Black Women in Primetime Soap Opera: Examining Representation within Genre Television

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ABSTRACT

Using textual genre analysis, this research studied representation in primetime soap operas *Scandal*, *How To Get Away with Murder*, and *Empire*. Two hundred and eighty-three episodes were viewed to understand how black female identity is represented in primetime soap and how genre influences those representation. Using Collins (2009) theory of controlling images, this study found that black female protagonists were depicted as jezebels and matriarchs. The welfare mother stereotype was updated by portrayals of black woman as hard working. Soap opera conventions such as heavy talk helped provide context to stereotypical portrayals while conventions such as melodrama lead to reactive characterization.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the 2017-2018 television season, 28% of lead roles in new scripted television shows were filled by minorities, a considerable increase from years past but a lag considering minorities consist of 40% the U.S. population (Hunt, Ramon & Tran, 2019). From racist minstrel theater to tokenism in popular sitcoms, African Americans have seen limited and often problematic visibility in the entertainment industry. However, with a changing media landscape that has diversified the ways audiences consume entertainment along with social media outcry from fans and campaigns like #OscarsSoWhite, which have highlighted the lack of quality diversity on-screen, representation of African Americans in film and television have recently seen incremental changes.

After airing for eight seasons, beginning in 2012 and ending in 2018, ABC network drama *Scandal* and its creator Shonda Rhimes have been regarded as changing the television landscape in leading the charge towards diversity in television (VanDerWerff, 2018). When *Scandal* debuted, there had not been an African American woman to headline a broadcast television drama since 1974's *Get Christie Love!* Much of the discourse in popular media highlighted this fact and noted the general lack of diversity in Hollywood (Nussbaum, 2012; Hughes, 2012; Vega, 2013). Similarly, *Scandal* has been credited with bringing prestige and relevance to the primetime soap opera (Lyons, 2015). In the wake of *Scandal's* success, broadcast networks have aired several television dramas staring women of color including Rhimes' produced *How to Get Away with Murder* (2016-present), Fox's *Empire* (2016-present), *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-2017), and *Minority Report* (2015), as well as *Quantico* (2015-2018) on ABC.

As *Scandal* cemented itself as a flagship show for ABC, much of the popular discourse surrounding the drama shifted away from highlighting its rarity as a primetime show led by an African American woman to its overall representation of black women. Its protagonist, Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington, has received both praise and criticism for the ways in which her character inhabits the screen. *The Feminist Wire* blogger, Brandon Maxwell (2013), argues that while on the surface Pope appears to be a progressive black female character, her role as a crisis manager to D.C.'s elite coupled with an ongoing affair with the married President of the United States reinforces both the mammy and Jezebel stereotypes.

Contributing to on-going analysis of black female representation on television, this research used *Scandal* and Olivia Pope as means to dissect portrayals of black women in the medium. Given the uptick in scripted television shows that feature black women in leading roles and to provide a fuller understanding of black female representation in current television, the inclusion of other black female characters is necessary. Similar in structure and sharing a television universe, as noted by a two-night crossover event, *How to Get Away with Murder* and its protagonist Annalise Keating provide a parallel to *Scandal*. Leaning heavily into soap-opera, *Empire* was fashioned as a "black *Dynasty*" (Hunt, 2014, para 9). *Empire* prominently features, Cookie Lyon, the matriarch of a powerful family in the recording industry. While investigating *Scandal, How to Get Away with Murder,* and *Empire's* use of stereotypes was a key element of this analysis, it sought to understand how black female representation functions within a contextualized system of narratives, specifically primetime soap-opera.

Background

Fictionalized representations of women and African Americans has been scarce, but especially so for African American women (Smith-Shomade, 2002). The 1950s ushered in the first fictionalized representations of black women on television with shows like *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951-1960). and *Beulah* (1945-1954), programs that were previously formatted for radio broadcast, providing stereotypical depictions of African Americans. Black women featured on these shows often portrayed domesticated, subservient roles like housekeepers, cooks, and the prevalent mammy stereotype, a stock character dating back to 19th century abolitionist literature (Bogle, 1989). Winston (1982) argues that such stereotypical depictions were not only created as representations of the real world, "but were also ways of coding and rationalizing interracial behavior" (p. 173). That is, such images worked to define African Americans and explain their place in society. Moreover, Winston contends that through stereotypical depictions or ignoring black people altogether in the medium, television in the 1950s worked to define and normalize America as white. The 1960's Civil Rights era brought more authentic portrayals of African Americans by way of news broadcasts, highlighting significant struggle and change within the movement. Though sitcom depictions of African Americans persisted, they were less stereotypical, and coupled with news images of the civil rights movement, television depicted was a more nuanced reality of African American life. The sixties and seventies provided less damaging stereotypical portrayals compared to decades prior with popular programs produced by Norman Lear like *Good Times* and *The Jefferson's* (1975-1985) dominating the airwaves. However, they were not without its flaws often criticized for its oversimplification of black life and hyper masculine portrayals of black men. The

misrepresentation of black life often occurred through what was depicted on screen (Bogle, 1988; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Unlike previous incarnations of black women in television, the eponymous *Julia* (1968-1971) worked outside of the home as a nurse in southern California. Skilled and educated, Julia depicted the work-life balance of a widowed, single mother. While *Julia* was devoid of glaring stereotypes of its predecessors, it garnered much criticism for both its colorless portrayal of the protagonists and its picturesque, unrealistic version of America, which was free of racial disharmony and inequality of the late 1960s (Bogle, 1988). Smith-Shomade (2002) suggests that such a colorblind approach laid the framework for colorless programming in the 1990s.

Julia is significant, particularly in this research, because of genre. Historical representations of black women in drama and sitcom is a rarity, especially on network television. It is doubly rare to find such representations of women of color in starring roles. The short run *Get Christie Love!* featured Teresa Graves as a Los Angeles homicide detective. Mixing Blaxploitation with crime drama, *Get Christie Love* did not prove to be a hit with audiences (Bose, 2015). However, as Smith-Shomade suggests, it featured an attractive black woman who was intelligent and tough, providing an empowering image for black audiences.

The 1980s marked a significant shift, both culturally and politically, in televisual representation of African Americans. In an examination of race and television within the historical and political context of Reaganism, Gray (1995) argues that commercial television acted as a site for the social construction of blackness as well as a “sign of blackness” where black identity was given meaning. For Gray, this process is embedded

with tension because of disparate discourses about representation of black people (p. 75). Though his analysis extends beyond scripted television, he points to *The Cosby Show (*1984-1992) as influential due to "the productive space it cleared and its aesthetic constructions of black cultural style it enabled" (Gray, 1995, p. 79). Like *Julia*, racial identity and politics, were not an explicit focal point of the series. Though black cultural aesthetics are present, race is incidental to the depiction of the upper-middle class family. Using genre, situational-comedy, and class, *The Cosby Show* functioned to have audiences identify with characters through humor and universal stories of American family life. Using class as a marker, *The Cosby Show* worked to dismantle stereotypes and provide new representations of black family life, contrary to many shows prior. While it provided a more dynamic view of the black family, it did not address class differences among African American families (Gray, 1995; Dyson, 1993). However, as Gray argues, *The Cosby Show* is important in "the way that it repositioned and recoded blackness and black (middle-class) subjectivity within television's own discursive and institutional practices" (p. 85). Important to this research is the idea of using genre to recode and reposition a black vantage point for audiences.

The Cosby Show, despite criticism of lack of economic diversity in its representation, is largely seen as progressive in its portrayal of African American family life. It was also a vehicle for comedian Bill Cosby. Though Phylicia Rashad's Clair Huxtable presented a far more progressive depiction of a black woman, working as an attorney while also fulfilling domestic duties, the show did not center on her character, and her work life was often ignored. *The Cosby Shows'* success, however, led to the development of many other sitcoms featuring African American families in the late 1980s

and 1990s like *A Different World* (1987-1993), a spin off show, *227* (1985-1990), *Amen,* (1986-1991) *Family Matters* (1989-1998), *Roc* (1991-1994), and *Frank's Place* (1988).

The 1980s also mark an important era in televisual representation of African Americans because it also coincides with a shift in mass television viewing. Though broadcast networks continued to dominate the airwaves throughout the decade, both cable television and home electronics integrated in American households, shifting viewing patterns, subsequently causing fragmentation of mass audiences. Also, the advent of a fourth network, Fox Broadcasting brought added competition for the big three networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC. In attempt to grow and build an audience, Fox appealed to a young demographic, including African American audiences, in a process known as "narrowcasting" (Zook, 1999, p. 4). According to Zook (1999), by the mid-nineties African Americans consisted of a quarter of Fox's market. Along with atypical, edgy shows like *Married with Children* (1987-1997)*, and The Simpsons* (1989-present), Fox aired *Living Single* (1993-1997), *Martin* (1992-1997), *Roc, The Sinbad Show* (1993-1994), and *In Living Color* (1990-1994), black produced television programs centering on black life. In Zook's analysis, she points to four traits of black produced Fox sitcoms. Such programs where unique in that they relied on autobiography, the use of personal experience of black life. They were also often improvisational and tackled dramatic storylines. Lastly, they used black aesthetics, or "visual signifiers of blackness" (Zook, 1999, p. 5). According to Lotz, (1999) in the decades between 1952 and 1985, networks needed to maintain 30% of the television viewing audience to remain successful; therefore, shows like *Julia* and *The Cosby Show* needed to appeal beyond African American audiences. Fox, unbound by traditional audience size markers in its early years,

needed audiences of any size. African Americans were appealing because despite being a little more than a tenth of the television viewing audience, black audiences' viewing index was a quarter higher than non-black households (Lotz, 2005). As Fox grew in popularity, it shifted its target audience. By the late nineties, the network courted a young male demographic, 18 to 34, an audience thought to be more of a commodity in its spending power (Lotz, 2005). A shift to event programming like Sunday night football and reality television, programming that encouraged live viewing, caused the cancellation of black sitcoms on ABC, NBC, and CBS as well. While black sitcoms decreased on established networks, new channels, UPN and The WB utilized Fox's upstart strategy, catering to niche audiences with shows featuring black casts. Programs like *Sister Sister* (1994-1999)*, Moesha* (1996-2001)*, The Parkers* (1999-2004), *Half and Half* (2002-2006), *Girlfriends* (2000-2008)*,* and *One on One* (2001-2006), prominently featured African American women, but by the mid-2000s such shows were cancelled (Lotz, 2005).

Although network television rarely featured black women, particularly in leading roles, in the late 1990s and 2000s with shows *like Soul Food* (2000-2004), *Any Day Now* (1998-2002)*, Hawthorne* (2009-2011)- the short lived and *The No. 1 Ladies Detective. Agency* (2008), cable television provided a few portrayals of black women. Fuller (2010) argues that similar to UPN and The WB, in the late 1990s and early 2000s cable networks, whose economic model permitted niche over mass audiences, similarly used narrowcasting as means to attract black audiences. The emphasis on quality programming as a means to keep and grow audiences was dominant on both network and cable television, but especially so for cable whose programming could take more creative risks.

Fuller points to black cable shows including *Any Day Now* as examples of the ways cable channels used black shows to promote the idea of “quality” and “edginess,” which worked to use race as a means of product differentiation. As such, cable offered a wider platform for black representation. While quality and edginess are still important markers for cable television, black scripted production has decreased while reality programming has become increasingly prevalent (Fuller, 2010).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Although representations of black women in television have been limited, much research and analysis has been done focusing on the ways black women have been depicted on the small screen and the influence of such portrayals on audiences. This literature review highlights research and analysis that emphasizes black women on television and the ways media images of black women effect viewers.

Black Women in Scripted Television

Early research on race and television suggests that African Americans were often underrepresented on scripted television in the 1970s. Studying primetime television between 1969 and 1978, Gerbner and Signorielli (1979) found that black people were underrepresented in drama in comparison to their percentage of the population, but with the exception of one year the number of black characters on television increased. Overtime, African Americans have seen increases in the number of characters on television and are also often overrepresented in the medium. In a content analysis of scripted primetime shows in the 1996 television season, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) found that 16% of characters were African American and more than half were in main roles. While African Americans were in 34% of sitcoms and 40% of crime shows, black characters were not featured in primetime soaps like *Melrose Place* (1992-1999). Despite an increased presence on primetime television, their research found that African Americans were often deemed lazy, more provocatively dressed, and more frequently ridiculed compared to other racial minorities and white characters, suggesting a prevalence of stereotypical representation and a lack of quality portrayals for both black men and women.

In *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television*, Smith-Shomade (2002) provides a comprehensive textual reading of representation of black women post-1980 on television. She posits that while black women are often objectified in the medium, they are also represented with subjectivity within media texts and through the audience's ability to identify with and make meaning out of representations of black women on television. Smith examines representations of black women in four sitcoms, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *Martin, Living Single* and *Moesha,* and points to them as examples of 1990s black television that existed with the tension of marginalization of decades prior and contemporary depictions of black women with agency. In her analysis, she argues that black women featured on these shows often occupied positions of service and performance, contributing to a simplified notion of black female identity. Having material possessions, romance, and class mobility are important aspects of black women characters within each of the texts. By using both African American vernacular and Standard English, speech gives a sense of authenticity and subjectivity while also marking class differences for black women characters. Smith-Shomade goes on to argue that both skin tone and body size are components of these sitcoms that work to position black women in stereotypical ways, particularly if they do not adhere to more Euro-centric standards. Similarly, hair politics, the ways in which black women negotiate black hairstyles with Euro-American trends is an identifying feature of black women. Hair, speech, class, skin tone and body shape work in together to provide subjectivities and objectives to representation. As she states, "the Black women presented in these comedies explored roles and ideologies heretofore rarely seen. They were indeed funny in many cases. But, once again, the greater proportion of Black

women's representations remained in supporting, mammyfied, and one-dimensional capacities" (Smith, 2002, p. 68). Smith's work is useful in the ways it highlights patterns of representation and shows the limited ways black women have been portrayed both in the genre and in their humanity.

That comedy, particularly multi-camera situation comedy with largely black casts, is the predominant source of fictionalized representation is significant. In a content analysis of fictional primetime shows between 2000 and 2008, Signorielli (2009a) found that 60% of black women were featured in sitcoms, 7% in action and crime shows, and 14% in drama. Almost half of black women were featured in shows with nonracially integrated casts (Signorielli, 2009a). Studying 61 primetime network shows in the spring of 1999, Harwood and Anderson (2002) found that while black Americans were generally positively represented on television and portrayed in almost equal share to their proportion of the population (11.4%), 50% of black characters where on 11% of the shows examined, pointing to a "ghettoization" of black characters (p. 93). In a content analysis of gender and occupation on primetime network shows between 1997 and 2006, Signorielli (2009b) found that 20% of all black characters were depicted in shows with predominately white casts. Fifty-three percent of black women were in predominately minority casts, 31% in casts with racially diverse shows, and 16% in white shows. Six in ten black women characters in shows with minority casts were not found to have jobs outside of the home. In shows with racially diverse casts, 35% of black women were found to not have a job while 24% of black women in mostly white shows were found to not have a job. Generally, black women were not found working in prestigious jobs among all show types (Signorielli, 2009b).

Though network television has provided scant leading roles for African American women, broadcast was not absent of black female characters. Often, African American women have been featured in recurring roles. Mascaro (2005) points to the NBC crime drama *Homicide: Life on The Street* (1993-1999) as an example of a primetime show featuring black women in complex, three dimensional portrayals. Using 1963 drama *East Side/West Side*, which featured Cicely Tyson, as a comparison, he argued that *Homicide* provides a rich depiction of African American motherhood, a balanced portrayal of marriage, and highlights social issues in a realistic way, making it, "an important show with mostly positive contributions to equality of representation of American culture" (Mascaro, 2005, p. 66). While Mascaro's analysis shows progresses in representation for black women, it is important to note that the characters within his research maintain secondary roles, a common trend for television in the mid to late 2000s. Krestsedemas (2010) notes that with work place dramas like *ER* (1994-2009)*, Grey's Anatomy* (2004-present) and *Law and Order* (1990-2010), black women were depicted as skilled and multifaceted professionals. Though black characters were incorporated within shows featuring predominately white casts, black characters were largely in the periphery often acting as bosses and supervisors, contributing to isolated characterization (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Krestsedemas, 2010). Similarly Mafe's (2018) textual analysis of black women in speculative film and television, points to the ways black female characterization can be nuanced even when they are not featured in lead roles. Mafe's research notes the lack of black women in science fiction, but points to *Firefly* (2002-2003) and *Dr. Who* (2005-present) as examples of positive portrayals of black women in the genre. She argues that even though female characters could be read as simply

sidekicks to the white male protagonists, they are treated as equals in their partnership and afforded moments of heroism, ultimately providing agency not regularly seen within the genre (Mafe, 2018).

Given its popularity and its uniqueness in starring a black woman in a lead role, much recent scholarly focus also has been paid to *Scandal*. In thinking about new ways to theorize and examine representations of black women, Cartier (2014) offers "future texts," as a method of textual analysis that constructs new meaning of black female representation through its rejection of respectability politics and recognition of an array of black identity (p. 151). Cartier argues that Olivia Pope's role as a mistress plays into the Jezebel stereotype which is ignored by black female audiences because of the economic and sexual power displayed on screen. Similarly, Pixley (2015) contends that Olivia Pope acts as a "super-trope" or "a person whose motivations might include traces of a simplified stereotype, but whose complex humanity stretches beyond the lines that would attempt to limit them to just one respect of their character" (p. 32). For Pixley, while Pope embodies aspects of historical stereotypes of black women, she is also a three-dimensional character with unique traits, exceeding a full trope. Gomez and McFarlane (2017) also note the duality of Pope's character, describing the contradiction in her depiction as "refraction" (p. 363). They argue that through the process of refraction, or the act of engaging in racial stereotypes while at the same time critiquing those same tropes, *Scandal* works to neutralize issues of race and gender (Gomez and McFarlane, 2017).

Although research shows that the quantity of representation is on par with the population, black characters, black female characters specifically, are often stereotypical

and depicted in less flattering ways compared white characters and other minority groups. More recent portrayals of black women in television have been more varied, but those roles often remain in the margins. Though a show like *Scandal* marks a shift in the types of roles afforded to black women, scholarly analysis suggest that it is not free of stereotypical representation. However, while examining stereotypes in television is important, it is not the only way to analyze quality representation. Similar to Mafe's research, analyses of black women characters should consider questions of agency, relatability, and genre.

Television Effects on Viewers

Substantive representation is important when one considers the impact television's portrayals of African Americans has on viewers. Television newscasts focusing on crime have presented misrepresentations of minorities (Entman, 1994; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dixon and Williams, 2015) and such inaccuracies can influence viewer's social judgments (Dixon, Azocar, 2007; Hurley, Jensen, Weaver, & Dixon, 2015). Similarly, misrepresentations that exist within scripted broadcast programs can also influence audiences. Ford's (1997) research suggest that negative, stereotypical depictions of African Americans in comedic roles increases the probability of making negative judgements of black people in general. Mastro and Tropp (2004) found that viewers' relational proximity to African Americans and predisposed racial prejudices has significant influences on how viewers judge black characters on sitcoms. Those with less contact with black people and individuals with higher levels of prejudice are more likely to negatively evaluate black characters. Punyanunt-Carter (2008) found that television

viewers perceived African Americans depicted in low-status jobs as unrealistic while negative personality traits were deemed true to life.

Stereotypes found in television can have some effect on the ways minorities view themselves and majority groups. Using both cross-sectional survey data and a content analysis of primetime shows airing between 1987 and 2008, Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi (2017) found that for Black people and Latinos a high presence of stereotypical representations, noted by television characters' professional status and how they were sexualized, influenced their feelings the towards their racial groups. For black respondents, the prevalence of black characters as hypersexualized decreased positive attitudes towards black people while the number of black characters portrayed in high status jobs was linked to favorable attitudes towards black people.

Similarly, stereotypical images of black women can impact the ways real life African American women are judged. In a priming experiment with 182 college students, Givens and Monahan (2005) found that when participants viewed short movie clips featuring prominent stereotypes of black women, the jezebel and the mammy, followed by watching a mock interview with both White and African American, female job candidates, participants attributed the African American candidate with negative qualities more quickly than positive adjectives. Similarly, participants who watched a clip with mammy imagery evaluated the African American interviewee with adjectives related to the mammy stereotype.

Research suggests that television viewing can have some influence particularly for young people. Using survey data, Atkin, Greenberg, and McDermott (1983) found that for white adolescents watching shows with largely black casts did not influence their

ideas of black people in real life. However, regardless of the amount of television viewed, when white youth found the actors attractive or active, they were likely to believe that black people were active and attractive in the real world. Using focus group data, Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, and Stevenson (2014) found that black youth are particularly critical and aware of stereotypical images of black women. Participants were shown images of black women in television, film, advertisements and magazines, and found that images of black women were overtly sexual and they were often depicted as caretakers, strong and angry. For participants, the angry black woman was especially prevalent in BET's television show *The Game* (2006-2015) where a prominent character, Tasha Mack, was deemed sassy and rude. Anyiwo, Ward, Fletcher, and Rowley (2018) studied the ways television usage influence black adolescents' beliefs about gender roles and stereotypes about black women. Using survey data, they found while overall television use was not related to endorsing ideas of traditional gender roles, regularly watching television shows with black casts was connected to endorsing ideas of being a strong black woman.

While this research did not focus on the quantity of representation or the effects such representation has on viewers, it is important to note how vital television depictions are in shaping our perceptions, judgements, and attitudes. This research aimed to analyze the quality and equality of black female representation in the current television climate to better understand the types of portrayals that might influence television audiences. As previously noted, sitcoms are the predominant genre of fictionalized black female representation on television. In its mixture of sketch comedy and situational drama as well as its economic and creative suitability for the Hollywood production industry,

sitcoms have been a fixture in American television (Creeber, 2001). Smith-Shomade argues that in sitcom specifically, "television emits and constructs racialized, gendered, sexualized and generational tropes" (p. 25). Further she contends, race frames television, or more specifically, "whiteness reigns as a controlling, dominating, patriarchal, standard-bearing ideology that regulates visual production, influences viewer consumption, and exists without notice or name. In its invisibility, along with blackness, supplies an overarching context and meaning to television representation---especially comedy" (Smith-Shomade, 2001, p. 31). It is from this notion that Smith-Shomade interrogates how black women within the text of sitcoms as well as the within production practices are represented. The emphasis on genre in Smith-Shomade's research works to illustrate the ways the structure, humor, characterization, and production of televised comedy contributes to black representation and black female objectivity. This research similarly aimed to emphasize how genre contributes to black representation and subjectivity. There is a current trend in mainstream network programming to attract African American women audiences through the inclusion of black women leads in both scripted drama and reality television (Umstead, 2015). Given the current trend to program drama, an investigation similar to Smith-Shomade's analysis of sitcoms, into how black women function with the genre is necessary. Looking at black female representation within the framework of primetime soap opera, a rare place for African American representation, produced important distinctions.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Because this study sought to examine representation of black women within primetime soap, an understanding of representation within a framework black feminist ideology along with genre and stereotyping theory is essential.

Representation Theory

For this research, Black Feminist Thought as theory provided a guiding framework for understanding and examining representations of black women. Black feminist thought highlights black women as producers of knowledge (Collins, 2000). As a theory, it acts a response to intersecting and opposing oppressions of race, gender, and class, sexuality, and nationality. Because the experience of black women in America is not monolithic, it focuses on varied responses to universal challenges black women face. BFT uses black women's history with oppression to create a self-defined perspective, one that fosters activism. Similarly, it takes into account shifts in society and differences within societal conditions in order to create fluid knowledge and practices. Its main objective is to create social justice for black women (Collins, 2000). A key component of black feminist thought is examining representation of black women because "controlling images" contribute to systemic class, gender, race, sexual oppression, injustice and subjugation of black women. These controlling images consist of stereotypical representations of black women used to reinforce patriarchal and capitalist agendas. Controlling images explicitly connect black women to either motherhood, performative sexuality or a combination of both. The mammy who lives to nurture and serve dominant groups, the matriarch, the black mother who continuously reproduces and her heads her family to the detriment of black men, the welfare mother who relies on government

assistance to support her family, the jezebel or hoochie who has boundless sexual desire, who seduces had represents deviant sexuality, and finally the Black Lady who is deemed asexual, middle class and encompasses respectability politics. Institutions including the media reproduce and disseminate these representations. Black Feminist Thought considers the ways black women intellectuals and artists negotiate and resist these images (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought as theory has been used in critical investigations of representations of black womanhood in film (Griffin, 2014). In this research, BFT is used as a means to identify oppressive images and to further understand how *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder,* and *Empire* uses and combats such generalizations in the narrative.

The controlling images theorized by Collins can also be situated in an understanding of stereotypes. For Hall (1997) "stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characters, which a represented as fixed by Nature" (p. 257). The use of stereotypes help to uphold systems of power while othering those deemed outside of the norm (Hall, 1997, p.258). In theorizing portrayals of homosexuality in film, Dyer (2012) argues that categorizing things in terms of "role, individual, type and member" helps interpret the world around us (p.275). While types help us explain the world, stereotypes are exclusionary and limit the way people can be characterized (Dyer, 2012).

Genre Theory

Genre is not only a way to categorize different types of media or fiction, but as Glehdill and Ball argue (2013) it "is a system or framework of conventions, expectations, and possibilities" (p. 345). In defining Hollywood film genres Neale (2000) argues that genres,

> consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render individual films, and the elements within them, intelligible and, therefore, explicable. They offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen: a way of working out why particular actions are taking place, why the characters are dressed the way they are, why they look, speak and behave the way they do, and so on (p. 27).

Important to Neale's understanding of genre is the idea of "verisimilitude" or an understanding of what can reasonably and appropriately happen (p. 28). For Neale, verisimilitude can be sociocultural or generic. While generic verisimilitude emphasizes what can reasonably occur within a genre, and sociocultural verisimilitude alludes to what can happen in reality. Both types of verisimilitudes help us make meaning of film (Neal, 2000).

Though Neale's idea of genre references films, it useful in examining other types of media including television. Aside from featuring black women in key roles, *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder,* and *Empire* share many commonalties with genre, primetime-soap opera, being among them. Soap opera is a broad term to categorize long form, serialized drama. With the format's roots in 1930s radio, there are unique cultural and economic values that are associated with the genre (Greeber, 2001). Brown (1994) attributes the style of the soap opera as influenced by the structure of serialized features in women magazines as well as domestic novels that centered on family life. Following

World War II, radio began to court female listeners, recognizing its importance in the daily lives of women who were largely excluded from the work force (Brown, 1994). Thought to be the pioneer of radio soaps, Irna Phillips created a fifteen minute *Painted Dreams* for WGN, a Chicago radio station as a means to venture into daytime radio serials. Due to sponsorship conflicts, Phillips left *Painted Dreams* and went on to produce *Today's Children*, a program that would later broadcast on NBC, sponsored by Pillsbury to surprising success (Allen, 1985). Along with Pillsbury, Proctor & Gamble conducted market research and found that women preferred entertainment while fulfilling domestic duties. Using serial narratives to sell products, Proctor & Gamble hired writers Frank and Anne Hummert to appeal to women, which proved to be essential in maintaining and creating new products during the Great Depression (Allen, 1985). Thus, the term soap opera, sudser or, washboard weeper derives from the tradition of home good manufacturers using serial narratives to promote products. As advertisers and audiences moved from radio to television, Proctor & Gamble was one of the first companies to produce a soap for television, a need caused by increasing competition in the synthetic laundry detergent market (Allen, 1985). In the 1950s, as daytime television proved viable for the medium, so did serialized narratives. Programs like *The Guiding Light, a Proctor & Gamble produced show, The Search for Tomorrow,* and *Love of Life,* proved to be mainstays on network television for decades (Allen, 1985). Brown (1994) notes that as women's lives evolved outside of the home, so did the lives of soap opera characters. By the 1970s, most soaps incorporated an hour-long format, leading to more complex storylines and characters. By the 1980s, shows began adding young characters opening up the genre to younger audiences as well as male viewers (Brown, 1994).

Despite its daytime roots, soap opera as a genre as extends beyond daytime television. While other primetime dramas are often serialized, there are distinct conventions within primetime soap shared with daytime soap. In Jane Feuer's (1992) examination of primetime serials, *Dynasty* and *Dallas* she argues that daytime soap and primetime melodramas are more alike than dissimilar in theme and in their use of multiple narrative plot lines and uninterrupted narrative. 1964's *Peyton Place*, a drama that aired twice a week, is credited as the first primetime soap, launching melodrama in primetime television (Creeber, 2001). *Dallas*, which aired on CBS in 1978, has become synonymous with the modern primetime soap. Featuring multiple characters, story arcs, and grand fashion, *Dallas* influenced both daytime and primetime television. It aired 356 episodes, ran in twenty countries, and spawned a spinoff show, *Knots Landing*, and influenced imitators including *Dynasty, Falcon Crest,* and *Flamingo Road* (Creeber, 2001). *Dallas* was often criticized for its over-the-top, unrealistic storylines which often characterized the genre; however, Ien Ang's (1985) classic work on the show found that found that viewers of Dallas connected with the show because of its emotional realism. Feur argues that primetime soaps like *Dallas* incorporate excess both in aesthetics and in ideology.

Given its history, one of the distinguishing features of soap opera and soap opera in genre theory is the connection to a female viewer. Pointing to the way soaps asks spectators to multitask in their identification with multiple protagonists and follow an always evolving narrative structure, Tania Modleski (1979) argues that soap operas produce spectators as an "ideal mother: who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her

family" (p.14). For Modleski, the narrative within a soap constructs a viewer. Implicit in her argument, however, is the viewer's understanding of motherhood and family, concepts that are often socially derived. This implication complicates the idea of a gendered audience. In Charlotte Brunsdon's (1981) examination of British soap opera *Crossroads*, she ties the two notions Modleski presents together. Brunsdon contends soap opera as exemplified by *Crossroads*, "textually implies a feminine viewer to the extent that its textual discontinuities, in order to make sense, require a viewer competent within the ideological and moral frameworks (the rules) of romance, marriage and family life to make sense of it" (p. 37). For Brunsdon, knowing the conventions of the genre, understanding the narratives within the show, and most importantly as it relates to gender, having "cultural knowledge of the socially acceptable codes and conventions for the conduct of personal life" is key component for soap audiences. Adding to the idea of female spectatorship within soap opera, Kuhn (1984) makes a distinction between the spectator and the social audience. The spectator "is a subject constituted in signification, interpellated by the…TV text" while the social audience are the individuals who collectively view a program (Kuhn, 1984, p. 23). Spectatorship deals with actively reading and making meaning out of text whereas social audience "emphasizes the status of cinema and television as social and economic institutions" (Kuhn, 1984, 23). When social audiences begin to interpret or make meaning out of texts they become a spectator. In Kuhn's estimation, soap operas assume a social audience who is already socially constructed as female while at the same addressing a female spectator. And as such, "women-as well as being *for* such representations-are in a sense also formed *by* them" (p. 24). While Mittell (2015) rejects

the notion of the primetime soap, arguing that soap opera and primetime drama have distinct norms, production styles and modes of viewing, he argues that serialization and melodrama make them similar. Of melodrama and serialization as they relate to soap, he argues that while these conventions are not "inherently 'feminine,'" these "narrative modes have been discursively linked to female practices as to signify a nonessential yet significantly gendered cultural realm" (Mittell, 2015, p. 274).

For this study, Kuhn and Brunsdon's ideas are essential as they present slightly different notions of the female spectator. Kuhn emphasizes how spectators are constructed through texts while Brunsdon focuses on the way spectators are constructed through culture, both provide useful frameworks in understanding how black female subjectivity can be achieved within primetime soap opera. Using Brunsdon's three categories of knowledge needed to understand soaps' as a gendered audience, this research examined how *Scandal, HTGAWM,* and *Empire*, primetime soap assumes a black female an understanding of black womanhood. Given soap opera's reliance on talk and plots that focus on relationships, this research analyzed the use of dialogue and the dialogue itself along with characters' interpersonal relationships for an understanding of how these primetime soaps assume a black female audience and allow subjectivity within the text.

CHAPTER IV: METHOD

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How are *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* categorized as primetime soap operas?
2. How are black women represented in primetime soap operas?
3. To what extent do soap conventions perpetuate or dismantle stereotypical representations of black women?
4. How is black identity portrayed in primetime soap?

To answer these questions, this study used textual analysis with specific analytical emphasis on genre. Using Brennan's (2013) notion of text, "texts are things that we make meaning from," which can include visual images and sound from film and television (p. 193). In this context, *Scandal*, *HTGAWM*, and *Empire* serve as text to understand representation within genre. Genre analysis can be beneficial because it "situates texts within textual and social contexts, underlining the social nature of the production and reading of texts" (Chandler, 1997, p. 10). Genre, as Brennan (2013) posits, "helps us to distinguish, evaluate, and make sense of various types of media products. Within each genre there are narrative and aesthetic conventions that reproduce and reinforce a system of beliefs about our social reality" (p. 203-204). McKee (2003) contends that genre functions "by providing conventions which allow efficient communication between producers and audiences" (p. 95). Genre analysis is best suited for this research as it sought to understand how conventions of soap opera may or may not support preexisting

notions, or as Collins theorizes "controling images," of black femininity and as well as how soaps with black leads present black identity and subjectivity.

Sample and Operationalization

Scandal, HTGAWM, and *Empire* were chosen because each feature a prominent black female character, starring Kerry Washington, Viola Davis, and Taraji P. Henson, respectively. Each show has consistently ranked within the top twenty most watched scripted shows within the 18-49-year-old demographic (de Mores, 2017; de Mores & Hipes, 2018). Beyond their wide audience reach, each show adheres to soap opera conventions. Soap opera's conventions include plots that deal with hidden secrets, infidelity, family relations and social issues. There are often many, interconnected narratives, many roles for women and feature characters of different backgrounds (Gledhill & Ball, 2013). They are heavily serialized and utilize the cliffhanger (Gledhill & Ball, 2013; Seiter & Wilson, 2005). Three shows were selected versus one because as Mitchell argues (2004) "Generic categories are intertextual and, hence, operate more broadly than within the bounded realm of a media text" (p. 10). To get a comprehensive view of the characters and world of each show, seven seasons of *Scandal*, five seasons of *HTGAWM*, and five seasons of *Empire* were viewed, totaling two-hundred and eighty-three episodes. Each episode was examined to find common themes. Those themes were documented on colored notecards and grouped together. Similarly, instances or references to black identity were similarly noted on notes and notecards to find patterns. Those patterns were grouped together to determine if they were implicit (subtle or non-spoken) or explicit (spoken aloud or directly referenced).

To determine how black femininity is represented in primetime soap, this study analyzed the frequency and context in which characters in each show can be categorized as a jezebel, a mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, or The Black Lady as defined by Collins idea of controlling images. To better understand how black identity is portrayed in primetime soap, this study analyzed if and how race is both implicitly and explicitly mentioned by characters within the show. Given that cultural knowledge and social realness are key components of understanding genre, and more specifically understanding soap as a gendered genre connected to female identity, dialogue, costume, setting, and set design were analyzed to determine the cultural cues of black female identity present. To determine the extent that conventions of primetime soap perpetuate and dismantle stereotypical depictions of black women, this research analyzed and identified instances of stereotypical depictions in relation to genre conventions such as heavy emphasis on talk, heightened and melodramatic plot, and characters' interpersonal relationships. It also analyzed and considered the ways conventions might lead to nuanced representation.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

This research aimed to understand how black women are represented in three broadcast television shows: *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder* (*HTGAWM*) and *Empire.* Specifically, this study explored how the classification of these programs as primetime soap operas shapes and perpetuates particular representations of black women. Soap opera conventions, such as heavy emphasis on talk and melodrama, create nuanced representation of black women. Moreover, this genre helps provide some subjectivity to characters; however, sensational plot overtakes character development and sometimes leads to reactive characterization. As primetime soap opera, *Scandal*, *HTGAWM*, and *Empire* perpetuate old stereotypes like the matriarch and jezebel, while also creating new images of black femininity.

Scandal, *HTGAWM*, and *Empire* as Soap Opera

The first question asks how are *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* categorized as primetime soap operas? Using genre theorists' understanding of soap opera conventions, the three programs were analyzed for their genre classification. According to Neale (1999), soap operas utilize similar narrative structure, character types, and plots, while emphasizing melodrama and talk. Across the three shows, these characteristics emerge, suggesting the distinct "generic verisimilitude" of the prime-time soap opera (Neale, 1999, p. 28). It is these characteristics that help situate each show among the genre.

Plots. The plots that drive *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* are not only similar in substance, but are also influenced by soap opera storytelling. Soap operas have plots involving "fallings out between family and community members, jealousies, infidelities, dirty dealings, hidden secrets and their exposure" (Gledhill and Ball, 2013, p. 348). Dirty

dealings and hidden secrets, particularly as it relates to murder, are plot points in the three shows studied. Murder is most central on *HTGAWM*, which sets up the world of the show through this lens. The eponymous name is a section of a first-year law class taught by the main protagonist Annalise Keating. In *HTGAWM*, three murders are central to the plot of the pilot episode and help setup the world of the show. The first murder plot, which also acts a procedural element of the show, involves Annalise acting a defense attorney. The second murder plot, which becomes one of the through lines of the season, is that of Lilia, Annalise's husband Sam's former student. The last murder plot, which is also a through line told through flash-forwards, is revealed to be Sam, Annalise's husband (Norwalk & Offer, 2014). While the first murder plot works to setup character background (showing Annalise at work), the other murder plots establish ongoing mysteries, storytelling that relies on intrigue and suspense. Although suspenseful plot is not exclusive to soap opera, the suspense, underscored by the reveal of the murdered, in *HTGAWM* works to establish continuous storytelling, a hallmark of soap opera plotting. Unlike other genres, like procedural crime drama, *HGTAWM* is less interested in the resolution of the murder plot or the intricacies of solving the murder in the first episode. Given that no crime has been solved in the pilot, murder as plot in this context is about the questions it brings forth for the audience or the secrets characters are keeping from each other, including who killed Sam and why? Through quick reveals and the relational proximity of characters to the murdered, murder plotting in *HTGAWM* establishes a sense of sensational storytelling or melodrama, another key aspect of soap opera. In *Empire* and *Scandal*, murder plots are less central to the plot of each pilot but are present. In *Scandal*, crisis manager Olivia Pope is presented with helping a client who is wrongly accused of

killing his girlfriend (Rhimes & McGuigan, 2012). *Scandal*'s murder storyline serves as a case-of-the-week, or procedural plot, likening it to a crime procedural due its neat resolution. However, as the case unfolds quickly through Olivia's ability to persuade, like *HTGAWM*, *Scandal*'s murder plot works to highlight the main protagonist as exceptionally skillful at her job, providing character background. The revelation that the accused murderer's alibi involves a secret relationship with a man adds a sensationalized twist, closely aligning the murder storyline to soap opera storytelling. In *Empire,* Cookie Lyon's, ex-husband is blackmailed for his involvement in prior murders and subsequently shoots his blackmailer (Daniel & Strong, 2015). The murder in *Empire* is not about the crime itself as the event has no resolution and is only tangentially tied to other characters and plot points. Instead, it acts as a point of intrigue for the following episodes.

Along with murder, *HTGAWM* and *Scandal* have C-plots that center on affairs. In the first episode, *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope is tasked with helping the married president, her former lover, deal with an allegation of an affair. In *HTGAWM*, Annalise is caught by one of her law students having an affair with one of her witnesses (Norwalk & Offer, 2014). Like the murder plots, affairs in both shows lean into soap not simply through substance, but also by using narrative structures that prioritize continuation of story over resolution and melodramatic tone.

Narrative Structure. *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* all share a similar narrative structure, a framework that is associated with soap opera. These narrative structures allow their plots, like murder and affairs, to comply with other genre conventions. Soap opera's narrative structure is characterized by "multiple and interweaving storylines" (Gledhill and Ball, 2013). Serialization or the sense of a "never-

ending story" also helps to define its narrative structure (Gledhill and Ball, 2013, p.364). Serialization in these three soaps is achieved in part through the cliffhanger or as Nussbaum (2012) describes "a climax half cracked" (para 4). *Empire* and *Scandal*'s pilots have some resolution and are less suspenseful than *HTGAWM*; however, cliffhangers are an integral part in their act breaks. In *Empire,* musical cues help emphasize each act break's cliffhanger. Act one of *Empire* ends with Cookie, who has recently been released from prison, forebodingly announcing, "I'm here to get what's mine" (Daniel & Strong, 2015). Instrumental strings crescendo, helping bring intensity to her statement and to conclude the first act (Daniel & Strong, 2015). Similarly, in *Scandal* the third act ends after Olivia menacingly warns an alleged mistress not come forward about the affair. Swarming instrumental music helps end the act with suspense. Details of Olivia's affair with the president remain unclear in the pilot of *Scandal*, but an unexpected kiss during a tense exchange between the pair help reveal a complicated history. While the reveal of the affair is not used as a cliffhanger, it is a loose end in the pilot, indicating a serialized plot point. Of the three shows *HTGAWM* ends with the most traditional cliffhanger, concluding with the revelation that Annalise's students, who throughout the episode via flash-forward are frantically trying to cover up a murder, are burning her husbands' dead body. The episode ends with a close-up of Sam's face, his body wrapped up in a rug, with fast cut flashes of their relationship (Norwalk & Offer, 2014). The use of flash-forwards and fast cuts emphasizes the unexpected nature of the reveal while building anticipation for the show's untold stories. Beyond the longstanding business model that necessitates and generates advertising revenue through narrative patterns like cliffhangers and continuous storytelling, the lack of finality in these three

shows' narrative structure produces storytelling with constant surprises, complex plotting, detailed characterization, and melodrama, all staples of soap opera structure.

Melodrama. The types of plot and narrative structure that define soap opera are highlighted by melodrama, which is used in all three pilots. While melodrama is not exclusive to soap opera, it is connected to the genre (Feur, 1984). Melodrama can be characterized "by chance happenings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversations, last minute rescues, and revelations, *deus ex machina* endings" (Neale, 1986, p. 6). Its narratives are also defined by "continual surprises, sensational developments, constant violations in the established direction of events" (Neale, 1986, p. 6). Melodramatic work is less concerned with realism and has "an excess of effect over cause" (Neale, 1986, p. 7). The emphasis on effect versus cause and lack of realism is seen in the second scene of *Scandal's* pilot where Olivia and one of her associates negotiate with "Ukrainian mobsters" who want six million dollars in exchange for a package (Rhimes & McGuigan, 2012). Olivia very quickly negotiates the sum down to three million and leaves with the package, which is later revealed to contain a baby (Rhimes & McGuigan, 2012). There is little context given for why Olivia is a key player in this hostage situation, why the mobsters presumably kidnapped the baby, or what happens to the baby or mobsters subsequently. The scene is less concerned with the realism of hostage negotiations, but instead works to highlight and introduce Olivia in her role as a skilled crisis manager. In *Scandal*, the conventional soap opera plot of the affair between Olivia and the president is revealed in melodramatic fashion: the coincidence of the use of a pet name, "sweet baby," for multiple women (Rhimes & McGuigan, 2012). The pilot of *HTGAWM* uses melodrama less than both *Scandal* and *Empire;* however, the

flash-forward reveal of Sam as the dead body situates itself as soap through not only the cliffhanger, but the element of surprise in seeing Annalise's husband as the murdered. The revelation that Annalise's partner in the affair is also a key witness in a case she is defending provides the type of shock and coincidence characterized by melodrama (Norwalk, 2012). *Empire* leans heavily into melodrama. Like *Scandal*'s affair, the murder in *Empire's* pilot takes a melodramatic cue when Cookie's ex-husband, Lucious, CEO of *Empire* records, unexpectedly kills Bunkie, a character who is introduced early in the episode as Lucious' longtime confidante. Although Bunkie betrays Lucious later in the episode, given Lucious' role as CEO of *Empire* and a reformed criminal, the murder is surprising and sudden (Daniels & Strong, 2015). Lucious continues to provide melodrama in the pilot through his homophobia and disapproval of Jamal; his gay son. In the present, through the use of homophobic slurs and lectures about Jamal's sexuality, it clear that Lucious is anti-gay. However, it is highlighted in a more shocking manner via flashback when Lucious angrily throws a young Jamal in a trashcan when he sees his son playing in high heels and a headscarf (Daniels and Strong, 2015). The action displays the sensationalism of melodrama while also highlighting the horror and tragedy of homophobia.

Character Types. Along with melodrama and serialized story structure, soap opera can be distinguished by diverse characters. *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* each feature varied character types. Character type in soap defined by Gledhill and Ball (2013) include "multiple and diverse characters across the social spectrum; many female roles, including older women" (p. 348). *Scandal* introduces eleven characters in four different storylines. Five characters are women. *Empire* introduces twelve characters in six

storylines while *HTGAWM* introduces thirteen characters in four storylines. *Empire's* pilot features a predominately all black cast with four women.

Talk. *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* prominently feature talk, a significant feature of soap opera which can be as characterized as "social action" or "conversation, gossip, dissection of personal and moral issues" (Gledhill and Ball, 2013, p. 368). Previous literature connects soap opera to a female audience (Modelski, 1979; Brunsdon, 1981; Feur, 1984). Because of the notion that social talk is feminine, talk in soap opera influences the idea of soap as a gendered genre (Gledhill and Ball, 2013). Each shows' pilots have a heavy emphasis on monologue, dialogue, and talk as action. The first two scenes of *Scandal* use fast-paced conversations to introduce characters. The first scene is set in a bar, a location primed for conversation. The second scene begins in an elevator where two characters discuss an engagement before negotiations with mobsters (Rhimes & McGugian, 2012). The third scene is set in Olivia's office where she and her associates discuss a new case, and in a monologue, spliced with clips of Olivia and her team interrogating a new client, Olivia explains to her new hire how her office works. The walk and talk made popular by writer Aaron Sorkin where characters walk while having conversation, typically providing exposition, is seen on three occasions in the pilot (VanDerWerff, 2006; Rhimes, 2012). Similarly, *HTGAWM*'s lecture hall, law office, and courtroom settings provide the backdrop for heavy conversation. Before the reveal of Sam's murder, the flash-forward sequence involves heavy conversation, mainly arguing, between law students regarding what to do with the body and how to establish solid alibis. The musical element of *Empire* reduces the time characters spend talking, but the

pilot's use of the boardroom, offices, parties, and luxury homes provide settings where the social action of talk occurs.

By themselves, the features that help define soap, salacious plot, serialized narrative structure, melodrama, heavy talk and diverse character types are not exclusive to soap opera and can be seen in many modern television genres including procedural television like crime and medical drama, as well as science-fiction, and period drama. *Scandal* and *HTGAWM* have aspects of a procedural with a case-of-the week in the pilot. However, those procedural elements utilize melodrama to tell the story. When these conventions are used concurrently and prominently, as they are in these three shows, they shape soap opera as a distinct television category. The use of these conventions in *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* exemplify how these characteristics build on each other to further shape the genre. Plots like murder and affairs are developed using melodramatic flourishes and serialized story frameworks. Together, they produce "generic verisimilitude" by creating expectations of what happens in primetime soap opera (Neale, 1997, p. 28). More specifically these conventions in these three shows create an understanding of what can happen to black women in primetime soap.

Stereotyping in Three Primetime Soaps

The second question asks how are black women portrayed in primetime soap opera? In each show, two prominent stereotypes or "controlling images" persists within the depiction of the main protagonists: the jezebel and the matriarch. An emphasis on work within each show gives way to a new image of black women: the professionally revered woman.

The Jezebel. The jezebel stereotype is portrayed through the affairs in *Scandal* and *HTGAWM*. The jezebel stereotype dates back to slavery and is characterized by the idea of black women as a “whore” or sexually aggressive, a notion that provided a justification for slave owners to sexually abuse black female slaves. (Collins, 2009, p. 271). Beyond the pilot, when it is revealed that she had an affair with the president, their relationship acts as a will they/won’t they plot device, a storytelling mechanism that centers on the romantic tension of two characters throughout the series (McNear, 2018; Bans & Verica 2012a; Rhimes & Dawson, 2012; Mitchell & Zisk, 2015). In *Scandal’s* case, that tension is largely sexual. Olivia is regularly portrayed as being unable to resist his sexual advances even during conflict and while realizing their relationship is not good for either of them (Rhimes & Dawson, 2012; Bans & Verica, 2012ba; Wilding & Verica, 2013; Wilding & DuVernay, 2013; Rhimes & Verica, 2015a; Fernandez & Okada, 2018). While this tension can be read as star-crossed lovers, her inability to resist his sexual advances perpetuates the idea of black woman tied to overt and excessive sexuality while also putting into question her sexual agency, likening her to a jezebel. *Scandal* complicates the jezebel image by showing instances of genuine love between the two. Fitz is seen professing his love for Olivia (Rhimes &Dawson, 2012; Van Dusen & Bokelberg, 2013), viewing her as his equal (Van Dusen & Bokelberg, 2013; Mohammed & Verica, 2014), and staging grand romantic gestures (Wilding & DurVernay, 2013; Fish, 2015; Van Dusen & King, 2015). However, those instances of romance are often emphasized by sex or heavy kissing, which puts the focus on the sexual nature of their relationship, creating a tension that once again appears more sexual than romantic.

Olivia is viewed as an object of sexual desire by other characters within the show. When news of the president's affair threatens to become exposed publicly and the president plans his resignation, his wife, Mellie Grant, scolds Olivia, "You let that girl into his pants. You left the team, Liv. You fell down on the job. You broke his heart. You left him open, and vulnerable, and helpless...I do my job. Why couldn't you do yours?" (Rhimes & Dawson, 2012). The implication is that Olivia's role is expected to stretch far beyond typical White House personnel. The expectation is that her job includes fulfilling his sexual and romantic desires, adding to Olivia's status as a jezebel. Olivia is often referred to as a whore by Mellie, which serves an insult and a reminder of Olivia's status as a jezebel (Fish & Bokelberg, 2013; Rhimes & Verica, 2013). Ultimately, downplaying the companionship between the pair and showcasing the protagonist's main romantic relationship as largely sexual, and in some cases connected to her job, reinforces the sexual objectification connected to the jezebel stereotype.

On the surface, in *HTGAWM* the jezebel stereotype can be read through the depiction of Annalise's affair with Nate. She appears unapologetic about their relationship, referring to him as her boyfriend to one of her students (Nowalk & Offer, 2014). The implication is that their relationship is fundamentally sexual and that Annalise is largely concerned with sex. While that is sometimes true, her relationship with Nate proves to be more complicated and strategic, as it helps provide an alibi for a murder as well as providing comfort in distressing times (Nowalk, 2015, Nowalk, 2016). It is through the relationship with her husband that jezebel imagery flourishes. During a fight, after Annalise becomes aware of his affair with his student and suspicious of his

involvement in her murder, Annalise confronts Sam with the revelation of her own affair. They have a tense, violent exchange,

> **Annalise**: His name is Nate, and boy is he good to me. He knows me. Just what I like and how I like it. He knows how to make me scream and groan and sweat. And so I let him take me wherever he wants. On this counter. On My desk. In our bed...**Sam**: [*While keeping Annalise in a chokehold*] You're nothing but a piece of ass. That's what I saw when I first I talked to you in the office that day. Cause I knew you'd put out. That's all you're really good for. Dirty, rough sex that I'm too ashamed to tell anyone about. That's how foul you are, you disgusting slut (Foley, Swafford & D'elia, 2014).

The impetus of their relationship as Sam explains is built upon viewing Annalise as sexually aggressive, which is made all the more complicated by the fact that her husband is a white man, contributing to the decades old idea that white men use black women only for their bodies and sexuality (Collins, 2000). This dialogue could be read as partners provoking one another in the heat of the moment. Nonetheless, framing Annalise as sexually promiscuous and providing background information tying the beginnings of their relationship to sex in this manner paints a picture of a black woman as sexually deviant. Making the exchange more problematic is Annalise's willingness to engage with Sam in this manner as well as the lack of rebuttal regarding the start of their relationship, which reads as a sense of acceptance or internalization of Sam's words about her womanhood.

The perception of being sexually deviant by significant others is also evident on *Empire* despite Cookie not being involved in an affair in seasons one through four. Cookie's ex-husband Lucious of refers to her as a "hoodrat" on multiple occasions, a slang term originally used to describe poor, sexually promiscuous women (Strong, Chaiken, & Daniels, 2015a; Haywood, Rodriguez & Brewer, 2017). Beyond, significant

others, Cooke is referred to as a hoodrat by other characters within the show. On a first date with a councilman to the opera, an out of place Cookie, as noted by her attire of a short, red bodycon dress in contrast to opera goers donning conservative evening gowns, overhears a group of women calling her a hoodrat. She embraces the title, confronting them by stating "You're gonna wish you never met a hoodrat like me" (Pyken, Locke, & Culpepper, 2016). Given that in earlier seasons Cookie has few sexual interactions, especially outside of a committed relationship, there is no true basis for the term hoodrat to be employed. Its use without meaningful context or evidence that she is sexually promiscuous, implies that she naturally embodies characteristics of the term. Cookie doesn't have to *do* anything to be deemed a hoodrat. The audience can assume by nature of her being a black woman, she simply *is*. By the end of the fifth season, *Empire* more fully embraces the jezebel stereotype when in the penultimate episode, a remarried Cookie engages in an extramarital affair with a man that she has had an ongoing flirtatious relationship with after she believes her husband has cheated on her (James, James, Johnson & Mcrane, 2019). That she eventually engages in an extramarital affair to spite her husband, weaponizes her sexuality, likening it to a tool similar to that of the perception of black women's sexuality during slavery. It is important to note that Cookie has sexual agency, and her choices are her own. While her depiction does conjure jezebel imagery, there is a sense of control not afforded to black woman and depictions of black female sexuality in the past. Nonetheless, by deploying the term hoodrat in such a manner and using Cookie's sexuality for revenge, *Empire* does little skirt the notion of black woman as inherently sexually aggressive.

The Matriarch. *Empire* prominently portrays the matriarch, or the aggressive, bad mother (Collins, 2000). The pilot episode establishes a poor relationship between Cookie and her youngest son Hakeem who resents her for her prison stint. In the first episode, feeling disrespected after Hakeem talks back to her and calls her a "bitch," she beats him with a broom (Daniels & Strong, 2015). Similarly, in a season two-episode Cookie beats Hakeem when he refuses to reverse a boardroom vote to remove Lucious as CEO (Strong & Strong, 2016). After a fallout due to his involvement in a hostile takeover of Empire Records, she slaps her middle child Jamal twice before seemingly ending their relationship (Strong, Chaiken, & Daniels, 2015b). When trying to mediate a dispute between her two sons over a recording, she yells at Jamal, "Get your narrow ass back up here, boy. Don't you ever walk away from me" before grabbing him by his face and threatening, "If you are afraid of getting on the wrong side of your daddy, you don't want to get on the wrong side of your mama" (Allen, Rodriguez & Peebles, 2017). She ends the exchange with a kiss on the cheek followed by a slap to the face. Although these actions are blatantly aggressive and violent, these moments are often scored with upbeat music or sometimes dramatic instrumentals, showing Cookie as audacious and unapologetic as if to be lauded by the audience. In doing so, it normalizes these aggressive actions as commonplace actions of black mothering.

Cookie's abrasive interactions extend beyond her children. She is depicted slapping and punching the significant others of her loved ones during disagreements over business (Strong, Chaiken & Daniels, 2015; Locke, Spellman & Shelton, 2017). She slaps a man she is dating when he fights with Hakeem (Spellman & Singleton, 2015). She throws a shoe at her ex-husband during a disagreement about signing a rapper with a bad

public image (Strong, Chaiken & Strong, 2015a). In a dispute over the future of the company, Cookie takes a bat to Empire's awards and framed records (Hawywood, Rodriguez & Brewer, 2017). Together these moments portray Cookie as a forceful, calculating businesswoman while at the same time being hostile and confrontational, ultimately contributing to the depiction of black femininity connected to aggression.

Similar to Cookie, although Annalise does not have biological children, *HTGAWM* depicts her as the matriarch to her law students often going to extreme lengths to protect them while at the same time causing them great emotional distress. This is best exemplified by her relationship to Wes, the aforementioned law student who catches Annalise having an affair and who is responsible for killing her husband (Foley, Swafford & D'elia, 2014). It is revealed throughout the series that Annalise and Wes' relationship dates back to his childhood when Annalise is hired as the defense attorney in a case where his mother is coerced to testify against his father who raped her. Wes' mother commits suicide in front of Annalise only before requesting that Annalise take care of her son (Foley, Leonard & Leonard, 2016). Wes eventually ends up in the foster care system. Feeling guilty in her role in his mother's death, Annalise gets Wes off the waitlist at the law school where she teaches, and he is chosen among the group of law students to intern with Annalise (Foley, 2015; Nowalk 2017). In flashbacks, it is revealed that Annalise tried to adopt him (Robinson & Nowlan, 2017). After Wes' death, during an AA meeting, Annalise best describes their complicated relationship:

> I hurt him in ways that I couldn't admit in this room. I just couldn't leave him alone. And I know why...I just couldn't keep him out of my head. I mean, I would worry if he did his homework or if he had any friends. And on Christmas it would just make me sick worrying if he had any presents. I told myself to stay away. What was broken in me was broken. No one could fix it, and then I did the

> opposite. I took him into my life, into my home. He needed someone to look after him, someone to love him, and I wanted to be that person. I wanted to protect him. I tried to so hard. All I did was ruin him. I mean if I had just left him alone he would have been fine, but I just- I just wanted to- I wanted to love him. I wanted to hold him tight. I wanted to keep him safe. This boy my student who was really just a stranger to me. That's a lie. He wasn't just a stranger. He felt...He felt...He felt like my son. He felt like my son because he was. He was my son (Norwalk, 2017).

As Annalise describes, she is not a great mother figure in Wes' life. While she tried to nurture and protect him, throughout their time on screen, their relationship is filled with betrayal and discord. She views herself as the source of his failure and what has gone wrong in his life. Though one might argue that Annalise's emotion about Wes can be read as extreme guilt or self-deprecation, it also paints the picture of her as lacking maternal instincts ultimately contributing to the depiction of black women as bad mothers.

Professionally Revered. Beyond the negative controlling images that have influenced portrayals of black women, soap opera presents a more favorable update to one of the most prevailing, demeaning stereotypes: the welfare mother. The welfare mother is typified by the idea of black women as lazy and dependent on the government for support (Collins, 2000). In primetime soap, black women are depicted as extraordinarily hardworking and highly revered in their profession with high economic status. In each soap, each main character is lauded and envied for their skills in the workforce. Together, these depictions portray black women as highly competent, extremely savvy and often smarter than their peer group. The professionally revered black woman reframes black femininity, and like the welfare mother, ties class and work ethic together.

Of the three shows, *Scandal* most situates Olivia as upper class, having attended prestigious boarding schools and Ivy League universities (Fish & Zuentes, 2015). Her wealth, displayed by designer handbags and luxury cars (Fish & Zuentes, 2015), could be read as generational given her background. However, an audience can ascertain that her connections to and work with the world's most powerful also contributes to her wealth. Beyond working with the White House, Olivia's clientele is among the most elite, representing billionaires, U.S. ambassadors and U.S. senators who recognize how powerful she is (Rhimes & McGuigan, 2012; Noah, 2012). The first scene of *Scandal*'s pilot sets up Olivia Pope as someone reputable whose name carries weight. Using a secondary character as the audience's guide to understand the world of the show, Quinn, is offered a job to work for "The Olivia Pope" who according to Harrison, one of Olivia's associates, "is as amazing as they say" (Rhimes & McGuigan, 2012). When Quinn meets Olivia, she is star struck, stating. "can I just say that I am a huge fan? I so admire your work in the White House. It is an honor to work for your law firm" (Rhimes & McGuigan, 2012). Despite a tenuous relationship, her father describes her as "The formidable Olivia Pope" (McGhee & Verica, 2013). Beyond the characters in the show knowing Olivia's reputation, Olivia herself recognizes that she is highly skilled, stating, "I'm very good at my job (Mitchell & Dawson, 2012). When trying to convince a senate candidate to hire her and that her opinion matters, Olivia states "I think you have promise. Do you know why that matters? That I think you have promise? Because I'm Olivia Pope" (Bans & Bokelberg, 2014). Similarly, when trying to convince Fitz to let her handle the PR when their affair threatens to become exposed, Olivia tells him, "I am very good at what I do. I am better at it than anybody else. That's not arrogance. That's

fact. And I am definitely better than you and your boys at the White House. You need me if you're going to survive this" (Byrne & Tinker, 2013). Along with characters who routinely talk about or reference Olivia's professional dominance, *Scandal* shows Olivia regularly winning cases. This is especially true in early seasons of *Scandal*, which have elements of a procedural. We see Olivia winning cases even when the odds are stacked against her (Rhimes & McGuigan, 2012; Byrne & Underwood, 2012; Mitchell & Dawson 2012; Bans & Verica, 2012a; Fish & Tinker, 2012; Bans &, Zisk 2013; Byrne. 2013). Later seasons move away from a case of the week format as Olivia's life becomes the source of *Scandal*, but she continues to have professional wins (Mitchell & Brown, 2014, Byrne & McCrane, 2015; Rhimes & Verica, 2015a).

Similar to the start of *Scandal*, the pilot of *HTGAWM* introduces Annalise as a rigorous law professor who is "a better defense attorney" than a Supreme Court justice (Norwalk, 2014). When Annalise wins a difficult case with an unreliable witness, an awestricken student states, "I want to be her," setting up a world where the main character is admired due to her skill and exceptional at her job (Norwalk &, Offer 2014). Like Olivia Pope, Annalise is regularly seen winning difficult cases often using unconventional or unscrupulous means (Nowalk & D'Elia,2015a; Bellomo, 2014; Foley, 2014; Bellomo, Leonard & Kattleman, 2015; Norwalk & D'Elia, 2015b; Fazzio, 2016). Like *Scandal*'s portrayal, her reputation precedes her. A co-council who is initially doubtful of Annalise's legal prowess, says of her, "Was she ever good at her job? People say she was an animal in court. Her closings were infamous" (Russo & Smith, 2017). In the same episode, Annalise says of herself, "I'm good. You know that" (Russo & Smith, 2017). After her license is suspended, and she faces disbarment, her reputation is barely

tarnished as she continues to win cases, showing that despite a professional downturn, Annalise continues to be a powerhouse (Robinson & Fuentes, 2016). *Empire* does not have a procedural element; however, the soap portrays Cookie as a jack-of-all trades who is highly instinctual and street smart, which helps her succeed at business. An early season two episode encapsulates Cookie's ability to handle all aspects of the music industry by showing her choreograph, train and rearrange a girl group, produce music, manage her youngest son's media rounds, strategically bombard a competitors' party (Locke & Brewer, 2015). Her professional instincts are depicted through her ability to make quick decisions like her ability to produce a song via text and plan a music concert on a whim (Escajeda & White, 2015). Along with having great instincts, Cookie is often depicted as providing strategy to get her family's business out of tough situations (Strong, Chaiken & Daniels, 2015; Spellman, Allen & Hamari, 2016; Allen, Houston & Davis, 2018). Her wealth is signified by an extensive fur collection, luxury cars, and mansions.

Both *HTGAWM* and *Empire* have a more nuanced look at work and class in comparison to *Scandal*, having plots where their main characters lose their fortunes and work hard to get them back (Mahoney, Houston & Hamri, 2018; Nowalk & Cragg, 2018). As a major player in the music industry, Cookie is treated like a celebrity within the world of the show, casting real life celebrities playing versions of themselves who see Cookie as a peer (Strong & Chaiken, 2015). While Annalise grew up poor and seemingly distanced herself from her family as she became wealthy and successful (Nowalk & D'Elia, 2017), Cookie's wealth stems from her exploits as a drug dealer, wealth she later used to create Empire Records. (Daniels & Strong, 2015). In both cases where wealth is lost, unlike the welfare mother who relies on government assistance, both women use

strategy and hard work to attain their wealth and reputations back. It should be noted that in *Empire's* case, although they have seemingly lost money, Cookie continues to have wealth, living in a mansion and employing domestic workers (Mahoney et al., 2018), maintaining an upper-class lifestyle.

Stereotyping Through Soap Opera Conventions.

The third question asks to what extent do soap opera conventions perpetuate or dismantle stereotypical representations of black women in *Empire, Scandal*, and *HTGAWM*? While stereotypical depictions like the matriarch and jezebel are evident, soap opera's emphasis on talk help provide some nuance to black female representation. More specifically, talk in primetime soap provide black female characters the ability to express points of views that add humanity to their characterization and lessen the impact of caricature and stereotype. On each show, black women characters, particularly the main protagonists, are provided perspective building monologue and heavy dialogue. In a three minute and fourteen second speech, a season five episode of *Scandal*, exemplifies the ways monologue aide in providing humanity to a character that embodies the jezebel stereotype. Recently outed as the president's mistress, Olivia is interviewed on a cable news show and asked if she regrets the affair:

> **Olivia**: I wish I never laid eyes on him.
> **Interviewer**: On President Grant?
> **Olivia**: I wish we never met. If we never [Oliva pauses, sighs and begins again]. I can't tell you how hard it's been to watch my friends, my family, my acquaintances being dragged into the spotlight because of me. Clients being investigated and harassed by the media because of me. Loved ones potentially having to drain their savings to hire lawyers and face congressional committees because of me. I wish I had never laid eyes on him because of them and what they're going through right now. But also because I've worked very hard to build a business, a business whose only aim is to help people become the best version of themselves, to stand in their truths and face the consequences of their actions,

> so they can gain forgiveness and move past their mistakes. Building that business was hard work. I didn't do it alone, but I built that business, and it's something I'm proud of, something that could all go away because I laid eyes on that man. That married man. If I never laid eyes on him, then I wouldn't have fallen in love, and he wouldn't have fallen in love. That may have made for two more lonely people in this world, but also a lot less pain and heartache for many, many others. Senator Grant and the Grant children, for the people I love, for this country that I love, a country that expects us in Washington to solve problems not make them. Is the love of two people worth all this destruction, all this attention? If it were a choice, who would choose this kind of love? So, I wish we never met, but we did. And I tried. I tried and failed and tried and failed again to hide, to stop loving him. But I couldn't. I was weak. I hated myself. I wore this ring to remind me of my weakness. And when our affair was exposed, I had to follow my own advice and stand in my truth, to own who I am, to accept my faults. And I won't ask for forgiveness. Just don't ask me to undo the past. Don't ask me to fall out of love with Fitzgerald Grant because if I could, I would. Does that answer your question? (Van Dusen & Wilson, 2015).

It is acknowledged within the world of the show that the interview works to change the media narrative about Olivia as a "home-wrecker" (Van Dusen & Wilson, 2015). This is also true for a reading of Oliva who could be interpreted simply as a mistress. The monologue provides the character with the ability to speak at length about her actions and choices, and in doing so provides a distinct point of view that allows the character to be read more than just a jezebel.

Talk in *HTGAWM* similarly provides Annalise with a point of view that allows for a window of understanding the character beyond what might be read as stereotypical. Mandated to go to therapy in order to get her license back, Annalise is tasked with writing a letter to her dead husband, which is portrayed through voiceover, inner monologue.

> Dear Sam, my therapist is making me do this. Dear Sam, did you ever make your patients write letters to dead people? Dear Sam, did you hear the house burned down?
> Dear Sam, your sister's suing me for the house even though it was never hers. I'm doing

> a class action suit, and Bonnie almost ruined it. I'm living in a hotel with a bunch of sad,
> horny divorcees. My mother has dementia. I'm an alcoholic. I haven't had sex in six months. I was put in jail. I'm lonely. Nobody likes me. I'm a joke. Dear Sam (Balogun & Nowlan, 2017).

The letter writing scene ends and cuts immediately to Annalise in a therapy session.

> **Annalise**: I didn't write the letter
> **Therapist**: Why not?
> [*Annalise shows the therapist a photo of her and her husband in the hospital after a stillbirth*]
> **Annalise**: I had a car accident at eight months. He died.
> **Therapist**: I'm sorry.
> **Annalise**: I know you're just doing your job bringing up Wes...Sam. But this? It was years of feeling like my body was broken. Sticking myself with needles. Fighting with Sam about if this is even what I wanted, to finally hearing his heartbeat. That was a real loss of him, of me, who I was before all this. Dead. I killed us both.
> **Therapist**: Were you drinking?
> **Annalise**: No, someone hit me.
> **Therapist**: So, it was an accident. You didn't kill him.
> **Annalise**: No. Stop! I'm opening up like you want me to, and you keep steering me someplace to get something that you think I should be feeling. Let me feel guilty!
> **Therapist**: I'm sorry. I don't mean to make you feel-
> **Annalise**: Well You do! So does everyone. The whole world always makes me feel like I'm not right the way I am. Sam wanting me to be the mother, my clients wanting me to be the hero. I can't be all those things. I can't be strong all the time. I can't be strong all the time (Balogun & Nowlan, 2017).

In this scene, the use of talk therapy works as a method to provide expositional background information about the character while also creating perspective. Ultimately, having a black woman character talk at length about her feelings adds a level of vulnerability and humanity to her characterization, which helps shed the stock or stereotypical aspects of the character.

Dialogue during a health scare in *Empire* similarly works to add vulnerability to a character who is seen as tough and, as previously argued, routinely aggressive. After

suffering a heart attack, Cookie refuses to stop working and continues to manage and produce music from home to the dismay of her family (Haywood & Rosengard, 2018). After her pleading husband insists that she stop working, she finally has a breakdown stating,

> I just need some sleep that's all. I don't want to die Lucious. I want to die. I just got everything back. I got you back. I got my family back. I got my life. I got...I'm not ready to leave it. I got too much to do, Lucious. I got too much love to give. I...I'm scared Lucious (Haywood & Rosengard, 2018).

Her inability to rest can be read as a character who is in denial about the state of her health. It can also be read as a character depicted as the strong black woman, a stereotype tangentially related to the matriarch (Collins, 2000). However, through dialogue, talk affords Cookie a point of view outside of being, tough, strong, aggressive or excessively great at her job, allowing her to express both her fears and desires.

While talk in soap helps provide subtly and subjectivity to stereotypical representation, the use of melodrama creates heightened stakes and plot, causing reactive characterization. In *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire*, the use of melodrama to create constant surprises puts characters in extreme situations where the emphasis is on plot versus character. Season four of *Scandal* best exemplifies the ways plot development overtakes character development as Olivia is kidnapped by the vice president in an effort to start a war (Rhimes & Verica, 2015b), auctioned off on the dark web (Davies & Zisk, 2015) all while she and her associates attempt to take down a secret government spy organization headed by her father (Canales & Szwarc, 2015; Mohamed & Allen, 2015, Davies & Rodriguez, 2015; Canales, Brownwell & Bokelberg, 2015; Rhimes, Wilding & Verica, 2015). These plot developments do not always connect to each other and often

leave little room for character exploration. It is unclear what Olivia is feeling in the aftermath of her kidnapping and how she maintains her work ethic. Olivia's mental state deteriorates while she is kidnapped, however, she returns to work, solving cases with only one mention of the kidnapping in a subsequent episode (McGee & Verica, 2015). Though she is not officially diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, "Put a Ring On it" alludes to the disorder by showing symptoms like anxiety and flashbacks, picking up the loose plot point in a later episode (Van Dusen & King, 2015). Her trauma is seemingly forgotten until a late season five episode, when Olivia unexpectedly murders the vice president when he threatens to reveal information about her kidnapping (McGhee & Goldwyn, 2016). What appears to be PTSD emerges as flashbacks of her kidnapping are edited in between scenes of her viciously attacking the vice president. In these extreme moments, it is again unclear what Olivia is thinking or feeling and how exactly she arrived at such an extreme action as murder. Given that there is little context or scene work showing Olivia in states of trauma or distress due to her kidnapping, these developments feel more about the shock of the moment and less about the character. Similarly, *Empire's* plotting puts Cookie in extreme situations including, her son being kidnapped (Calhoun, James & Bray, 2015), attempting to murder her husband (Chaiken & Allen, 2015), and her husband's amnesia (Mahoney & Hamri, 2017), with little exploration of her feelings and why she makes many of her choices. Instead of using these situations to provide more background or growth for Cookie, these moments serve as sensational developments or cliffhangers to larger plot. The lack of character development due to melodrama is not inherently a sign of stereotypical representation. However, in the context of these shows, emphasizing excessive plot over character work

diminishes attempts at multidimensional characterization. Ultimately, in these shows, talk and melodrama create a tension for black female representation: allowing for some nuance while at the same time stifling subjectivity by disallowing character development.

Black Identity in Primetime Soap

The fourth question asks how is black identity portrayed in primetime soap opera? In seasons one and two of *Scandal*, the plot, dialogue and characterization of the main protagonist rarely involve race and black culture. However, in seasons three through eight race and black culture are depicted and mentioned in plots and character development. Often depictions of race and culture are subtle, or implicit, portrayed through setting, character interactions, hair and makeup. Portrayals of race and black culture are sometimes more blatant and explicit, shown through major plot points, subject matter, dialogue and character work about the black experience. This is also true of *Empire* and *HTGAWM* where portrayals of race and black culture are depicted both implicitly and explicitly throughout each series.

Implicit mentions of race. Throughout *Scandal*'s first season, which consists of seven episodes, race is never explicitly mentioned. However, in season two, there are a few subtle references to race. In one of the earliest references to race, Olivia states to the president, "I'm feeling a little Sally Hemmings/Thomas Jefferson about all this," when explaining the frustrations in dealing with their affair while working as a White House staffer (Rhimes & Bokelberg, 2012). A few scenes later, in a rebuttal, the president explains:

> 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 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. We're in this together (Rhimes & Bokelberg, 2012).

These interactions are not only an acknowledgement of race in a black female character's life, but also evidence that America's history with race and racism is not divorced from characters' depictions. This suggests that a sense of sociocultural verisimilitude in genre, as Neale argues, is needed to fully understand characters' perspectives. Similarly, subtle acknowledgement of black identity is seen through Olivia's brushes with microaggressions, or intentional or accidental slights often based on race and gender (Sue, 2010). In a later season two episode, when meeting a new client for the first time, the client, a white woman, assumes that Olivia's associate, Abby who is also a white woman, is Olivia Pope. She reaches to shake Abby's hand, quickly stating, "You must be Olivia Pope" (Mitchell & Robin, 2013). The interaction is brief, and the characters continue solving issues; however, the exchange is emblematic of real-life experiences of minorities. Though the interplay is minor, the characters race is significant and helps bring a sense of racial identity to the character.

The presence of family also highlights racial identity. *HTGAWM*'s introduction of Ophelia, Annalise's mother, helps show Annalise's black, poor, southern roots. While Ophelia initially chastises Annalise for marrying her husband who slept with and killed "a white woman," she ultimately provides comfort to a grieving Annalise after the death of Sam, combing Annalise's natural hair because her "kitchen is tight," a reference to a kinky section of black hair at the back of the neck. (Swafford, Stockstill & Listo, 2015). In the season two finale, attempting to avoid an arrest warrant, Annalise returns to her

hometown of Memphis and reunites with her estranged family. Black culture seeps through Annalise's interaction with her family as they eat soul food and dance to soul music. Similarly, the introduction of Olivia's father brings similar disdain in her choices in *Scandal*. Disappointed that Olivia would settle for becoming First Lady amidst the media leak that the president has a mistress, Rowan Pope, Olivia's father, insists that she flee D.C. and states, "you have to be...half as good as them to get half of what they have," a common mantra among black parents (Rhimes & Verica, 2013; Drumming, 2013).

Aesthetic choices, such as hair, also contribute to characters black identity. Along with the aforementioned "kitchen" reference, the emphasis on black female hair, particularly the process of hair styling, helps highlight black identity. Annalise strips herself of her make-up, removes her wig and wig cap to reveal her natural hair (Nowalk & D'Elia, 2016). Both Annalise and Cookie are regularly depicted in a hair scarf, protective hair choice for black women (Strong, & Strong; 2016; Norwalk & D'Elia, 2016). In a nearly three-minute scene, Annalise is seen getting sew-in extensions in a black hair salon, gossiping and talking about relationships, the hair salon scene provides a signifier of black female community and racial identity (Lee & Turner, 2016).

In a crossover episode of *Scandal* and *HTGAWM*, hair and hair styling are seen again as a signifier for black identity and the hair salon a space for black community. Prepping for a media tour, Olivia and Annalise get their hair styled together. The two women bond with the two black stylists, on the archetypes of "ratchet" families (Mohamed & Goldwyn, 2018). They agree that "everyone has one hood cousin" or "uncle that used to be a pimp (Mohamed & Goldwyn, 2018). When it is revealed to Annalise that Olivia has limited connections to the White House, they share a tense

exchange that highlights how they perceive each other as black women, bringing a subtle portrayal of blackness or black identity to a more blatant conversation about race.

> **Annalise**: You think we're soul sisters just 'cause you rented out a hair salon for few hours on the black side of town? Please. I've dealt with plenty of bougie-ass black women just like you. Spent most of your life in boarding school, Ivy League universities, with a horse between your legs and a silver spoon in your mouth. You're not the only one who knows how to Google. You called me a hot mess, remember? But it sounds to me that despite all your failed attempts to stand above me on your little pedestal we're the same. So keep it real, Olivia Pope. Why'd you leave the White House?
> **Olivia**: You know your skin tone and measurements aren't the reason people don't like you. It's you, Annalise Keating. You are a bully who insults people and then wonders why they won't help you. But hey, you're just trying to keep it real? Right? How's that working out for you? Can't be that great if you had to haul your broke-ass on the Megabus to beg for my help. You may think you know who I am and what I'm about, but don't get it twisted. We are not the same, so allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Olivia Pope. And I don't have to explain myself to anyone, especially you.
> [*After asking a previously dismissed stylist to return*] Olivia: Don't worry about your wash and press. I'll be sure to put that on my siddity-ass, no limit, platinum card.
> **Annalise**: I'll pay for my own damn hair (Mohamed & Goldwyn, 2018).

Beyond hair and the hair salon acting as a marker for black culture and identity, hair and hair styling acts as an equalizer between the two characters whose black experiences, as highlighted in the scene, they perceive as being different due to class and colorism.

Explicit Mentions of Race. *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire,* each have dialogue or plots regarding race and racial issues. This is especially true for the entirety of *Empire,* throughout *HTGAWM*, and in later seasons of *Scandal*. One way each of these shows explicitly address race and its impacts on characters' racial identity is through explorations and depictions of the criminal justice system. In "The Lawn Chair," Olivia is hired by D.C. police to handle public relations after a police officer kills a black teenager (McGee & Verica, 2015). *Scandal* forces Olivia to confront race by providing a foil,

Marcus Walker, an activist who challenges Olivia's role in helping the police's image. During a standoff with police and the father of the slain teenager, Marcus rhetorically asks Olivia, "You know why you're here, right? You know why they chose you? (McGhee & Verica, 2015). The implication is that she is hired due to her race. While Olivia sympathizes with the protesters and the father, she believes there are better methods to end the standoff. In the same exchange, Marcus further questions Olivia's motives stating, "We don't want the same thing. You want to put it to bed quietly, tell everyone on The Hill that you came down to the hood and saved us. No thanks, Olivia. Your black card's not getting validated today" (McGhee & Verica, 2015). Disagreeing with the police's methods of handling a growing body of protesters, and presumably affected by Marcus' words, Olivia quits her stint with the police and joins the protesters chanting, "Stand up fight back. No more black man under attack" (McGhee & Verica, 2015). Realizing that the police are hiding pertinent video footage that could put into question the validity of the officers' account of the shooting, Olivia seeks the attorney general's help. When he is refuses to give her the footage, she questions the rule of law, stating the laws are present to "protect people who look like you" (McGhee & Verica, 2015). She continues, "you talk about fairness and justice like it's available to everybody. It's not!" (McGhee & Verica, 2015).

While "The Lawn Chair" serves as a ripped from the headlines, one off social justice episode of *Scandal*, *Empire* explores social justice by having their characters causally and routinely deal with issues of black criminality. Cookie throws a "Free Luscious" concert rally where statistics about mass incarceration are given to the crowd. (Strong & Aiken, 2015). Noting the irony of throwing a rally for a man that has

committed murder, Hakeem brings this to Cookie's attention, stating, "We should be performing for the brothers and sisters who are innocent," pointing to real-life social injustice (Strong & Aiken, 2015). In a season five episode of, feeling conflicted about calling 911 on a loved one, Cookie recounts the ordeal in a livestream stating, "When the cops got there, I was so scared. I was scared because I thought I would lose someone I love so much to a cop's bullet. That's what it's like to be black and brown in this country. My god. Who do we call, huh? Who do we call when we need help? Who will protect us?" (Allen et al., 2018). From this ordeal, a B-plot in a larger story, it is evident Cookie's blackness is often in the forefront of her decision making

Given that *HTGAWM*'s premise is connected to the legal system, issues of criminal justice, particularly as it relates to race and gender, arise with regularity (Robinson, 2016). For Annalise, racial injustice is a character motivation. In a season one episode, Annalise takes an appellate case involving a black man wrongly convicted of murder because as she describes to her students, "this was the first case that opened my eyes to the fact that the justice system doesn't always reward those who tell the truth, but those who have the power to create their own. And it's a fact that's pissed me off ever since I heard about this case" (Foley & D'Elia, 2014). While this remark can be read as a blanket statement about her anger toward injustice more broadly, Annalise's motivation to fight for racial injustice in this case is made clearer later in the episode when it is revealed that a senator had a role in the murder in order to gentrify a neighborhood. Annalise gives an impassioned speech while the senator is on the stand stating, "I am sorry senator if you do not have the time to answer for who bore the cost of your development. Not just Trisha Stanley and her boyfriend, David Allen, who served 21

years in prison, but the thousands who displaced in the name of lining your pockets. The majority of whom are poor, powerless, and didn't bear the color of skin desirable to your business interests" (Foley & D'Elia, 2014).

Defending black and brown inmates who have not received proper due justice, *Scandal* and *HTGAWM* use a class action lawsuit as the impetus for the crossover episodes. While Mohammed and Goldywn (2018) and Balogun, Thompson, and Fuentes (2018) dialogue work to highlight the often harsh realities of the criminal justice system throughout both episodes, it is Balogun et al. final monologue, which Annalise delivers, that precisely and explicitly details the ways the U.S. criminal justice system unsuccessfully protects citizens. In front of the Court, she states:

> Racism is built into the DNA of America, and as long as we turn a blind eye to the pain of those suffering under its oppression, we will never escape those origins. The only safeguard people of color have is the right to a defense, and we won't even give them that, which means that the promise of civil rights have never been fulfilled. Due to the failure of our justice system, our public defense system in particular, Jim Crow is alive and kicking. Laws that made it illegal for blacks and whites to be buried in the same cemetery, that categorized people into quadroons and octoroons, that punished a black person for seeking medical attention in a white hospital. Some may claim that slavery has ended, but tell that to the inmates that are kept in cages and are told that they don't have any rights at all. People like my client Nathaniel Lahey and millions of people like him who are relegated to a subclass of human existence in our prisons. There is no alternative to justice in this case. There is no other options. To decide against my plaintiff is to choose lining the pockets of prison owners over providing basic defense for the people who live in them. And is that the America that this court really wants to live in, where money is more important than humanity, where criminality is confused with mental health. The sixth amendment was ratified in 1791. It's been 226 years since then. Let's finally guarantee its rights to all of our citizens (Balogun et al., 2018).

This speech connects Annalise's passion and motivation in her work to achieving racial equality and social justice while also building a world where characters acknowledge race

and are directly impacted by racial issues. Ultimately, it helps to add to characterization where race and racial identity is important and dealt with in a straightforward way.

A season six episode of *Scandal* highlights the ways depictions of black criminality and black parenting bring out racial identity. Olivia's imprisoned mother delivers a monologue about her perception of black female identity to her ex-husband, Olivia's father.

> Damn Shame. I tell you, being a black woman. Be strong they say. Support your man. Raise a man. Think like a man. Well damn, I gotta do all that? 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. We still try. Try to help all y'all. Even when we get nothing. Is that admirable or ridiculous? 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, Mister Big Strong Black Man. God forbid you let a sista like me help you out. No, you don't want that. Don't let me put you back when you fall. Wipe the crust out of your ways. Put a pep back in your step. Cause when we do you resent us for making you better, smarter, stronger. Then drop us so you can be with someone basic. Someone with all that baggage you left us this. Trying and saving and trying to save like we do. Admirable or ridiculous? Baby, you tell me (Bryne, Fish & Goldwyn, 2017).

A speechless Olivia watches as her mother speaks, seeming simultaneously horrified, awed and empathetic. The monologue serves as reminder of who Olivia comes from, a sort of cue of her blackness. It should also be noted that at nearly two minutes long, by allowing a black female character to speak at length about her experience, it is an example of the ways soaps use talk to provide subjectivity to images of black women that might be deemed stereotypical.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

Through textual genre analysis, this research analyzed seven seasons of *Scandal*, five seasons of *HTGAWM*, and five seasons of *Empire* to show the ways soap opera depicts black female protagonists and the ways the genre influences those portrayals. Research shows that black women are rarely seen on primetime television and when those depictions do occur, they are limited to situational comedies (Signorelli, 2009a). Black women are not regularly featured in primetime soap (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). This research provides context on the ways black woman are represented on recent primetime television, specifically soap opera.

The conventions of soap opera rely on salacious plot, heavy talk, serialized narrative structure and melodrama (Neale, 1997; Gledhill and Ball, 2013). *Scandal*, *HTGAWM*, and *Empire* are influenced by soap opera conventions and their storytelling patterns embody soap opera characteristics, presenting contemporary incarnations of a longstanding genre. These three shows highlight the ways continuous narrative storytelling often impacts the use of over-the-top or sensational plots like murders, affairs, and kidnappings. Together, these programs help make the case that highly serialized television often necessities melodrama. At the same time, the use of social action or talk helps ground those storytelling choices, providing a sense of realism to these stories. The similarity in story structure between *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* might appear redundant or unoriginal; however, the repetition helps audiences understand and make meaning of genre (Neale, 2000). That these conventions and narrative techniques endure in current television is indicative of soap opera as one of the mediums most compelling genres.

Given that these shows were among the highest rated when they aired (de Mores, 2017; de Mores & Hipes, 2018), it is important to note the types of images depicted on popular television. Past research shows that black women are not only rarely portrayed in scripted television, but that more broadly media depicts black woman stereotypically in distinct controlling images (Collins, 2000). Using Collins' as a framework for black female imagery, this research finds that black female protagonists are most frequently portrayed using the jezebel stereotype (sexual deviant) and the matriarch (bad, aggressive mother), adding to decades old ideas of black woman that that are rooted in racism. It should be noted that depictions of black woman engaging in sex or sexual interactions does not inherently invoke the jezebel stereotype; however, in these three shows the jezebel image is often alluded to due to the ways black woman are perceived by characters within the show, offering a reading of them as hyper-sexual. While stereotypical images are present, these soaps disrupt the idea of black women as welfare mothers who are lazy and rely on government aid (Collins, 2000). By showing black woman as skillful and often the smartest person in the room, soap opera in this form challenges and updates depictions of the professional black woman. One might confuse the professional black woman with the Black Lady image, or the asexual, middle class black woman who is largely focused on work (Collins, 2000). While they are certainly hard working, the black women in these soaps are neither asexual nor concerned with respectability politics associated with that trope. They are highly skilled, respected and revered for their work. Being portrayed as exceptionally gifted is not without drawbacks. While it attempts to correct a negative trope, it presents black woman as unrealistically

gifted or unassailable, inadvertently connecting it back to the idea of the strong black woman associated to the matriarch image (Collins, 2000).

Although dated stereotypes exist in these depictions of black woman in soap, this research finds that conventions of the genre in some ways help provide nuanced representation while at the same time minimizing character growth. Through talk, specifically extensive monologue and dialogue, black woman who can be read as a jezebel are given the ability to express themselves, showing black woman as multi-dimensional. At the same time, melodrama limits characterization by focusing on shock and the sensational. Melodramatic plot influences the structure of storytelling, amplifying plot devices like the cliffhanger. In doing so, it creates less character driven stories. Even though black woman in soap seem front in center, in some ways, it is not unlike past iterations of black women on television who were often found in the periphery ((Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Krestsedemas, 2010).

Through depictions of family, aesthetic choices in hair, and portrayals of the criminal justice system, these soaps give characters a sense of black identity. This research finds that cues or signs of blackness are often subtle, depicted through hair and interactions with other black characters, and conversations with and about family reminding protagonists about their blackness. Often those cues are more blatant, tying black identity to criminal justice through plots where black woman face police brutality or defend people who have been wronged by the justice system. Smith-Shomade (2002) argued that black sitcoms that used African American vernacular provided a level of authenticity to characters that in turn projected agency. This is also true of soap opera. Depicting characters as having similar experiences as those within the black community

provides subjectivity to black characterization while at the same time providing a fiction that feels realistic. Providing subjectivity in soap opera is a hallmark of the genre as research has argued that soaps allow women to find cultural cues on screen that shape the way female audiences view the text while also shaping them (Modeleski, 1979; Kuhn, 1984, Brunsdon, 1981). *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* show that contemporary primetime soap goes a step further, providing cues of both femininity and black identity.

Ultimately, these three soaps provide examples of what substantive representation can look like for black women while also highlighting opportunities for future depictions. Although there is evidence of stereotypes within these shows, those stock images coupled with the dismantling of tropes like the welfare queen is in an indication that representation of black women in soap is neither overwhelmingly negative nor positive. This is emblematic of an attempt to present black women as fully realized with both flaws and strengths. At the same time, these shows depict black woman as exceedingly wealthy without meaningful engagement of class or the structures of capitalism that lead them to their wealth and the effects that may have on the communities these characters are representing. Displaying the excesses of wealth is a common feature of the genre (Feur, 1992), however, if agency is to be truly afforded to black women in television, diverse and realistic portrayals of income, class and wealth is also necessary.

CHAPTER VII: LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research provided a qualitative reading on black female representation in primetime soap opera. Future research could study other popular genres on contemporary television like science-fiction or crime drama which might highlight similarities or differences in the ways other genre conventions influence representation. While this research focused on scripted shows that originally aired on broadcast television, future research might analyze television shows on streaming or cable, mediums with fewer content restrictions. *Empire* and *HTGAWM* will air their final seasons in the 2019-2020 television seasons, after this research was conducted. This research largely looked at the ways the main protagonists were represented not black men, other minorities, or secondary characters. Future studies might expand to secondary characters or non-black people of color. Quantitative research might enumerate the instances that stereotypical portrayals were depicted or quantify the use of genre conventions within these shows. Future research might also study the ways audiences perceive black female characters in soap opera or the influence of social media on storytelling on the medium or its impacts on audiences who watch the genre.

CHAPTER VIII : CONCLUSION

This research analyzed black female representation in primetime soap opera. Given that fictionalized portrayals of black women have historically been scarce, it is important to note the ways such depictions are happening on screen. Because black women have prominent visibility in current primetime soap opera, it is equally important to understand how the genre's conventions influence representation. Genre helps inform how stories are told. Examining how stories are told can help explain representation within the narrative. Studying genre and representation together gives a sense of not only what can happen to black women characters, but also why it happens.

Understanding the types of portrayals depicted in media is especially crucial when one considers that media depictions of black women influence real-life perceptions of black women (Givens & Monahan, 2005; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). The rise of diverse representation in film and television gives way to new depictions of black women, but that does not always mean they are divorced from stereotype entirely. Scripted television that offers readings of black women as sexually deviant or as bad mothers such as *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* has the potential to affect how people view black women. At the same time, depicting black woman as hard workers, like these shows have done, may have positive influences on people's perceptions. Ultimately, current primetime soap opera is providing more complex representation of black women which has not historically been seen in scripted television.

The popularity of *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* and *Empire* is an example of the endurance of primetime soap opera and a willingness of audiences to see black women and black culture in the forefront of narrative television. As new television shows continue to be

developed and aired starring women of color, it is necessary for showrunners and writers to challenge stereotypical depictions instead of embracing of them. Similarly, subverting and challenging expectations of genre is essential in creating new perspectives and different ways to tell stories. In doing so, scripted television has the chance to create fresh narratives where black women are represented fully.

While primetime soap opera, like all television genres, is meant for entertainment, the representation and the stories told within soap opera provide unique perspectives about culture and, in some instances, identity. This research provides an example of the patterns of representation for black women in television, and in doing so highlights the ways dated images and stereotypes influence contemporary storytelling. That stereotypical images of black women are consistent, even in contemporary television, shows the persistence of old ideologies and problematic beliefs of black women. Beyond these portrayals having the ability to impact audiences' ideas or perspectives of black femininity, analyzing representation in this way has the potential to help us understand society at large.

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