

Out of all of the identities that we have examined to date in this course, the one that I want to discuss the most is sexuality. I am at a unique perspective as I am labeled a (government defined) senior citizen – age 63 , a woman , and Black. I've lived through the edge of the Age of Aquarius as a child – the swinging Sixties – but was a young adult during the mid to late 70s – women's lib, Black power, gay liberation – the exploration of personal choice and the freedom to express it. That freedom also included the choice to be a sexual being without being confined in a marriage – or even a regular relationship. I didn't get married until 40 – my earlier opportunities to do so either fizzled out or I was smart enough to not engage in that step with that person. I had plenty of time to figure out who I am as a person and my place in the world by the time I said 'I do' to my husband. Still married 22+ years later and count myself lucky that I chose well – and that I'm still alive and kicking.

Here I am – at the age of when my late mother and her friends – all Black women, all widows started to date again - Not to remarry or live with someone – just to have a companion. I assumed sex was involved but I certainly didn't bring it up. Even being shy of 40 years old and married, that discussion was 'grown folk's business'. This was also the start of the online dating websites, and my late aunt taught my mother the process – which sites to go to, how to do the profile, etc. They were pretty successful at it, too – they got some quality relationships that involved actual dates for dinner, movies or perhaps to play cards at someone's house – and companionship.

The chapter on sexuality got me to think about their experience – and about myself as I navigate through these last 40 years of my life - my goal is to make it to 100 in reasonably good health and wealth. Working in Tech industry, I interact with a lot of men – mostly white, some Black, range of ages. While I can be very oblivious at times, I can't remember the last time a flirtatious – even a halfhearted one – came my way. Maybe Zoom leaves a lot to be desired but even before the pandemic, in my best dressed office attire and friendly social attitude, it's obvious – except for my husband, thank goodness – that those days of casual 'hey good looking' banter were behind me. I rarely wear my wedding ring because it slips off – needs resizing - and besides, I know I'm married. I used to think that my attitude as a married woman shines through without the ring accouterment. Now I realize that I could wear a sign that says, 'hey flirt with me' and

still not get a nibble. Don't get me wrong – I'm not looking to play with fire – but I would still like to be viewed more than a friend, a co-worker, a fellow Black person, a classmate, a senior citizen, gym rat, dog owner, married lady. My mind lives in my late 20s and 30s – but the daily reality reminds pretty quickly that I'm in my 60s. As an independent only child that I am, I love my identity as 'married', and the partner I chose 'to death do us part' but it would be nice to say once, 'Thank you for the lovely invitation of (coffee, breakfast, dancing) but I'm married.'

How does one make that transition – from being seen to becoming 'it' without female pronouns? Or getting that flat greeting of 'ma'am'? Would it be different if I lived in my home state of California where there is a lot of diversity? Would it be different if I lived in the upper Northeast or Southeast where there are large populations of Blacks? Is this specific to the combination of gender and age – or is it being a Black woman who is aging? Or is this just in my head that I've become a sexless creature outside of my home – and it turns out there is precedent.

A historical view

As a dark-skinned Black woman with dreads who wears a clothing size of 12 -14 , I'm not used to be considered beautiful – in my youth, in my literature or in the movies I watch. Dark skinned women with natural hair usually took a big back seat - and still do in some cases - to European standards of hair and skin color. Ebony Fashion Fair, Essence, Oprah, the rise of BET and OWN – all participants in helping to change the narrative of a Black woman's beauty so that Cicely Tyson, Lupita Nyong'o, Grace Jones can expand the conversation of sexuality to darker skin and nappy hair.

However, all Black women – regardless of color tone, clothing size, and hair choices - have to still fight history. Reading the WPA stores of former slaves was heartbreaking – to have been in the crosshairs of both the plantation owner and his wife must have been difficult to survive on a good day, not to mention the days where the enslaved Black woman got abused by both. (*On Slaveholders' Sexual Abuse of Slaves Selections from 19th- & 20th-century Slave Narratives*) I know that somewhere in my family tree my female ancestors had to endure all of this so that I live today - a relatively free person.

Our white Christian owners had to justify the enslavement of God's children – so he made us inhuman. To justify rape and incest during a time where sexuality was considered shameful, the Black woman (and man) became 'carnal, passionate, lustful, lewd, rapacious, bestial, [and] sensual'. We were a source of labor and additional resources – our babies – and if a Black woman was barren, there were more abuse, psychological and physical. (Dickerson & Rousseau, 1970) If by chance an enslaved Black woman reached an age where she is considered elderly and can no longer reproduce for 'profit', she no longer had value – 'too old to breed' and lost their sexuality. (Dickerson & Rousseau, 1970).

Post slavery, our image changed with the economic times – and not for the better. Since we were no longer exploited for our reproductive skills, we became that 'antagonistic, emasculating' Black woman in the 1970s, not really free to explore our sexual freedoms like white woman. (Dickerson & Rousseau, 1970). I went to an all-girl high school during the early-mid 70s and can remember this shift. My white classmates were having sex and openly sharing their experiences, even those who started to recognize that they were attracted to the same sex. For black girls, we were constantly told not to have sex until marriage – and for those who did, the price was pregnancy – and getting kicked out of the house, like my classmate and friend, Angela.

Black women never caught a break from being classified out our true self. The mammy – de-sexed fat, loud, but 'loves me my white employers.':

The mammy typifies the asexual image of a Black female slave who was deemed to be submissive and safe to serve white slave masters and their families in their homes (Sewell, 2013). Her sexuality was caricatured in the form of an overweight, unattractive, and unappealing dark-skinned woman who was incapable of satisfying her white slave owner's sexual appetite. (Salisu, 2021)

Think how ironic it is in 'Gone with the Wind', where Clark Gable's character brings Hattie McDonald's character a pair of red underpants from his European travels, therefore providing a smidgen of sexuality to Hattie's character. It's the only time Mammy becomes a woman as she blushes and giggles when asked to show that she is wearing them.

We are the emasculating Black matriarch –“too dominating, too demanding, too strict, too inconsiderate, and too masculine,”(Dickerson, 2009). We are the ‘welfare queen’ that is scamming the federal system of funds to buy Cadillacs and fur coats, a myth Ronald Reagan started in the late 1970s.(Lybarger, 2019).

Or, we become exotic, forbidden fruit – the jezebel.

While the jezebel is usually portrayed as a promiscuous, lustful, sex slave (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016) and the Black matriarch is portrayed as a sexually aggressive and controlling woman. In these three images, Black females’ control over their sexuality and fertility is conceptualized as antithetical to elite white male interests. (Hill Collins, 2002)

I remember my first white boyfriend – in my late 20s – who called everyone in his circle that he had a new girlfriend and ‘Guess what – she’s Black’. I should have left him right then and there but in youth comes insecurity – and lack of a strong voice. However, while the younger generations still have to deal with racist sexist tropes, at least they have apps to weed out the undesirables – May not be much of a consolation prize but at least they don’t have to meet them:

“Certain White guys I talk to online, they’re like ‘I never had sex with a Black girl. Imagine having sex with you.’ I said to them, ‘Is that all you want?’ They respond, ‘I don’t know, maybe.’ I’m just like, okay this is uncomfortable. One guy said, ‘I don’t think we’ll date, but I just wanna have sex with you ’cause I never had sex with a Black woman.’ I felt so uncomfortable, and I was just so annoyed. It made me very upset. I was just, like, what the heck? That’s why I don’t date a lot of them online, because I get a lot of that too.” Alicia, a Jamaican American. (Lin, Lundquist, Curington et al., 2022)

In summary, I did not imagine this sexless image that I find myself fighting in this world not to internalize – the **bold** is mine:

*A centuries-long tradition of dictating African American women’s sexuality exists in the U.S. through state-sanctioned reproductive exploitation for the purposes of labor; restrictive eugenics policies that enforce court-mandated sterilization of African American women; control of the image of these women through media and other social rhetoric; as well as the coercion of African American complicity through terror tactics historically employed by Whites against African Americans in the U.S. [38–40]. **The commodification of African American sexuality through oppression and exploitation can naturally lead to a perception of older African American women’s sexuality as undesirable, and these women themselves may hold such perceptions.** (Laganá et al., 2013).*

What do older Black women think/say?

There have been a few small studies of older Black women and sexuality, which was enlightening that we are not completely overlooked from a clinical standpoint. One 2015 study, conducted at an adult day center in a low-income neighborhood, collected responses from 12 Blacks, age of 70 to 100, mirrored my late mom and her friends' view on senior citizen dating :

We found that older African American cited reasons to be in a relationship but did not want to be in a marriage. Failing health, financial reasons and a desire for freedom from caregiving were deterrents for marriage. (Gupta et al., 2015)

A 2009 to 2013 study of 13 older Black women, ages 57 – 82, focused more on our sexuality and concluded that it was a myth that older Black women are asexual, that there was a desire for sexual relationships but lacked a suitable partner. The study also provided suggestions for better research methods as there were trust issues and limited answer responses to some of the questions. (Laganá et al., 2013). I can imagine the distrust of how the information would be used but also in the realization in addressing their sexuality honestly, and in front of a stranger.

The latest research, conducted in 2018, with 14 Black woman, ages 60 – 75, was revealing to me how families sabotaged their mothers' quest for a sexual relationship:

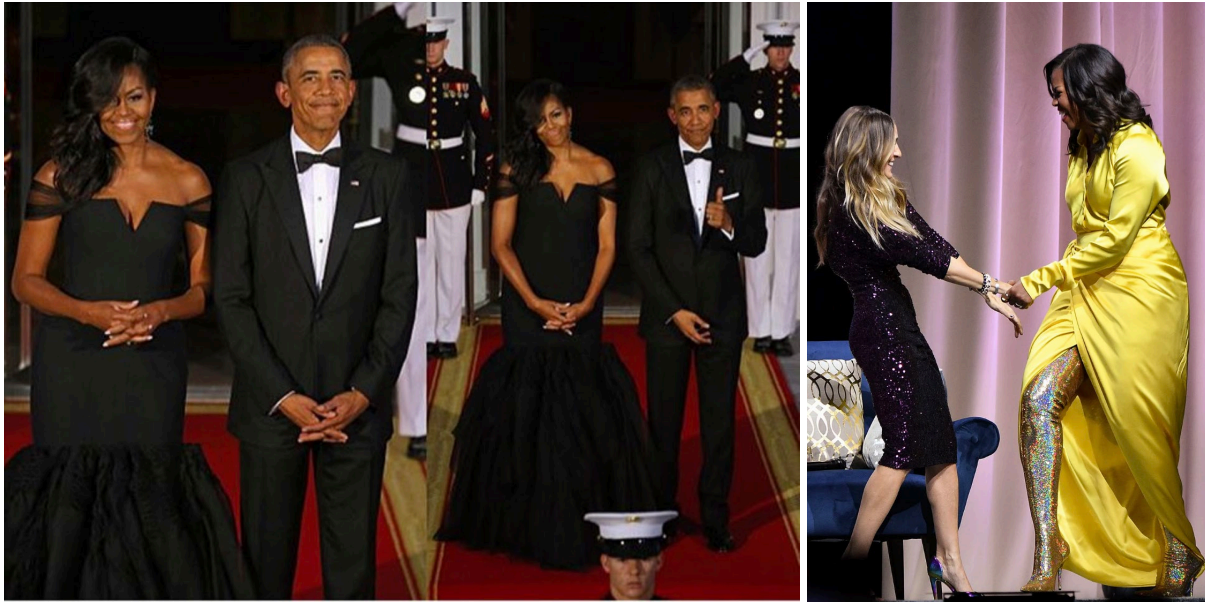
As these women aged, their sexual identities became sublimated because, in their matriarchal roles and as older women, there was little room for them to be sexual beings. Sharon explained: I am 64. Should I even be considering having sex with anybody? Because some people think that when you are over 60, you are dead. Rather, they remind me that I am a grandmother now, and grandmothers don't think about stuff like that. (Salisu, 2021)

There is some luck there for me- I don't have kids. I am reminded, though, by what my mom said about one of her friends – how her daughters were stopping her from coloring her hair because it wasn't age appropriate. 'They are trying to make her look older – and unattractive'.

In reflection and summary

I am hopeful by the generation of older Black women in media – dark skinned, intelligent, talented, sexual beings that is starting to nibble at the stereotypes– showing the world that we exist. It may not change in my lifetime, but we are demanding the microphone. A few examples:

Michelle Obama broke the internet twice – once as First Lady, once on her book tour – she is 58.



Viola Davis , age 56, played a complex character – Annalise Keating - in ‘How To Get Away with Murder’ – and also Ma Rainey, a famous bi-sexual Black Blues singer from 1920s. Viola’s thoughts about Ma, who was definitely not a ‘mammy’ :

“In researching Ma Rainey, she was unapologetic about her sexuality,” Davis tells The Advocate. “This is a woman who went to orgies. She was arrested at an orgy. I felt like Ma always had a woman with her. A lot of the women who dance with her were her women. She had orgies with them. That was her world. I didn't want to sweep it under the rug.” (TheAdvocateMag, 2020)

“When you find a woman like Ma Rainey - she's big, she is bisexual, she's dark skinned. She's all those things,” Viola continues. Usually a character like that is just funny, she's just big, black and funny. That's it. That, or she's uber maternal. In my world, within the African American community, there are a lot of Ma Raineys,” she says. (Baggs, 2020).

There are some TV shows that are showing older Black women in relationships – marriages, dating –

- Angela Bassett (63) – ‘9-1-1,’ married to a white firefighter captain who actively participates in their relationship.
- Lorraine Toussaint(62) – ‘The Equalizer’ who plays Queen Latifah’s ‘Aunt Vi’ – who recently reactivated a relationship from the past, with a woman and told her niece to set up her online dating profile to ‘open’ regarding sexuality.

There are two other shows that highlight older Black women in relationships and/or marriage with a younger man – ‘Queen Sugar’s Aunt Vi (Tina Lifford, 56) and ‘The Chi’s Jada (Yolonda Ross, 47) . These beautiful actresses are portrayed older than their actual age, both with chronic but treatable diseases, and are desired and cared for by their partners. Perhaps continued representation of Black women in real relationships gives us less famous older Black women, especially those without a partner, hope for a fulfilling future.

In my own way, I can fight the asexual perception of older Black women by supporting media that highlights our humanity and sexuality in a positive manner. I can also reject the constant silent messages that I’m less than because of my older dark skin and natural hair – and remind my friends to do the same. I can reinforce the existence of older Black women in places where you don’t see us - in Technology, in areas of study like Philosophy, in places of wealth like Spa Metropole by Givenchy Monte Carlo or at dinner at Le Louis XV(which was a fabulous experience). And I can use my voice – loudly - when I’m in public to compliment another seasoned Black sistah that she is looking good today – so she knows she has been seen!

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