

# Representation of African American Women on Television

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**Budačić, Valentina**

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Representation of African American Women on Television:

The (De)Construction of Stereotypes about Black Women

(Smjer: književnost i kultura – amerikanistika)

Student: Valentina Budačić

Mentor: prof. dr. sc. Jelena Šesnić

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Black characters on television have been riddled by stereotyping for years. Starting from the very beginnings of American cinema, the portrayals of African Americans have not always been the kindest. Black women especially have been targeted by a myriad of stereotypes that have evolved over centuries of oppression, surviving slavery, the Jim Crow era and settling neatly into modern-day life. These stereotypes have been repurposed so many times that they have become not only an integral part of the early depictions of black<sup>1</sup> women in television and film, but have also become so ingrained in American culture that their power is felt to this day. Some of the stereotypes mentioned in this paper are that of the Mammy, the Strong Black Woman, the Jezebel, the Sapphire, the Angry Black Woman and the Tragic Mulatta. The main thesis of this paper deals with the way in which the hit show *Scandal* took on the stereotypes black women are faced with and has deconstructed them in such a way that they work for, instead of against its main character, Olivia Pope.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section introduces the history of blackness on U.S. television and where the show *Scandal* fits into this mosaic. Leaning on the works of Steinbugler and Shuman and Cording, the second section will explore the emotional labor that goes into interracial relationships, while establishing a parallel between the characters from *Scandal* and the real-life example of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson and how this stereotype affects the *Scandal* characters. The third section deals with the aforementioned stereotypes that affect black women – and in what way the main character of the show, Olivia, embodies, or as the case may be, very often deconstructs them.

This paper will try to provide an insight into the present struggle of depicting black women in a way that isn't riddled by stereotypes by offering an example of a black female character on television that defies the traditions U.S. television has imposed on black women. While the stereotypes are present, what makes *Scandal* unique is the way in which the main character is able to subvert them into whatever works for her best, offering a fresh representation of a modern-day black woman.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will use lower case letters for the purposes of stating a person's skin color. A case could be made to capitalize both black and white, as Amy Steinbugler does in her book *Beyond Loving*. There are also a number of articles that strongly object to the lower case black, like the *New York Times* article: [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html?_r=0). There are, however, also articles that support the lower case in both black and white, including most of the journalistic community so to keep in line with the preferred trend, I will stick to the traditional lower case of both black and white, as is discussed in the following article: [https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language\\_corner\\_1.php](https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php).

## 2. THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF TELEVISION

Blackness has almost become a staple on U.S. television. The amount of shows featuring black characters, be it protagonists or just secondary characters, shows a slow but steady change of trends on US television. Shows like Donald Glover's *Atlanta*, Netflix's *Dear White People*, or even comedies ranging from Kenya Barris' ABC hit *Black-ish* to its two spinoffs *Grown-ish* and newly released *Mixed-ish* are just some that come to mind. That wasn't always the case. Back in 1999 NAACP raised concerns about the lack of black-led shows in the upcoming lineup of the four big networks – NBC, CBS, ABC and Fox. None of the 26 new prime-time programs that were announced that year had a single black lead character (Fuller 285). It seemed television was exclusively for whites. Where blacks did come to prominence, however, was cable television – an avenue that perhaps wasn't as trodden as that of the other big four networks, but one that was willing to take a risk.

But what even constitutes a risk in this scenario? Well, it seems that 20 years ago having black characters lead an ensemble and have a prime-time slot was somewhat of a myth. For the big networks, “minority-led shows [just don't] draw enough viewers” (Fuller 286). So the next best course of action was to move to cable. Cable was somewhat of a trailblazer, taking on the risk factor of showing black content. The programs that were produced were labeled “quality” – as opposed to soapy shows, reality television or even just plain old comedies, cable television produced content that included high-profile actors, had high production values and Emmy-worthy programming (Fuller 287). And the risk paid off.

The viewership they generated was bigger than before. But the most interesting tidbit was the following: it not only included its (from the outside perspective) intended audience – blacks; it was also alluring to the hungry masses of white upscale viewers, always on the lookout for more “quality” content. Blackness became a brand and whites were buying it in masses (Fuller 286). But it would be foolish to assume whites weren't from the get-go the intended audience. According to Fuller, blackness was used as a marketing strategy to brand something as “cool” or “edgy” (296). Even today we see white people trying to emulate parts of black culture – and most of the time quite unsuccessfully (rap for example, being one of the domains where blacks will seemingly always have the upper hand, is marked by the likes such as Tupac, 50 Cent or Jay-Z; apart from Eminem, there haven't really been any prominent white rappers, even though many have tried). Cable television offered a wide variety of shows, and one that spoke to both black and white audiences was the 2003 hit

*Chappelle's Show*. Race was front and center in this sketch show. Chappelle played around with presenting sensitive topics in a comedic way, catering to both blacks and whites (something we see today in the examples of ABC's *Black-ish* and *Grown-ish* as well). According to Fuller, "the show drew white viewers even as it critiqued white supremacy" (298). There was an underlying feeling that if you watched this show, you yourself weren't racist. Because how could you be? If you watch progressive shows like that, that are produced by trailblazing cable companies, you yourself had to have been progressive and non-racist (Fuller 300).

As simple as that sounds, the human psyche is more complicated than that. A study indicated that "viewers may use media representations of race as an opportunity for outgroup affiliation" (Coover 428). What this means is that it may be possible that white viewers are more likely to like black characters and by extension black content, "not in spite of their race, but because of it" (Coover 414) – simply for the reason that they don't want to appear racist themselves. It's a phenomenon called "enlightened" or "aversive" racism, and it seems to be the case with *Chappelle's Show* as well, or for that matter, cable broadcasting of black content in general back in the day.

Another study raised the question of aversive racism in connection to viewers' perceptions and recall of occupational characters on television. The participants, who were either whites or blacks, were shown one of two videos of five different occupational roles. They were either presented with one showing only white characters or the other showing only black characters. The results of the study were twofold. One was that blacks had better recall of black characters in comparison to white characters, whereas there was no significant difference in whites' recall of black vs. white characters. The second was that both black and white viewers had a more favorable perception of black characters in comparison to their white counterparts. According to Appiah, the head of the study, participants might have practiced aversive racism in that instance since "rating five black characters in a research context may bring racial issues to mind and stimulate participants to make assumptions about the way in which their responses may be interpreted" (790). In order not to seem racist, white participants might have rated black characters more favorably.

Given the complex and oftentimes racially charged history of black television, one has to wonder where this leaves modern-day productions. Netflix hits like *Dear White People* and *When They See Us*, network darlings like *Black-ish* and *Empire*, and quirky niche shows, like

*Insecure* or *Pose*, that have proven to be just as competitive as the network megahits, all make the television landscape more diverse than ever. They are all a product of the aforementioned shows that have shaped the TV landscape and have made the emergence of these new productions possible. These new shows, however, are allowed more leverage in terms of the material they deal with and the cast they hire than their predecessors because the landscape we move in nowadays has changed. It is no longer acceptable to audiences that shows gloss over real issues. Being “woke” (a term used nowadays to describe somebody who is aware of social and racial injustices), as in the show *Dear White People*, and current is almost like a requirement. People within the industry even demand more diversity (what with the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite from a couple of years ago and similar instances of the acting community standing up), every topic has become political, and every appointment is scrutinized. So when Shonda Rhimes introduced a show in 2012 about an African American Washington fixer, hired Kerry Washington in the lead role, and thus brought forth the first network drama show in almost 40 years with an African American woman in the lead role, both black and white audiences were enthralled.

## 2.1. WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT *SCANDAL*?

The clothes, the fast-paced monologues, the power walk down the White House corridors – these are the associations audiences have when they think of *Scandal*. A fervent fanbase that would monopolize Twitter every Thursday, making it Scandal Thursday and engaging even the likes of Oprah in watching the show, made *Scandal* one of the most popular shows on television back in 2012 when it premiered on ABC. *Scandal* tells the story of Washington fixer Olivia Pope, a successful, ambitious, smart African American woman who just so happens to have a love affair with the President of the United States (*Scandal* was never shy of embracing its own soapiness). Olivia has her own firm where she assembled a ragtag team of professional killers, lawyers and activists that would help her solve any and all scandals that the Washington elite might have. Throughout its seven-season run, Olivia’s character became more sinister as she became more power hungry and ambitious. During those seven seasons, she managed to team up with her President/lover’s ex-wife and got her elected as President. She became the most powerful woman in Washington. She was also responsible for several deaths making audiences question her integrity. But she was also unapologetically herself. *Scandal* came on air in a time when America had its first black President. The First Lady was an educated, sophisticated African American woman. It seemed audiences were ready to embrace a different kind of representation on television than

what they'd been offered previously. Although the show seemed to be popular among black audiences quite a lot, the showrunners were very eager to point out that the audience spanned over all races, genders and ages (Vega, *A Show Makes Friends and History*). And indeed, *Scandal* in general always seemed to steer away from direct confrontations with race issues. On one hand, the show very clearly has a black woman in the lead, so in a way, it can't escape the race conversation altogether. On the other hand though, it very rarely directly confronts racial issues (there are several episodes that stand out, but they are few and far between) and viewers, whether they are black or white, are happy to enjoy the show for what it is – "It's about seeing the show where black women and other women are represented less about race and more about who they are" (Vega, *A Show Makes Friends and History*). However, to presume that *Scandal*'s success doesn't at least to some extent ride on the fact that it has a strong black lead would be a detriment to its own merits.

The popularity and ultimately the cultural importance of *Scandal* can be traced back to this very reason. As mentioned previously, it is the first network drama show in 40 years with an African American woman in the lead role. The character of Olivia Pope is based on real life Washington figure Judy Smith, who was the first African American female assistant U.S. attorney and a deputy press secretary (Dreher 390). Dreher goes on to stress the societal shift in the way black women in power are perceived, with the examples of Condoleezza Rice and Michelle Obama, to name a few, emphasizing a new "sense of comfort and ease with black women in visual culture" (391). Olivia Pope, according to that logic, would therefore be well received. Here is a woman in power, firmly seated at the table with the white men who run the country, and she is running circles around them. Olivia Pope's outspokenness, ambition and work ethic, but also her moral shortcomings at times give her something that many black female characters seemed to lack in the past – believability and a sense of realness. This realness comes at a price, though. While trying to construct a real, fully fleshed out character, it seems that due to America's history with race it is at times hard to avoid certain stereotypes that have long been associated with black women. The following two chapters will therefore explore how a revisionist work such as *Scandal* balances the realness of its depiction of black women with the historical and societal implications of how black women had been represented thus far.



### 3. DEBUNKING THE SALLY HEMINGS STEREOTYPE

One aspect about Olivia's life that is central to understanding her character and which makes her "real" to audiences everywhere is her relationship with Fitz. Fitz, or Fitzgerald Grant III, is the President of the United States. He fits the mold of almost every real-life American president – white, male, rich, and stemming from a powerful family. Olivia and Fitz's relationship began as an affair when she started working for his presidential campaign. During the course of the show we see the relationship unravel, come back together and unravel again. The ups and downs of their relationship showcase integral issues interracial couples face in real life as well, only in this case they're magnified due to their high-ranking positions. What they as a couple do, the conscious and subconscious analysis of their relationship and their roles within it, constitutes as emotional labor. According to Steinbugler, emotional labor manifests itself in the "numerous ways in which interracial partners negotiate differences in racial habitus" (84). That includes "adjust[ing] behaviors, conceal[ing] emotions, translat[ing] racial perspectives, decid[ing] whether and how to discuss racial matters, critically examin[ing] their own racial status, and attempt[ing] to understand their partner's racial disposition" (Steinbugler 84). Oftentimes, though, one or both partners are guilty of color-blindism without even knowing it. According to Pryor, "most white Americans and even some black Americans claim color-blind ideology, believing that the U.S. is a "post-racial" society where race is no longer a significant obstacle to social, political, and economic opportunities" (95). Oftentimes partners will revert to this easy fallback which helps them minimize the impact of race on the relationship. Through the lens of racework as emotional labor and color-blindism as the reoccurring fallback for dealing with an interracial relationship, the following chapter will try to dissect their relationship in such a way as to offer insight into the complexities and the work that goes into an interracial relationship, along with the pitfalls that come along with that, mainly falling, as an interracial couple, into a specific stereotype. But to understand what these issues entail, what emotional labor involves, and how this stereotype operates, first we must examine the historical context of interraciality in America.

#### 3.1. AMERICA'S HISTORY WITH INTERRACIALITY

Black and white interpersonal encounters are no modern invention. America has a long and problematic relationship with interraciality, fraught by tension, fear and prejudice, and it goes all the way back to the centuries of slavery. According to Steinbugler, due to the

racial hierarchies that were set in place during that time, when we talk about interracial relationships in the era of slavery, we mostly talk about rape or sexual exploitation (1). Black women in particular were on the receiving end, with white men being the main perpetrators. Owning slaves meant wielding power, and the more slaves one had, the more powerful they were. There was little regard for the black female body and one way of securing the increase of labor force was to impregnate slaves. Thus, black female slaves were not only exploited in the fields, but also in the bed (Steinbugler 3). The silence of the crime was deafening though. Nobody talked about it – the female slave couldn't say a word, otherwise she'd be whipped, or worse. The family of the perpetrator wouldn't say anything to protect their reputation. And society wouldn't talk about it to protect the hierarchy that was already put in place – the dominion of the white patriarchy (Steinbugler 3). But the proof was right there in front of everyone, screaming in their faces. During this time certain stereotypes were born. In order to justify the rape of African American women, “they were castigated as loose, hypersexual, and animalistic” (Steinbugler 3). Stereotypes such as the Jezebel or even the Mammy were created to further demean black women and protect white men.

After slavery was abolished, a new form of racism was born – it was the era of the Jim Crow laws. Although blacks had gained their freedom, in many ways they remained subordinated to the law of the majority – the whites. While certain freedoms existed, the right to marry a person of color was still one that wasn't attained. With the advent of the miscegenation laws in 1883, it became even more frowned upon to enter into any kind of interracial relationship. In the South, the Ku Klux Klan made life intolerable for blacks. Threats, lynching and violence were constant so contact between whites and blacks wasn't as frequent (Steinbugler 4). In the North, however, a more lenient approach to black and white contact was established. The Harlem Renaissance between 1920 and 1935 marks a time when congruence between blacks and whites stood in stark contrast to the racial developments in the South (Steinbugler 4). Harlem was a sort of hub for playing out any and all sexual phantasies one might have had. For many Whites that meant taking advantage yet again of black bodies. It was like a game for them, “at once forbidden and lurid” (Steinbugler 5). For whites, these transgressions – venturing into neighborhoods they don't normally go to and engaging in sexual activities with people they aren't allowed to engage with – signify a “desire to consume racial difference” (Steinbugler 5). What was fear in the South, turned into eroticization in the North, but it was all part of the same coin – the same belief that “Blacks were intrinsically different from Whites” (Steinbugler 6).

A turning point for interracial relationships, and indeed for perhaps the whole American society, was the Supreme Court's 1967 ruling in the case *Loving v. Virginia*. The Lovings made possible the desegregation of a fundamental institution – marriage. According to Steinbugler, in 1965, “72 percent of Southern Whites and 42 percent of Non-Southern Whites told Gallup pollsters that they agreed with laws forbidding intermarriage” (11). Three years after the Supreme Court ruling, the numbers dropped to 56% of Southern whites and 30% of Non-Southern whites who were in favor of these laws (Steinbugler 11). This does not, however, mark a radical change in opinion. Interraciality continued to be a point of contention not only amongst whites but blacks as well. With the rise of black nationalism in the 1970s, “for some, interracial intimacy amounted to an attempt to reject Black culture and assimilate into Whiteness” (Steinbugler 11). Given the advancements in racial relations nowadays, the number of people not approving is still staggering. In 2013, “96 percent of Blacks and 84 percent of whites reported approval of Black-white marriages, which all seems nice and good” (Pryor 94). However, when one starts to scratch the surface further, the numbers drop lower and faster than initially anticipated. When asked if they would support the union of a close family member to whites, 53.7% of blacks stated a positive answer, while only 26.3% of whites would approve of a family member marrying someone who is black (Pryor 94).

### 3.2. FROM SALLY HEMINGS AND THOMAS JEFFERSON TO OLIVIA AND FITZ

As dismal as these numbers are, there are, however, examples from history that went against the social norms of the day, even if they were done in secret. The story of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson draws uncanny parallels to Olivia and Fitz's relationship. It is unclear how much of that story influenced *Scandal* creator Shonda Rhimes in her depiction of the central love story we see on our small screens. It is, however, worth exploring.

First and foremost, it is important to note one thing – Jefferson was a slaveholder. That fact very often escapes the collective memory of most Americans and gets glossed over in favor of his other achievements that have made him one of the most celebrated American presidents and statesmen. According to Shuman and Corning, it took several entries in the *Columbia Encyclopedia* to even mention his relationship to slavery, and more specifically to his slaves (135). Yet the truth of the matter is that for most of his life, Jefferson held slaves, and one slave in particular stands out – Sally Hemings. Hemings was considerably younger than Jefferson when she became his concubine, with some sources claiming he was the father

of her children (Shuman and Cording 134). 1802 is the year most historians agree the relationship became public knowledge (Shuman and Cording 134), exploding “on the national scene during the early part of Jefferson’s first term as president” (Dreher 391). The true nature of the relationship will perhaps never be known, as there is no written evidence by either Jefferson or Hemings of this affair (Shuman and Cording 136), but what is known to the public is that Hemings stayed with him until his death. Her descendants are directly linked to Jefferson, and with modern-day scientific advancements a centuries long contested relationship had finally been proven – though there are still some detractors (Shuman and Cording 137).

Where does this leave Fitz? He obviously isn’t a slaveholder but there are other points where these two men seem to share a lot in common. Both men stem from a line of well-off families (though Jefferson did inherit a lot of debt upon his father-in-law’s death, according to the official Thomas Jefferson Foundation) – Thomas Jefferson inherited a large estate with slaves, while a character on *Scandal* references Fitz’s upbringing as coming out of a “boarding school assembly line” (S02E11)<sup>2</sup>. Both climbed to the very top of American politics, holding positions of the utmost power while also enjoying great popularity. They are also both white. It seems redundant to say that but given the structures of power both in Jefferson’s day and nowadays, a person’s whiteness is still the golden ticket into the Oval Office. Furthermore, they both share core democratic values. The *Columbia Encyclopedia* references Jefferson’s belief in “individual liberty”, his democratic views and “his actions to prevent the continuance of an aristocracy of wealth and birth” (Shuman and Corning 135). Fitz’s whole shtick is fighting for the American people. In a flashback to the presidential campaign, Cyrus Bean describes him as “the real deal, a patriot, a believer” (S02E11) and Hollis Doyle, who will later be seen running for president himself and whom many have called the *Scandal* version of Donald Trump, chimes in with “How rare is that? How often does that come about?” (S02E11) with another campaign aide saying “Once in a generation, if you’re lucky” (S02E11), enforcing the belief that men like Fitz belong to the great men of the past, such as Jefferson.

Now let’s examine the parallels between Olivia Pope and Sally Hemings. Both Olivia and Sally are black women. What sets them apart is some 200 years’ worth of fighting for racial equality. Sally was Jefferson’s deceased wife’s half-sister and while she was alive,

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<sup>2</sup> The following chapters will employ the method of citation used above. S signifies the season, while E represents the episode in question.

belonged to her. It is believed that they started their relationship when she was only 14, after having arrived in France where Jefferson was appointed the United States Minister to France. She remained his slave to the end of his days. How consensual that relationship was is hard to say given the fact that Jefferson was Sally's master and she had little to no free will to express her consent. It is, however, often depicted in movies and television as a love story (Shuman and Corning 136). Olivia and Fitz's relationship on the other hand is most certainly consensual. Yet one cannot escape the power dynamics that have colored not only Sally and Jefferson's relationship, but Olivia and Fitz's too. As is the case with Jefferson, Fitz is the President of the United States. Olivia, even though she is obviously not as subjugated as Sally, still holds a subordinate position in his administration. The constant power struggle is showcased in the following scene:

FITZ: Look I know this is difficult.

OLIVIA: Difficult? Are you...? Somehow, I've become this person who – I have no words.

FITZ: We are together. That's all that matters.

OLIVIA: Really? Because I'm feeling a little, I don't know, Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson about all this. I have to go. (S02E08)

This altercation comes on the heels of their visit to Camp David where Olivia realizes Mellie, Fitz's wife, will always be there, always part of the equation. She is entangled with a married man, the President no less, and feels like she is always at his beck and call, much like Sally, a slave, would have been to Jefferson, her master. Olivia employs here emotional labor, to make sense of her relationship to Fitz and her role in that relationship. Her realization is that she is in a subordinate position to Fitz and the irony of the Hemings/Jefferson stereotype doesn't escape her. This argument goes further and escalates by the end of the episode.

OLIVIA: Did you need something?

FITZ: The Sally Hemings-Thomas Jefferson comment was below the belt.

OLIVIA: Because it's so untrue?

FITZ: You're playing the race card on the fact that I'm in love with you? Come on. Don't belittle us. It's insulting and beneath you and designed to drive me away. I'm not going away.

OLIVIA: I don't have to drive you away. You're married, you have children, you're the leader of the free world. You are away. By definition, you're away. You're unavailable.

FITZ: So this is about Mellie?

OLIVIA: N-no! This is – I smile at her and I take off my clothes for you. I wait for you. I watch for you. My whole life is you. I can't breathe because I'm waiting for you. You own me. You control me. I-I belong to you. I- (S02E08)

Apart from the fact that he is a married man, what bothers Olivia the most is the fact that she feels she belongs to someone. She dedicated so much of herself to Fitz and his campaign and presidency that, in a way, her intellectual powers are appropriated by him. On top of that she is also his mistress, so that her body belongs to him as well. Fitz, on the other hand, counters with a scoff that she can't use the "race card" on him loving her. In a sense, this might be a parallel to Sally and Jefferson. It invokes the imagery of slave and master even though we're in present-day America. The fact that she uses words like "control", "belong" and "own" is very indicative of the type of relationship she has in mind, hence her Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson comment. The kind of emotional labor she infuses in this conversation goes over Fitz's head, which marks a recurrent issue within interracial relationships, where one partner is more aware of race as a factor playing a role in a relationship than the other (Steinbugler 32). Fitz's response marks, in his eyes, a definitive difference between his and Olivia's relationship and Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson's.

FITZ: You own me! You control me. I belong to you. You think I don't want to be a better man? You think that I don't want to dedicate myself to my marriage? You don't think I want to be honorable, to be the man that you voted for? I love you. I'm in love with you. You're the love of my life. My every feeling is controlled by the look on your face. I can't breathe without you. I can't sleep without you. I wait for you. I watch for you. I exist for you. If I could escape all of this and run away with you... There's no Sally or Thomas here. You're nobody's victim, Liv. I belong to you. (S02E08)

Fitz uses the same phrases Olivia has used and just flips them. He is the one who belongs to her, she owns him. Olivia, desperate not to fall into the Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson trope, tries to explain to Fitz the reality of being an African American woman in a relationship with a powerful married white man. Fitz's response, albeit incredibly romantic, shows the frustrations in an interracial relationship. For Olivia, race in this particular case

plays a major role. She doesn't want to be another Sally Hemings, a stereotype of a black woman under the control of a powerful white man. She is aware of her race.

Fitz, having grown up in a privileged environment and never made aware of the importance of his whiteness, doesn't see their relationship as a race thing. To him it's simple. He loves her, she loves him and that's that. Yet this is exactly where interracial couples do the most emotional labor. Trying to understand one another can be hard, especially when they come with different "racial lenses" (Steinbugler 85). They've both grown up living a privileged life, but because of the circumstances of their race, they carry different attitudes towards race and its importance in a relationship. What Fitz is guilty of here might be interpreted as color-blindism. According to Pryor, "interracial couples use color-blind practices to manage their interracial status both within their relationship and dealing with reactions from the outside world" (96). Fitz is so enamored with Olivia that he doesn't seem to grasp the complexity of their relationship, that he is, indeed, with a black woman and that that does seem to carry a certain amount of weight. That is not to say, however, that Fitz is completely oblivious to racial issues not only in his relationship with Olivia but in politics in general. However, in this particular case the emotional labor that is expected of him is still unattainable for him, and he reverts to color-blindness. They exhibit issues that are often reoccurring with many interracial couples and obviously struggle with the Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson comparison. As hard as they might try, until Fitz becomes more attuned with Olivia's and his own role in that relationship, he will, instead of practicing emotional labor, revert back to color-blindism. As complex as their relationship is, though, Olivia on her own is even more of a complex character. The next chapter will therefore offer a look into the other stereotypes her character had to wrestle with and how Rhimes dealt with them.

#### 4. CHIPPING AWAY AT STEREOTYPES

Ever since the birth of American cinema, black characters have played an integral part in its history. Granted, they were initially portrayed by white actors in blackface – a 1903 version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows the titular character portrayed by a white actor wearing blackface – but with Hollywood and the movie industry expanding, more and more black actors found themselves on the call sheet (Bogle 3). The stereotypes portrayed in these films were inevitable. However, Hollywood isn't the birthplace of these stereotypes that were so

omnipresent in every picture that featured a black character. The stereotypes of the Mammy, Tom, Coon or the Tragic Mulatto, among others, had been ingrained in American culture since the days of slavery, transcending literature, music and minstrel shows (Bogle 4). They had survived various iterations, formed and deformed themselves into subtler, more nuanced stereotypes, fit, it seems, for these modern times. So when analyzing stereotypical images of black women, one has to mention the following: the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Sapphire, the Tragic Mulatta, and then more modern iterations such as the Angry Black Woman and the Strong Black Woman. *Scandal's* Olivia Pope is the type of character that plays on the verge of each of these stereotypes. There are certain aspects of her that seem oddly familiar, yet she manages to subvert them in such a way that they don't seem obvious at first. This chapter presents a historic overview of the before mentioned stereotypes and the ways in which the character of Olivia Pope embodies or, as the case may be, deconstructs them.

#### 4.1. THE MAMMY

Perhaps the oldest, most well-known stereotype about the black woman – the Mammy is the product of history which was then transposed by imagination. It seems she is so prevalent in all the various accounts of southern life on a plantation that not having a Mammy in one's account would feel almost inauthentic. And indeed, the Mammy was very real for many Southern people during slavery and after, yet the American imagination had turned her into a caricature of itself. Christian (1980) offers the following description of what a Mammy is supposed to look and be like:

black in color as well as race and fat with enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children in the world; her head is perpetually covered with her trademark kerchief to hide the kinky hair that marks her as ugly. Tied to her physical characteristics are her personality traits: she is strong, for she certainly has enough girth, but this strength is used in the service to her white master and as a way of keeping her male counterparts in check; she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother; she is sexless. (West 142)

Although historically not every Mammy had this specific look (as racist as it was described), later through further expanding on this particular stereotype it became so standardized that the look and feel of the Mammy was something nobody dared to change in further representations. Strength is here also mentioned, and indeed, the Mammy is also a “strict disciplinarian” (Wallace-Sanders 6).



The etymology of the word Mammy is also an interesting aspect, and perhaps the clearest indication of what this stereotype is all about – it is a blend of *ma'am* and *mamma* (Wallace-Sanders 4). The reason I say this might give us insight into the meaning of the stereotype and, later, how it relates to Olivia, is the following: on one hand, part of the name is comprised of the word *ma'am*. Ma'am commands a certain level of respect that not every slave could claim. It was reserved for only the select few, and the Mammy was one of them. Apart from the obvious lack of sheer human dignity and general respect – because, after all, she was a slave and was certainly not treated with the same respect a free white person was – there still remains a certain level of reverence and respect towards the Mammy. She managed the household in a way not even the mistress of the house on a plantation knew how to. She had control of perhaps the most precious cargo a plantation had to offer, apart from its slaves – the masters' children. This leads us to the second aspect of Mammy's name – *mamma*. She was a mother, a wet nurse, a care-taker. Oftentimes more so than the actual biological mother of her white charges. As Wallace-Sanders quotes another study from 1924, "there can be no doubt that with the peculiar African capacity for devotion, the old mammy dearly loved her charges" (8). This was the assumption whites had of the Mammy, that she must love their children and that she is willing to devote her whole life to them, that that is her single purpose in life. Of course, very little thought went into what she actually wanted, and how she actually felt. In the end, her role was to raise the children of her white masters, provide them with love and affection, care and nourishment, all the while being painfully aware of her own inferior status compared to them. This assumed maternal devotion is perhaps the most important aspect of the Mammy stereotype.

Now, this leads us to Olivia. How can a successful, young, educated, slender African American woman – so the polar opposite of the Mammy – embody any of the traits that we have previously mentioned belong to the Mammy? It does seem a bit awkward at first, and Shonda Rhimes even goes so far as to refuse to cast African Americans in roles of pimps and drug dealers to avoid further propelling stereotypes about African Americans (Wanzo 374), yet these stereotypes are so deeply ingrained in American culture that escaping them works perhaps on a surface level, but a deeper examination shows just how penetrative and at times unavoidable they are. Olivia poses an interesting example though. It is important to note that even though certain aspects of the Mammy are always there, Rhimes manages to deconstruct them in a way that suits Olivia's ambitions and motives. The second part of this chapter will

try to explain in which way Olivia's character aligns with or diverges from the Mammy stereotype.

For a further examination of Olivia as the Mammy we need to go back to the etymology of the word Mammy. We started by explaining that it is a blend between *ma'am* and *mamma*. That same logic applies to Olivia, who establishes an almost maternal bond with her associates at Pope and Associates. Each and every one of them was somehow taken care of by Olivia, everyone was once saved by her. She is the embodiment of the mother in that office. A scene which further illustrates that shows a confrontation she has with one of her proteges, Abby, who she also saved at one point. This time, though, it is Huck who needs her help. He is kidnapped and Abby had something to do with it.

OLIVIA: So, help me understand. You kill Huck, frame Cyrus. For what? What did they give you? What was your best outcome for selling out your *family*?

ABBY: I had no idea they would harm Huck. And you have just as much blame for Cyrus rotting in jail as I do. I have done everything in my power to get him out while you have done everything in your power to keep him in, to turn a blind eye to his innocence to protect your father, to protect your place in the Oval. You knew Cyrus was innocent, but you still –

OLIVIA: Huck might be dead. *My Huck*. (S06E09)

The emphasis here is on family. She sees Huck (and Quinn for that matter, and Abby) as family. They are hers and she would go to war for them. She takes care of them and even though she slaps Abby in this scene about four times, if it was any of them that were in danger, she would do anything to save them – same as she is doing for Huck now:

OLIVIA: You get in there and wait till Quinn finds out what you did and, Abby, I will not call her off. I will not save you from her. I will applaud whatever way she chooses to express her rage. So you better pray to God that when we find Huck, he's alive.  
(S06E09)

She is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to protect her own, exuding a maternal sense of protection even though she has no children of her own. But by taking all of them under her wing, protecting them from themselves or from the outside world, Olivia becomes a mother to them.

Of course we couldn't possibly draw a straight parallel to the Mammy since she was a slave and didn't have her own autonomy, but these examples show that on a subversive level, there still run some parallels to this stereotype, whether the creator intended it (unlikely) or not. This doesn't mean that Olivia is an embodiment of the Mammy through and through though. Some aspects, yes, are there in one form or another. But on the whole Olivia takes them on and makes them work for her own agenda. That is why we cannot claim that she fully embodies the Mammy stereotype. When it comes to the caretaker role, indeed, she does create her own family, wherein she takes on the maternal role, but she does not stand in an inferior position to her "charges" as the Mammy would. She creates a hierarchy that suits her. Olivia uses this hierarchy as a stepping stone to more power. She is a woman of her own machinations and all the respect she gained stems from power – power she acquired by being a strong black woman. Which leads us to another stereotype – the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman (SBW).

#### 4.2. THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN

According to West, "the majority (83%) of Black college women in one sample perceived themselves as currently, or in the future, exhibiting the following traits: strong/assertive, independent, educated, hardworking/ambitious, caring, and self-confident" (143). If there is one character on television who embodies these attributes, it is surely Olivia Pope. Oftentimes she truly comes across as a superhuman – she runs her own firm, helping countless people who have nowhere to run to except to her; she juggles intense personal relationships, be it with men such as Fitz and Jake, or with her father or friends/coworkers; she has an even tighter grasp on the Oval than the President herself, practically running the country; and she has to keep her enemies at bay, be it former friend and mentor Cyrus Beene or right-wing Conservative Sally Langston whose sharp tongue has on more than one occasion given Liv a headache.

Juggling all aspects of one's life and still being on top of everything is what we have come to expect from Olivia Pope. It is also what the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman entails. According to Watson and Hunter, "standing up for oneself, exhibiting selfreliance, and taking care of others" is notable behavior for the SBW (425). West makes a notable distinction, though, to the Mammy stereotype. "Unlike her Mammy predecessor, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) is expected to perform constant emotional services to Black community and family members" (West 143).

Given that Olivia's family are her coworkers, who are not black, it makes it difficult for Olivia's character to embody every aspect of that stereotype. But there are examples where Olivia gives back to the black community. In season 4, episode 14 the show tackles police brutality. It was right on the heels of Ferguson when Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American had been fatally shot by a police officer. What followed was a culmination of years of inaction when it came to police brutality. Riots and protests ensued, marking one of modern-day's most violent uprisings in the United States. *Scandal* took that narrative and transferred it to Washington. A young black man was shot in the vicinity of the White House, prompting questions and protests from the public. Olivia was set to solve the case. She participated in the protests and she discovered the police officer who shot the young man had previously planted a knife on him so it would look like self-defense. The episode ends with an independent federal investigation into the Washington D.C. Police Force and the murdered boy's father meeting with the President. The ending is of course quite utopian, but it does show Olivia standing up for what she believes in and fighting for the black community.

This stereotype is reiterated by Olivia's mother, a terrorist, in an episode when she comes back in order to, as she claims, protect her daughter but is apprehended on the suspicion of a possible assassination attempt on Mellie on her inauguration day. She laments the fact that she only wants to help but is treated as a criminal.

MAYA: I tell you, being a black woman, "Be strong," they say. Support your man, raise a man, think like a man. Well, damn. I got to do all that? [Scoffs] Who's out here working for me, carrying my burden, building me up when I get down? Nobody. Black women out here trying to save everybody, and what do we get? Swagger jacked by white girls wearing cornrows and bamboo earrings. Ain't that a bitch? But we still try. Try to help all y'all. Even when we get nothing. Is that admirable or ridiculous? [Laughing] I don't know! I know me sitting here is ridiculous when I could be helping, but you don't want my help. You want to do it all by yourself. Mr. Big Strong Black Man. God forbid you let a sista like me help you out. Naw, you don't want that. Don't let me put you on my back when you fall. Wipe the crust out of your eyes. Put a pep back in your step. Because when we do, you resent us for making you better, smarter, stronger. Then drop us so you can be with someone basic, someone without all that baggage you left us with. But we still try. (S06E15)

She is describing the reality of every Strong Black Woman. They are supposed to support, love, care for, be there for and help everyone but themselves, but then when it's their turn to ask for help, they can't do it because they are supposed to be strong. It is ironic, however, that of all people Maya would have that monologue. This is another example of *Scandal* subverting a known stereotype about black women. Although stereotypes of the absent black father are still part of American culture, in this case it is the mother who abandoned her family (rather, she was taken away from her family by Rowan but the reason would be considered a good one – she was a terrorist committing crimes against the United States, posing a direct threat to national security), yet she is the one giving the talk about being a Strong Black Woman and supporting and caring for her family, making her husband stronger and better, all the while not being in the picture and not accomplishing any of that.

What happens very often to black women who try to foster that image of the SBW and what *Scandal* unfortunately only briefly touches upon, are the very real mental health issues that correlate with that stereotypical imaging of what a black woman should be. Research suggests that the SBW schema can lead to “emotion dysregulation, increased distress, and obesity” (Watson and Hunter 425). They are also “reluctant to seek help” (West 144). Olivia not only juggles a myriad of responsibilities, she has also herself been through traumatic events, such as when she was kidnapped. If the SBW schema doesn't affect her mental well-being, one would think being kidnapped would bring certain issues to the forefront, but apart from one episode where she completely loses it (she kills the man who was responsible for her kidnapping), her mental health is rarely spoken about. Perhaps that is one of the glaring shortages of *Scandal*, but it does highlight at least one aspect connected to the SBW schema, and that is that she rarely asks for help. She does have her associates, but she delegates, she doesn't ask for anyone's help. It is very rare one would see Olivia Pope breaking down and asking for something.

#### 4.3. THE JEZEBEL

Going from the Strong Black Woman to the Jezebel is quite the jump, but it does highlight the complexity of Olivia Pope's character. First, though, it is important to give a little background on the stereotype of the Jezebel. Historically speaking, Jezebel is a biblical figure from the Book of Kings who “by manipulation or seduction, [...] was accused of misleading the saints of God into sins of idolatry and sexual immorality” (Davis and Tucker-Brown 113). Modern-day interpretations don't steer too far away from that. Anderson et al.

write that the Jezebel is “an alluring and seductive African American woman who is highly sexualized and valued purely for her sexuality” (463). The stereotype originated during the era of slavery (Anderson et al. 463). Black women who were enslaved were put on the auction block, naked, and viewed as objects, tools to be used on the field (or in many cases in bed), objectified and given a price. Davis and Tucker-Brown also mention the nineteenth-century Hottentot Venus, an African woman who was paraded around Europe for the pleasure of the male gaze. She was a voluptuous woman and the public was fascinated with her – her genitalia were showcased for all the world to see (Davis and Tucker-Brown 112).

Apart from this blatant sexist and racist parade, there had also been some ‘attempts’ at a scientific explanation of black female sexuality. As Davis and Tucker-Brown write, “at the end of the nineteenth century European experts in fields ranging from anthropology to psychology ‘scientifically’ concluded that black female body embodied the notion of uncontrolled sexuality” (113). This ‘justification’ gave rise to an almost unison notion that black women were free to be raped – because if their bodies embodied uncontrolled sexuality, then the man couldn’t possibly be at fault for sleeping with her against her own will – clearly she must have wanted it (West 152). This tradition of the (mostly) white male gaze objectifying the black female body continues to this day. Nowadays, we have such iterations of the Jezebel like “freaks, gold diggers, divas, and baby mamas”, all images “depicted in music videos, movies, Internet, and gaming” – outlets that promote “negative female stereotypes that dominate the portrayal of African American females”, in turn causing “society’s bias” to become “commonplace and internalized by both society and the object of desire” (Davis and Tucker-Brown 113).

It is not uncommon for films and TV shows to depict female sexuality through a male lens, serving the purpose of a male audience. Too often a sex or nude scene would show up on screen where many a female viewer would think to herself: What exactly was the purpose of this? (A somewhat recent example is the depiction of Sansa Stark’s rape on HBO’s hit drama *Game of Thrones* – a woman is brutally raped, yet the camera zooms in on Theon, a boy she grew up with, capturing his reaction and the horror on his face as he is forced to watch, taking the agency away from the female character). bell hooks, feminist writer and author of many works that deal with the intersectionality between gender and race, is, among other things, no stranger to offering harsh criticisms on what are arguably both the critics’ and the audiences’ darlings, offering scathing reviews of films such as *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *12 Years A Slave*. During a 2014 panel titled *Are You Still A Slave?* hooks makes

the point of questioning how we deal with the black female body on the example of *12 Years A Slave*. She says: “One of the aspects of the film I found so incredibly upsetting was the representation of the black female body, not just the body of Patsy but the body of all the black women coated again as sexual servants, victims, only there to satisfy the needs of someone else” (hooks, *Are You Still A Slave?*). She is aiming at the scene when Patsy is being raped, a daunting scene many audience members had trouble watching. She takes aim at the needless sexualization and objectification of the black female body in popular culture, even going as far as calling Beyoncé a ‘cultural terrorist’ for recycling and promoting the Jezebel stereotype. So with that being said, can we classify Olivia Pope as a Jezebel? Is she as well a cultural terrorist or does Rhimes offer us something deeper than that?

To answer that question, the first example we will examine is a conversation between Rowan, Olivia’s father, and Fitz. It is while Rowan is held prisoner by Fitz that a heated conversation between the two ensues, one in which Fitz uses his relationship to Olivia to taunt her father.

FITZ: I'm screwing her, you know. Your daughter. Every chance I get. The things I could tell you. About the way she tastes. She's quite a girl. Talented. (S03E10)

In this moment, Fitz uses Olivia and her body for his own agenda. She is not even in the room but he takes autonomy over her, sexualizing her, even objectifying her (talented in bed as if that was her main talent, her greatest achievement) only to get under Rowan’s skin. Fitz, a character usually respectful of Olivia and her choices, respectful of every woman he is around, in order to get the better of Rowan, uses the woman he loves and her sexuality to demean her father, in the process demeaning her. Rowan has a monologue prepared of course. After telling Fitz off about how he is just a boy, he makes a point of excluding Olivia from that association Fitz brought up.

ROWAN: You are always going to be senator Grant's disappointing boy, Fitz. She is always going to be the formidable Olivia Pope. (S03E10)

No matter their romantic relationship, Olivia’s sexuality is her own, and she will always be formidable, while he, Fitz, will always be the disappointing son. Rowan goes on to ruin this sentiment by adding: “Don't use the person that I made to make you into a man”, taking ownership of Olivia in another way.

The thing about Olivia, though, is that she doesn't let anybody take ownership of her or her sexuality. She is by all accounts a sexually liberated woman, taking pleasure when, where and with whom she so chooses to. When confronted by her then boyfriend Edison Davis with the question of whether Fitz was her previous lover, accusing her of keeping it from him and not letting him into the hospital room after Fitz was shot, Olivia goes off on him.

OLIVIA: Five, that's sexist and insulting. You'd never suggest Scooter Libby was screwing Dick Cheney. Four, the lengths you're going to try to twist this into a conspiracy are cause for concern. You should speak to someone about that. Three, the President is awake and talking, and the suggestion that he isn't is partisan political crap that I thought you had enough integrity to rise above. Two, in the past three minutes, you've called me a criminal, a whore, an idiot, and a liar, so this is pretty much the last time we'll be speaking, so one, who I am or am not screwing, what I am or am not doing, is no longer any of your damn business. (S02E11)

Olivia takes full ownership of her sexuality in a sense that she would not allow any man she has ever been with to tame her or subdue her and bend her to their own will in any shape or form, be it on a professional, sexual or emotional level. Even Fitz, who is the love of her life, could not persuade her to move to Vermont and live a cozy life there, being his wife and 'making jam'. Olivia's strength stems from power and her power is inextricably connected to her sexuality, that is, her ownership of her own sexuality. Her reclaiming that, offering a representation on television of someone who is in full control, who has power, all the while being as sexually open as she chooses to be – in this process breaking what the white patriarchal society deems acceptable of a black woman – makes her less of a cultural terrorist, and more of a feminist anarchist.

#### 4.4. THE SAPPHERE

Running parallel to the Jezebel stereotype is that of the Sapphire. Black women had been subjugated to a myriad of stereotypes, but none is as firmly rooted in today's society as that of the Sapphire. To understand the stereotype a little better, we have to first draw parallels to the other existing stereotypes, to be more precise to those of the Mammy and the Jezebel. Deborah Gray White makes a clear distinction between the three in her book *Ar'n't I a Woman?*:



As a stereotype, Sapphire is a domineering female who consumes men and usurps their role. Her persona is not sexual but it is as indomitable as Jezebel's and equally as emasculating in effect. While Jezebel emasculates men by annulling their ability to resist her temptations, and thus her manipulations, Sapphire emasculates men by usurping their role. Her assertive demeanor identifies her with Mammy, but unlike Mammy she is devoid of maternal compassion and understanding. Sapphire is as tough, efficient, and tireless as Mammy. Mammy operates, however, within the boundaries prescribed for women, while Sapphire is firmly anchored in a man's world. (White 176)

There are two main takeaways here relevant to our discussion. One, the Sapphire usurps the *man's role* in this world. Two, the Sapphire does this in a *male dominated environment*. The reason why this is important for deconstructing Olivia's character will become evident in the following passage. To do that we have to analyze a telling scene from *Scandal's* last season where Olivia has a conversation with Mellie after Mellie feels threatened by Olivia's grasp on power in the Oval and starts questioning her loyalty.

OLIVIA: There's three things you need to know about me that you should already know, but I clearly need to reiterate. One, you do not ignore me. Because, two, I am right, always. It's frustrating, get used to it. And, three, there is only us. You and me. That's all there is. We have it all – the people, the pulpit, the purse strings, the guns, all of it. Everything ours to deploy in the defense and betterment of the people and office we serve. But the men outside these oval walls? They want to take it all away from us. Because they are terrified. Because they are outraged. Because they have come to the realization that all those centuries of misogyny and privilege and status quo are finally over. That is why you never listen to a man over me. Your success as President is my only agenda. I, alone, have your back always! You want to keep the barbarians at the gate? You want to hold these walls? You want to keep having it all, reverse the tides of injustice, redraw the map, flood the darkness with light, earn our place, and make it so that a woman holding this office is no longer a novelty but the norm? Then you have to stop thinking of me as an employee and start thinking of me as what I am.

MELLIE: And what is that?

OLIVIA: The boss. Put your faith in me, and me alone, and you will become a monument. Ignore me, allow them to come between us, and you will become an asterisk. (S07E01)

Season seven opens with Olivia and Mellie holding all the power in Washington. Mellie is the President, Olivia is her right-hand woman. The position held by Olivia now was previously held by the likes of Cyrus Beene. She is the White House Chief of Staff, the first time a woman held that position. Mellie is the first female President of the United States. Together these two women form the most powerful duo in Washington. By putting Olivia in that position, Rhimes offers us an alternate universe in which the likes of Hillary Clinton (personified by Mellie Grant) win, and caricatures like Donald Trump (mirrored in the character of Hollis Doyle) never see the light of day. What is more, Rhimes puts an African American woman in one of the most powerful positions in the United States. The men around her are “outraged” and “terrified” because not only do they have a female President for the first time, but also the second most powerful person in that Oval is a black woman. The deconstruction of this stereotype, though, arises from the context Olivia is placed in.

The historical context will tell us that “as during slavery, black women had to rely upon survival instincts that ran counter to dependence” (White 176). History will also tell us that “they had to bargain for the best wage, aggressively resist white attempts to steal their children, and be strong-willed in negotiating the kind of house and field work they would and would not do” (White 176). What the contemporary context tells us in the case of *Scandal*’s Olivia Pope is that her predicament sets her apart from the Sapphire stereotype insofar as it operates from a completely different angle. Olivia does not operate from a position of weakness or disadvantage, but from a position of power. The way she was brought up, educated, alongside her character, her personality, and her father’s ambitions, all of those factors play a role in her rise to the top. She is able to inhabit the man’s role because she was raised to believe herself to be an equal. As comedian Mindy Kaling said at a 2015 Sundance Film Festival panel, the reason for her own success is that her parents raised her with the entitlement of a tall, blond, white man. Olivia, too, has been raised with that entitlement. She has been educated in the most prestigious schools; her father, though on the outside a mere paleontologist, was the most powerful man in America, instilling in her ambition and a work ethic equaling his own; she was trained and mentored by none other than Cyrus Beene, the man that would be responsible for Fitz’s election. Olivia’s life, in short, is abundant with privilege. Her outlook on life is far different from any stereotypical image black women are

usually portrayed as having. Thus, the way she carries herself, the way she commands a room and the way she “usurps” the man’s role is nothing to be surprised about. If there is a character who audiences can expect that from, it is Olivia Pope.

#### 4.5. THE ANGRY BLACK WOMAN

Too often though, by “usurping the man’s role”, by saying what they mean, by being vocal, black women are labeled as “angry”. Nobody escapes the stereotype of the ABW or “Sistas with Attitude” (West 149). Serena Williams, the world-famous tennis player, was called an Angry Black Woman because she voiced her frustration at a referee’s call, and was later on heavily fined for that “outburst”. Michelle Obama, one of the most powerful women in the world, was also labeled an Angry Black Woman after Barack Obama began his campaign, alluding to her outspokenness and assertiveness as being a possible reflection of her “emasculating, acerbic, and domineering” nature, rather than a reflection of her “strength and intelligence” (Walley-Jean 69). Countless other black women have been subjugated to the same stereotype, making it so “embedded in society that the label is used to describe any African American woman” (Walley-Jean 71).

The stereotype itself, as the name suggests, describes black women as angry “when emotional is paired with loud and tough, as with the Black female target”, therefore suggesting “a hostile, domineering nature that is out of control and threatening—unfavorable traits for women”, as Donovan puts it (West 149). Being loud and vocal about one’s dissatisfaction or injustice can lead to “their passion and righteous indignation often being misread as irrational anger”, which “can be used to silence and shame Black women who dare to challenge social inequalities, complain about their circumstances, or demand fair treatment” (West 149).

The way Olivia uses her anger, though, is never portrayed as irrational. Rhimes, as previously mentioned, goes to great lengths to avoid stereotyping African Americans, and when Olivia is mad, she is mad for a reason. This is not to say that Serena Williams’s reaction to the referee’s call or Michelle Obama simply speaking out at an event are instances of irrational anger, but simply that the media and the society as a whole are capable of twisting and putting black women into an already designated box without affording them a safe space to speak out on the matter or defend their viewpoint. Rhimes, on the other hand, gave a whole show to an African American woman whose sole mission is to rise to absolute power (perhaps not initially, but Olivia’s ambitions throughout the seasons have changed and made

her more power-hungry). In her wake she has come across many powerful men, all of whom she stood up to, defeating each and every one of them with carefully crafted power-monologues.

The deconstruction of this stereotype comes, therefore, in three steps. First is the removal of oneself from the private sphere into the public sphere. Olivia is part of the public political apparatus of Washington and her run-ins with her opponents are played out on a much bigger stage than the ABW stereotype normally is. Her anger and her frustrations when it comes to her job in politics make her a fierce opponent, an enemy you would not want to have. By transferring her domain into the public sphere, the stereotype loses some of its potency as Olivia thusly becomes an equal to her opponents. Which brings us to the second step of removal, and that is by transferring Olivia's "aggression" into the public sphere, her opponents become white men rather than black men, a part of the stereotype which was born out of the Sapphire stereotype – a 1940s radio and television show by the name of *Amos 'n' Andy* was one of the first depictions of a nagging black woman trying to castigate her husband (Walley-Jean 70). The removal of the black man as the target and the removal of the private sphere as the setting mark a stark departure from the previously known characteristics of this stereotype. However, it is what Rhimes bestowed upon Olivia that truly marks a difference.

What Rhimes gave back to the black woman in those instances of Olivia speaking up is one, the power of agency, and two, the faculty of reason. The third step of removal from this stereotype is giving Olivia a voice. In *Scandal*, Olivia has the freedom to express herself fully, giving audiences everywhere a chance to better understand her and her actions. Even her manic outburst in season five when she kills Andrew Nichols, the man responsible for her kidnapping, is not a stereotype for the Angry Black Woman, but simply a representation of a woman who was kidnapped, mistreated and abused, exacting revenge on the party responsible for her trauma (how little her mental health was discussed in that episode was mentioned previously, but in this case that argument does not interfere with her having agency or reason). What the media are sometimes lacking, what society oftentimes seems to forget, and where *Scandal* seems to form a bridge to this kind of understanding, is that, as Michelle Obama put it, when black women are concerned, what they have in common is not being angry but rather not being listened to:

I was now starting to actually feel a bit angry, which then made me feel worse, as if I were fulfilling some prophecy laid out for me by the haters, as if I'd given in. It's remarkable how a stereotype functions as an actual trap. How many "angry black women" had been caught in the circular logic of that phrase? When you aren't being listened to, why wouldn't you get louder? If you're written off as angry or emotional, doesn't that just cause more of the same? (Obama 265)

Labeling black women as angry without even knowing them seems to be the trend nowadays, ascribing some kind of "militant anger" (Obama 264) to them but with shows like *Scandal* that offer fully fleshed out characters, and not a warped version of reality (as soapy as *Scandal* can get, it still strives for real characters rather than caricatures of them), strides can be made in dismantling stereotypes black women are faced with.

#### 4.6. THE TRAGIC MULATTA

According to the Jim Crow Museum, located in Big Rapids, Michigan, and part of the Ferris State University, "a mulatto is defined as: the first general offspring of a black and white parent; or, an individual with both white and black ancestors. Generally, mulattoes are light-skinned, though dark enough to be excluded from the white race" (Pilgrim, *The Tragic Mulatto Myth*). The tragic part comes in the form of not belonging to either world. Bost writes about a heroine "Zoe", a name often associated with the Tragic Mulatta, as a reminder of "the supreme injustice of racial hierarchies and the enslavement of women (675). Pilgrim also mentions the name of Lydia Maria Child, an abolitionist writer, who, along with other writers, introduces the character of the Tragic Mulatta. In Child's works, the Tragic Mulatta is "ignorant of both her mother's race and her own. She believed herself to be white and free. Her heart was pure, her manners impeccable, her language polished, and her face beautiful. Her father died; her "negro blood" discovered, she was remanded to slavery, deserted by her white lover, and died a victim of slavery and white male violence" (Pilgrim, *The Tragic Mulatto Myth*). With that being said, why would we then consider this stereotype for Olivia Pope's character? She is after all a black woman with both parents black.

The reason for the inclusion of this stereotype has less to do with the color of Olivia's parents' skin, and more with the way Olivia was raised and how she acts. We've already seen certain aspects of her character while developing and deconstructing other stereotypes, but little has been said about her day-to-day persona. Olivia grew up in a seemingly happy family, with both of her parents around until the age of 12, when her mother was supposedly

killed in a plane crash. She went to the most prestigious schools, had the finest education and was groomed to become even bigger and more important than her own father. She is sophisticated, well-spoken and beautiful. Due to the stereotypes we have already discussed and what with being a black woman in politics, her place in that world is one of constant contention. On one hand, she very rarely discusses her blackness, if at all. Her contact with black culture, apart from a couple of episodes where she takes a stand for the black community, is limited at best. It's not that she doesn't fit in, it's as if she's not even part of that world. On the other hand, she has to fight off stereotypes and prejudices against her at every turn precisely because of her race, and oftentimes gender as well. And she is quite successful at that but there are also moments when her weak side is exposed and her tragic not belonging to either world becomes evident. One such example is a talking-to she gets from her father, Rowan after it is discovered she is Fitz's mistress.

ROWAN: Now listen to me. You raised your skirt and opened your knees and gave it away to a man with too much power. You're not rare. You're not special. Your story's no different than a thousand other stories in this town, so you know how this goes. You could call this in your sleep. First they'll smile, be warm, sympathetic, on your side, letting you know that they will fight for you. They will lull you into a false sense of security. And then, once your belly is exposed, they will gut you and everyone you know. And they will be swift about it. And by the time you realize you should be fighting back, well, you're already bleeding to death. That is the presidency versus you. Whose victory do you think they will fight for? Whose body do you think they will bury?

OLIVIA: He would never –

ROWAN: "He would never." You and I both know that he is not in charge. He is never in charge. Power is in charge. Power got him elected. I know more than you could possibly imagine about things of which you cannot dream. He told you that you would be first lady, and you believed him! Did I not raise you for better? How many times have I told you you have to be what? You have to be what?

OLIVIA: Twice –

ROWAN: What?!

OLIVIA: Twice as good.

ROWAN: Twice as good as them to get half of what they have. Sleeping with that - For God sakes! You know to aim higher. At the very least, you could have aimed for chief of staff, secretary of state! First lady! Do you have to be so mediocre? (S03E01)

Even though she has been a staple in the political arena for years and has built up a reputation few could claim themselves, when it comes to fighting the presidency, she was always going to lose. Being a woman and being black, she learned the lesson her father taught her – she had to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have. No matter her prestigious education, her fine clothes or her undeniable work ethic, she was always going to be less than what they – the white men that wield the power in Washington – are. Her success can't depend on someone else's, in this case on Fitz's. She has to be responsible for her own success story and she is going to have to work for it harder than any white man walking the streets of Washington.

It is perhaps ironic that this last stereotype is not fully deconstructed, as it is the one stereotype that physically defines her the least and yet, in society's eyes makes her exactly that – a Tragic Mulatta. A woman who is neither fully anchored here nor there. But perhaps that is not such a bad thing. Perhaps by fully living through this stereotype, she is able to navigate both worlds the way she chooses to. It is the series finale that reveals a perhaps utopian future, but one in which Olivia's portrait proudly hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, with two young African American girls viewing it in awe, suggesting her importance and influence in American politics. As Wanzo writes, “what is most interesting about black representation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not whether it is racist or not, or whether it evokes stereotype or not, but how the strands of a stereotype, fantasy, history, and experience all interact” (388). By living through each stereotype society and history have thrown at characters like hers before and in the end living her own experience of it, Olivia forges her own path.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Given the sheer number of the various stereotypes black women are often forced into, it is then refreshing to see a character on TV that is capable of navigating through that landscape without falling into the obvious or expected roles black women are usually given. It is hard, of course, to avoid stereotypes at times, and certain aspects about Olivia's character show an embrace of some of the stereotypes black women have to deal with. But Rhimes offers a spin on it that is empowering Olivia rather than demeaning her.

There are many parallels to the various stereotypes as well as ways in which Rhimes managed to integrate and disintegrate them within the framework of the show. Olivia's relationship with Fitz is one of those examples due to the fact that she is his subordinate and that power dynamic is an integral part of the Sally Hemings-Thomas Jefferson parallel, yet she is aware of the implications of that relationship and practices emotional labor as a way of managing it. Another stereotype she is faced with is that of the Mammy which is embodied in Olivia's role as the matriarch in her firm, but by positioning her as the boss of the firm, her grasp on the family she created allows her power, rather than a feeling of inferiority. That power allows her to firmly plant her feet in a world dominated by white men, thus affirming yet at the same time deconstructing the Sapphire stereotype. The Strong Black Woman stereotype works in Olivia's favor as she projects a sense of self-reliance, while the Angry Black Woman stereotype is deconstructed by giving Olivia a platform to speak on – she is a force to be reckoned with and she will be heard. By projecting her sexuality as something she and she alone has control over, Rhimes gives Olivia agency, rather than making her just another black female body to be objectified, unlike the Jezebel. And while it is hard to tear her away from the Tragic Mulatta stereotype entirely, by placing her in both worlds (black and white), she is capable of so much more.

Olivia Pope represents a modern take on what African American women could be portrayed as today. Production companies should take note and work with something that has very clearly been successful – audiences are craving accurate, realistic, *real* representations of black women, not caricatures they were fed in the past. By being aware of the stereotypes black women have to contend with and offering different ways of how they could be deconstructed, television shows could bring about real change in the way society perceives black women.



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the underlying stereotypes black women have to contend with and how they are dealt with in the television show *Scandal*. The stereotypes examined are those of the Mammy, the Sapphire, the Jezebel, the Angry Black Woman, the Strong Black Woman and the Tragic Mulatta, as well as the stereotype of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson often associated with interracial couples. By examining various scenes from the show in relation to each of the aforementioned stereotypes, what sticks out is that some stereotypes are deconstructed fully, while others are harder to escape from. However, the final conclusion of this paper is that the main character of the show, Olivia Pope, although confronted with these stereotypes, often manages to subvert them and offers a different take on what is conventionally showcased on television when it comes to the representation of African American women, proving the cultural impact and worth of the show for future representations of African American women on television.

Key words: stereotypes, black women, U.S. television, race