

## To be sentimental, powerful, and Black: Affective agency in Viola Davis's award speeches

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### Abstract

This article considers how the long-standing American cultural tradition of sentimentality and its affective power can be discursively utilized by contemporary Black women in the public contexts. Using the concept of sentimental political storytelling as discussed by Rebecca Wanzo, I analyze three award speeches given by Viola Davis – a popular and acclaimed African American actress whose speeches generate significant public and media attention. Framing Davis's speeches within the Black feminist epistemology, I draw on the conventions of sentimental storytelling proposed by Wanzo to argue that Davis is an example of a Black woman skilfully using sentimentality to gain affective agency and mobilize sympathy from mainstream public while at the same time narrativizing African Americans' lived experiences to have their humanity and their struggle recognized today. Given the continued prioritization of White female suffering in the American media over stories of Black women's struggle, the ways in which Black women can discursively utilize sentimentality to gain affective agency and negotiate self-definition in interactional public contexts is of significant sociolinguistic interest.

**Keywords:** African American women; sentimentality; affective agency; discourse; media.

### 0. Introduction

Sentimentality holds a major potential for sociolinguistic studies of language. Inherently emotional, sentimentality has had a long-lasting and conspicuous role in the American literary history, and it has been the object of considerable attention in literary criticism (Howard 1999). Its contemporary uses in American politics have also been of interest for scholars (Marcus 2002; Berlant

1997, 2008). It has been a salient category within the American cultural tradition. However, there seems to be a considerable lack of attention given to the discursive practice of sentimentality in investigations of language as a social action. In interactional public contexts, sentimentality is crucial to acquiring affective agency (Wanzo 2009). If we consider affect as relational, generated through actions, rather than residing within a person (Bucholtz et al. 2018), we must also consider the role language plays in generating affect. Thus, integrating the category of sentimentality into the sociolinguistic framework allows us to investigate the ways in which ‘emotionality’ can be harnessed via discursive practices to generate affective agency that has the potential of *doing* considerable social work (Howard 1999; Wanzo 2009). Moreover, following Ramos-Zayas’s understanding of personhood as “socially encumbered” and “not simply a cultural interior-focused “self”” (2011: 27), and her positioning of affect as “based in experiences” of that personhood (2011: 27), should also make us vigilant of the complex dynamics between race as a social category and the role affect plays in reinforcing or resisting racial inequality (Bucholtz et al. 2018). It allows us to problematize the affective aspect of the paradigm of racialization (Ramos-Zayas 2011) – a social process through which systemic disadvantages are placed on “certain kind of bodies that have been categorized as phenotypically marked” (Bucholtz et al. 2018:1). Given that language is a chief mode through which racial inequality is produced but also contested (Bucholtz et al. 2018), “emotional” language seems like a potent tool of challenging institutional inequalities. Therefore, integrating race into discussions of sentimentality as a discursive practice holds the potential of illuminating the ways in which non-White speakers can gain affective agency in public contexts.

In this article, I draw on Rebecca Wanzo’s conceptualization of sentimentality. In *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (2009), Wanzo discusses sentimental politics, its role in storytelling in the public sphere and its racialized and gendered dynamics. She points to the continued prioritization of sympathy and affective agency of White women over Black women in narratives of American citizens’ suffering (2009: 3). At the same time, she proposes a set of certain conventions of sentimental storytelling that African American women can and do utilize in order to mobilize affect and sympathy of the public. Historically, storytelling has been a major genre in the African American oral cultural tradition and it has allowed Black women to convey their experiences and knowledge, and navigate the reality of being a Black woman in the White mainstream society

(Richardson 2002). Thus, sentimental storytelling appears to be a potent discursive strategy for Black women to negotiate agency and power in public contexts and it is a key element of gaining affective agency (Wanzo 2009: 3) necessary for “moving and being moved” to social action and change (Bucholtz et al. 2018: 4).

With this article I aim to contribute to integrating sentimentality into the sociolinguistic frame of inquiry into language as social practice on the one hand, and to filling the apparent gap in the studies on contemporary discursive uses of sentimentality by African American women in the interactional public contexts on the other. For this purpose, using the concept of sentimental political storytelling, I analyze three speeches given by the actress Viola Davis on three different occasions of her winning major television and film awards. More specifically, drawing on the sentimental conventions proposed by Wanzo (2009), I investigate the interactional and discursive strategies employed by Davis in her speeches that contribute to her affective power. I argue that Davis is a noteworthy example of a contemporary Black woman skilfully using sentimentality to mobilize affect of the mainstream (White) society and establish herself as powerful speaker. Given the context of the American public and media continuously prioritizing White female suffering (Wanzo 2009), Davis makes for an extremely interesting case study of a contemporary Black woman’s successful negotiations and mobilizations of affective agency via garnering identification and sympathy from (White) mainstream society *and* narrativizing African Americans’ lived experiences to have their humanity and struggle recognized today.

The article starts with a brief summary of conceptualizations of sentimentality in the American cultural tradition (1) with the focus on theorization of sentimental political storytelling as proposed by Wanzo (2009). Then, I briefly discuss affective agency (2) as inherent to sentimentality. I then describe the methodology and methods (3) as informed by Black feminist theory, and discuss the findings of the study (4), focusing on the interactional and discursive strategies that contribute to Davis establishing herself as a sentimental, powerful, and affective speaker.

## **1. American tradition of sentimentality**

There is a substantial body of scholarly work on the American tradition of sentimentality in the 18th and 19th century literature. Interestingly, because of

(or perhaps *despite*) sentimentality being inherently affective, indistinguishable from emotion (Howard 1999), a major point of contention regarding literary sentimentality seems to be the question of the genre being either a valid transformative literary convention or an inherently emotionally inauthentic, excessive one. Here I focus on the political, discursive aspect of sentimentality as it has been historically utilized in the American public sphere. Moving beyond the popular and scholarly understandings of sentimentality as suspicious (Howard 1999) or even “coercively” emotional (Dalrymple 2012), and therefore somehow counterproductive and shallow, I treat sentimentality as a legitimate interactional and discursive practice that has the potential of doing substantive political and social work (Howard 1999; Wanzo 2009). What is more, as Howard points out, analyzing cultural and social texts and language practices through the sentimental lens illuminates the “moments when the discursive processes that construct emotions become visible” (1999: 69). Because sentimentality is so visibly full of socially constructed emotions (Howard 1999), studies of sentimental language as a valid category hold a lot of potential for contributing to our understanding of language as a social action.

According to Rebecca Wanzo, sentimentality is everywhere, and it is “continuously touched by the history of Black subjugation” (2009: 11). Sentimental politics, which is the practice of disseminating texts and stories about people’s suffering in order to mobilize political change (Wanzo 2009: 3), has historically shaped the perception of who counts as a proper victim and is therefore worthy of sympathy (Wanzo 2009). Because African American women have been historically defined against the dominant models of traditional White femininity, speech, and modes of behaviour (Davis 1972; Houston and Davis 2002; Morgan 2002), they were also denied the sentimental attention and sympathy of the public available to White women. Within historical sentimental politics, the connection between morality and affect was emphasized to render “a feeling person as an ethical person” (Cobb 2015: 29). Middle-class White women were defined as sentimental (and therefore affective) agents of morality, while Black women were sentimental objects and not feeling subjects (Cobb 2015). The exception was perhaps the slave narrative which allowed Black women to disseminate the stories of their suffering to a broader public and gain affective agency needed to propel the abolitionist cause in the U.S. Nevertheless, sentimental politics today continues to prioritize White bodies, and Black women are in turns hypervisible and absent from being the recipients of sympathy from the media and subjects of political concern at a time where their struggle is alleged to be a thing of the past (Wanzo 2009: 13). The

stories of their struggles tend to be marginalized in the media and when they *do* get visibility and public platform it is because they successfully employ one or more of the conventions of sentimental storytelling (Wanzo 2009). Sentimental storytelling “narrativizes sympathy for the purposes of political mobilization” (Wanzo 2009: 3). The sentimental conventions, as proposed by Wanzo, are building blocks of the American sentimental tradition and they help to examine why certain stories of suffering gain national platform while others remain invisible.

Therefore, if she wants to garner sympathy from a broader community when telling stories of suffering, an African American woman must negotiate one or more of these conventions: (1) progress narratives, in which historical injustices are placed in the past, and which prioritize sympathy for people who have achieved success granting them independence from state interventions; (2) suffering hierarchies, which privilege some bodies, stories, and histories over others; (3) homogenization of suffering, which conflates suffering experiences of different (racial) groups and diminishes the racial aspect of differentiation between stories of struggle; (4) therapeutic/emotional intimacy with more powerful people which allows for self-transformation as a response to structural social injustices; (5) “fake” suffering, wherein some people who claim to be suffering are, in reality, just suffering from hysterical, phantom pains (Wanzo 2009: 10). Within suffering hierarchies especially, Black people have to compete for public attention and sympathy not only with other citizens but also with their own historical legacy of struggle and “ghosts of the past” that are iconographic in the American culture today: the suffering slave, the segregation of Jim Crow laws, and the peaceful protesters of the Civil Rights era (Wanzo 2009: 13).

## **2. Affective agency**

Gaining affective agency, i.e. “the ability of a subject to have her political and social circumstances move a populace and produce institutional effects” (Wanzo 2009: 3), is the goal of sentimentality, which relies on emotions. It is crucial in mobilizing sympathy from the public. Bucholtz et al. (2018) theorize agency and affective agency as one and the same in terms of meaning, with affective agency being a conceptual tool underscoring the intentionality and subjectivity of affect and, in turn, the affective dimension of agency. They underscore affect’s complexity as a social and relational phenomenon, and its

location as not within bodies but in actions. They also theorize it as inherently political, since it “acts upon the world and thus effects change and engages with power in socially consequential ways” (Bucholtz et al. 2018: 4).

Contemporary Black women continue to struggle to gain affective agency in the public since they are up against historical representations about Black women in the U.S. on the one hand, and sentimental logic which determines who is worthy of public sympathy on the other (Wanzo 2009). Paradoxically, the aforementioned iconographic idealized images of Black pain circulating the mass social consciousness in America today further hinder the efforts of African Americans to gain affective agency (Wanzo 2009). Ahmed argues that emotions play a crucial role in the “surfacing” of certain bodies over others through how they move between people and signs (2004: 117). This can be seen as reinforcing the notion of affective agency as a power that can be consciously harnessed in language since it mobilizes feelings that do not simply reside within the individuals in a private sphere but rather are socially constructed. In other words, emotions function as a form of capital and their social circulation produces affect. The more signs circulate the more affective they become (Ahmed 2004). Language as a social action is a chief resource in the accumulation of affective economies. Emotions are also what replicates racialized structural injustices, producing dehumanizing affects (Ahmed 2004; Bucholtz et al. 2018). Language both perpetuates these injustices and helps resisting and exposing them. As Bucholtz et al. rightfully observe, “to be racialized is a deeply emotional and bodily experience, one that cannot be apprehended through the intellect alone” (2018: 3). Therefore, it is crucial to include data from non-White speakers in the studies of production and negotiation of affective agency in language.

### **3. Methodology and methods**

Critical sociolinguistics calls for investigation of linguistic data informed by social theories, which makes for a richer analysis. In my analysis of Davis’s award speeches, Black feminist epistemology (Collins 2000) serves as an overarching theoretical framework. Various qualitative language communication scholars (Bucholtz 1996; Houston and Davis 2002; Evans-Winters 2019) emphasize the value of Black feminist epistemology as an alternative theory in studying Black women’s discourses and everyday talk. Some of its dimensions that I find relevant in the analysis of Davis’s speeches are: concrete experience

as a criterion of meaning, ethics of caring, and ethics of personal accountability. Moreover, Black feminist theory contributes to the analysis of Davis's speech performances as rooted in a specific socio-historical context of African American oral tradition, rather than reading the communicative features and discursive strategies she uses as incidental or analytically insignificant. It allows for a more complex and in-depth exploration of Davis's language use. The framework also underscores the importance of studying various and multiple Black women's discourses and interactions. In the analysis below, I use conversation analysis to examine the ways in which Davis constructs and controls the speech events at the micro-level of interaction with the audiences, negotiating her stance in the frame of these performances as an assertive, powerful, and yet sympathetic and *affective* speaker. Drawing on the sentimental conventions proposed by Wanzo (2009), I use discourse analysis to identify the sentimental discursive (rhetorical) strategies Davis employs in her speeches, and how they are embedded in the wider socio-cultural context of her performances. Altogether, the discussed interactional and discursive strategies contribute to Davis establishing herself as a remarkable and subversive sentimental speaker who gains affective power through her award speeches and successfully mobilizes affect in the public media contexts.

#### **4. Viola Davis's award speeches: Description and analysis**

Viola Davis is an African American actress celebrated and revered by the mainstream American public. She has risen to mainstream fame and recognition fairly recently and well in her forties, thanks to the leading role in a legal drama television show *How To Get Away With Murder* (2014-ongoing), where she plays "the brilliant, charismatic and seductive" law professor and defence attorney, Annalise Keating (ABC website). For that role she won two Screen Actor Guild Awards (2014 and 2015), and an Emmy Award in 2015. Her recognition and stardom were further solidified in 2017 when she won a Screen Actors Guild Award, a Golden Globe, a BAFTA Award, and an Academy Award for her role in *Fences*, a period drama based on a play by August Wilson, and directed by Denzel Washington. She is the first African American person to win the so-called Triple Crown of Acting – an Oscar, an Emmy, and a Tony. In 2017, Davis was named by *Times* among their list of 100 Most Influential People. Moreover, there is a mainstream consciousness and perception of Davis as not only an acclaimed and talented stage, television and film

performer, but also a remarkable, powerful speech-giver (*Washington Post*, *New York Times*). Her speeches have proven to be major cultural events on their own. They have been covered in the news on multiple occasions, and commented on. For example, after her Academy Award win *Washington Post* wrote, “Viola Davis won an Oscar and gave an amazing speech – no one is surprised”. After she gave her Oscar speech, the ceremony host Jimmy Kimmel joked that Davis “just won an Emmy for that speech”. Media outlets provide transcripts of her speeches, “The Best Of” compilations of her speeches. There seem to be a public consensus that Davis is a powerful and note-worthy public speaker. What is then the phenomenon of Davis’s award speeches?

I investigate three of Davis’s speeches given on three different occasions of her winning major television and film awards which held special cultural significance. Her 2015 Emmy Award win made Davis the first African American woman in the award’s 73 years of history to win in the Leading Performance by an Actress category. Her Emmy win and speech in September 2015 came eight months after the Academy announced Oscar nominations in January 2015, with all 20 acting nominations awarded to White actors. A hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, created by a Black woman on Twitter in reaction to the news, spurred a massive social justice campaign, drawing attention to and criticizing biased practices and institutional inequalities in the show business industry, and has forced a (still ongoing) change. In 2017, when Davis won a Best Supporting Actress Academy Award for her performance in *Fences*, she became the seventh Black woman in the Oscars’ 90 years of history to win in that category<sup>1</sup>, and the eighth Black woman to win in the Best Actress (Leading or Supporting) category in general. For the same performance, she won a BAFTA award, also in 2017. Davis’s Oscar and BAFTA wins and speeches came in the same breakthrough year that seemed to be marking an institutional change in recognition of artists of colour in the film industry, a shift towards inclusion. In 2017, seven people of colour were nominated for Academy Awards in the acting categories. Davis won on the same night that Mahershala Ali became the first (Black) Muslim person to win an Oscar for acting and *Moonlight* made history as Best Picture Oscar winner. Her wins *felt* like part of the cultural shift, especially in the American context.

All three speeches were covered in the media, and all three speeches make for legitimate case studies of how sentimentality and its conventions can be

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019 Regina King became the eighth Black woman to win an Academy Award in that category.



successfully utilized to generate affect by a contemporary Black woman in the public sphere<sup>2</sup>. Below I provide transcripts of Davis's three speeches<sup>3</sup> and discuss the interactional and discursive strategies utilized therein.

### EMMY speech (2015)

- 01 VD: "In my ↑mi::nd (2.0) I see a line (2.0) and over that line I see green fields (0.5)  
 02 and lovely flowers and beautiful white women (0.2) with their arms >stretched  
 03 out to me over that line< (0.2) but I can't seem to get there no how (0.2) I can't  
 04 seem to get over that ↓line." (2.0) That was Harriet Tubman in the 1800s. (2.0)  
 05 A: ((cheering))  
 06 VD: And lemme tell you somethin' (0.5) the ↑only thing that separates women of  
 07 colour (0.2) from anyone else (0.2) is opportunity. (9.0)  
 08 A: [((applause))]  
 09 VD: [You ↑cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there. (4.0)  
 10 A: [((clapping))]  
 11 VD: [So here's (3.0) to all (0.2) the writers, the ↑awesome (.) people that are Ben  
 12 Sherwood, Paul Lee, Peter [Nowalk (3.0)  
 13 A: [((cheering))]  
 14 ↑Shonda Rhimes (1.0)  
 15 A: [((applause))]  
 16 VD: [people who (0.5) have redefined what it me::ans >to be beautiful, to be sexy,  
 17 to be a leading woman< (0.5) to be ↓black! (3.0)  
 18 A: [((applause))]  
 19 VD: [And to the Taraji P. ↑Hensons (.) the Kerry Washingtons, [the >Halle Berrys  
 20 A: [((clapping))]  
 21 VD: the Nicole Beharies, the Meagan Goods< (2.0) to Gabrielle Union (2.0), th::ank  
 22 you (.) for taking us over that ↓line (2.0)

<sup>2</sup> I argue that Davis's BAFTA speech, given before a British audience, showcases her awareness of the cultural contexts in which she is utilizing sentimentality and that the British audience's psychological distance influences the content of Davis's speech without lessening its affective power.

<sup>3</sup> The transcription was done based on modified Jeffersonian notation (Jefferson, 2004; see Appendix).

**OSCAR speech (2017)**

- 01 VD: Thank you to the Academy-(1.0) you know there is one place (1.0) that ↑all the  
 02 people with the greatest p<sup>hh</sup>otential (0.2) are gathered, (0.5) one place. (1.0)  
 03 And that's the ↓graveyard. (2.0) People ask me all the time (2.0) ↑what kind of  
 04 stories (0.5) do you wanna tell Viola? (1.0) And I say-exhume those b<sup>hh</sup>odies  
 05 (1.0) exhume those st<sup>hh</sup>ories. (1.0) The stories of the people who ↑dreamed  
 06 ↑big (1.0) >and never saw those dreams to ↑fruition<. (1.5) People who fell in  
 07 ↑love >and ↑lost< (2.0) I became an artist and thank G<sup>hh</sup>od I did (.) because we  
 08 are the o<sup>hh</sup>nly profession that >c<sup>hh</sup>elebrates what it m<sup>h</sup>eans to live a l<sup>hh</sup>ife<. (8.0)  
 09 A: ((applause))
- 10 VD: So here's to August Wilson (0.5) who ↑exhu:::m:ed (0.5) and ex<sup>hh</sup>alted >the  
 11 ordinary p<sup>h</sup>eople< (7.0)  
 12 A: (((clapping)))
- 13 VD: And to >Bron Pictures, Paramount, Macro< (0.5) >Todd Black, Molly Allen,  
 14 Scott Rudin< for being (1.0) the cheerleaders (.) for a movie that is about  
 15 ↓p<sup>h</sup>eople (0.8) and wor:ds (0.5) and >l<sup>hh</sup>ife, and forgiveness, and grace< (2.0)  
 16 A: ((clapping))
- 17 VD: and to (.) >Mykelti Williamson, Stephen McKinley Henderson, Russell  
 18 Hornsby, Jovan Adepo, Saniyya Sidney< (.) for being (1.0) the most wonderful  
 19 artists I've ever worked ↑with (1.0) and °oh captain, my captain, Denzel  
 Washington° (11.0)  
 20 A: ((applause))
- 21 VD: >thank you for pu'in< (1.0) t:wo entities in the driving seat (0.5) August and  
 22 Go:d (1.5) an' they served you well. (2.0) And to Dan (0.5) and Mae Alice  
 23 Davis who were the c-and are the centre of my universe (0.5) the people who  
 24 taught me >good and bad, how to f:ail, how to l<sup>h</sup>ove< (1.0) how to ↑hold an  
 25 award (0.5) how to ↑lo:se (0.5) my ↑parents (1.0) I'm so >th<sup>h</sup>ankful that God  
 26 °chose you°< (1.0) to bring me into this world (.) To my s<sup>h</sup>isters (.) >my sister  
 27 Dolores who's here who played Jaji and Jaja with me, we were rich white  
 28 women < in the tea party (.) [↑games (4.0)  
 29 A: (((laughter)))

30 VD: thank you for (.) the ↑imagination (1.0) And to my husband and my daughter  
31 (2.0) my heart (0.5) you and (.) Genesis, you teach me every day > how to live  
32 how to love< (0.5) I'm so:: glad that you are the foundation °of my life°. (1.0)  
33 Thank you to the Academy, thank you.

**BAFTA speech (2017)**

01 VD: Oh my God, thank you so much [(1.0) Ummm (6.0)  
02 A: [(applause  
03 VD: And to (.) all the other wonderful (0.5) nominees (.) >Naomie, Hayley< (.)  
04 Nicole (0.5) ughhh who am I forgetting-[°uh shit° I'm so sorry  
05 A: [(laughter  
06 VD: [ummmm (3.0) °and Michelle° (1.5)  
07 A: ((laughter))  
08 VD: Ummm (1.0) August Wilson. (1.5) Uhhh-you know, my father was-uh  
09 groomed horses (.) at the race track (.) and he had a fifth grade education  
10 ↑a:nd (0.5) he was a janitor (.) >towards the end of his life when he died of  
11 cancer at a McDonalds<. (2.0) And the reason why I say that is when he took  
12 his last breath (1.0) one of the most devastating things that went through my  
13 mind is (1.0) did his life matter? (2.0) And August (.) answers that question so  
14 brilliantly (0.5) because what he did is he (.) said (1.0) that our lives mattered  
15 as African Americans (.) the horse groomer, the sanitation worker, the people  
[who grew up under the heavy  
16 A [(clapping  
17 VD: [boot of Jim Crow (9.0)  
18 A: [(applause  
19 VD: the people who did not make it into history books but their-they have a story  
20 (0.5) and those stories deserve to be t<sup>hh</sup>old. (0.5) Because they l<sup>h</sup>ived. (1.0)  
21 Ohh-and ↑so (.) thank you August, thank you Denzel Washington (1.0)  
22 A: ((clapping)  
23 VD: [for::: (3.0)  
24 A: [(clapping))

25 VD: honouring actors >and not the sky, not the lead ‘cause sometimes, you know,  
 26 we are sacrificed for great cinematic< (0.5) vision, which is not bad-but it’s  
 27 nice to be the centre (.) and the focus as an actor. >And to Mykelti Williamson,  
 28 Stephen McKinley Henderson, Jovan Adepo and< (.) uh-Russell Hornsby,  
 29 Saniyya Sidney, all the wonderful, you know< (1.0) actors, and >Paramount,  
 30 Macro, Braun< (.) Scott Rudin:: (.) >M::olly Allen, Todd Black.< To my  
 31 beautiful husband (.) Julius, of 13 years and my daughter, Genesis (0.5) who  
 32 every time I tell her a story at night, she says the most important phrase (.)  
 33 which is, “Mommy, please put me in a story” (1.0) and I do. (0.5) Thank you.

#### 4.1. Interactional features

Davis structures each of her three speeches using a story as the opener. Each of the three speeches begins with a narrative which is then followed by the climax to which the audience then responds. As Mandelbaum points out, “storytelling recipients must monitor for the possible climax of the story so that they can produce a proper response. They draw on the story’s sequential context (that is, the character of preceding talk), its beginning or preface, and background material provided by the teller, as resources for ascertaining what event could constitute the climax of the story” (2013: 499). This construction of the speech events by Davis therefore grabs the audiences’ attention from the beginning, making them engaged in the story and in the speech.

At the beginning of her Emmy speech it seems like Davis is talking about the line that separates her and White women in a beautiful meadow full of flowers (1–4). She only reveals that it is actually a quote from Harriet Tubman in the 1800s in line 4 and that reveal serves as the first climax to the story to which the audience then reacts with a cheer (4–5). She further reiterates her message in lines 6–7 and 9, each line serving to further intensify the point made by the quote from Tubman, regarding the line separating Black women from White women. And each of those lines receives a considerable applause, with lines 6–7 receiving the biggest one. This would imply that this is the point of the story which the audience considers the most important part, the climax.

Davis follows a similar pattern at the beginning of her Oscar speech, where she starts by talking about a place where all people with the biggest potential are gathered (1–2), only to reveal in line 3 that that place is the graveyard. She

then semantically links the image of the graveyard with the figurative use of the verb ‘exhume’ (4–5) when she is inserting herself into the story and talks about exhuming people and stories. At this point there is yet no reaction from the audience. Davis then turns focus once again to her story and stories (5–6) in a frame within a frame move. The climax comes in lines 7–8 and is recognized by the audience’s significant, 8-second applause (8–9). The climax of the story is then reiterated (10–11) and, again, recognized with a significant, 7-second applause (11–12).

The very beginning of Davis’s BAFTA speech (1–8) is markedly different from the other two. She doesn’t open her Emmy speech with a thank you. In her Oscar speech, the expected “thank you to the Academy” line is there, but it is cut short and Davis proceeds to the story she wants to tell. In both of these speeches, this gives an impression of a sense of purpose and directness that Davis brings to her speeches from the very start. The BAFTA speech, on the other hand, begins with an exclamation (“Oh my god, thank you so much”), it is followed with quite a few hesitation devices (in lines 1, 4, and 8), and even an expletive and an apology (line 4), when Davis is struggling to name all of her fellow nominees. The audience offers reassurance in the form of laughter (7). The overall impression so far at that point is of less structure, a genuine surprise of a win, spontaneity. However, after that, Davis follows a similar structure as in her other two speeches, and proceeds with a narrative. She discloses a personal story of her father, and once again uses a frame within a frame, to talk about his story in her story (8–13). She then intensifies her point, collectivizing her and her father’s story, to a larger community, using collective pronoun ‘our’ when stating that “our lives as African Americans mattered” (14). This is the moment that the audience recognizes with clapping as the initial climax (16), which then culminates in a significant, 9-second applause when Davis mentions Jim Crow (16–18).

In all three speeches we can observe Davis consequently and consciously use the following elements of tonal semantics: elongated articulation, significant pauses, change of pace, deliberate stress and rhythm of speech, changes in pitch/intonation. Specifically, they are noticeable in lines 1–4, 6–7, 9, 16–17, 19–22 of the Emmy speech; lines 1–8, 10–11, 15, 21–25 of the Oscar speech, and lines 8–15, 20–23, 31–33 of the BAFTA speech. These elements do considerable interactional work. They indicate to the audience what is important in the telling, which are the key words in the telling, how they should react to the telling, where to pay special attention. They contribute to the engagement of the audience. It is also important here to take into account the

socio-historical context of Davis's speeches as communicative events informed by a specific oral tradition. Performance is an established tradition in African American culture which values verbal skills, especially those utilized in interactive and narrative contexts (Hecht et al. 2003). Interactional features such as tonal semantics and rhetorical devices such as historical contextualization and the use of storytelling, are features of African American oral tradition utilized to engage the audience so that they are affectively moved (Hecht et al. 2003). The performance and narrative aspects of African American oral tradition function as showcasing the oratory skills and assertiveness of the speaker. Assertiveness is understood here as a communication style that "stands up for and tries to achieve personal rights without damaging others" (Hecht et al. 2003: 158). On the interactional level already, the speeches showcase Davis's remarkable verbal and oratory skills. She has control over the structure of the event. She signals to the audience the important moments of the telling so they can react; she initiates their turns with her pauses, but also overlaps her telling with the audience's reactions: in lines 8–10, 15–16, 18–19 of the Emmy speech; she controls the pace. Her construction of these speech events signals a sense of purpose, directness, the importance she places on the verbal performance in these interactional contexts, and assertiveness.

#### 4.2. Discursive strategies

It is important here to consider the historical context of Davis's speech events. When Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar in 1940 for her role of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), she became the first person of colour in history to receive an Academy Award. In 2002, Halle Berry won a Best Actress Oscar, becoming the first (and to this date the only) Black woman to receive an Academy Award in this category. Their 'pioneering' wins held special cultural significance, and their award speeches were also given considerable attention. Both constitute a historical backdrop for contextualization of Davis's speeches. McDaniel emphasized how humbled she was by her win, hoping to be "a credit to her race and the motion picture industry". Wanzo considers McDaniel's speech as a negotiation of complex personhood, "in between worlds but desiring acceptance in both" (2006: 140) White and Black communities. In her speech, Berry emphasized the opportunity her win opened "for every nameless, faceless woman of colour" and evoked the names of Black actresses that came before her, as well as her fellow Black actresses, dedicating

her win to all of them. She spoke to the tradition of exclusion of Black actresses and limited opportunities the film industry offered them (Wanzo 2006). Both of their speeches can be perceived as examples of negotiations of personhood, representation of Black people, and self-definition as Black subjects within institutional contexts (Wanzo 2006: 149). We can trace elements evocative of these negotiations in Davis's speeches as well. Her Emmy speech thematically focuses on the lack of opportunity given to Black women, lack of roles and subsequent lack of accolades, as well as on encouragement and recognition of other Black actresses who worked to "get us over that line". Among the three analysed speeches, Davis's Emmy speech speaks most directly to the tradition of exclusion of Black actresses from the industry, present in Berry's speech as well. All three of Davis's speeches seem to have a complex set of intended recipients in mind. She speaks *both* to the White mainstream and her fellow African Americans. The sentimental conventions and other discursive strategies she uses in her speeches allow her to make rhetorical moves that negotiate her co-group membership in the two communities. This could be seen as somehow reminiscent of "the balancing act" of McDaniel's Oscar speech where she answered to both the demands of White audiences and the Black community (Wanzo 2006: 139). It is especially visible in Davis's Oscar and BAFTA speeches. Below I discuss a number of sentimental conventions paired with other discursive strategies Davis uses that contribute to her gaining affective power.

### ***Progress narratives***

The progress narrative is perhaps most explicitly realized by Davis in her Emmy speech, where she states that "the only thing that separates women of colour from anyone else is opportunity". This gives her significant applause. The statement taps into the American cultural narrative of upward mobility and creating opportunity, and encourages identification from everyone. It also invites the notion of putting the historical racialized injustices in the past and focusing on the notion that lack of opportunity is the *only* difference between Black women and the rest of the society. However, Davis flips this convention, because she makes the connection between present lack of opportunities separating women of colour, lack of roles that cannot result in awards, with the line that separated Harriet Tubman from White women in the 1800s. Therefore, she is historically contextualizing the present struggles of Black women, making relevant the past. Elements of the progress narrative are present also

later in the Emmy speech, when Davis is acknowledging her fellow Black actresses, thanking them for “taking us over that line”. This is evocative of the quote from Tubman who could not get over the line to reach the White women on the green field. The deliberate use of the plural (“Taraji P. Hensons, Kerry Washingtons...”) could suggest that Davis means to honour these and other Black women who have contributed to advancing Black women’s progress, signaling the importance of sisterhood and solidarity between Black women. Moreover, Davis elevating other Black actresses and their contributions to Black women’s collective progress can be seen as representing the dimensions of ethics of caring, and ethics of personal responsibility within Black feminist epistemology.

### ***Suffering hierarchies***

Most of the stories of contemporary Black women using sentimental conventions that Wanzo discusses privilege the therapeutic intimacy with powerful people and self-transformation as responses to failures of the law and structural injustices. Davis defies this expectation.

Overall, in the three speeches, Davis relies on the suffering hierarchies the most. Wanzo (2009) discusses how contemporary Black women must compete for public sympathy within this hierarchy both with White citizens and the sentimental legacy of African American historical suffering. Davis uses this convention in a subversive manner. For example, in her Oscar speech she demands that attention be given to ordinary people, who dreamed, lived, loved, failed, and lost, and who died not having realized their potential (“exhume those bodies, exhume those stories”). She names August Wilson as the one who “exhumed and exalted the ordinary people”. The audience reacts to that with significant applause.

Interestingly, in this speech, the value of ordinary people and August Wilson’s role as an artist in elevating their stories is supported by the generalization topos that invites identification from the wider audience. What is not being explicitly said is that Wilson wrote plays *specifically* about African Americans and their life struggles in the 20th century. I see this omission as subversion, even if of one sentimental convention for another. The competition for sympathy within suffering hierarchies is subverted here by what is perhaps the sole example of Davis’s use of homogenization of suffering, done for the sake of inviting identification.



Her Emmy speech relies most heavily on the suffering hierarchy, which is also used here in a subversive manner. Via a personal disclosure of the story of her father – a poor working class Black man who didn't have much of an education, worked multiple menial jobs and died an undignified death (“at a McDonalds”) – Davis prioritizes the suffering of ordinary working-class African Americans on the suffering hierarchy. She questions whether her father's life actually mattered and once again celebrates August Wilson as an artist who recognized the humanity and value of ordinary Black people (“the horse groomer, the sanitation worker”). In this speech, the “ordinary people” are explicitly specified to be African Americans under Jim Crow, in a historically contextualized frame. Moreover, Davis signals co-group membership with that marginalized group, using the collective “*our* lives mattered”.

One possible reason for this specific framing might be the fact that the British audiences' psychological distance allows Davis to be more direct, rely less on the generalization strategy, and more explicitly on prioritizing the suffering of African Americans. There is no risk, however theoretical, of antagonizing the audience whose sympathy Davis wants to gain with this sentimental story. It is not their historical context. I argue that Davis is just as deliberate in her language use in the BAFTA speech as she is in her Emmy and Oscar speeches, and that perhaps this slight yet significant change in the content of the BAFTA speech (compared to the Oscar speech), is indicative of Davis's awareness of the effects of her sentimental language use in different cultural contexts. The British audience is still affected and they do offer recognition, reacting to the mention of Jim Crow with significant applause. Of all three speeches, this speech best represents the dimension of Black feminist epistemology that values concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, intensifying the proximity between Davis herself and the African Americans whose struggle she is prioritizing in this speech. The ethics of caring is also present when Davis emphasizes the importance of the demand for representation of Black people in storytelling when she thanks her daughter (“mommy put me in a story”).

#### ***Alignment with more powerful people***

Davis aligns herself with more powerful people (predominantly White, male Hollywood) in her Emmy and Oscar speeches. In the Emmy speech, traces of the therapeutic sentimental convention can be seen when Davis celebrates the creators of *How To Get Away With Murder* who “redefined what it means to

be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be Black!”<sup>4</sup> That is to imply that significant change of the cultural image of Black women in the media has been possible thanks to the creators of the show. That sentiment receives applause from the audience. In her Oscar speech, the sentimental therapeutic alignment and intimacy is realized when Davis says she is thankful for having become an artist because artists are “the only profession that celebrates what it means to live a life”. She uses the collective “we” to emphasize her co-group membership in that special group. That line is also met with significant applause from the audience. The celebratory, uplifting function of artists as those who honour and elevate the marginalized voices and people (the stories and bodies on the graveyard that ought to be “exhumed” and “exalted”) is further reinforced by Davis referring to universal qualities and values of “people, words, life, forgiveness, grace” that *Fences* is about.

## 5. Conclusion

Lauren Berlant (1997; 2008) points to the affective turn in the American public as a problematic phenomenon under which tangible political action and dissent have been replaced by the craving of the affective experience. In other words, the affective power of moving and being moved (Bucholtz et al. 2018) seems to have become the goal in itself, rather than a legitimate tool of critiques of power structures and social injustices that brings actual institutional results. In the light of that, it would be difficult to ascertain and perhaps farfetched to decisively claim the degree to which Viola Davis’s speeches have been successful in spurring *real* political action and institutional change. That is perhaps a task for future research efforts. Wanzo herself admits that sentimentality “is a politically effective but insufficient means of political change” (2009: 9). Moreover, it could be concluded that Davis and her sentimental speeches are so revered in the mainstream American public *because* she mobilizes exactly the kind of affects that are treated as substitutes of political change, and which further encourage the individualist self-transformation mode endemic to the American culture (Wanzo 2009). Nevertheless, as I hope to have demonstrated in this article, Davis is an example of a Black woman who very skillfully utilizes sentimental conventions to generate affective power in the public speech

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<sup>4</sup> Among all the creators behind the show mentioned by Davis, Shonda Rhimes is the only Black person.

genre, and establishes herself as an assertive speaker. It is visible both on the interactional level of her speeches as interactions with the audiences, and on the discursive level. Additionally, Davis's speeches *are* designed to produce institutional effects. She speaks to the tradition of exclusion of Black actresses (Emmy speech) thus drawing attention to the need for an institutional change. She speaks to the tradition of negotiation of representation of Black people, both implicitly (Oscar speech) and explicitly (BAFTA speech), emphasizing the respect and recognition 'ordinary' people deserve. The rhetorical moves Davis makes in her speeches *are* designed to 'move' a populace (Bucholtz et al. 2018). This movement can be located precisely in the affect her speeches mobilize. It would be difficult to decisively claim that Davis's speeches have indeed produced *tangible* institutional effects, but taking into account the fact that what started as a Twitter hashtag has had real institutional consequences within the industry itself,<sup>5</sup> Davis's speeches could be considered as contributing to producing these effects.

As Rebecca Wanzo emphasizes, African American women's subversion of the status quo in the public contexts has entailed "an assertive utilization of historical sentimental narratives about suffering in the United States. It requires producing a story about uplift and transformation, negotiating the history of representations of proper victims and Black suffering" (2009: 5). Viola Davis does so very consciously. Although we can see their traces in her speeches, Davis does not seem to rely predominantly on the strategies of homogenization of suffering, and therapeutic intimacy as self-transformation, so prioritized in many popular sentimental narratives of Black women's struggle. When she does align herself with more powerful people (predominantly White male Hollywood) it is to signal co-group membership with artists and invite identification, creating an intimate public (Berlant 2008) for her affective speeches. Overall, in her speeches Davis utilizes the sentimental hierarchy of suffering most prominently. While she does not discuss suffering as such, Davis creatively uses the suffering hierarchies to underscore a connection between African Americans' historical struggles and present negotiations of agency and recognition in the public. Within this sentimental convention, she uses the strategy of historical contextualization to connect the past stories of

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<sup>5</sup> #OscarsSoWhite solidified as a social campaign for inclusion following 2016 Oscar nominations when, for the second year in a row, all 20 nominees in the acting categories were White. The same year the Academy announced a membership initiative A2020, aiming to double the numbers of women and ethnic minorities among the members in four years.

African American struggle with the present. She also uses historical contextualization to creatively flip the sentimental progress narrative. Davis does substantive discursive and interactional work, drawing on her own experience, her cultural background. Moreover, in Davis's speeches, we can trace the elements of the core dimensions of Black feminist epistemology: ethics of caring and ethics of personal accountability, and concrete experience as a criterion of meaning.

Wanzo's discussion of sentimental political storytelling exposes that allegedly "only those Black women who conform to the dictates of White heteronormativity – often fair-skinned, pious, pretty, respectable, and who politically embark upon a trajectory of personal introspection and change, rather than social critique – are worthy of (...) public sympathy" (Isoke 2013: 218). Viola Davis seems to defy also this conformity. She is a dark-skinned, middle-aged Black woman, who, arguably, has received mainstream recognition when she was well in her forties. She is vocal about having grown up in poverty, about issues of discrimination against women of colour when it comes to film offers and equal pay, perception of them as unattractive, unworthy of attention – all of which has been her experience. We can trace the elements of those critiques in her speeches.

All of that is in itself already subversive and potentially challenging the status quo, given the context of both sentimentality and affect being historically unavailable to African American women as active agents/subjects in the public sphere. As Wanzo (2009) points out, it is extremely difficult for Black women and their struggles to garner sympathy in the mainstream American media and society today. Through her skillful use of sentimental conventions, Davis manages to both mobilize sympathy of mainstream (White) public *and* narrativize the contemporary struggles specific to African American people, honouring them and elevating their humanity. She speaks *both* to the White establishment and other African Americans. I argue that sentimentality allows her to make both groups feel included, while at the same time being a critique of the former and the demand for recognition of the latter. Paired with other rhetorical moves she makes, sentimental conventions allow Davis to negotiate self-membership in these groups and navigate between designed addressees of her speeches, resulting in a complex set of recipients.

Having in mind the inherently political quality of affect as acting upon the world and engaging with power in socially consequential ways (Bucholtz et al. 2018), Viola Davis's award speeches are illuminating examples of different ways in which Black women may use sentimentality to generate affective

power. Given the problematic potential of affect to produce affective personas (Ramos-Zayas 2011) under the paradigm of racialization of nonWhite subjects, the ways in which African American women can successfully gain affective agency and negotiate self-definition in interactional public contexts should continue to be of significant social interest. Sentimentality proves to be one such potent discursive practice.

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**Appendix: Transcription conventions (after Jefferson 2004)**

|                    |  |
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| [                  | Single left bracket indicates overlapping utterances, including those which start simultaneously.                                  |
| (1.0)              | A number in parenthesis indicates the time, in seconds, of a gap in speech.  |
| (.)                | A ‘micropause’, i.e. a pause of less than one tenth of a second is indicated by a dot in parenthesis.                              |
| (( ))              | Double parentheses indicate a nonverbal activity, e.g. laughter, related to the talk.  |
| ↓                  | Downward arrow indicates falling pitch or intonation.  |
| ↑                  | Upward arrow indicates rising pitch or intonation.   |
| m <sup>h</sup> :nd | Breathiness.   |
| mi:nd              | Colon(s) indicate(s) that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching. |
| <u>mind</u>        | Underlined words/sounds are emphasized and typically louder.   |
| °mind°             | Degree signs indicate that the material between them is quieter than the surrounding talk.   |
| >mind<             | Inward arrows indicate faster speech.  |