BTRG Mini-Lecture: Visibility and Black Feminism in Media Studies

Hi everyone! I'm Aiswarya, and I study and teach at The University of Edinburgh. Today, I'm going to introduce the concept of 'visibility' through Black feminist perspectives.

So, here's a few sentences you've heard before. "Representation matters. Recognition is important. *We need more visibility*." People often mean this when it comes to a minority group's visibility in education, or politics, or health. But media visibility has also been part of the struggle.

As an example, let's look at Uhura from the 1960s sci-fi series, *Star Trek*, who was played by the late Nichelle Nichols. Uhura is a smart, outgoing Black female character, and her existence on primetime American TV countered decades of racist caricatures of Black women. Martin Luther King Jr. once referred to her as one of the first non-stereotypical roles of a Black woman. She's remembered for all this even today.

This kind of *positive* Black female visibility is clearly important, and a lot has already been said about why that's the case. In this lecture, though, we're going to join a group of Black feminist thinkers to open up the very *politics* of 'visibility' -- of seeing and being seen.

We'll ask two questions: First, 'Black visibility matters, but how?' And second, 'Black visibility matters, but to whom?"

Well, instead of 'how?', we might actually first ask, "Black visibility matters, but *since when*?" We can trace one answer back to the colonial era: those fifteenth-century 'encounters' between Africans and Europeans. Many of these European settlers wrote about their experiences of looking at people they had never seen before. But looking is never neutral. Who gets to look, and who's forced to be looked at?

Discussing Black women in particular, Patricia Hill Collins writes that "Through *colonial eyes*, the stigma of biological Blackness and the *seeming* primitiveness of African cultures *marked* the borders of *extreme abnormality*… "

Now, let's break that down. Through the colonial gaze, Black women in particular were seen as 'primitive' and 'abnormal' because, apparently, their bodies and attitudes differed from the *ideal white* woman, such as her average body proportions or 'passive' temperament. White colonialists were morbidly fascinated by this. They were eager to learn more, in part to continue using this 'abnormality' as an excuse to justify sexual and psychic violence *against* Black women. Forcing Black women to be looked at, and recording differences through photography, was one way to do this.

Of course, the more they learned, the more they wanted to keep Black women in check. This became especially true during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Here, Black women were viewed both as 'valuable property' and as potential criminals. A simple example is how eighteenth-century New York cops forced enslaved Africans to carry lit candles after dark, because they were always ever seen as potentially dangerous escapees.

This is why Simone Browne argues that slavery kickstarted surveillance culture in the U.S. She points out that things haven't actually 'changed', but have just caught up to modern-day technology like CCTVs. Browne tells us how Black women are *9 times* more likely than white women to be 'randomly' x-rayed at airport security in the U.S.

But why? Well, society still sees Black women as 'abnormal', criminal threats to be subdued. But now it's not because of the fear that a Black woman will escape enslavement, but because of stubborn stereotypes that remain: what Collins has called the 'controlling images'

of Black womanhood. These images include the sexually aggressive ‘Jezebel’, or the ‘welfare queen’ with ‘too many’ children.

These images circulated heavily in our media in the twentieth century and earlier, and that’s what Uhura was going up against. But you can also see these images around today, especially in the way Black women are discussed on social media and on many U.S. news networks.

Such ‘controlling images’ blame Black women for their historical and continued vulnerability in white America and they absolve the racist state of any responsibility. It’s back to those early white colonisers using Black women’s ‘abnormality’ as an excuse for their violence.

So, maybe one solution is more Uhuras: fewer negative controlling images, and more positive ones. But it looks like even going in the opposite direction, such as with the positive image of Strong Black Women, doesn’t seem to really help.

Melissa Harris-Perry’s theory of the ‘crooked room’ suggests that *all* images of Black women, positive *and* negative, inevitably just create this cultural burden on Black women that is difficult to escape. An everyday example is the character of the Black best friend – not unlike Uhura, really.

She is funny, often ‘sassy’, and ever-helpful, but tends to disappear once she’s of no real use to the white protagonist. Faced with even these ‘positive images’ of Black womanhood, it can be difficult to seek more ‘authentic’, liberated lives outside of a white establishment, outside of the ‘colonial eyes’, outside of the ‘crooked room’.

I think Michele Wallace said it best. The so-called positive image of the ‘strong Black woman’ can force real Black women to become more of a silent abstraction than a human being, “floating above our heads like one of the cartoon characters in Macy's Christmas Parade, a form larger than life, and yet a deformation powerless to speak.”

In recent times, Black women who are trans* have especially been facing the pitfalls of ‘positive visibility’, where they’ve become ‘larger than life’ yet ‘powerless to speak’, as Wallace puts it.

Popular shows like *Orange is the New Black* have been praised for ‘introducing’ Black trans* femininity to the American mainstream. Some years ago, even, Time Magazine featured the fantastic Black trans* actress Laverne Cox on its cover.

But state legislation that hurts Black trans* womanhood continues to pass in the U.S, and every day violence has only risen – sometimes even *because* this shiny new visibility paints bigger and bigger targets on the backs of everyday Black trans* women.

So, the cruel paradox of ‘good’ visibility is that it’s more frosting than cake. It sometimes offers the illusion of progress without guaranteeing better life chances for *all* Black women.

At this point, it’s easy to become pessimistic about that second question I posed at the start, i.e., “Black visibility or Black representation matters, but to whom?” But it does absolutely matter – to *all* of us. As Tourmaline and others have put it, “if we do not attend to representation, and work collectively to bring *new* visual grammars into existence, then we will remain caught in the traps of the past.”

I think that the TV sitcom *Abbott Elementary* is a piece of media that tries to create these new visual grammars, that is, new ways of seeing and being seen. Here, a fake camera crew follows a team of Black women teachers, their colleagues, and students hilariously

trying to make it work in an under-funded, predominantly Black public school. Part of the 'joke', I think, is that the students of many such American schools have long grown up under constant visual surveillance, such as through CCTVs. As we saw in the work of Simone Browne, this link between Blackness, visibility, and keeping check on criminality has been around for a long time.

But the show's *mockumentary* format offers a glimpse of a different reality: where visibility works *with* Black life, not against it. Characters like Janine have a relationship, almost a kind of sisterhood, with the camera. She and others confide in the fake cameras, lie to them, and joke around with them. These Black women look into the cameras themselves, reclaiming the right to gaze *back*. You could even go so far as to say that this hints at a kind of radical 'oppositional gaze', an anti-racist gaze, in the words of bell hooks.

It's also like the show is saying: America has been keeping watch on Black women for centuries, with brutal consequences, so we may as well have some fun with it this time.

I'll end this lecture here by inviting you to think about a piece of media that you've enjoyed recently, about or by Black women. I'd like you to really reflect on its visual grammars, i.e., not just thinking about visibility in terms of 'good' or 'bad', but the work's *relationship* with visibility: with seeing, being seen, and maybe even going unseen.

Before you do, here's a list of the resources I used to put this lecture together, and which might be useful to you.

Finally of course, thank you very much for watching this lecture on media, visibility politics, and Black feminist theory!