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## **How to get away with authenticity: Viola Davis and the intersections of Blackness, naturalness, femininity and relatability**

Francesca Sobande, Cardiff University

School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

**ABSTRACT:** By focusing on the star image of Viola Davis, this article explores intersecting narratives concerning authenticity, Blackness, celebrity, and embodiment, which are revealed as part of media and public responses to famous Black actresses. Discourses of race and fame are unpacked whilst scrutinising overlapping perceptions of naturalness, femininity and relatability. Building upon prior studies of the socio-cultural impact of celebrities' hair, the analysis focuses on how the hair of famous Black women is read as an aesthetic signifier of the perceived (in)authenticity of their Blackness, which may be entwined with ideas about Black feminist politics. Since the launch of *Scandal* in 2012 and *How to Get Away with Murder* (HTGAWM) in 2014, much attention has been paid to Viola Davis and Kerry Washington, the lead actresses in these US television dramas respectively. By analysing online narratives and aspects of interviews with Black women in Britain, this article examines assessments of the authenticity and relatability of famous Black actresses. It contributes to scholarly conversations regarding the contingent nature of impressions of authentic celebrity, including their raced and gendered components. This involves accounting for some of the ways that normative perceptions of Blackness, femininity and feminism operate as part of interracial and intra-racial celebrity discourse.

**KEYWORDS:** Race; Black; feminist; authenticity; hair

**Introduction:** authentic celebrity, feminism(s) and natural aesthetics Building upon extant research related to celebrity, race and gender, this article explores the influence of hegemonic discourse regarding fame, Blackness, feminism and normative femininity, amidst ideas about the authenticity and relatability of famous Black actresses. It involves teasing out how ostensibly post-feminist narratives, which have become a relatively 'marketable commodity' (Hermes 2005, p. 54), contrast with Black feminist narratives (Emejulu and Sobande 2019), and how this may influence interpretations of the authenticity and relatability of famous Black actresses, such as Davis. This work includes consideration of the socio-cultural symbolic role that such celebrities play, including in relation to the gaze of Black women who are media spectators. The word 'actress' features throughout this article, in line with its frequent use as part of categories at celebrity awards ceremonies, and in reference to women who act. However, there is recognition of the problematic gendered power relations that can underlie distinctions between who is classed as an 'actor' and who is classed as an 'actress'.

A celebrity's appearance, including their physical body, 'either functions to reproduce dominant culture's patriarchal, racial and heterosexual gaze, or it allows transgressive, oppositional, and queer feelings and fantasies to emerge' (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 4). In 2015, the iconic blond hair of celebrities, which 'retain[s] a prominent position as a potent statement of feminine allure' (Cook 2015, p. 6), was a source of analysis of matters regarding fame, aesthetics, and naturalness (Vincendeau 2015). Such work provokes questions regarding the ways in which different types of hair contribute to a celebrity's public image and assessments of their authenticity. Thus, this article foregrounds responses to the hair of famous Black women, a subject that has received comparatively less academic attention and is often treated as a signifier of their gendered identity, as well as their 'racial identity and cultural consciousness' (Jacobs-Huey 2006, p. 90).

Whilst all celebrities may be subject to scrutiny with regard to their authenticity, as Dyer (2005) attests, 'as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people' (p. 10). Although many white celebrities manoeuvre through a minutia of media without being explicitly racialised, as the words of Dyer (2005) allude to, a Black celebrity is rarely conceived of as being just a celebrity. On the contrary, critiques of their celebrity image are frequently enmeshed with those of their racial identity. This is illustrated in the way judgements of famous Black women may relate to, and deviate from, those of famous white women. Through an intersectional analysis (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016) of facets of celebrities' identities much may be learnt about ideas concerning authentic Blackness and celebrity, including the interdependent narratives of race and gender that sow the seeds from which these ideas spring.

The launch of *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* (hereafter, HTGAWM) was launched. For those unfamiliar with both, which debuted on the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) network channel, Davis plays Annalise Keating in HTGAWM, a lawyer and law professor embroiled in criminal activity. In *Scandal*, Kerry Washington plays Olivia Pope, who works in crisis management and is involved in an affair with the President of the United States of America. These shows set themselves apart from an increasing 'landscape of post-race, post-feminist millennial television' (Kaklamanidou and Tally 2014, p. 63), which appeared to be 'lacking racial consciousness' (Hamilton 2014, p. 49), either by excluding depictions of Black people altogether, or by their stereotypical depiction.

The social significance of *Scandal* catalysed academic enquiry related to topics such as the fandom experiences of Black women and racially diverse audiences (Erigha 2015, Warner 2015). By virtue of the burgeoning body of research on *Scandal* and Washington, this article will instead principally focus on the celebrity identity of Davis, now firmly established in the public imagination since she became the first Black woman to receive an Emmy award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series in 2015. There is specific

emphasis on the responses to a notable scene in season one, episode four of HTGAWM, which depicts the anti-heroine character of Annalise Keating removing her makeup and straight-haired wig at the end of a tumultuous day. The close-up scene lingers upon the relatively bare face of Davis, who is seen with very short and seemingly naturally textured hair. As will be elaborated upon later in this chapter, this evocative scene raises questions concerning authenticity, the politics of Black hair, and the self-presentation of Black women.

In discussing themes related to celebrity, Blackness, and the social value of images of Black actresses, I will identify how issues related to colourism (hooks 1995) and B(l)ackness (Dagbovie-Mullins 2013) may feed perceptions of the authenticity, relatability and femininity of famous Black actresses. The bracketed term 'B(l)ackness' is intended to capture perceptions of the inauthenticity and inadequacy of a celebrity's discernible Blackness (their alleged lack of Blackness), underscoring how perceptions of race are often caught up with those of aesthetic appearance. Although there have been detailed analyses of some of the ways in which famous Black women are constructed (Arzumanova 2016, Del Guadalupe Davidson 2017, Fairclough 2015, Fleetwood 2015, Kooijman 2014, Royster 2009, Weidhase 2015), there has been less exploration of how Black women themselves engage with such celebrity images. Further consideration of this may elucidate some of the shifting ways that the authenticity and relatability of famous Black actresses is perceived, including when considered by individuals with lived experience of being Black women themselves. In mining matters to do with interpretations of the authenticity of Black actresses, it is not my intention to reinforce the notion that authenticity is a fixed and objective quality (Dyer 2004). Yet, in dealing with such a topic, there is recognition of how people sometimes treat it as such.

This analysis opens with observations of how the aesthetic images of Davis and Washington are (re)framed through Twitter activity. It moves on to explore the celebrity image of Davis by recounting elements of her publicised self-narrative, as well as media commentary about her star image. Finally, attention turns towards the words of ten interview participants. This article examines what authenticity and relatability may mean in the context of conversations about famous Black actresses who are rarely equated with normative beauty, feminine or feminist ideals. It includes discussion of how Black feminist narratives contribute to such conversations, which have gained a degree of increased attention within popular culture in recent years.

### **'Wrap her hair': (re)framing the aesthetic image of Black actresses on Twitter**

Celebrity is the effect of 'an inter-textual performance practice' (Usher 2015, p. 306) that cuts across various 'cultural circuits in many different ways, shaped by a myriad different contexts, technologies and interactions' (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 6), such as those of Twitter users and online columnists. Furthermore, Twitter is 'central to the formulation and circulation of twenty-first century [celebrities]' (Usher 2015, p. 306), including inspection of

their physical appearance (Horeck 2015). As the lively Twitter activity of Scandal and HTGAWM spectators has been widely noted (Erigha 2015), a degree of Twitter analysis is included in this research. A total of 3189 tweets were collated, all of which were produced between the launch of Scandal (2012) and February 2016. Datasets were generated through Twitter by searching ‘Annalise Keating wig’ (365 tweets), ‘Annalise Keating Black woman’ (462 tweets), ‘Olivia Pope hair’ (1357 tweets) and ‘Olivia Pope Black woman’ (1005 tweets). The higher number of tweets about Washington than those pertaining to Davis can be attributed to the longevity of Scandal in comparison to HTGAWM. There is also acknowledgment that these tweets represent part of a larger volume of tweets that are not accessible without the use of additional software. Each dataset was analysed using NVivo software, and a word frequency test identified the most commonly used words. All tweets were then interpretively analysed to ascertain intertextual themes. The interpretive analysis of tweets and online articles referenced in this work was influenced by a critical approach to discourse analysis, which is ‘a method for studying text that focuses on interpreting the material with reference to broader patterns and structures in society’ (Humphreys 2015, p. 52).

Amongst the 15 most frequently used words in both the ‘Annalise Keating Black woman’ and ‘Olivia Pope Black woman’ datasets, were ‘hair’ and ‘wig’. This further evidences how this feature of their embodiment has been a source of public interest. Comments made about this aspect of the physical appearance of Washington in Scandal included words and phrases such as: ‘bonnet’, ‘wrap her hair’, ‘relaxed hair’, ‘laid’, ‘cap’, ‘isn’t realistic’, ‘false image’, ‘pre-weave’, ‘fictional’, ‘we all know’, and ‘real black women’. Additionally, there were remarks that referred to the ‘hair laws’ of Black women, in reference to certain haircare practices and products that are perceived as being commonly adopted and used by them. This includes hair wrapping routines at night, which will be revisited later on in this article. Tweets about the hairstyles and wigs adorned by Davis in HTGAWM included words and phrases such as: ‘natural hair’, ‘wig off’, ‘hair flip’, ‘laid’, ‘wig game’, ‘box braid’, ‘sassy’, ‘snatch’, ‘wig line’ and ‘armour’. Such commentary featured vocabulary that ‘includes in-group hair terms’ (Jacobs-Huey 2006, p. 90) that may particularly reflect the voices of Black women on Twitter, who are aware of both backstage and onstage dimensions of the self-presentation of Black women, including the use of silk or satin ‘bonnets’ to maintain and protect their ‘laid’ hair.

Amongst the tweets analysed were the constant appearance of claims of falseness with regard to the aesthetic image of Washington in Scandal – in contrast with that of Davis, who was more frequently framed as being ‘real’. These comparisons included reference to the visibility of Davis’ natural hair, as well as her fictional character’s haircare routines, such as wrapping her hair in a scarf at night to minimise breakage. Such sentiments highlight the distinct way that natural Black hair may be interpreted as signifying the realness and relatability of a Black woman (Banks 2000, hooks 1995, Jacobs-Huey 2006, Tulloch 2004) – impressions of which are dependent upon the eye of the beholder. This stands in contrast

with how the primarily straight hair of Washington in *Scandal* was mentioned as part of claims that insinuate much about perceptions of her inauthenticity and B(l)ackness, such as by referring to her as representing a ‘false image’ that contradicts the experiences of ‘real Black women’. The tension between the relative positionings of Davis and Washington exposes how assessments of the authenticity and relatability of famous Black women are influenced by interracial as well as intra-racial celebrity dynamics. They may be informed by normative ideas about femininity, which involve the physical appearance of famous Black women being compared to that of famous white women, who are more commonly ascribed the status of being ‘classically beautiful’. Additionally, this authenticating and relational activity may be played out as part of public comparisons between the racialised femininity and embodiment of famous Black women (Fleetwood 2015, Royster 2009).

Celebrities function as symbolic resources, resulting in spectators negotiating conventions concerning identity. Examples of this include how ‘female celebrities are used to determine normative femininity’ (Kanai 2015, p. 322), as well as how famous women whose physical appearance contrasts with such normative ideals, may be subject to ridicule. The embodiment of famous Black women across various arenas has been a source of much derision, as was exemplified by the comments of Fox News host Bill O’Reilly in 2017 (Shapira 2017). When speaking about Maxine Waters, the US Representative for California’s forty-third congressional district, the television host stated: ‘I didn’t hear a word she said. I was looking at the James Brown wig’. This remark is demonstrative of how the hair of Black women may be commonly critiqued in ways that dismiss their femininity. Analysis of tweets about Davis reveal some of the ways in which her authenticity may be affirmed in relation to her aesthetic image, which some view as being ‘more real’ than that of Washington. Conversely, tweets about Davis removing her on-screen character’s wig in *HTGAWM* (2014) also include those that denounced her femininity and physical attractiveness. Tweets of this nature likened her to famous Black men and cartoon characters, such as Jay Z, Jamie Foxx in the film *Django Unchained* (2012), and the character of Cleveland Brown in the animated sitcom *Family Guy* (1999-present).

Washington, who is noticeably lighter-skinned than Davis and frequently shown in *Scandal* with much longer, straight hair, embodies an image that more closely resembles traditional standards of beauty and femininity, which are determined in relation to a ‘politics of representation affirming white beauty standards’ for all women (hooks 1995, p. 124), including ‘one’s closeness to whites in terms of facial features and skin color’ (Dagbovie-Mullins 2013, p. 38). This may have contributed to the noted absence of similar tweets about Washington, as opposed to the number querying the feminine credentials of Davis, for example, by explicitly referring to her as being a man.

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 actresses are outlined. 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) that are associated with the iconic blonde haircuts of famous women, including Grace Kelly and Bridget Bardot (Vincendeau 2015). Whilst such women undeniably negotiate their own set of stereotypes – including those related to being angelic, ditsy, or sultry blonde bombshells – these common tropes fail to call into question their femininity in the same way that famous Black women with natural hair may be subject to.

### **'You define you': agency, authenticity and Davis**

Despite the glamour that surrounds images of famous women, there is a need for further analysis of how ideas about celebrity may relate to perceptions of their ordinariness (Biressi and Nunn 2002). Expanding upon the compelling work of Kanai (2015), this section discusses how perceptions of the authenticity of Davis are bound to narratives that juxtapose postfeminist tendencies, such as 'performing an anxiety-free lack of concern regarding social norms' (Kanai 2015, p. 328) and embodying 'slim, white, youthful standards of beauty' (ibid.). My argument considers how other discourses frame the realness and relatability that Davis and other famous Black women are ascribed, including those regarding potentially Black feminist tendencies (Del Guadalupe Davidson 2017).

The portrayal and pursuit of authentic celebrity is 'particularly demonstrated through the blurring of the public and private self' (Usher and Fremaux 2015, p. 58), which may be further interpreted as providing 'a more natural or unmediated picture of them' (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 4). Celebrities are situated within media landscapes in which 'the media represent and tend to reinforce normative social values' (Opoku-Mensah 2001, p. 30). This includes online commentary about celebrities that consists 'of narrativizing and judging the contrast between the public and the private celebrity image as markers of larger social ideologies, particularly around gender, race, sexuality, and class' (Meyers 2015, p. 72). Numerous articles about Davis and her role in HTGAWM focus upon issues concerned with her hair and underscore the part she played 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' (Gordon 2015), 'Viola Davis Speaks Out On Societal Pressures and Black Girls' Hair' (Campbell 2016), and 'Her Character Was Only Supposed To Remove Her Makeup Before Bed. Then Viola Davis Made It Real' (Ramsey 2014). The first of these articles also repeatedly surfaced amongst the tweets that were analysed, which reaffirms the intertextuality of the construction of Davis' celebrity image.

The visibility of a celebrity's branding strategies can suggest their limited agency, and may conflict with efforts to appear authentic and self-possessed. Articles such as those mentioned highlight the influence of Davis in the construction of her character's aesthetic image (Davis cited Gordon 2015): Before I got the role, I said, 'Shonda, Pete, Betsy, I'm not gonna do this unless I can take my wig off'. It's like Rosalind Russell said, acting is like

stripping naked in front of an audience and turning around really slowly. One of the reasons I stopped watching TV was that I didn't see myself on TV. It is partly a combination of narratives about the agency of Davis and the occasional appearance of her natural hair that develop the celebrity image of a self-empowered Black woman – one who seems to speak candidly about herself, such as when saying 'like India Arie says, "I'm not my hair". Well, I am my hair, but there's so much more to me' (Davis cited Campbell 2016).

Headlines, including 'Viola Davis Reveals Battle with Alopecia' (Ramos 2014), 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' (Ramos 2014) contribute to an overarching image of self-disclosure with which Davis is often associated. Statements such as 'she dared to do what we rarely see black women in Hollywood attempt: go sans wig and let the world see her natural, chemical-free [hair]' (Carter 2014); and 'my favourite saying in the world is, "The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are". I am telling you, I have spent so much of my life not feeling comfortable in my skin. I am just so not there anymore' (Davis cited Ramos 2014), reassert the idea that when famous Black actresses wear their hair naturally, spectators are 'being taken "behind the scenes", "beneath the surface", "beyond the image", there where the truth resides' (Dyer 2004, p. 10).

Media coverage of celebrities is 'a central player in the production and circulation of celebrity precisely because they focus the revelation of the private and "real" individual behind the screen persona through gossip talk' (Meyers 2015, pp. 71–72). It is both the public revelation of a seemingly private part of herself (her natural hair and her relationship with it), and the degree of self-ownership and agency that Davis seems to convey that contribute to certain claims of her authenticity. These ideas are enforced by public declarations, such as when Davis said: 'I never showed my natural hair. It was a crutch, not an enhancement [. . .]. I was so desperate for people to think that I was beautiful. I had to be liberated from that [feeling] to a certain extent' (Davis cited Ramos 2014). It is imperative to recognise that what may be viewed as being the self-construction of an allegedly authentic celebrity image on the part of Davis, still requires the involvement of certain platforms, places and people, in and through which such an identity may be projected.

As hooks (1995) observes, Black women are subject to the effects of a hierarchy that involves 'issues of both skin color and hair texture' (p. 126). When an article in The New York Times by Stanley (2014) caused controversy after referring to Davis as being 'less classically beautiful' than other actresses, Davis directly addressed this on US television talk show The View (2014):

I think that beauty is subjective. I've heard that statement my entire life being a dark-Skinned Black woman [. . .]. 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.

Davis' testimony on *The View* (2014) exemplifies her image as a self-assured Black woman who seems to embrace her Blackness and speaks of embodying 'her true self' whilst encouraging others to do the same. Davis' morale-raising comments often involve her referencing the words of other well-known Black women in the process, including India Arie and Ruby Dee. Perceptions of her authenticity may be linked to notions of conforming (or not) to normative ideas about the embodiment and on-screen depiction of Black women, as well as her embracing of 'race as an explicit theme in the narrative' (Hamilton 2014, p. 52) – a theme that Davis projects when speaking about herself. Such commentary may disrupt the possibility of Davis being subsumed by post-racial and post-feminist language (Hamad 2013), such as by being held up as an 'exemplar of a version of contemporary femininity that supposedly transcends racial politics' (Cobb 2011, p. 37). Instead, hers is a celebrity image void of 'ambiguity in terms of the work it takes to be seen as a person in a society bent on denying your agency' (Del Guadalupe Davidson 2017, p. 95).

When disentangling issues related to DIY digital culture and the postfeminist sensibilities of famous white women, such as Jennifer Lawrence, Kanai (2015) maintains that such a form of 'feminine identity must be presented as the result of "free choice" and, accordingly, authentic' (p. 328). This statement is particularly relevant to how Davis' celebrity image is conveyed, including her declarations of self-love for her Black embodiment. However, such actions also situate Davis outside of a postfeminist celebrity locus that overlooks the different racialised experiences of women. Moreover, the actions of Davis possibly position her closer to Black feminist celebrity narratives (Arzumanova 2016), which have gained increased attention amidst popular cultural contexts in recent years, including since the release of Beyoncé Knowles' (2016), visual album *Lemonade*, and Solange Knowles' (2016) allegory of Black narratives in the form of her album *A Seat at the Table*.

In addition to appearing to be transparent about the internal and external critique that she has experienced throughout the course of her career as a dark-skinned Black woman, Davis actively embraces opportunities to speak about the work that remains to be done in terms of remedying the racism and sexism that courses through the veins of various celebrity settings. Her Emmy award acceptance speech in 2015 is but one example of this, and one in which Davis was able 'to connect Harriet Tubman's vision of standing on opposite sides to white women but never being able to cross the line to signal that she is truly equal with them' (Del Guadalupe Davidson 2017, p. 95). Headlines such as 'Viola Davis and the White Feminist' Backlash' (Thomas 2015) and 'Viola Davis' Phone Contains Hollywood's Best Intersectional Feminist Message Threads' (The Sydney Morning Herald

2016) are suggestive of how the words of Davis open up conversations about different types of feminism. Consequently, Black feminist sentiments (Emejulu and Sobande 2019), play a part in the ongoing development of perceptions of her potentially authentic and Black feminist celebrity self-brand. As part of an article in The Huffington Post, Davis is quoted, saying that subsequent to the contentious article in The New York Times ‘many women were messaging using the hashtag #notclassicallybeautiful with pictures of themselves – afros, crew cuts, weaves, you name it. It was phenomenal’ (DavisNet 2014). As Warner (2015) poignantly affirms, ‘Black women’s hair and the discourses around it are not pathological but a set of rituals’ that ‘invoke communal relations among Black ladies’ (p. 45), including a sense of connectivity between famous Black actresses and Black women media spectators. By speaking frankly about her self-image and the negative comments she received about it – whilst simultaneously highlighting how this led other Black women to come together online – Davis may come across as being relatable in the eyes of Black women who may also identify a Black feminist quality to her actions.

### **Black women’s self-referential responses to Davis**

Images of celebrities can be ‘used by audiences as sources for their own meaning-making processes, offering sites of identification or dis-identification with the values embodied by celebrities’ (Meyers 2015, p. 74). This section focuses on excerpts from ten interviews with Black women in Britain, ranging from nineteen to thirty-three years of age. The interviews were undertaken as part of broader research concerning the media marketplace experiences of Black women in Britain. Over the course of each in-depth and semi-structured interview, participants were asked if they watched HTGAWM or Scandal. From this starting point, further conversations about Davis and Washington ensued. All participants identified as being Black and African-Caribbean, and of the ten mentioned in this article, two identified as being mixed-race. Participants chose pseudonyms, and were recruited through emails sent to organisations and groups concerned with issues to do with gender, race and the lives of African-Caribbean people, as well as via information that was sent to my family and friends to circulate amongst their contacts if they felt them to be relevant.

Comments made by participants referred to how the wig removal scene in season one episode four of HTGAWM (2014) resonated with them due to the rareness and relatability of seeing Black women on TV with natural hair. Okra, who is thirty-three years of age and works in the Scottish health sector, summed this up when saying ‘that whole thing of shedding your full self, you know, and revealing your full self [. . .] and shedding your mask. It’s sad that’s a big TV moment, but I’m grateful it happened’. Okra’s sentiments were matched by other participants, such as Mamanyigma, who is twenty-five years of age, works in the non-profit sector in Scotland, and identifies as mixed-race. She described the scene by saying:

I thought that was like a true reflection of some Black women who wear wigs or weaves, and how it is like, a really uncomfortable thing [. . .] that at the end of the day, she takes it off. I just thought that was really quite powerful 'cause we just don't see these things on television.

Furthermore, Ralph-Angel, who is a photographer and social sciences graduate living in Scotland, stated:

Her just taking her wig off and her makeup off right in front of the camera [. . .], yeah, great you know, I thought that was amazing. Whereas Kerry Washington [. . .], how many seasons of *Scandal* have there been now? The whole time she's wearing straight hair and not natural hair.

The remarks of such participants are another reminder of the part that can be played by the hair of famous Black actresses in their capacity to come across in authentic and relatable ways. When claims are made about the authenticity of famous Black actresses, such opinions may also relate to matters concerning the potential co-optation of their identities 'in the realm of allegedly superficial and predominantly "white" pop culture' (Kooijman 2014, p. 306). Lisa, who is nineteen years of age and a science undergraduate student in London, spoke about Washington's image in *Scandal* in comparison to that of Davis in *HTGAWM*. She said:

She sort of plays into respectability politics [. . .] palatable for people rather than [. . .] like, she is real, but it's a very specific acceptable real, for white audiences I think [. . .] rather than just, say in *How to Get Away with Murder*.

Lisa's comments indicate that her opinion of the authenticity and relatability of images of famous Black actresses is shaped by the extent to which they seem as though they have been constructed to appease a white gaze. Notions of who their intended audience is may be affected by the aesthetic appearance of famous Black actresses, such as whether they seem to conform to hegemonic and predominantly white beauty ideals. Speaking to another participant named Rachel, who is twenty-one years of age and works in England, further illuminated related issues. When asked about her thoughts on the scene in *HTGAWM* when Davis removes her character's wig, Rachel said the following:

I will admit I did feel a bit uncomfortable [. . .]. I understand what it was, the unmasking of her [. . .]. I think I felt uncomfortable because there is always such nuisance on the TV about Black women wearing fake hair, you know? Some people kind of take what they watch on TV and apply it to real life and 'cause it was widely on mainstream media, I was very cautious of how the conversation would go. I tend

to find that when Black women unmask their beauty, they tend to chime on about it quite a lot and I don't feel that it necessarily comes from a place of admiration. I think it comes from a place of 'they're still ugly' [. . .], almost that sort of thing. I wasn't really too sure. I think that maybe if it was on a network like BET [Black Entertainment Network] I wouldn't have the same response [. . .], but because I guess it was mainstream, I was worried about how it would be taken.

Rachel's comments reflect how perceptions of the target audience may influence Black women's responses to images of famous Black actresses, including whether or not they relate to them or view them as being 'uncomfortable', as Rachel said, given her concerns about a potentially omnipresent white gaze.

Temj, who is a twenty-six-year-old postgraduate research student in Scotland, spoke about the inspirational nature of seeing Davis with natural hair at high-profile events, as well as when in character: 'She's natural and whenever she goes to award shows, she's always wearing her hair naturally out [. . .]. I just love to see it and it's something now that is just becoming the norm'. In addition to this, Shelby, who is twenty-one years of age and preparing to embark on a medical-related career and postgraduate degree in England, also focused on the scene in HTGAWM when saying: 'They were showing the part of a Black woman that wears a wig that has just never been seen before [on TV]'.

It is through merging the public and private components of their image, such as through revealing an element of their physical appearance that is rarely publicly visible, that an ordinariness may be attributed to celebrities (Biressi and Nunn 2002). As a result of this, they may acquire an authentic status (Dyer 2004, Marshall 2010, Usher and Fremaux 2015), due to the perspective of spectators who thus find them somewhat more accessible and relatable. It is partly the stigma that is specific to Black women's natural hair, which is based on the intersection of sexism and racism (Banks 2000, hooks 1995, Jacobs-Huey 2006, Tulloch 2004), that facilitates the potentially authentic impact of images of famous Black women who are depicted with their hair this way. Another participant named Nymeria, a twenty-seven-year-old artist and arts graduate from Scotland, also spoke of the revelatory quality of the key 'wig reveal' scene in HTGAWM:

I think it was her that chose this [. . .]. She takes her wig off at night [. . .] and having to come to terms with who she is under the façade of her professional exterior [. . .]. I can tell that was written in by someone of colour. That was written in by a woman of colour and it was probably Viola Davis who said 'we should do this'.

The interview process also involved me speaking to Ola, a nineteen-year-old business undergraduate student in Scotland. Ola made comments about Davis that further revealed how depictions of the hair of famous Black actresses may affect judgements of their naturalness, normality and authenticity:

You just don't ever see that [. . .]. [It's always like] a Black woman on TV with their weaves and wigs or whatever, so it was just cool to take that away and just remove that [. . .], so it was just her with her natural hair [. . .], her natural self [. . .], just true role [. . .] and just her, a Black woman [. . .] just sat there in front of you.

Ola's comments were similar to those of Lisa, whose words about Davis are very much suggestive of a 'self-relevant authenticity' (Rose and Wood 2005, p. 289):

I loved that! I loved that scene so much because [. . .] especially with hair, a lot of Black women's hair is very scrutinised a lot of the time. The Black women that you do see in leading roles have like wigs and weaves and ways to cover up their hair and make it straighter [. . .], make it not natural [. . .] and then in this, *How to Get Away with Murder*, yes she wears a wig but at the same time it is a choice and she takes it off. I really love that scene. I think it's amazing. I don't know what it is about the act of taking off a wig and like [. . .] taking off the makeup and like, looking at yourself in the mirror [. . .]; it was just sort of cathartic to watch her do that. It was so nice to see someone [. . .] be so bare and so [. . .] open on screen.

As well as speaking about the aesthetic appearance of Davis, participants emphasised the significance of hearing her talk about the need for better representations of Black women in Hollywood. Lucy, who also identifies as mixed-race, is a twenty-four-year-old creative performer and works part-time in hospitality in Scotland. She stressed how such actions feed into the extent to which Davis may seem relatable to other Black women:

Looking back at Viola Davis' characters history, it's all very much poor Black characters you know, and for her to get this role [HTGAWM] and for it to be so successful [. . .]; it really was a cause for celebration, and the fact that she acknowledged that as being important, it sent out a message to Black women.

Neoliberal post-feminist celebrity narratives that refuse to pay 'attention to racial and ethnic identity' (Kaklamanidou and Tally 2014, p. 75) and the ways in which these factors influence the lives of women are unlikely to appeal to Black women such as Lucy. Whilst the performances of Davis, including those in HTGWM, may gain her 'cross-racial popularity' (Fleetwood 2015, p. 75), certain notions of her authentic image may be based upon her perceived intent on reaching out to, and centring, the narratives of Black women. It is the ostensibly natural Black aesthetic image of Davis and her willingness to articulate issues concerning Black women specifically that garner her authenticity in Lucy's mind. This emphasises how interpretations of the authenticity and relatability of Black actresses can be shaped by perceptions of their status as racial icons (Fleetwood 2015) as well as celebrities,

and due to how they position themselves in terms of engaging in public discussion about both their race and gender, unlike the ambivalence regarding discourses of race that can occur as part of post-feminist celebrity narratives.

The interviews unearthed self-referential sentiments that may influence Black women's assessments of the authenticity and relatability of the aesthetic image of famous Black actresses. The natural hair of Davis was a source of much conversation, yet the remarks of interview participants suggest that it is not simply that the natural hair of famous Black actresses may be interpreted as being an aesthetic marker that communicates 'qualities of sincerity and authenticity, those images of the private and natural' (Dyer 2004, p. 14). Rather, their comments allude to how this, coupled with what appears to be the agency and transparency of a celebrity, may foster their perceived realness, and in turn, catalyse 'identificatory pleasures' (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 5) on the part of onlookers.

## Conclusion

This three-tiered analysis highlights how discourses of Blackness, femininity and feminism can mould perceptions of the authenticity and relatability of Black actresses who navigate disciplining media discourse that scrutinises the (un)naturalness of their appearance – right down to the texture of the follicles found on their heads. It remains difficult for famous women to challenge normative depictions of race and gender, not least because of the dominance of images that reinforce white beauty ideals that are unattainable for Black women. The public statements of Davis often convey the difficulties of being a Black woman in a predominantly white space, whilst challenging barriers and acting as a 'role model for other black women and girls' (Del Guadalupe Davidson 2017, p. 95). The 'you define you' message of Davis (DavisNet 2014) and her reclamation of the notion of her not being 'classically beautiful' indicates a 'deconstruction of mainstream constructions of beauty, which result in a very empowering sense of self' (Banks 2000, p. 34).

This is not to suggest that the actions of Davis are completely unfiltered and unmanaged by other actors involved in the development of her celebrity image. Instead, such observations illuminate how different types of feminist sentiments may be entangled with ideas regarding the authenticity and relatability of famous women whose race may be of equal influence to their gender in terms of how they are associated with 'issues of women, emancipation, and feminism' (Hermes 2005, p. 86). Further research regarding Black feminist celebrity images may contribute to an increased understanding of the plurality of celebrity feminist narratives. This includes the different ways that these narratives may be demarcated, such as by positioning one type of celebrity feminism and the individuals who symbolise it in relation to a perceived oppositional celebrity feminist presence, and the celebrities associated with that presence.

Performing authenticity can entail celebrities appearing to challenge commercial constraints, including societal expectations that encourage them to adhere to specific

expressions of their identities. Due to the self-empowerment it may signify, combined with the paradoxical stigma that surrounds it, the natural hair of famous Black actresses continues to be interpreted in ways related to ideas about their authenticity and relatability, including those conceived of by other Black women. The words of the interview participants, in addition to the circulation of #notclassicallybeautiful on Twitter, exemplify how the natural hair of famous Black actresses can contribute to feelings of relatability on the part of other Black women – and for whom natural hair may be a norm, regardless of its elusive depiction in mass-media. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that Black women respond to images of famous Black actresses in ways that are as diverse as this audience's demographic.

Celebrities are situated in a wider social reality – a reality that 'is not devoid of racial issues and moments in which race come to the foreground' (Hamilton 2014, p. 53). The authentic status of a celebrity is both strived for, and struggled over, rather than being intrinsically possessed (Dyer 1991). This striving and struggling may involve the negotiation of overlapping contours of conventions concerning race, gender, celebrity, and feminism(s). There is no single embodied expression of Black womanhood that can encompass the wide range of identities of Black women, however, this research exposes some of the aesthetic markers and related dynamics that may sculpt views of the authenticity, femininity and relatability of famous Black actresses, whilst contextualising why this may be, and for whom.

## Note

1. In 2017 MTV's Movie and TV Awards ceremony introduced gender-neutral performance categories, which highlights how gender power relations are associated with the terms 'actor' and 'actress'.

Francesca Sobande is a Lecturer in Digital Media Studies at Cardiff University. Her work focuses on how racism and sexism manifest in media and the marketplace. She has published work in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Marketing Theory*, and *Consumption Markets and Culture*. Francesca is the author of *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, Sobande 2020). She is also co-editor (with Akwugo Emejulu) of *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (Pluto Press, Emejulu and Sobande 2019).

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