of genre than with the operation of black maternal disavowal and negation. Chris’s mother is central to this cinematic economy of substitution.

Black motherhood is insistently present in cinematic narratives as the object and source of a general. Black mothers consistently serve as the emotional catalysts for narrative arcs conveying the transitions to adulthood, structures of intimacy and self-appearance, sexuality, labor, and reproduction. These are narrative tropes that depend on a long history of what Saidiya Hartman theorizes as the “transference of dispossession” from mother to child.⁷ Hartman’s methodological emphasis on black women as central to any theoretical conceptualization of black subjectivity can serve as a guide for decoding black maternal figures whose fundamental impropriety and affective ambivalence directly inflect questions of film form, narrativity, affect, and genre. Rather than embrace these films as exemplary narratives of black subjective autonomy and self-determination, it is useful to refocus attention instead on the black mother in order to show how the protagonists in these films are constantly negotiating a difficult structure of black maternity and its attendant grammars of loss, abjection, and rejection.

Pariah (Dee Rees, 2011) is a film where the pathological construction of the black mother is fully assumed. It features a black mother, Audrey (Kim Wayans), whose normative aspirations for her daughter Alike, (Adepero Oduye), cannot

be considered as separate from her daughter’s journey into queer selfhood. The mother-daughter relationship in *Pariah* is central to the way the film construes queer life worlds. Audrey’s normative worldview constantly figures Alike’s queerness as negativity. Alike’s positioning as black, butch lesbian “pariah” and social outcast is enacted in relation to the maternal disavowal she experiences at every turn: Audrey forces her daughter to wear feminine clothes and to hang out with Bina, a girl from church whom Audrey believes will have a positive influence on Alike. The film imagines alternative expressions of maternal love through Alike’s friend Lara and her English teacher, who serve as (queer) maternal proxies for Audrey.

Alike’s father, Arthur (Charles Parnell), is also subject to Audrey’s manipulation and control. Alike’s queerness is represented as an open secret to her father, who honors his daughter’s unspoken desire for privacy. Alike, in turn, conceals what she suspects to be her father’s infidelity. At one point, Audrey accuses Arthur of covering for his daughter when he reports that Alike has a boyfriend and just needs some space. An incredulous Audrey responds, “A Boyfriend. Space? She’s never around as it is, and *you’re just like her!* Creeping in all hours of the night acting like you’ve got something to hide, both of you, and acting like *I’m* the big bad witch. What about me, huh? I’m here alone by myself all the time. . . .” Toward the film’s end, Audrey screams at Arthur, exclaiming, “Your daughter’s turning into a damn man right before your very eyes, and you can’t even see it!!” She forces her daughter to confess that she is “a nasty ass dyke.”

However, at the same time that Audrey’s narrow construction of her daughter’s queerness is guided by a “homo/heterosexual” definition that is always “indicatively male” and which imposes on the entire family, she also refuses a grammar of black motherhood with a distinct genealogy.⁸ Although Audrey’s homophobia is repeatedly constituted through domestic intimacy, it is also paradoxically entangled with her resistance to becoming the black mother who, in Hartman terms, “enjoy[s] a position that is revered and reviled, essential to the endurance of black social life and, at the same time, blamed for its destruction. . . . She is the best nanny and the worst mother.”⁹ Often black women’s resistance to this genealogy occurs at the expense of genuine forms of maternal encounter and filial love, but also at the expense of love itself. If, as film theorist Mary Ann Doane asserts, “Maternal desire is frequently revealed as actively resistant to the development of a love story,” this is especially true for the black mother, whose fraught maternal inheritance constricts the bonds and boundaries of filial love.¹⁰



Alike (Adepero Oduye) and her mother Audrey (Kim Wayans) in Dee Rees's *Pariah*.

Andrew Dosunmu's *Mother of George* (2013) offers a crucial turning point in the cinematic conceptualization of black maternity as the shared desire of an older woman who hopes to be a grandmother and a younger woman who hopes to be a mother. The film sustains the generational tension between these two women beautifully as it presents the many facets of black maternity, portraying motherhood as a physical and psychological struggle for the younger woman, Adenike Balogun (Danai Gurira), and as an issue of social duty and inheritance for the older Ma Ayo Balogun (Bukky Ajayi).

Dosunmu's film is sumptuous and opalescent, a diasporic mosaic that juxtaposes sensuous images of traditional Nigerian culture, customs, and habits with images of contemporary black immigrant life in Brooklyn. It opens with a shimmering picture of the wedding of Ayodele Balogun (Isaach de Bankolé) and his wife, Adenike, and tracks the newlyweds early on as they bring their lives together in celebratory heterosexual union. But the film's iridescent scope gradually begins to contract as the maternal conflict at its center unfolds. Some thirty minutes into the film, Adenike is confronted by Ma Ayo, who reminds her daughter-in-law: "You have been married for quite some time. . . ." During

their brief but tense conversation, Adenike assures Ma Ayo that "many women have babies in their thirties," to which Ma Ayo quickly and abruptly responds, "Yes, but you haven't!" Ma Ayo's words shame Adenike into obedience and illustrate the connections between fertility, pregnancy, motherhood, and prosperity in the set of social expectations that define the black diasporic, immigrant experience.

The conversation between the two women is framed cinematically to complicate and extend the ontological positioning of the black maternal figure. Ma Ayo is visually absent; for the entire conversation, Adenike is reacting to a voice that filters in from off-screen, to the right of the frame. Ma Ayo's voice is heard, but she is not seen. The decision to cut Ma Ayo out of the frame aesthetically foregrounds her powerful omnipresence as reigning matriarch.

In another damning scene, Ma Ayo and Adenike are seen in what appears to be a house of prayer, having another conversation about Adenike's desired pregnancy. Ma Ayo makes it clear that the fertility problems are Adenike's to solve and, in a shocking turning of the tables on convention, suggests to Adenike that she get pregnant by her husband's brother, insisting, "Only the mother knows who the father is . . . it's all



Adenike Balogen (Danai Gurira) in Andrew Dosunmu's *Mother of George*.

the same blood.” As a mother-to-be, Adenike’s life is filled with stress and anguish over her decision to comply with Ma Ayo’s directive. Stricken with guilt, she confesses one day to her husband that his brother is the father of the baby she is carrying, citing her mother-in-law’s language to justify her actions: “it’s all the same blood.”

When Ayodele finds out about the incident toward the end of the film, he charges into his mother’s house, demanding explanations. Ma Ayo replies calmly in the face of her son’s indictment of her: “Is it me you are yelling at? Is there no respect at all? I am still your mother. . . . A child belongs to all of us. It doesn’t matter who the father is.” This stunning admission on the part of his mother reveals the full force of her matriarchal power, at the same time that it points to the expendability and structural irrelevance of the father.

Ma Ayo is a subversive figure. Her fidelity to the survival of the Balogun tribe and the security of her family’s social standing override neoliberal fantasies of the patriarchal nuclear family and its ideologies of acceptance, social legibility, and inclusion. Ma Ayo’s love may seem toxic because it destroys the organic cohesion between brothers, sons, lovers, and wives, but her desire to maintain tribal standing is the diasporic difference she wields, and this difference distinctly marks *Mother of George* as a diasporic film text that expands and gives nuance to the lexicon of a black film archive that tends to typify black motherhood as myopic, unimaginative, limited, and constricted. Ma Ayo’s maternal desire causes her to act in ways that defy normative American codes of family relationships. Ma Ayo completely disregards any masculine hierarchy between her sons and effectively destabilizes the fraternal relationship between the two men.

In the end, the Baloguns, who will have to live with this secret forever, fail in their role as embodying an immigrant

success story. This shortcoming is what makes *Mother of George* very different from one critic’s oblivious dismissal of it as “just a different voice in the immigrant tale of New York City.”¹¹ Ma Ayo’s maternal transgression violates the laws of familial relationships, and shatters the family. Rather than appeal to healing and closure, the narrative insists upon the brokenness of this black family as Ayodele splinters off from his wife who has just had a child.

The figure most damned by this action is the son and husband, Ayodele, positioned as future patriarch. He recognizes this blow to the patriarchal order and condemns his mother for having “cursed” the entire family. The complication of the paternal legacy in contemporary film narratives that emphasize the internal drama of the black family, is an aesthetic intervention sustained by the antagonistic presence of black mothers. Such dramas refuse to concede to the continued social pathologization of the black family in the white American imagination, which emphatically insists upon the absent black father, as well as the usurping of the paternal role by the mother and daughter, the matrilineal line, as the source of black degeneracy.¹² Rather than offer a corrective to this social diagnosis, black cinema further points toward this fracturing, revealing these familial rifts and ruptures to be symptoms of a more complex history of interdicted black maternity.

Moonlight (Barry Jenkins, 2016) extends this complex genealogy of black maternal sentiment. The film foregrounds the protagonist’s quest for black queer identity by sublimating maternal desire. The main character’s embodied exploration of his own masculinity becomes central to his search for independent selfhood; yet his journey, which is full of contradictory and conflicted yearnings for clarity, autonomy, and distinction, is processed against the backdrop of black maternal failure, rejection, and even hysteria.

As in *Mother of George*, black motherhood in *Moonlight* takes shape cinematically as something pathological and even untenable. The mother, Paula (Naomie Harris), is a drug addict who takes her son’s school lunch money, constantly bullies and intimidates him, and trivializes and belittles his existence. While Harris plays the mother throughout, the character of the son from childhood to adolescence to adulthood is played by three actors: Alex Hibbert as Little, Ashton Sanders as Chiron, Trevante Rhodes as Black. In a stunning scene early in the film, Little is seen standing helplessly in the hallway of their small apartment home as his mother screams at him. Paula’s scream is seen but not heard, though it’s possible to conclude that what she screams is the word “faggot” after Little questions Juan (Mahershala Ali) and Teresa (Janelle Monáe), the couple who have taken him in, about this word’s meaning. The persistent psychic haunting



Paula (Naomie Harris) in *Moonlight*.

of this primal encounter with the mother that can neither be articulated by Little nor forgotten by Chiron is symptomatically reflected over time in his muted speech and verbal reticence.

And yet Paula, who is portrayed as unruly, antisocial, disruptive, and reclusive in relation to her drug use, is also protective and possessive of Little, although she becomes slightly envious of her son as he begins to find his way in the world. Toward the end of the film, Chiron visits his mother in a rehab center in Florida, where she apologizes for all the abuse. Importantly, however, when Paula asks for her son's forgiveness, she concedes her negligence but does not repudiate her *love*. Insisting that she has loved her son through this deep history of mistreatment, Paula's confession must be understood as a secret she has held close for many years. I resist the impulse to interpret the seriousness of the film as "ruined" or "spoiled" by the pathos of the mother's sentimental and narcissistic claim to maternal love. Instead, I consider her confession the affective catalyst for, and driving force behind, the film's enigmatic ending.

If intimacy, not just sexuality, is truly the subject of Barry Jenkins's film, it is the mother who lays the affective groundwork for the mournful ambiguity of the film's final moments. Paula's disclosure of a love that is unrecognizable as such, even unrealizable, sets a tonal precedent for the halted love between Chiron/Black and his life-long friend, Kevin (Jaden Piner, Jharrel Jerome, André Holland). After they

have been out of touch for many years, a rendezvous between the two men, which involves a romantic dinner and shared confessions, culminates in an all-too-quick final shot of the men embracing in the dark in Kevin's apartment. Far from unrequited, the expression of love in the final scene is tender and exploratory, as it both suggests Black's inexperience with queer intimacy and insists that the sense of intimacy between him and Kevin be left there in that final moment as radically open-ended, undisclosed, and opaque.

The film's coming-of-age arc that presumably ushers in Little/Chiron/Black's journey into adulthood fully unravels as the film's ending turns tenderly toward the vulnerability of childhood and its attendant memories. Paula's revelation of her unwavering love for her son exposes a fundamental secret of black motherhood: that the practice of restrained filial intimacy is fundamentally entangled with love and loss. In the case of Paula and Chiron, that love is expressed *as* loss, loss expressed *as* love, or the "too closeness of love and loss."¹³ Specifically, it is the loss of the mother, both in *Moonlight* and in black life more generally, as it repeats through cycles of maternal loss, that encapsulates racial slavery's gendered social afterlife.¹⁴

The critical arc in black narrative cinema over the last ten years from *Get Out* to *Pariah*, to *Mother of George*, and finally to *Moonlight* insists upon black motherhood as integral to the aesthetics of form and the genre-making capacities of film. One could go so far as to claim that the elements of cinematic



Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) screams into the blackness of the sunken place in *Get Out*.

form that drive these narratives reflect aesthetic choices that have to do with coloration, shot position, and narrative flashbacks that are themselves bound up with and inflected through the haunting and cipher-like construction of black maternal figures. Furthermore, these films insist upon simultaneously marking *and* excluding the mother from the emotional drama of black subjective life and its complex and contradictory expressions of intimacy, which have as much to do with the breaking and splintering of familial bonds as bridging gaps. It is clear that the mother sutures these bonds; she is a scar, a visible reminder and remainder of a terrible historicity that cannot be assimilated into the idealization of the American family.

In *Moonlight*, love for Paula, Little/Chiron/Black's mother, is not and perhaps can never be the fulfillment or idealization of the parental relation, but it is and will always be the real material outcome and quotidian expression of the struggle for black (female) existence. For Paula, as for other black women on screen, love is and perhaps can only ever be that which survives. In the larger praxis of black diasporic otherworlding, that which survives is everything there is.

Notes

1. See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
2. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 55.
3. Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 118.
4. My claim here is centrally related to and guided by Kara Keeling's assertion that "the black femme is a figure that exists on the edge line, that is, the between the visible and the invisible, the thought and the unthought in the critical theories that currently animate film and media studies." See Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.
5. Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle*, 13:2 (2003), 185.
6. Harvey Neptune, "Loving Through Loss: Reading Saidiya Hartman's History of Black Hurt," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, 6:1 (2008), 4–5.
7. Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18:1 (2016): 166.
8. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.
9. Hartman, "The Belly of the World," 171.
10. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 92.
11. John Anderson, "Family Problems with Delicate Solutions," *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/movies/mother-of-george-a-film-by-andrew-dosunmu.html.
12. Hortense Spillers's essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" insists that this pathological characterization of the black family begins with the "report" issued by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the late sixties, becomes effected through social policy, and integrated into the American social imagination. See *Diacritics* 17: 2, (1987), 66–67.
13. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 25.
14. *Ibid.*