

Black Women Over 50 On Screen – From Intersectional Oppression in the Industry to Defying Ageist Agendas

Transcript of lecture by Dr. Francesca Sobande for the Women Over 50 Film Festival 2020

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Hello, I'm Dr. Francesca Sobande and I'm a lecturer in digital media studies at the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. Much of my work tackles issues regarding racism, sexism, structural inequalities, media, and the marketplace. My work particularly focuses on the media and creative experiences of Black women in Britain, some of which are discussed in detail in my recent book, *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain*, which was published with Palgrave Macmillan last month and is available as an ebook and in print: <https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783030466787>

Before I start today's talk on *Black Women over 50 On Screen: From Intersectional Oppression to Defying Ageist Agendas*, I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in making the *Women Over 50 Film Festival* happen. Festivals such as this one do not exist without a lot of work and labour that often goes unacknowledged, so I just want to say that I am very grateful for all that has gone into the *Women Over 50 Film Festival*, and thank you for inviting me to be a part of it. I am looking forward to watching the festival films, Q&As, and awards ceremony, and to the many conversations that will surround the festival, and hopefully continue long after it.

It is no secret that ageism in the television, film, and media industry continues to negatively impact the careers of women over 50. Women are discriminated against in ways that relate to their age and which involve them having to deal with narrow assumptions about the type of on-screen roles that they can and should play, as well as the amount of money that they should expect to be paid for such work. As a result, some women have gone to great lengths to attempt to keep their real age a secret, or to legally contest claims about their age which they feel will be damaging to their career opportunities. In recent years, discussion of ageism in Hollywood has attracted increasing media attention as is signalled by online articles such as a 2020 Forbes piece on "Researchers, Writers and Actors Highlight and Tackle Ageism in Hollywood", as well as a 2019 Guardian piece on "Over-40 Actors Still Fighting the Ageism that Stymied Judy Garland". Despite media discourse about ageism in the film industry having expanded in some encouraging ways, seldom is there nuanced analysis of how ageism intersects with other forms of oppression such as racism, and, specifically, anti-blackness, and colourism.

Commonly the perspectives of white women are emphasised amid media and industry discussion of ageism on-screen, as is reflected in article headlines such as “Irina Shayk, Julianne Moore, Jennifer Aniston & More Female Celebs Get Real About Aging in Hollywood”, “Nicole Kidman Declares War On Ageism In Hollywood”, and “Helen Mirren: ageism in Hollywood is 'outrageous’”. The first of these articles features a range of comments from famous white women, such as US actor Jennifer Aniston who states that “There is this pressure in Hollywood to be ageless...”. I definitely do not disagree with this statement but I do call for such discussions to involve much more recognition of how inequalities within the industry are moulded by the contours of interlocking structural oppression such as ageism *and* racism and sexism.

There are myriad definitions of what constitutes ageism, but the World Health Organisation defines ageism as “the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age. Ageism is widespread and an insidious practice which has harmful effects on the health of older adults. For older people, ageism is an everyday challenge. Overlooked for employment, restricted from social services and stereotyped in the media, ageism marginalises and excludes older people in their communities.” This definition of ageism also includes the following explanation from the World Health Organisation: “Ageism is everywhere, yet it is the most socially “normalized” of any prejudice, and is not widely countered – like racism or sexism. These attitudes lead to the marginalisation of older people within our communities and have negative impacts on their health and well-being.”

In contrast with how the World Health Organisation refers to ageism as though it is disconnected from racism and sexism, I view ageism and its normalisation as being entangled with racism, sexism, and many other types of normalised oppression, including ableism, homophobia, and transphobia. Treating ageism, racism, and sexism as separate issues results in an unhelpfully skewed understanding of the difficulties that women over 50 face in the screen industries, and can lead to people homogenising women’s experiences in ways that erase differences between them, and can further marginalise Black women. For this reason, my talk draws on Black feminist approaches which articulate how matters to do with race and gender are intrinsically connected, and which meaningfully account for the particularities of Black women’s lived experiences.

Today, reflecting on the on-screen careers and star narratives of Viola Davis, Angela Bassett, Halle Berry, Pam Grier, and Grace Jones, I'll be focusing on how famous Black women have faced intersectional forms of oppression in the screen industries—namely, anti-blackness, ageism, sexism, and colourism—and have defied restrictive ageist assumptions and agendas concerning their acting and on-screen career trajectories. As part of this discussion I will be drawing on research that formed my 2019 Celebrity Studies paper on “How to get away with authenticity: Viola Davis and the intersections of Blackness, naturalness, femininity and relatability”. My talk today is about the experiences of Black women over 50 in front of the camera, but, of course, the forms of interconnected oppression that I refer to also impact Black women who work behind it.

I am conscious that conversations to do with on-screen representation and ageism sometimes just scratch the surface of the many systemic ways that women over 50 are oppressed, and that it is not possible for me to address all facets of such oppression over the course of this talk. Nevertheless, my hope is that today's session shines a light on some of the specific ways that ageism and its connection to other power relations effects the on-screen depiction and experiences of Black women over 50, in addition to the off-screen labour practices and conditions that are part of such women's work. I unequivocally support work that affirms the importance of telling the stories of women of different ages, and in ways that attend to how the experiences of those women—including their experiences working in the television, film, and media industry—are influenced by entwined structural factors such as, but not limited to, ageism, sexism, and racism.

I recognise that the title of my talk has the potential to be interpreted as propping up the idea that the actors who I am discussing have surpassed ageism that continues to thrive in the screen industries. On the contrary, when speaking about these issues today I emphasise that it is important to note that the success of Black women such as Viola Davis, Angela Bassett, Grace Jones, Halle Berry, and Pam Grier, should not be perceived as illustrating how Black women can simply work their way out of the oppression and obstacles to their success that exist within and beyond these industries. Rather, my discussion today involves consideration of some of the experiences of critically acclaimed Black women actors over 50, whose career trajectories evidence the existence of intersecting ageism, sexism, antiblackness, and colourism, and demonstrate the significant amount of additional and unsupported work and labour that Black women put in as part of their efforts to challenge this and pursue their acting ambitions.

When preparing for today I have tried to tread carefully with my choice of words, aiming to avoid perpetuating the damaging, neoliberal, and individualistic idea that Black women can overcome such structural oppression through grit, will, and determination. The burden of responsibility to address the structures that oppress Black women over 50 should not, but typically does, lie with such women. Therefore, while I acknowledge how Black women including Viola Davis, Angela Bassett, Grace Jones, Halle Berry, and Pam Grier have done much work to attempt to challenge the oppression of Black women of many ages, I do so from a point of view that is critical of how others fetishise Black women's tireless work, and infrequently afford Black women actors the opportunity to focus on their careers without the additional expectation that they become spokes people for *all* Black women and take on the infinite task of trying to change the industry and its exclusionary structures.

In 2015, when accepting the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Drama Series, Viola Davis, spoke out about ageism, racism, and colourism in the screen industries, including when alluding to the significance of the fact that those involved in casting Davis as Annalise Keating, the lead character in the television show *How to Get Away with Murder*, thought that, in the words of Davis, "...a sexualised, messy, mysterious woman could be a 49 year-old, dark-skinned African American woman" who

looks like her. Typically, Black women over 50 in Hollywood, and Black women in general, for that matter, are rarely afforded the opportunity to play complex leading roles that do not reinforce reductive stereotypes. When such women are depicted it is uncommon for them to be portraying characters who are both desirable and desiring, and whose sexuality is explored in ways that do not solely cater to a heteronormative cis-male gaze. Some of the on-screen depictions of Black women over 50 which have emerged over the last decade have differed to the flat archetypes that deny the fullness of such women's lives and emotions.

The launch of the television show *Scandal* in 2012 ended a 38-year period without a Black woman in a lead role in a US television network drama – since the 1974 show *Get Christie Love!* (1974–1975), starring Teresa Graves. Two years later, *How to Get Away with Murder* was launched. The introduction of *How to Get Away with Murder* on ABC in 2014 marked somewhat of a shift in the high-profile media landscape of on-screen representations of Black women over 40 and 50 years-old, including due to the fact that the show did not solely centre heterosexual relationships and included storylines that did not treat the sexuality of the character Annalise Keating as a mere footnote. Still, even though *How to Get Away with Murder* undeniably presented depictions of Black women over 50 that are scarcely foregrounded in mainstream television shows, it is vital to not assume that changes to the on-screen depiction of Black women, including an increase in the number of depictions of them, results in substantial structural changes that improve the precarious and discriminatory labour conditions and practices that they often have to navigate when working in the screen industries.

Unfortunately, it is common for media conversations to do with ageism and women in the screen industries to predominantly focus on how they are portrayed on-screen, and to stop short of addressing issues related to their experiences at work, material conditions, and the salaries that they do or do not receive. If conversations to do with ageism and the experiences of women actors over 50 exclusively focus on the politics of representation, without critically considering the oppressive force of the capitalist structures that shape the screen industries then there is a risk that work towards tackling ageism in these industries will be notably limited in its potential to contribute to major changes.

Numerous articles about Viola Davis and her role in *How to Get Away with Murder* which she played from aged 49 into her fifties focus upon issues concerned with her hair and underscore her role in developing her on-screen character, including the decision to show her removing her wig. This is emphasised by headlines such as: “Viola Davis Wouldn't Have Played Annalise Keating If Her Wig Didn't Come Off”, “Viola Davis Speaks Out On Societal Pressures and Black Girls' Hair”, and “Her Character Was Only Supposed To Remove Her Makeup Before Bed. Then Viola Davis Made It Real”. Headlines, including “Viola Davis Reveals Battle with Alopecia”, that discuss the need to ‘applaud her decision to “come out” with her natural hair at a time when the whole world would be watching because we can only imagine how big a step that was for her”, contribute to an overarching image of self-disclosure with which Davis is often associated.” However, such articles also illustrate the

constant scrutiny that Black women in Hollywood face, especially in relation to their physical appearance.

While it is true that the physical embodiment of all women on-screen is subject to forms of critique and surveillance, the way in which the appearance of Black women over 50 is scrutinised is undoubtedly shaped by the intersections of ageism, sexism, anti-blackness, and colourism which involves the structural oppression of dark-skinned Black women in ways that significantly differ to how light-skinned Black women are societally favoured and are often regarded as palatable and preferential depictions of Blackness in Hollywood, and beyond. Put briefly, when accounting for the ageism faced by Black women over 50 on-screen, there is a need to acknowledge how it is interconnected with other forms of oppression that are particular to the experiences of Black women.

As bell hooks (1995) observes, Black women are subject to the effects of a hierarchy that involves what hooks described as being “issues of both skin color and hair texture” (p. 126). This is evidenced by examples such as a New York Times article that referred to Viola Davis as being “less classically beautiful” than other women in Hollywood. Davis directly addressed this comment on US television talk show *The View*, when speaking about beauty as being subjective. In the words of Davis, “...classically beautiful is a fancy way of saying ugly and denouncing you. It worked when I was younger. It no longer works now [. . .] because it’s like what Ruby Dee said, she wanted that beauty [. . .] that comes from within [. . .]. Strength, courage and dignity, and what you are seeing now is so many Black women came out after that article and they used the hashtag #notclassicallybeautiful and they’re showing their face [. . .] and teaching a culture how to treat them [. . .] at the end of the day, you define you”. The testimony of Davis on *The View* exemplifies her image as a self-assured Black woman who embraces her Blackness and speaks of embodying “her true self” whilst encouraging others to do the same.

Online narratives that question the femininity and desirability of Davis, including the visibility of her natural hair, are indicative of how intersecting and normative ideas pertaining to race, gender, and “color-caste hierarchies” (hooks 1995, p. 120) influence how the aesthetic images and femininity of famous Black women actors are outlined and understood. After all, the stigma that surrounds natural Black hair stands in stark opposition to the social capital and potentially “aspirational image of white femininity” (Cook 2015, p. 6) associated with the iconic blonde haircuts of famous women, including Grace Kelly and Bridget Bardot.

The stereotypes of the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire which are associated with some of Black women’s on-screen portrayals cannot be comprehended by treating issues to do with race, gender, and age as though they exist separately. Black women such as Davis do not merely have to contend with the pervasiveness of ageism in the film industry. They deal with intersecting forms of structural oppression rooted in anti-blackness, colourism, featurism, and hair texturism, which target dark-skinned Black women. Stereotypical on-

screen portrayals of Black women have involved images that objectify, hypersexualise and spectacularise Black women in derogatory ways that dismiss their many different realities. When reflecting on the construction and circulation of stereotypical depictions it is necessary to grapple with how media representations don't emerge out of nowhere—media depictions are located in particular places and moments in time and they can communicate much about social and political histories as well as contemporary structural inequalities and power dynamics. It's not just about how Black women are depicted, it's also about who or what is behind such depictions, the politics surrounding the production process, as well as the messages and meanings that are intended to be associated with such images, and the ways that these do or do not contribute to changing Black women's material conditions.

Although the saying “Black don't crack” is often positively associated with the physical appearance of Black people who look younger than their years, the reality is that the physical appearance of Black women over 50 in Hollywood, even those who may be regarded as looking younger than their age, is often policed in inherently discriminatory ways that can considerably constrain their career trajectories. Although Viola Davis may now be thought of as a critically acclaimed actor, as she has commented on herself, including when reflecting on her regrets about being involved in the film *The Help*, she has been working in this industry for decades and in the process of getting to this point in her career has had to navigate stereotypical, racist, ageist, and sexist plots and casting decisions that impact the work and salaries of Black women actors.

As the feminist media studies scholarship of Hannah Hamad highlights, in the early twenty-first century, celebrities may find themselves navigating, what Hamad refers to as “post-racial discourses of colour-blindness and racial transcendence in celebrity culture” (Hamad 2013, p. 118). Post-racial is a term that is typically used to encompass a point in time and/or part of society that is thought to exist in a way that is not impacted by issues concerning race and racism. The way that Black women such as Viola Davis speak out about how their careers have been affected by racism and interdependent forms of oppression such as ageism and sexism, push against the post-racial discourses that circulate amid media and popular culture. When calling out the need to not treat the gender pay gap as separate to the race pay gap in Hollywood, Davis has commented on her being referred to as “a Black Meryl Streep”, by executives. This comment captures how the talent of Black women over 50 on-screen is often treated as though it is nothing more than a Black version of what white women are perceived as doing, or already have done, rather than Black women's talent being acknowledged and recognised in its own right.

In the words of Richard Dyer (2005), “as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced...” (p. 10). Although many white actors manoeuvre through a minutia of media without being explicitly racialised, Black actors are rarely conceived of as just being an actor. Instead, as is indicated by executives referring to Davis as “a Black Meryl Streep”, Black actors cannot escape the fact that their acting and identity as an actor is commonly interpreted in ways inextricably

impacted by their race and the ripeness of anti-blackness which can result in people flippantly referring to them as the Black version of a well-known white actor.

Many of the public statements of Davis convey the difficulties of being a Black woman in a predominantly white space, while challenging barriers and acting as a role model for other Black women and girls. Furthermore, Viola Davis and her successful career have frequently been framed as exemplifying how, against the odds, some Black women actors have been cast in what may be referred to as “career-defining roles” in their 40s and 50s. Narratives that focus on the success of Black women such as Davis, without paying equal attention to the additional layers of work, labour, and resistance that Davis has faced in comparison to white women actors, can perpetuate a harmful and inaccurate post-racial position that insinuates that women such as Davis have transcended the impact of anti-blackness and interconnected forms of discrimination such as sexism, and ageism, as opposed to acknowledging that Davis has experienced structural harm as a result of such oppression.

Other famous Black women who have featured on-screen in their fifties and across a range of genres including drama, thriller, and documentary film, include Angela Bassett, Halle Berry, Grace Jones, and Pam Grier. Each of these woman’s careers distinctly differs to the others’, but all these Black women have in various ways spoken about and hinted at their encounters with ageism, racism, and sexism in the industry. When commenting on the part that she played in the film *John Wick 3*, Halle Berry has been quoted as saying “I knew what it would require of me and the chance to kick ageism in the face. People at a certain age believe they are done and cannot do certain stuff. I knew that this would give me a very great platform to show something different which is very important”. As a light-skinned Black woman, Halle Berry and her on-screen career have been propelled by colourism—her embodied proximity to whiteness and the dominance of white supremacist desirability politics in society which involves the uncritical idealisation of white and light-skinned people, and the contrastingly severe oppression of dark-skinned people.

In other words, when considering the on-screen experiences of Black women over 50 it is imperative to acknowledge clear differences between them, such as the dominance of depictions of cisgender Black women and the hyper-visibility of light-skinned Black women of all ages in mainstream media in many places, which is symptomatic of deeply entrenched colourism. I do not deny that Halle Berry faces ageism and that the chance to challenge this is part of what motivated some of her recent acting decisions. However, I feel that it is important to contextualise such experiences of ageism, in a way that does not gloss over that Berry’s physical appearance is far from being dramatically different to the light-skinned embodied identities that are often idealised and cast. While Pam Grier’s career has differed from Berry’s in many ways, including Grier’s roles in 1970s Blaxploitation films, it can be argued that due to colourism and Grier’s relatively light complexion, similarly to Berry she has been cast in roles and shows that dark-skinned Black women are scarcely, if ever, considered for.

The North American television show, *The L Word*, which first aired in 2004, and focused mainly on the lives of a group of lesbian and bisexual women in Los Angeles, featured Grier in the role of Kit Porter, the sibling of Bette Porter played by Jennifer Beals. The show and the reboot, *The L Word: Generation Q*, have been critiqued for their extremely limited depiction of Black women, including their foregrounding of light-skinned Black women, and the relative lack of representations of Black queer love and relationships. Thus, even though *The L Word* included a Black woman character, played by Grier, who was over 50 when starring in the show, it was still shaped by oppression in the industry which involves the preferential treatment of light-skinned Black women in comparison to dark-skinned Black women, and the hyper-visibility of inter-racial romantic and sexual relationships involving Black women, in contrast with the scant depiction of Black love.

Another Black woman over 50 who is known for her high-profile and decades-long acting career is Angela Bassett. Of all the actors who have been mentioned so far, Bassett is especially associated with comments about her youthful appearance and questions about how she achieves this. In a 2018 article in *Allure* with the title “Stop Asking Angela Bassett Why She Looks ‘So Young’ for Her Age”, which is part of a themed issue to draw attention to an *Allure*’s initiative banning the term “anti-aging” from its website and pages, Bassett, who is 60 at the time, is referred to as having never been in greater demand, and having acquired a “deep confidence” partly as a result of the improbability of her achievement.

Bassett is quoted as saying “As we advance...60 is the new 40, or 70 is the new 50. It keeps getting pushed. But you have to keep the stress down and the attitude hot”. The words of Bassett perhaps, if taken out of the context of this interview which also includes Bassett commenting on both ageism and racism, may be regarded as suggesting that women over 50 have no problems getting meaningful, long-term, and well-paid work as on-screen stars. While Bassett’s acting talents are clear to see, it is also apparent that celebrity culture’s fascination with her youthful appearance may also contribute to the media interest that surrounds her. In turn, Bassett’s continued success may be understood as partly being bolstered by what she refers to as being the backhanded compliment that she frequently receives—the notion that she looks “great” for her age.

Bassett, who was the first Black woman to win a Golden Globe in the Best Actress – Musical or Comedy section for her portrayal of Tina Turner in *What’s Love Got to Do With It*, has been referred to as “body goals” in various online articles such as a piece in *Yahoo Style!* which features words including “serious body envy”, “Revealing her toned tum and glowing skin”, and “Proving sexy has no age limit, the star’s stunning selfie is a step forward for body confidence, particularly for women in their prime”. Such a relentless focus on Bassett’s looks, even as part of media coverage that positively portrays her, reflects the prevalence of ageism in the television, film, and media industry, and the celebrity culture that is connected to it. While the phrase “Black don’t crack” is sometimes used to celebrate the youthfulness and vibrancy of Black women in ways that are intended to be empowering, it is also a phrase that can function in ways that uphold unrealistic expectations of the looks of Black women actors who are over 50. Also, such a focus on the physical appearance of Black

women over 50 who are on-screen is often coupled with a lack of equal media interest in and appreciation of their extensive talents.

Grace Jones, who is a model, actor, singer, and all-round performer, is somewhat less associated with a continued acting career than the other famous women who I mentioned, but should still irrefutably be recognised for her many on-screen performances and for her appearance in the 2017 documentary film about her life, *Bloodlight and Bami*. Media articles that refer to Jones as being a “goddess” and imply that she is invincible may distract from the structural challenges that she has faced, and some of the dehumanising ways that she has been spectacularised and Othered in the media. Jones, who is now thought to be in her 70s, but whose exact age is often a source of mystery, is referred to in an Independent article as being a reminder that “age is just a number”. The article mainly focuses on the stage performances of Jones who has continue to do high-energy gigs long past her 50s. In the article Jones is described as “a pensioner, and a grandmother”, among other things.

The article goes on to insinuate that although the vibrant on-stage presence of Jones who was in her late 60s at the time, may be something to celebrate, it may also feed into or stem from pressures placed on women over 60 to be endlessly confident, energetic, physically strong, and attractive. A counterview to this perspective is that it may be ageist to assume that women over 60 will inevitably struggle to achieve any of this, or that they will feel a pressure to because of women such as Jones. The scrutiny that has been directed at Jones throughout the years has been shaped by interconnected ageism, anti-blackness, sexism, and colourism, in addition to rigid gender norms that the androgynous appearance of Jones has often challenged.

What will the future on-screen experiences of Black women over 50 be like? It is clear that over the last decade there have been some heartening, but fairly limited, changes. There may be more images of some Black women in certain on-screen contexts, but this does not mean that the types of ageism, sexism, anti-blackness, and colourism that Black women face have diminished in any way. The rise of digital culture and online content-sharing platforms have resulted in some new avenues through which Black women create, star in, and share media in relatively autonomous ways. However, mainstream activity in the screen industries continues to side-line Black women over 50, and to often pigeonhole their creativity in ways that prevent them from doing the work that they want to. My hope is that as long as sustained structural efforts towards addressing ageism and the experiences of women over 50 in these industries meaningfully deals with the interlocking nature of oppression, there is the possibility of catalysing many seemingly small, yet, incrementally significant changes that enable Black women of all ages to work in these industries on their own terms, and in ways that enrich their lives.

