

No Longer Your Best Black Friend (BBF): The Roles and Expectations of Black Women in Contemporary Television

By

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Does media have a hand in how contemporary society views black women? According to Radley W. Gorham, a “cultural stereotype seems to play an important role in how we process information about people from various groups regardless of whether we endorse it”.¹ Media affects everyone and how we see everyone. According to an article by Ariel Cheung, media scholar Tamara Winfrey-Harris, says “people looking for instances of brown skin in media, they’re going to see it everywhere, but you have to clarify that our presence in media did not equate to power, choice and an identity of our own choosing”². What Winfrey-Harris is saying is that black female characters represented in the majority of media were not created by black women³. Often times black female characters are products of others, whether the others are black men, white men, white women, etc. This construction by others raises some questions, but most important is do black women viewers feel they are accurately represented in the media?

Ann Marie Kerwin noted that in a survey, when respondents were asked how to best describe how black women were portrayed in media, the adjectives most cited were

¹ Once stereotypes are characterized, they become categorized into structures called schemas, which help us simplify complex social environments. Schemas structure our knowledge of things, but also our expectations. So what we know of or see of black women will become our expectations of them.

² Ariel Cheung, "Black women's progress collides with media stereotypes," *USA Today*, February 11, 2015, accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/02/11/black-history-black-women/23266115/>.

³ My use of black women throughout my study is in reference to U.S. born cisgender African-American women.

“argumentative” (60%), “lazy” (46%) and “corrupt” (45%)⁴. Kerwin also cites, International President for Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Mary Breaux Wright as saying “only 12 percent of black women and white women believe there are positive images of black women in media”⁵. It is clear that audiences are aware that black women are not represented positively in media. With black people watching roughly 57 hours more of television than white viewers, that is an average of 213 hours per month, it is troublesome to note that they are continually digesting negative images of themselves⁶.

In research published in a 2013 *Essence* article, negative imagery of black women was seen twice as frequently as positive imagery with 85 percent of respondents reporting they regularly see representations of Baby Mamas in media⁷. It is reported that younger women, ages 18 to 29, are more likely than older women to be aware of negative images and also more likely to find them compelling since they consume more media overall⁸. It is clear that media has a hand in how black women and black girls view themselves, but also how perceptible are they to these images?

Jonathan Higgins, Ed.D. and Journalist, says of one of the main characters of the ABC hit television series *Empire*, “Cookie...has continued to perpetuate the stereotype of what society

⁴ The survey was coordinated by the Mosaic Center for Multiculturalism and the black sorority Zeta Phi Beta in 2017. The first section was sent to 500 black and white women ages 18 to 24, while the second section was sent to a broader sample of 500 women of all races. Kerwin, Ann Marie. "The 'Angry Black Woman' Makes Real Women Angry." Ad Age. September 27, 2017. Accessed November 28, 2017. <http://adage.com/article/media/angry-black-woman-makes-real-women-angry/310633/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ESSENCE surveyed over 1,200 black women. Dawnie Walton, "ESSENCE's Images Study: Bonus Insights," *Essence*, October 07, 2013, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.essence.com/lifestyle/essence-images-study-bonus-insights/>.

⁸ Rebecca Ann. Lind, *Race/gender/media: considering diversity, across audiences, content, and producers*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2013).

believes black women to be,” and continues that she is “loud, vindictive, petty and always ready for some mess”⁹. Higgins notes that this portrayal of black women in Hollywood “preys on the insecurities of black women”¹⁰. One could even say that these insecurities are rooted in historical and contemporary stereotypes that plague black women; their marriageability, desirability, etc. Sandra Sims-Williams, chief diversity officer, Publicis, points to “ABC’s ‘Blackish’ as a good thing because it’s a program that’s a real reflection of black middle-class life and the issues facing [the family]”¹¹. It is clear that negative and positive images of black women can coexist during the same time period.

The discussion around black women’s place in film and television is more prominent than ever. In 2015 the Oscars did not nominate a single person of color for any of the top four acting categories, and the awards show in 2016 was then subjected to a boycott along with the hashtag #oscarssowhite. At the 73rd Golden Globes Taraji P. Henson won for Best Actress in a TV Drama for her role as Cookie Lyons in *Empire*. In her acceptance speech Henson said, “Who knew that playing an ex-convict would take me all around the globe?” Recently there was controversy surrounding the Golden Globe Awards for “snubbing” the film, *Girls Trip* – a comedy featuring a main cast of black women. The snubbing of the film speaks to the ways the film industry has been struggling with generating quality roles for black women, while my study will explore the growing diversity of television in the roles for this population. However, there

⁹ Jonathan P. Higgins, Ed.D. "Why Hollywood's Portrayal of Black Women Is Problematic." *The Root*. November 24, 2016. Accessed November 12, 2017. <https://www.theroot.com/why-hollywood-s-portrayal-of-black-women-is-problematic-1790857877>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Kerwin, Ann Marie. "The 'Angry Black Woman' Makes Real Women Angry." *Ad Age*. September 27, 2017. Accessed November 28, 2017. <http://adage.com/article/media/angry-black-woman-makes-real-women-angry/310633/>.

are not many shows on television in which black women have adequate representation—and far less, *accurate*—representation. One can find a plethora of instances of brown skin everywhere in media. Author Tamara Winfrey-Harris says “we probably have more diversity of black female characters on television than ever before. The problem is there is nowhere near the diversity our white counter parts have. We’re still not allowed to be fully human in the ways they are”¹².

Negative images of black women are pervasive and nothing new. In May 1851 Sojourner Truth delivered a speech and asked “Ar’nt I a woman?”. For centuries black women have fought for their humanity against historical stereotypes, social codes that depict them as less than human and render them less than a woman.

My interest in exploring the roles and expectations of black women in the contemporary U.S. was a rather long process. Coming into my graduate career I was interested in looking at media, representation and postblackness. However, over the course of time I slowly started to narrow down my research topic. After taking a black women’s history course, I further narrowed my topic down into exploring black women’s representation in media. Learning the history of black women, and their constant resilience and contribution to black people’s uplift, was fascinating to me. What stuck with me after the course concluded, however, was how black women’s image and representations have not really changed throughout time. There are still certain expectations held about black women and certain roles that they are expected to fit into. This is heavily prevalent in the film and television industry.

¹² See Ariel Cheung’s article on USA Today, discussing Winfrey-Harris’s book *The Sisters Are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative for Black Women in America*. Ariel Cheung, “Black women’s progress collides with media stereotypes,” USA Today, February 11, 2015, accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/02/11/black-history-black-women/23266115/>.

Challenges

While doing my research I came across a few challenges. My main goal for my thesis was to do a historical analysis along with focus group interviews. My original plan was to conduct one-on-one interviews and then follow up with a focus group interview about black women's thoughts on black female characters in television. However, with time constraints and without a grounded understanding of historical stereotypes and their place in media, I did not feel like I could do the research justice. I needed to develop a historical and contemporary context on my own, before I could start with social research.

With conducting my own research, I needed to acknowledge that there is already research about black women not feeling "accurately" represented in media accompanied with data about black women's thoughts on the negative images in media, and how they feel invisible, or inaccurately represented. The information from the ESSENCE Image Study is essential for the research I wanted to conduct, because it enticed me to ask in what ways do they not feel represented. However, when it comes to what is an accurate representation of black women, things become more complicated. Black women are not a monolithic group so having a definition of what would be an accurate description is no easy task to pin down. Stereotypical portrayals might have some truth to some people, while these portrayals might not have any truth to others. This part of the project was too big to fit within a semester of work, unfortunately.

Another challenge with my research is in terms of accessibility when it comes to the television shows I have chosen. More of this topic will be discussed further in my methodology section, however choosing television shows for this research was complex. There are numerous things to consider when narrowing down points of interest. A few things I had to consider were

whether I would look at all the black women in a particular show¹³ or just the black female lead, and if I would consider only lead characters in predominantly white casts or black ensembles – also what constitutes a black female lead; if these shows would be currently running or within a certain timeframe; and if I would look at just network broadcast shows, cable shows, subscription based shows, or a mix of all three. Deciding on my qualifications for choosing shows and characters was a long process.

It was a challenge to decide whether I should use Baker's theories or use a more contemporary approach like Spencer's interpretation. The conceptual theory of mastery of form and deformation of master at first seems like a binary, but it can be an interwoven set of ideas. Possibly in the time of the Harlem Renaissance and after Reconstruction there was more of a binary to Baker's theories, but as society has aged the binary has become blurred. We must ask if these theories can happen at the same time? Right now for my research, I chose to keep it as a conceptual frame work, but for future study it might have to be viewed as a spectrum/range of possibilities especially when television shows are analyzed through the creators, writers, directors, studios, audiences, etc.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze black female lead characters in television shows. I want to explore how these lead characters fit into societal roles and expectations put on them since slavery; the roles and expectations I found stem from historical stereotypes. I also want to expand the discussion on the importance of black female lead characters and their roles

¹³ When I say all the black women in the show, I mean lead characters, secondary characters, and any reoccurring characters. This is not the same as an ensemble cast, however, since all characters do not share equal screen time.

in these television shows. I want to acknowledge the diversity of black female lead characters in television used as a platform to show different black identities. However, since black women and men (writers, directors, producers, etc.) still have to work within the frames of male whiteness in Hollywood, I wanted to interrogate how this reality might affect the roles and expectations of black women on the screen. The purpose of this study is not to discredit or shame these shows, but rather to analyze the complexity of working within an industry dominated by oppressive structures.

Since black women have been fighting since slavery for their humanity, and the image of black women has long been controlled by external forces – especially when this comes to media representation – black female lead characters either fit in to or they break the status quo of what is expected of them¹⁴. Black lead female characters are either written for network shows which have more restrictions for broadcasting thus limiting character development or they are written for subscription based shows which have fewer restrictions for broadcasting and therefore can allow more nuanced and sometimes controversial behavior. It is essential to compare and contrast how black female lead characters differ from network television shows to subscription television shows.

¹⁴ For future study it is pertinent to consider to whether both can take place at the same time. I believe this would need to into consideration the goal or objective of the writer(s), creator(s), and the actress. The character is a creation of more than one person, so all of these creators must be explored.

Significance of Study

With the premiere of *Scandal*, in 2012, Kerry Washington became the first black woman in 37 years to lead a television show¹⁵. Casting Washington into the role “opened the floodgates for Black women in television” and led to many other shows lead by black women¹⁶. My study is timely with Hollywood facing a shakeup following controversial awards years and now the #MeToo movement, taking a look into certain structures can add to the existing dialogue happening right now. Understanding oppressive structures that all women face in Hollywood and U.S. society is important, but these oppressive structures do not always work the same with black women.

Scholarship focusing on black women, popular culture, and representation will benefit from this study to gain a better understanding of the complexity of black female characters in contemporary television shows; this will also benefit audiences who watch these shows, critics of these shows, and future writers and directors. The study also aims to add to existing literature and plans to juxtapose what I find with what authorities have published on the topic of black women’s image or representation. I have limited my authorities to Deborah Gray White, Darlene Clark Hines, and Sheri Parks when discussing stereotypes and black women’s history. For the discussion regarding the theories of mastery of form and deformation of mastery I sought out

¹⁵ Before Washington was cast as Olivia Pope, Teresa Graves played Christie Love in *Get Christie Love!*, canceled in 1975. Not one black woman has lead a network drama show since, until *Scandal*. Ariana Romero and Eric McCandless/ABC, ""Scandal" Series Finale: How The Show Changed TV Forever," With Scandal Ending, Will Olivia Pope Be Its Legacy, April 19, 2018, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.refinery29.com/2018/04/196707/scandal-finale-legacy-kerry-washington-black-lead-actress>.

¹⁶ Following *Scandal*, Gabrielle Union in *Being Mary Jane*, Viola Davis in *How to Get Away with Murder*, Taraji P. Henson in *Empire*, Rutina Wesley, Dawn-Lyen Gardner, and Bianca Lawson in *Queen Sugar*, Tracee Ellis-Ross in *black-ish*, Yara Shahidi *grown-ish*, and Issa Rae in *Insecure*. There are even more shows that have premiered and some even canceled since *Scandal*.

Houston Baker and Jon Michael Spencer as authority figures. I chose to use Baker as he founded these theories, however Baker's theories apply mostly to poetry. Spencer's work is the only I found that used Baker's theories in relation to television in a contemporary context.

Literature Review

The review of the literature will begin with black women and their roles throughout history and their importance within the black communities. I will utilize historical works by Deborah Gray White and Darlene Clark Hine to review black women's role in slavery and social movements. There is an importance in having a foundation in knowing black women have always had agency¹⁷. It will then explain the history and development of racial stereotypes associated with black women, and then examine these narratives throughout popular culture and media. Lastly, the review of the literature will examine the theories of mastery of form and deformation of mastery, to place black women's history and their forced stereotypes within context of media. This will provide a framework for understanding historical and contemporary television and discourse about black women. Additionally, I will review the theory of intersectionality and agenda setting theory to provide context and information around how stereotypes affect black women in the television industry.

¹⁷ When speaking of agency, I am referring to is one's independent capability or ability to act on one's will; to make their own choices independently. To speak for themselves, have physical and socio-economic mobility. Often, black women's agency has been for the black communities rather than an individual agency. A further and contemporary exploration of agency and black women would be a great benefit to further research of black women in television.

“Slave women were everywhere, yet nowhere.”¹⁸

Black Women's Invisibility

Black women are rendered invisible because of their gender and their color; they “suffer a double oppression”¹⁹. It’s not an invisibility of not being seen, it is that black women were seen but everything that made them women or simply human was stripped away. This double oppression coupled with political and economic index, means that black women have a powerlessness in U.S. society, and that powerlessness is invisibility²⁰.

Deborah Gray White goes on to say that black men are being rescued and saved by new black studies scholars, but that black women and their existence/experiences are not being challenged like that of black men. White argues that “black men can be rescued from the myth of the Negro” and black women have not had their story told in a way to be rescued from their myths²¹; however it is important to acknowledge that more scholarship about black women is being done. Black women have been and will continue be tied to their myths, unless their history and lives are talked about. Black women and their work continue to remain invisible but not unto themselves. But does only bringing up the history of black women and their myths rid black women of today from the stereotypes?

Darlene Clark Hine in her book, *A Shining Thread of Hope*, examines the mythology of the American mainstream and demonstrates a thorough appreciation of powerful black women;

¹⁸ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* Revised ed. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 23.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 28.

who are usually the largest unacknowledged force in American society. There is a huge emphasis by black women on community development. Community development or kinship started from slave quarters and merged into the abolitionist societies, churches, and black women clubs²². In chapter five, there is a particularly illuminating investigation of black women and their involvement in the Civil War; these women served in almost all aspects of the war except on the front line.

After the war, black women were the pillars for building black communities. They became lawyers, educators, doctors and artists²³. The black church became the way and space for black women to better their communities²⁴. The history of black women is the history of the black community. Black women were leaders who saw the strength in community²⁵. This look at individual lives in a larger context begins to rewrite the narrative of black families and black lives during slavery and the motivation for migration and building communities. Black women were not complacent with the roles they were given in American society. They had agency and used what they had to uplift their communities.

In *Too Heavy a Load*, Deborah Gray White continually highlights how black women are constantly ahead of America's social responsibility. Black women carry the problems of their race, but also gender, class and sexuality²⁶. White does not specifically bring up how black men do not fight for black women, but through her many examples of how black women had to constantly turn their fight to the fight for men and the community, it shows how the only people

²² Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 1999), 5.

²³ *Ibid*, 146.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 308.

²⁶ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York, NY: Norton, 1999), 265.

fighting for black women are black women. No matter the progress they make in their own race work and for society, black women still have to defend their name and humanity.

Stereotypes

Black women were positioned as the tie between sex and race mythology in America, thus making it difficult for black women to escape the stereotypes given to them²⁷. They were not treated as human, but were seen as human in the aspects of a sexual object for white men. Black women still to this day have to fight against the racial stereotypes and caricatures created from Southern society. These caricatures rob them of any human aspect and morality. It is interesting, and not really spoken about by White, that these stereotypes were also based on the social “status” of these enslaved women and the type of work they did.

White says the “jezebel was the counter image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady”²⁸. All this stereotypical woman craved was flesh, everything else came second. This fixed image of enslaved women, reflects the hypersexualization associated with black women today. This stereotype came from the cultural differences of people from Africa – semi nudity, polygamy, tribal dances and religion – and in general how Southern men viewed women²⁹. This view of black women only flourished under the conditions they were worked and kept. Planters made sure that “their slave women were prolific” to increase their slave population³⁰.

²⁷ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* Revised ed. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 28.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 29.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 31.

So, it was only through the talk of the reproduction rate of slave women that their sexual activity began to be talked about in public; this let the people talking and writing about enslaved women to associate her with immoral behavior³¹. Enslaved women's' conditions helped "imprint the Jezebel image on to the mind"; however, these owners and traders created the environment, which ensured their expectations of female slave behavior would be met, be it unconsciously or consciously³². Southern society degraded and exploited a class of its women and ignored the involvement of the young men with women: viewed as immoral by Southerners. Rather than fault themselves, Southerners blamed black women³³.

To counter this Jezebel type they created, Southerners created the Mammy. Mammy's image is as misleading as the Jezebel. It was an image created to suit the views of Southerners and reinforce and justify their dehumanization of black women³⁴. Mammy became the perfect image for the antebellum South because she was the personification of "the ideal slave, and the ideal woman"³⁵. Mammy was devoted to the white household and its children, but subservient to the white man. However, mammy was not the head of the household or the one who kept everything running, it was the wife of the planter, and the Mammy was not treated with the utmost respect³⁶. Mammy was at the same time a woman and black³⁷, even though she is a caricature, this is the only time a black woman's gender is not questioned; however she is usually reduced to being asexual, thus is the only way she becomes loyal to and safe for the white family.

³¹ Ibid, 31.

³² Ibid, 34.

³³ Ibid, 38.

³⁴ Ibid, 48.

³⁵ Ibid, 58.

³⁶ Ibid, 51, 52.

³⁷ Ibid, 61.

The next stereotype to enter how to characterize black women was the Sapphire. The Sapphire is a “domineering female who consumes men and usurps their role,”³⁸ essentially the Sapphire was an overpowering matriarch who emasculated men – black men in particular. The Sapphire was a mix of the Jezebel and Mammy. This stereotype, defeminized black women and left them open to being violated without seeing any justice, and some of the violence delivered was that black women were not women at all³⁹.

The constant demonization of black women let the history of African Americans to be reinterpreted by ignoring the brutalizing of black women while only stressing the horrid lives of black men⁴⁰. What White means is that everything black women experienced becomes ignored because there was only focus on the violation of black men, even the rape of black women became an interpretation of violence against black men⁴¹. Today, black women have to fight to be seen and to be seen *as a woman*. Black women were and still are being forced to assimilate to the white standard of gender roles. A contemporary example is that of Serena Williams. Williams has been a pro tennis player for more than 20 years and has faced a consistent stream of body shaming, being labeled manly, all for being strong⁴². Williams’ gender would be questioned, people would assume she was a man because her body did not fit the beauty standards held for women⁴³. The defeminizing of Williams reflects a long history of black women and their fight to be seen as women.

³⁸ Ibid, 176.

³⁹ Ibid, 175, 176.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 176.

⁴¹ Ibid, 177.

⁴² Andrea Park, "Serena Williams Has the Perfect Reply to Body Critics," Teen Vogue, May 31, 2018, , accessed June 07, 2018, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/serena-williams-addresses-the-body-shaming-shes-experienced-for-having-muscles>.

⁴³ Ibid.

Sheri Parks' book, *Fierce Angels*, is dedicated to the history of the images of black women. Parks argues that, "if black women are to have some power over their own stories now, they will need to know the ancient stories" and how the images they are burdened with have been deeply entrenched into the collective American schema⁴⁴. In order to know why certain images of black women are commonly consumed it is important to know the history of such images and narratives. For Parks, the Sacred Dark Feminine⁴⁵ is an archetype that reflected a worldview of life, pleasing and terrible; suffering is a part of life⁴⁶. Parks says that "people see in black women what they expect to see"⁴⁷. The dark female outsider becomes the helper in western secular literature. Her image is used however she is needed.

Parks argues that the image of the Sacred Dark Feminine was co-opted and used to romanticize human slavery in the U.S. when American colonists forcibly imported African women to be their helpers⁴⁸. This allowed slave masters to manipulate the old archetype in ways to that suited their own needs. The most important need was to convince themselves and others that the strong dark women that they desperately needed loved and supported them⁴⁹. Parks argues that the image of the mammy is so old, older than U.S. slavery. She is gifted with being so wise, so reassuring, and knowing all the mysteries and all the answers⁵⁰. In this way the mammy is the American version of the old Crone and she filled the gaps left by the image

⁴⁴ Sheri Parks. *Fierce Angels: From Sacred Dark Feminine to Strong Black Woman*. (New York, NY: Random House, 2010), 3.

⁴⁵ For Parks, the Sacred Dark Feminine is the basis for all of the stereotypes or negative images/narratives of black women.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 33.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 35.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 35.

constructed for white women⁵¹. The mammy was created for the defense of slavery, but was used to pacify the worries of bringing enslaved women into slave owners homes⁵².

As explained previously, the popular image of the mammy had more to do with the needs of whites, than the actions or needs of black women. The mammy actually has many images/narratives. The propaganda mammy was created to strip any allegiance she had to her own race, so that she could serve and devote herself to the white audience and white family⁵³. In reality, the image of the mammy was usually a young girl who was forced to grow old because being described as old, large, or ugly hid the sensuality lurking just beneath the surface of the enslavement of black women⁵⁴.

The image we come to call the mammy, today, is an extreme caricature of the propaganda mammy. This image of the propaganda mammy has extended into the present to describe black women who spend most of their energy to help white people; they are the helper or the best black friend (BBF)⁵⁵. The BBF is there to solve all your problems, take care of you, and guide you. The images of the loving and devoted mammy existed side by side with the image of the dangerous black man⁵⁶. The image of the mammy was used to render black women as harmless and loyal to white people; thus stripping black women of any self-agency, intelligence, needs or wants. Thus the mammy "...absolved Southerners of the sins of slavery," because she was so loyal and devoted to white people that slavery was okay in her eyes⁵⁷.

⁵¹ Crone is represented by the color black and took over transitions, death, and catastrophes. Ibid, 36, 37.

⁵² Ibid, 37.

⁵³ Ibid, 51. propaganda mammy is a large (assumed to be ugly), dark (assumed to be uglier) woman who was happy to in her role a domestic slave or servant. Ibid, 39.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 52.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 39.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 67.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 68.

The other co-opted images of the Sacred Dark Feminine are that of the Angry Black Woman and the Strong Black Woman. The negative version of the Angry Black Woman image is of a woman who is always angry and at any moment ready to act out her anger on innocent (white) people⁵⁸. Another version of the Angry Black Woman is the “harsh” or emasculating black woman; essentially this version is used by men to say that black women are too aggressive, not “feminine” or submissive enough⁵⁹. The Angry Black Woman is a more contemporary version of the Sapphire image discussed by White earlier. The Sapphire was a threat to black men via being the head of household. The Angry Black Woman is a threat to men in general. This image is comparing the black woman to the dominant (white) standard of what it means to be a woman. The most prominent and contemporary Angry Black Woman in American popular culture is that of Madea, created and portrayed by Tyler Perry⁶⁰. The image of Madea is a large, loud, older black woman who is ready to fight or get messy at any moment. The image of the Angry Black Woman has become negative in order to position her as dangerous, because in actuality an Angry Black Woman is a change maker⁶¹. The images we see of the Strong Black Woman is usually as the interested stranger or the devoted familiar; she sacrifices herself for others, but will not appear weak to them (stoic)⁶².

Media and Popular culture

The images and narratives of black women entered media and popular culture as a means for justifying slavery, to rendering them harmless or as objects, or as means to serve white

⁵⁸ Ibid, 110.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 120.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 139.

⁶¹ Ibid, 139.

⁶² Ibid, 171.

people in any way they needed. In popular culture, the black women are the “social worker, the rape counselor, the interested stranger who shows up just when things are at their worst”.⁶³ Television shows often reframe stories in alignment with the mythologies as to make black women appear strong, resilient, and always interested in the problems of other people, even when she is the one with a problem⁶⁴. These women are characterized as ready and able to help somebody else. This image of the strong black woman and Sacred Dark Feminine has proven to be comforting and healing for American culture as a whole⁶⁵. This image of the black woman is useful, because she is there to fix any problem that arises, whether she is the maid, best friend, teacher, counselor, mistress, or random helper. The images’ longevity in popular culture is due to their usefulness to the dominant culture and whoever controls this image has a powerful weapon; and black women usually do not have control over this⁶⁶. Thus, this leaves black women in a conflict; they have to decide if they want to work with or against what mainstream authorities purport about them and the many representatives of the Sacred Dark Feminine⁶⁷.

The conflict mostly arises in the theater, the cinema, the radio, and the television screen. These venues are popular culture’s center stage, and black women and their “mythically influenced roles have been staples in all of them”⁶⁸. American Patriarchy created soft, idealized (white) women and gave them strong black female sidekicks who would stay by their side and protect them⁶⁹. Thus the mammy became a fixture in American popular culture, especially when

⁶³ Ibid, 70.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 70.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 72.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 73.

⁶⁷ Parks says that black women have often done both at the same time. Ibid, 73.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 73.

⁶⁹ Parks references that the American patriarchy is the dreams of men captured and exaggerated by Hollywood. The strong black woman, a representative of the Sacred Dark Feminine, filled the vacuum that was left by the subjugation of white women. Ibid, 74.

times called for the assurance and love of a fierce woman⁷⁰. Park argues that sometimes as performers, black women would imitate the imitators, thus working against the mainstream authorities while working with them⁷¹.

Television, Parks argues, was a critical component in the new contemporary America, because it quickly came to be used for entertainment purposes⁷². Television shows are still full of strong black women, however following the release of the Moynihan Report in 1965, more shows with working-class black families headed by black women began to appear⁷³. This happened because the people controlling the images of black women were white men. Those behind the characters, writers and actors, pushed for more variety, and the strong working-class women characters were followed by strong upwardly mobile black women⁷⁴. The 1980s and the 1990s were the golden age of television, because situation comedies created a new kind of diversity within the shared national culture. These shows in this golden age depicted black families with strong black women in them as average families with whom mainstream (white) audiences could identify⁷⁵. Following this golden age of television, black writers and producers were being employed and they seized the opportunity to create richer characters in black cultural situations⁷⁶. Television shows featuring black families moved from stories about the working-

⁷⁰ These characters gave support, advice, ideas, and recipes that led to economic and personal salvation. Ibid, 74.

⁷¹ Ibid, 77.

⁷² Entertainment television provided commentary on the social changes and required audiences to develop on going relationships with the characters. Ibid, 84.

⁷³ These black female characters were often wise and heavysset, mimicking the mammy; *That's My Mama*, *What's Happening*, and *Good Times* are a few examples. Ibid, 85.

⁷⁴ *The Jeffersons*, and *All in the Family*. Ibid, 86.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 86-87.

⁷⁶ *The Cosby Show*, was the crown jewel of this era, it ran from 1984 to 1992. However, I am unsure if Parks means richer to mean more complex or wealthier; I have gone with the later interpretation. Ibid, 87.

class, to those who in were situation in a middle-class to upper-middle-class background. During this time black women gained power behind the camera, too; such as Winifred Hervey who wrote and produced *The Cosby Show*; *The Golden Girls*; *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*; *In the House*; and *The Steve Harvey Show*⁷⁷.

As television started shifting from family situation comedies to ensemble shows, the network lineups included some black ensemble shows, which created more opportunity for variety of black female characters within one program⁷⁸. As dramatic ensemble shows started being integrated into television rosters, black female characters were included but often were only supporting characters reminiscent of the mammy⁷⁹. Supporting black female characters “had to be attractive, intelligent and resourceful, but also strong-willed yet sensitive and caring”⁸⁰. Many of the actresses who played these supporting characters utilized their other roles to stretch and develop their careers and acting skills⁸¹. If these secondary roles were limiting, the actresses found a way to make the most of them. Parks argues that newer roles in television shows have been lumped together as the role of “best black friends,” or BBFs, for leading white characters⁸².

The BBF role is different than the mammy image we often think of. These new women were wise, educated with sharp intellects, and were beautiful and talented in their own right⁸³, yet they were still kept in supporting roles. For now, many Hollywood images of the Sacred

⁷⁷ Ibid, 88.

⁷⁸ UPN ran the show *Girlfriends*, all these black female personalities were strong in one way or another, but as an ensemble, they had to be strong in different ways. Ibid, 94-95.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 95.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 95.

⁸¹ Ibid, 96.

⁸² Ibid, 96.

⁸³ Ibid, 96.

Dark Feminine and the strong black woman will hark back to the more subordinated images, because many people love her⁸⁴. Park argues that the media – in which ever form – teaches others (white people) what to expect from black women and what their roles are, and that black women can either embrace or resist the images they see⁸⁵.

Marquita Maria Gammage uses her book *Representations of Black Women in the Media*, to highlight how black women have been negatively portrayed in the media through its ability to broadcast ideas of blackness to the public⁸⁶. Gammage argues that media such as rap music videos, television dramas, reality television shows, and newscasts create and affect expectations of black women⁸⁷. These expectations lead to the damnation of black womanhood through continually reinforcing negative imagery of black women to the masses. Black women in real life are thus seen as their one dimensional stereotypes.

Contemporary media provide a venue to promote an anti-Black woman agenda by utilizing stereotypical portrayals of black women, which currently dominate popular representations and perceptions of black womanhood⁸⁸. Black women have been reduced to images as representations of their reality. The reduction of black women's image allows for the damnation of their womanhood, through a systematic monopolization of their images in an attempt to “destroy and control the value placed” on black women's femininity. Gammage says the damnation of black womanhood happens in three forms, ideological, social, and institutional.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 108.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 109.

⁸⁶ Marquita Marie Gammage, *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood* (S.l.: TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2017), i.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 1.

Ideological is the racial system of oppression, but for black women this exists as a sexist system of oppression⁸⁹. Social is enforced and reinforced through Eurocentric systems of patriarchy.

This is noticeable through the conflicts black women often face as being both mothers and laborers, black women often operate, as Gammage puts it, as reproductive laborers, sexual laborers, and physical laborers⁹⁰. This is in direct opposition to Eurocentric patriarchal standards for women, who are expected to just be mothers and wives. Institutional damnation is the highest and most alarming form, because it has the potential to not only reinforce the under valuing of black women in society, but it can also legitimize this under valuing⁹¹. The contemporary forms of damnation manifest in media systems. Gammage says that media has systematically adopted this devalued or co-opted understanding of black womanhood and has evolved the racial stereotypes of black womanhood to contemporary assumptions about black peoplehood and blackness⁹². Since media serves as a primary and readily accessible mode of education in the U.S., media productions of black womanhood can often lead to and result in the colonization or co-opting of black women's images⁹³.

Gammage's interpretations correspond to my own findings: in the television dramas of the 21st century there is the continuation of using stereotypes of black womanhood even when these shows are written and/or produced by black women⁹⁴. Although, black female writers and producers were able to gain some more freedom for their shows, there is little variation in the

⁸⁹ It is unclear to me, whether or not Gammage is wanting to contribute to the conversation on intersectionality in her discussion of systematic oppression or not. I am interpreting her work as including intersectionality, but without outright discussing this theory. Ibid, 4.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 5.

⁹¹ Ibid, 5.

⁹² Ibid, 5.

⁹³ Ibid, 6.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 95.

character traits of the black women on these television dramas⁹⁵. These television dramas feature black female characters whose lives revolve around them being single and full of drama, career-minded, having no children, and never achieving a happily ever after⁹⁶. However, all of these shows are broadcasted on networks that are owned and operated by white-run entities. So, it can be argued that black shows and black writers, producers, and creators have to work within the frame of white expectations of how black women should be portrayed to the masses.

Patricia Hilliard-Nunn's article, "Representing African American Women in Hollywood Movies," is about Hollywood's film and television industries, and audiences that consume its work. Hilliard-Nunn argues that "to this day mainstream images of Black people have not significantly changed"⁹⁷. She claims this is due to film and communication theories not working with or in relation to Hollywood practices in order to develop a more inclusive, diverse, and accurate representations of black women⁹⁸. However, a show's writer and/or producer may have the freedom to create what they choose, but the audience has the freedom to be critical spectators⁹⁹. Since, television is a business, the audience most television shows need to be geared toward, is one that is made up of white, young, and predominantly male¹⁰⁰. This audience makes the studios money. Thus, the narratives the majority of society desires and is most comfortable with¹⁰¹ are usually ones that continues the co-option of black women's image.

⁹⁵ Television dramas such as *The Game*, *Scandal*, *Single Ladies*, *Being Mary Jane*, and *How to Get Away with Murder* were all created and/or produced by black women. Ibid, 95.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 95.

⁹⁷ Patricia Hilliard-Nunn, "Representing African American Women in Hollywood Movies." In *Afrocentric Visions: Studies in Culture and Communication*, ed. Janice D. Hamlet (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998), 175.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 177.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 177.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 177.

Conceptual Frames

The theories I am looking at and/or utilizing within my study are mastery of form, deformation of mastery, intersectionality, and agenda-setting. I will utilize mastery of form and deformation of mastery throughout my study, and utilize the theories of intersectionality and agenda-setting as a means to comprehend more the place of black women in society and media. Houston Baker's theories of mastery of form and deformation of mastery serve as guide for my analytical framework of my study. Baker uses his theories in his discussion of black poets during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, when there was much debate surrounding how black artists would identify themselves. Poets at this time wanted to either be known as, for example, a black poet or just simply a poet.

Baker's mastery of form is first and foremost a mask. This mask is worn to conceal, disguise, and "floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee"¹⁰². Mastery of form is meant to conceal or disguise the true intentions of the wearer, Baker compares this to being a praying mantis or a rabbit and compares deformation of mastery to being a gorilla¹⁰³. Mastery of form is compared to animals whose sole purpose is to survive within the dominant system of nature; essentially they are prey within the world or predators. These animals know their place and work within it in order to survive. Deformation of mastery is meant to advertise and distinguish rather than conceal¹⁰⁴; the gorilla is an animal who will fight when their territory or life is threatened. Baker goes on to compare those in deformation "comprehend the territory

¹⁰² Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 50.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 51.

within their own vale/veil fully than any intruder” and that any intruder will think the indigenous sounds as deformed and/or monstrous¹⁰⁵.

Baker’s use of animals as examples to explain his theories, I think does not acknowledge culture within the context of art, but rather implies race as the most important and maybe only factor. This being said, looking at his theories within the context of his understanding and study, mastery of form is simply put as following a traditional method, and deformation of mastery not only refuses this accepted tradition, but also attacks tradition. The stereotypes to which I have given historical context, represent the roles and expectations which people expect to see black woman uphold in their roles as black female characters. The stereotypes are an example of the theory of Baker’s, mastery of form and anything not working with or utilizing stereotypes is breaking away from tradition. Dr. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, literature and film researcher, acknowledges that Baker’s mastery of form is a mask that conceals real black identity, so a black cultural performer may speak to whites from a position of safety, and deformation of mastery as wearing a mask that advertises black difference through vernacular performance¹⁰⁶.

Jon Michael Spencer utilizes Baker’s theories within his own work, *The Rhythms of Black Folk*. Spencer defines mastery of form, as the manipulation of a minstrel mask, where black people are actually “confronting and critiquing the guardians of our oppression,”¹⁰⁷ thus gaining power to compete against the odds with the “masters”¹⁰⁸. Spencer uses *In Living Color*’s

¹⁰⁵ It is important to acknowledge Baker’s use of vale and veil. My interpretation is that Baker is using vale as a means of physical space and veil as a means of space that is separated based on race and/or culture. Ibid, 51, 52.

¹⁰⁶ Dorothea Fischer-Hornung. *EmBODYing Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance* (Münster: Lit, 2001), 54. Fischer-Hornung references Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15-17, 49-51.

¹⁰⁷ Jon Michael Spencer, *The Rhythms of Black Folk: Race, Religion, and Pan-Africanism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), 136.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 137.

Honey the Clown as an example of mastery of form. This character articulates the “familiar stereotypic sounds of minstrelsy,” however they are really... “signifying” by sounding deeply critical critiques of white culture¹⁰⁹. Spencer says this is a viable strategy for existence and emotional relief that has “roots in the era of slavery in the behavior we called “puttin’ on ole master”¹¹⁰. Deformation of mastery is the outright rebellion and rejection of white culture, “where black speakers, and actors explicitly attack white supremacist ideology”¹¹¹. Here Spencer acknowledges that culture has a place when discussing Baker’s theories, because the mask is used when entering the dominant white cultural space. Where with deformation of mastery there is no mask or veil, instead there is an outright expression of blackness as resistance.

Black Hawk Hancock’s use of Baker’s theories in *American Allegory*, acknowledges that Baker’s theories or categories have nothing to do with helping understand the individuals in relation to those forms, instead it breaks down into “conflating race with culture and culture with race”.¹¹² Hancock utilizes Ralph Ellison to argue that these theories or forms have nothing to do with race, but everything to do with “the practical mastery of the cultural form in question”¹¹³. Like Park, Hancock recognizes that someone can exist within these two forms. Hancock says that “for Baker, one must simultaneously engage in both the mastery of form and the deformation of mastery in order to forge a unique and recognized self”¹¹⁴.

Engaging both forms simultaneously adds depth and multidimensionality to black women’s media characters and shows their ability to adapt to the floating signifiers or race and

¹⁰⁹Ibid, 139.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 141.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 136.

¹¹² Black Hawk Hancock, *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 232.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

culture. Added to the duality of race and culture combined, black women are also affected by their gender and socioeconomic situation. Intersectionality is a theory that is based on the intersection of multiple inequalities¹¹⁵. This theory will help in the understanding of black women and their representation, because they suffer unacknowledged inequality in multiple ways. Black women are instead treated with one identity category as a dominant, race gender¹¹⁶. Therefore, black women and women of color who are at the intersection of two or more categories are often rendered marginalized due to gender¹¹⁷. Intersectionality is a way to focus awareness on people and experiences that are often overlooked¹¹⁸. The agenda setting theory is one that implies that media influences us about the importance of topics or the media tells us what to think about (McCombs and Shaw). Agenda setting occurs through the cognitive process of “accessibility”. This implies that the more frequently and prominently the media covers an issue, then that issue becomes more accessible in audience’s memories¹¹⁹. So if media continually portrays black women as stereotypes, the audience will see black women as those stereotypes.

¹¹⁵ Sylvia Walby, Jo Armstrong, and Sofia Strid, "Intersectionality: Multiple Inequalities in Social Theory," *Sociology* 46, no. 2 (2012): 224, doi:10.1177/0038038511416164.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 226.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 226.

¹¹⁸ Catharine A. Mackinnon, "Intersectionality as Method: A Note," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 1020, doi:10.1086/669570.

¹¹⁹ Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Methodology

*Analytical Framework*¹²⁰

Since black women have been fighting since slavery for their humanity, and the image of black women has long been controlled by external forces – especially when this comes to media representation – black female lead characters either fit in to or they break the status quo of what is expected of them. My analytical framework started off with an idea from Sheri Park’s book *Fierce Angels*. Parks stated “when in the service of the status quo, black women are figures of reconciliation,” however when they are “working against it they are figures of social justice and revolution.”¹²¹ This reconciliation goes back to the idea of the mammy and the south reconciling with their own failure after the Civil War. The south used the image of the mammy as a way to seek forgiveness but also to justify letting her into white society; she is harmless. If a black female character is in the status quo, she is the image of everything is all right. If the black female character is going against the role she has been given, she is the image of revolution. Revolution does not mean war in this point in context, but simply a revolution of what black women have been seen as and the diversity of what it means to be a black woman. This lead to the theories developed by Houston Baker, through reading Jon Michael Spencer’s *The Rhythms of Black Folk: Race, Religion, and Pan-Africanism*. My argument is that black female characters either fit into the roles or expectation society has of them or they break these expectations by

¹²⁰ **Analytic frame** is a detailed sketch or outline of an idea about some social phenomenon. Ideas are elaborated through analytic frames; frames constitute ways of seeing the things they elaborate. Analysis studying something in terms of its aspects or parts then synthesis of evidence, which involves putting pieces together to make sense of them.

Charles C. Ragin and Lisa M. Amoroso, *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1994), 56,58.

¹²¹ Sheri Parks. *Fierce Angels: From Sacred Dark Feminine to Strong Black Woman*. (New York, NY: Random House, 2010) 72.

being unapologetically black; however, that is defined unto themselves. In this study I am only analyzing the black female lead characters. I am not analyzing the writers, the overall television show, the other characters, the television show's creator/s, etc. I am putting these characters in a conceptual framework to understand on a more surface view the black female characters and their roles in television.

I will frame my argument by utilizing the theories of mastery of form and deformation of mastery in the context of contemporary television shows, i.e. *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Chewing Gum*, and *Insecure*. To synthesis my evidence I will situate *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* within the frame of mastery of form, and I will situate *Chewing Gum* and *Insecure* within the frame of deformation of mastery. I will use a the more contemporary understanding of Baker's work by using Spencer and Hancock when I place the black female characters within the framework of mastery of form and deformation of mastery. I must recognize that these shows are written, and thus either comply with traditions and expectations placed on black women's roles or refuse to accept traditional expectations and thus create new or more realistic roles of black women in television. I will utilize Spencer when I look for how mastery of form is present in these shows, i.e. how the minstrel mask is being manipulated, and how the shows and/or characters are trying to gain more power, freedom, or flexibility in the white dominated industry¹²². In addition, I will look for how these shows and/or characters explicitly attack white supremacist ideology or expectations¹²³.

Mastery of form and deformation of mastery are all about the mastery of cultural form; i.e. mastery of form is how well one masters the culture form of the dominant (white) culture,

¹²² Jon Michael Spencer, *The Rhythms of Black Folk: Race, Religion, and Pan-Africanism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), 137.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 136.

therefore deformation of mastery is how well one masters the cultural form of resistance to domination. If we take Hancock's understanding of Baker's theories in relation to Ralph Ellison, then what I am looking for in these shows is the form of culture these characters perform or signify.

This is also an interpretive¹²⁴ and critical¹²⁵ approach situated within this analytic framework. This study has an interpretive research approach, because I am placing these shows within a socio-historic context, and I am "interpreting" the reality of these shows and its social and the meanings that emerge from their interactions. It is impossible to abstract these shows from their social setting because these shows were made to be consumed by a wide audience, therefore they need to be interpreted through a social reality, because not everyone interacts with these shows in the same way. My critical theory approach is grounded in decreasing and understanding the complexity of the dominant narrative about black women – which relies on use of old film formulas that contain codes (schemas/stereotypes) – and increasing the freedom of black female characters (through writers, producers, etc.) to be more diverse and complex.

¹²⁴ **Interpretive research** is a research paradigm that is based on the assumption that social reality is not singular or objective, but is shaped by human experiences and social contexts, and is therefore best studied within its socio-historic context. Because interpretive researchers view social reality as being embedded within and impossible to abstract from their social settings, they "interpret" the reality through a "sense-making" process rather than a hypothesis testing process. - Pelz, Bill. "Research Methods for the Social Sciences." Chapter 12 Interpretive Research | Research Methods for the Social Sciences. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-research-methods/chapter/chapter-12-interpretive-research/>.

¹²⁵ A **critical theory** provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms. Critical theory must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation. - James Bohman, "Critical Theory," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, March 08, 2005, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>.

My study aims to highlight what is “stereotypical” and/or “groundbreaking” with some of the current black female lead characters in television shows. I will provide clear standards for criticism on such characters and shows throughout chapter two through four. I aim to dig beneath the surface level of societal readings of these black female characters in order to place them within the context of the complexity of socio- and historical roles/expectations of black women, and the television industry. In order to understand historical roles of black women, I needed to understand their history and the historical stereotypes that have followed them. The stereotypes I will look at come from Deborah Gray White and Sheri Parks.

The shows I chose to look at are *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Chewing Gum* and *Insecure*. I chose these shows based on the qualifications of the Golden Globe’s category definition of best actress in a television series, whether drama, musical, or comedy. In order for an actress to qualify for a lead character nomination, the “lead cast members in a television series, limited series or motion picture made for television must be the central characters who drive the narrative of the program”¹²⁶. I chose to analyze *Scandal*, because it was the first show in the 21st century to feature a black female lead character. Next I chose *How to Get Away with Murder*, because Viola Davis was the first black actress to win “Lead Actress in a Drama Series” at the Primetime Emmy Awards¹²⁷. I chose to analyze *Chewing Gum* and *Insecure*, because these shows feature millennial black female lead characters.

¹²⁶The Primetime Awards Committee, “70th Primetime Emmy Awards 2017-2018 Rules and Procedures,” Golden Globes, updated March 29, 2018, accessed April 1, 2018. <https://www.emmys.com/sites/default/files/Downloads/2018-rules-procedures-v4.pdf>.

¹²⁷ Geoff Berkshire, “Viola Davis Becomes First Black Woman to Win Lead Actress in a Drama Series,” *Variety*, September 21, 2015, accessed March 03, 2018, <http://variety.com/2015/tv/awards/viola-davis-emmy-award-winner-best-actress-first-black-woman-1201597643/>.

The analysis of these shows is also comparing how drama series and comedic series can have a role in how black female characters' roles are written. I wanted to see if Park's acknowledgment of comedic series allowing for more diversity in roles, while drama series still utilize the mammy narrative, still upholds today. These shows also appear either on network broadcast channels or are through subscription based streaming services. There are different types of audiences these shows are geared toward, based on where they air and/or stream. I believe this is just a starting point in how to analyze shows that feature black female lead characters. There are lot more shows than just the four I chose to analyze for my study. I decided on four, due to time constraint, but also due to age, class, and profession of these characters. Each of these four characters has messy lives, but two of the characters are more established in their work profession and are considered middle- to upper-middle class, while the other two characters are working-class, and are at the start of their career or work life.

Chapter 2: Mastery of Form

For this chapter I am looking at mastery of form within the context of race and culture. It is important to recognize how these characters within each show perform or signify culture. However, at the same time I have to be aware that these are characters whose race have an impact in the way these shows operate. These characters are representative of how audiences might potentially view black women in real life, I cannot leave out culture or race in my analysis, because race and culture are confounded. This chapter is aimed at seeing how these shows and the black female lead characters comply with the traditional expectations of black women's roles in television drama series. I will look for which form of culture these characters perform or signify, but also how the characters of Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating are concealing black identities, so a black cultural performer may speak to whites from a position of "safety"¹²⁸.

Olivia Pope and *Scandal*

Summary

Scandal was created and is written by Shonda Rhimes, a black woman, and debuted on ABC on April 5, 2012¹²⁹. The show details the life of high-powered politicians and their support team¹³⁰. Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), is the female lead character, is the head of her own crisis management firm and is charged with the task of *fixing* emergency and potentially career-

¹²⁸ Dorothea Fischer-Hornung. *EmBODYing Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance* (Münster: Lit, 2001), 54. Fischer-Hornung references Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15-17, 49-51.

¹²⁹ Marquita Marie Gammage, *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood* (S.l.: TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2017), 97.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

ending crises for her wealthy high-powered clients. Olivia Pope is a 30-something, attractive, powerful black woman. Through the course of the show she has an extramarital affair with the president of the United States, a white man¹³¹. They engage in a long-term partially secret affair. She and the president's wife, Mellie Grant, are at odds, due to the infidelity.

Olivia turns to her family for stability, but finds out her father is the head of a deadly top-secret governmental organization, and her mother is a terrorist whom she believed to be dead. Olivia turns to Jake Ballard, a white man, for comfort, and develops a sexual relationship; after she gets involved in her own scandals¹³². Eventually Olivia teams up with Mellie Grant to run her campaign for presidency. She becomes the chief of staff and now gets to control the country, her dream and her dad's dream¹³³.

Analysis

Olivia Pope's character embodies the Sapphire stereotype by emasculating the Black man and rendering him unworthy of love, but also by being a portrayed sexual threat to the White family structure¹³⁴. In Season 2, Olivia Pope is in an off and on again relationship with Senator Edison Davis, a black man, but is in love with the President, Grant. Edison attempts many times to secure his relationship with Olivia, he proposes to her, with her constant rejection. When Edison begins to become suspicious of her relationship with the president, and accuses her of having an affair with him, Olivia goes on the defensive and rejects his proposal and informs him that the kind of love he can offer her is not sufficient¹³⁵. This show portrays black men as

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Olivia ends up getting kidnapped and held for ransom. This has a traumatic effect on Olivia, who ends up withdrawing from her life. Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 101.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 101.

incompatible and unsuitable for black women who have college degrees and careers¹³⁶. The Sapphire is a mix between the Jezebel and Mammy¹³⁷ and Olivia Pope represents this stereotype.

Olivia represents the Mammy image of the Sapphire, because her whole world, career and personal life, revolve around her helping others, which means sacrificing herself along the way. When Olivia is kidnapped instead of seeking help for the aftermath of this event, she instead relies on her sexual relationship with Jake Ballard to cope with the trauma (Season 4). She sacrifices herself, when she decides to rig a presidential election in order to help the man she loves become president (Season 2, Ep. 11). Olivia's rise to power always hangs in the balance however, because she is willing to risk everything on a happily ever after with President Grant. This is all to show her loyalty lay completely with him, that her love for him is so fierce she will rig an election for him, kill for him, betray her own people for him; all of this is an act of assurance for her love/commitment to him. Her representation as the Jezebel image of the Sapphire is seen when she is the mistress of the president of the United States. The character of Olivia Pope has been created to be complex through the image of the Sapphire. The Sapphire allows for Olivia to be a sexualized Jezebel but also a loyal Mammy.

This extramarital affair eventually leads to the Grant family filing for divorce. The hypersexualization image of her character makes her unsuited to be a wife – Pope remains unwed and never in a serious committed relationship throughout the entirety of the series – and unsuited to be a mother – Pope never has children¹³⁸. Her relationships whether romantic or platonic with men always have issues and are never stable. However, Olivia Pope is just more

¹³⁶ Ibid, 102.

¹³⁷ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* Revised ed. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 176.

¹³⁸ Marquita Marie Gammage, *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood* (S.l.: TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2017), 1.

than these expected stereotypes; her being a black woman shines through in some of *Scandal's* most powerful scenes.

Olivia's rise to power is a plan that was instilled in her from an early age by her father, Ronan. He constantly reminds her that "you have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have" (Season 3, Ep. 1). The exchange between Olivia and her father Ronan is one many black families are familiar with. This exchange is not meant for the white audiences, but for the black women and men watching this show. The meta-message shared by black people is that Olivia, as a black woman, has to be twice as good as a white person in order to have just half of what white people do. Thus, her career-minded attitude is instilled in her by her father, but is warranted due to the significance of already starting way behind her white counterparts even given her social status as a black woman. The importance of Olivia Pope being a protagonist and eventually anti-hero is vital to the complexity of black women on screen, but also the complexity of being a black woman working and existing within the dominant (white) culture.

Throughout the entire series, Olivia Pope has the ear of the president, while they are on good terms, essentially running the country. Essentially Olivia was the BFF, coming to the president's side whenever an unfortunate event happened. Olivia fixed everything. Whether this was through President Fitzgerald Grant or President Mellie Grant, Olivia was the most powerful person in the country. Olivia Pope was playing the game of her oppressors. Olivia received elite education, worked with some of the most important people of the world, and even fixed their mistakes, with an end game of somehow being in control of the United States. Olivia Pope is playing the game of her oppressors, by mastering their cultural form while concealing her true self. She knows in order to survive and get what she wants. She has to play by their game, but is

playing the game to gain the most powerful position in the United States. Olivia is always working to gain currency to compete against the odds with the “masters”¹³⁹.

Eventually though Olivia’s blackness is portrayed on camera. During Season 2, Ep. 20 is the first time audiences see Olivia with her natural hair. The significance of Olivia’s natural hair is a reminder to her audience that she is black; however, it is also a reminder of her place in a white male dominated work place and city. Hair is a huge cultural identity for black women, and the significance of her character having straight hair for the majority of the series can be interpreted as one of the ways she is mastering the cultural form of the dominant (white) culture, while masking her own.

Race is nowhere yet everywhere in *Scandal*. What I mean is that to a white audience, Olivia Pope can almost become race-less, but when *Scandal* chooses to acknowledge her blackness is when there are subtle critiques of oppressive structures being made. The historical context and significance of a black woman being the mistress of a white man is one from slavery. Shonda Rhimes even writes this into Season 2, Ep. 8 when Olivia Pope tells President Grant that their affair makes her feel “a little Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson about all this.” The show does a good job in acknowledging that the stereotype of the jezebel, usually associated with the hypersexualization of black women, has its historical roots in slavery and that it impacts how people view black women in terms of relationships with white men. Having Olivia directly address the unbalanced power dynamic between her and President Grant, recognizes there is a complexity in their relationship that mirrors her being forced to participate making one question what type of relationship they could possibly be in.

¹³⁹ Jon Michael. Spencer, *The Rhythms of Black Folk: Race, Religion, and Pan-Africanism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), 137.

Annalise Keating and *How to Get Away with Murder*

Summary

How to Get Away with Murder debuted on ABC on September 25, 2014 and is a part of Shonda Rhimes' production company ShondaLand¹⁴⁰. Rhimes, however is an executive producer of this show, and the main writer and creator is a white man, Peter Nowalk, who has worked with Rhimes on her shows *Scandal* and *Grey's Anatomy*. This is the only show in my study that was created by a white man, and is predominantly written by a white man. Two of the many other writers in the show are black women; however, in this study, I have to be aware of the impact this might have on the character development of Annalise Keating¹⁴¹.

The narrative or storyline of the show follows the life of Professor Annalise Keating, who is at first married to a white man, and they have no children¹⁴². Annalise Keating owns a law practice, that employs students from her classroom as interns, allowing them to learn law by participating in real life cases; each week is a new lesson in the principle of defense law. However, Annalise gets too involved in her students live when they get directly involved in a murder they must cover up¹⁴³. This has a domino effect, and this first murder, continues to haunt Annalise and her students, as every decision they make is one that must keep them from going to prison. As the title of the show says, murder is almost at the center of the plot for each season.

¹⁴⁰ Marquita Marie Gammage, *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood* (S.l.: TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2017), 98.

¹⁴¹ It is unclear if creating this show Nowalk intended for the character of Annalise Keating to be black or not. Him being a white man writing a black female character might verge on voyeurism.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

As each season progresses Annalise, along with her students and employees, get entrapped further into webs of lies, manipulation, blackmail, and corruption.

Analysis

She is no mammy; she is her own boss and her first priority is to win cases and protect her reputation. The character of Annalise Keating is initially presented as a jezebel stereotype. She is engaged in sexual affairs with married men, including a black officer Nate Lahey, and her deceased husband, Sam, a white man before their marriage. During the first season she is presented as a hyper-sexual temptress¹⁴⁴. Annalise uses her sexual relationship with Nate to advance her position in cases, to help clear her name, and eventually frame him for the murder of her husband while using a night of sex with him as her alibi (Season 2, Ep. 12)¹⁴⁵. The point of a jezebel, is to use sex to get something in return; i.e. her manipulation of her relationship with Nate Lahey by using her body and sex to get what she wants or needs. The character of Eve Rothlo, is another person whom Annalise uses and manipulates in order to obtain some of her wants. Annalise essentially contacts Eve anytime she is in need of emotional support, which usually rekindles their sexual relationship, or when she needs Eve to serve as Nate's attorney after she frames him for murder (Season 2). The power she has over these two serves her mission of keeping her out of jail and keeping her reputation intact. Jonathan Higgins argues that the character of Annalise Keating battles alcoholism on the show, but she is also portrayed as "so vindictive that she is willing to kill someone to keep herself out of trouble with the law"¹⁴⁶. It is

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 109.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 109-110.

¹⁴⁶ Jonathan P. Higgins, Ed.D. "Why Hollywood's Portrayal of Black Women Is Problematic." *The Root*. November 24, 2016. Accessed November 12, 2017. <https://www.theroot.com/why-hollywood-s-portrayal-of-black-women-is-problematic-1790857877>.

important to note that Annalise is an alcoholic in the show, because it adds to her jezebel image of not being able to control her urges.

Annalise is never presented as trying to escape her race; instead she excels at playing the oppressor's game. Audiences can see Annalise and her interactions with others in the black communities in her affair with Nate Lahey, who is black as well, and the way she cares, in her own way, for her family. It is insinuated that Annalise gives money to her family, who still live in Memphis. One instance, the show has to present Annalise's blackness is during the very first season of the show. Annalise sits in front of a mirror and the camera shows her taking off her wig, make up, and false eyelashes as she stares at herself (Season 1, Ep. 4). Annalise is essentially removing the mask and armor she puts on every day, in order to take her place in a white dominated position.

In this episode she is taking off her mask to confront her white husband. Young says this is an "ode to when black women fix their face before a fight or confrontation", whether it be applying Vaseline or removing jewelry¹⁴⁷. Black women have been taught that natural hair is not professional, so Annalise wears wigs to be more professional and approachable. She wears false eyelashes and applies makeup in order to assimilate within white culture. She is mastering the white culture form in order to gain power, reputation, and some sort of status in society. However, this moment in the episode is also a rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards and the expectations that are placed on black women. In the show, this is just Annalise's routine, but not for the black women who watch this show. For Annalise to not have her mask or armor on is

¹⁴⁷ Damon Young, "Why The "Unmasking" Of Viola Davis On HTGAWM Is The Blackest Thing We've Ever Seen This Week," Very Smart Brothas, October 17, 2014, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://verysmartbrothas.theroot.com/why-the-unmasking-of-viola-davis-on-htgawm-is-the-bla-1822521794>.

allowing this black woman to be exposed; she is vulnerable. Black women are always supposed to be strong and put together. Nevertheless, the importance of this black routine has racial, historical, and even sexual context. This black routine is not something that those outside of black culture will be able to fully understand. This scene in particular is a perfect example, of how mastery of form works. Annalise Keating figuratively wears a mask, makeup and wig, in order to play or perform white culture. She is seen as being compliant with the expectations placed on her, while she plays the game to benefit herself.

In The Status Quo

The characters of Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating are within the status quo of what is expected of black women today. They are fierce, fighters, tough, and resilient. They are strong black women, because they have faced tragedy and yet they still continue to thrive in the face of adversity. However, the narratives of black experiences always tend to be marked with some indication of struggle or tragedy a character has faced. When it comes to television dramas this is not bad or unwarranted storytelling; however, these narratives contribute to the continuous monolithic portrayal that encourages unnecessary pity and further relegates black women to the category of “other”¹⁴⁸.

Olivia Pope’s and Annalise Keating’s narratives are marked by tragedy or struggle. When Olivia Pope was young, her mother died and her father sent her away to boarding schools. This trauma and rejection followed her until adulthood. She has no mother¹⁴⁹ and no real relationship

¹⁴⁸ Shannon Miller, ""Chewing Gum" Matters, And Here's Why," Ravishly, April 13, 2017, accessed March 04, 2018, <https://ravishly.com/chewing-gum-matters-and-heres-why>.

¹⁴⁹ Her mother is later introduced to the series as a terrorist, then she eventually is killed. Olivia still has no relationship with her, as the mother she knew was not the same person.

with her father either. Olivia is continually in a destructive, abusive, and tragic relationship with President Grant. She survives being kidnapped and then isolates herself by locking herself in her apartment and developing a sexually dependent relationship with Jake Ballard in order to deal mentally with this traumatic experience. Similarly, Annalise Keating's romantic relationships are always marked with some sort of tragic narrative. Her husband, Sam, is having an affair and hires someone to kill his pregnant mistress; she is having an affair with Nate Lahey, whose wife is in a hospital dying; and her romantic relationship with Eve Rothlo ends when she leaves her for Sam. Throughout the series, viewers are let into other tragic events of Annalise's life. Annalise is sexually abused by a relative as a child, which leads to her mother killing this family member; which is supposed to give the audience insight into why she has issues with romantic relationships. The relationship with her father is also essentially nonexistent, as he walked out on his family, thus reinforcing the stereotypes of absent/abandoning black fathers. Her husband Sam, is killed by her students, and later audiences learn that she suffers a miscarriage. Annalise is continually manipulating, backstabbing, and plotting in order to always come out top, but she is constructed as doing this in self-defense, protecting herself from those coming after her. These tragedies that mark these characters' lives are always met with resilience, they somehow always overcome these odds. These tragedies that have scarred their lives are supposed to serve as explanations as to why these characters are the way they are and giving them some sort of complexity.

These women are also isolated. Their interactions with other black people are complicated throughout each series¹⁵⁰. Olivia Pope has tumultuous relationships with the other black characters that pop in and out of the entirety of the series. She is a black woman working and operating in a white male dominated world. However, her isolation is also one of her personal life always being left to her to deal or suffer with in private. She does not seek help often, but instead powers through the difficulties in order to “help” others. The same goes for Annalise, who always suffers in silence. Her relationship with the other black characters are destructive and often filled with distrust. She never fully deals with the tragedies that have plagued her life. She pushes through, by keeping busy with work or coming up with ways to get herself and her employees/students out of some legal trouble. She develops an alcohol and drug dependency and later has to enter court ordered rehab. When she is dealing with her tragedies or struggles she is often depicted alone in her home suffering. These characters add to and continue the narrative of the strong black woman – i.e. that black women must be strong and resilient, and sacrifice themselves for others. The shows never make it clear how much the protagonists suffer when trying to bear the burden of everyone else at their own expense. Their suffering is a result of their past and/or their traumas, and not a result of their sacrifices. However, these characters and the shows, also proved something to the white male dominated industry of television, that black women can lead a show and bring in ratings.

The shows are not complacent in the continuation of supplying audiences stereotyped roles of black women. Black women and men (writers, producers, etc.) still have to work within

¹⁵⁰ Both of these women have no friends. They have employees, who always seek to maintain a form of relationship with these women, who at times are willing to abandon them. Marquita Marie Gammage, *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood* (S.I.: TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2017), 105.

the frames of male whiteness, so they must decide if they want to work with or against what mainstream authorities expect them to be. These shows do both. These black female lead characters are single and their lives are full of drama, career-mindedness, they have no children, and may never achieve a happily ever after. However, these characters brought something new to the table. They are strong, but no longer the best black friend who has to constantly hold up those around them to be valuable¹⁵¹.

These women are valuable because of their skill and power, through which they were able to have their own successful businesses. Allowing these black female characters to lead messy lives, allows them to fall short and break the expected roles of a black woman who can always give wise advice and the right answers. These black female characters have some sort of agency, loyalty, and devotion to themselves, and while it may seem like sometimes their loyalty remains with those they work for or with, it really is them playing the game of their oppressors. The most important thing these two shows brought to the expectations of black women, is problems that are not centrally focused on being a *black* problem. The lead characters were demonstrating mastery of form while, as Spencer argues, confronting and critiquing the guardians of black oppression.

¹⁵¹ Candace McDuffie, "Olivia Pope Becoming Unlikeable On 'Scandal' Is Actually Really Great For Representation," *Bustle*, April 25, 2018, , accessed April 26, 2018, <https://www.bustle.com/p/olivia-becoming-unlikeable-on-scandal-is-actually-really-great-for-representation-8826731>.

Chapter 3: Deformation of Mastery

For chapter three, I am looking at deformation of mastery, also within the context of race and culture. However, since deformation of mastery is the rejection of white culture, I will be looking for how each show and the black female lead characters' reject white culture or tradition, instead of performing it. In addition, I will look for instances where Tracey Gordon and Issa Dee questions tradition, and how they express their blackness. Deformation of mastery is meant to advertise and distinguish rather than conceal, and I interpret this in how these characters are unapologetically black. This chapter is aimed at seeing the diversity in how blackness and black culture is used to reject the roles and expectations put onto black women by dominant society. Deformation of mastery is a form of insurgency by subtly critiquing and confronting the dominant society. These

Tracey Gordon and *Chewing Gum*

Summary

Chewing Gum was created by and is written by Michaela Coel, and debuted on Netflix on October 31, 2016. The show is loosely based off of Coel's life. It is a British comedy about a 24-year-old black Christian woman, Tracey Gordon, living in a London housing estate and on a quest to lose her virginity and find herself¹⁵². The show is unusual for staging a coming-of-age story that is centered on a black woman¹⁵³. *Chewing Gum* is about black working class life, and

¹⁵² Christabel Nsiah-Buadi, "In 'Chewing Gum,' Tracey Is The Quirkiest And Freest Character On TV," NPR, April 24, 2017, , accessed April 04, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/24/515228121/in-chewing-gum-tracy-is-the-quirkiest-and-freest-character-on-tv>.

¹⁵³ Shannon Miller, "'Chewing Gum' Matters, And Here's Why," Ravishly, April 13, 2017, accessed March 04, 2018, <https://ravishly.com/chewing-gum-matters-and-heres-why>.

focuses on the messy intersections of ethnicity/race, class, sexuality, and faith, while taking delight in examining the most sensitive corners of traditional white standards¹⁵⁴.

The narrative of season one and series two revolves around Tracey really, *really* wanting to have sex¹⁵⁵. However, the plot of series one complicates matters for Tracey. Tracey's family and her fiancé are very religious, which means that they don't believe in sex before marriage. Tracey's tries to move her (sexual) relationship with her fiancé Ronald forward, but soon finds out he is gay. Tracey eventually ends things with Ronald, never exposing his secret, but then her sister Cynthia ends up engaged to Ronald (Series 1, Ep. 5). During series one, Tracey meets Connor who becomes her goal (Series 1, Ep. 2). Tracey and Connor's relationship is very awkward. The two, obviously having feelings for each other but just do not know how to act around one another. Series one ends with Tracey being kicked out of her mother's apartment after she finds out Tracey is in a relationship with a white man.

The narrative of season two follows Tracey as she tries to get over and replace Connor, get back into her mom's good graces, and still lose her virginity. Between the ending of series one and the beginning of series two, Tracey and Connor live in a homeless shelter where events of Tracey setting up a threesome while high leads to their breakup (Series 2, Ep. 1). In order to make Connor jealous, Tracey claims she is dating rapper Stormzy, who she lures to her work under false pretenses; Stormzy believes she is dying of cancer (Series 2, Ep. 1). In desperate need to meet someone new and get over Connor, Tracey agrees to go to a party with her cousin Boy Tracy, her friend Candice, and Candice's boyfriend, Aaron (Series 2, Ep. 3). However,

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/michaela-coel-chewing-gum-netflix>

¹⁵⁵ Jackson McHenry, "5 Reasons to Check Out Chewing Gum, a Netflix Hidden Gem," *Vulture*, December 09, 2016, accessed March 04, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/chewing-gum-is-a-netflix-hidden-gem.html>.

chaos ensues as she learns it is a sex club. As series two comes to an end, Tracey decides to join a book club in hopes of meeting men not boys. As a result, Tracey meets Remi and loses her virginity to him (Series 2, Ep. 6). However, Tracey is panicked and concerned when she learns he is only sixteen-years-old. The show quickly moves past this horrifying moment in Tracey's life as she learns this is legal. The series ends with Tracey going to a neighbor's baby shower and meeting up with her family, Connor and his girlfriend, and her friends. Seemingly things are left to viewers as Tracey finally discovers the path she wants to take in life. Throughout both series Tracey is allowed the space to make dumb mistakes, grow from them in some way, and then move on¹⁵⁶.

Analysis

What *Chewing Gum* does well, is avoid the clichés or old formulas of television that tend to condescend the characters living in poverty, or simply treat them with pity¹⁵⁷. This show does not rely on the stereotyping of poor black people to make the lives of these characters interesting for its audience. Instead, viewers are treated to a coming-of age story centered on a black woman who is trying to experience life on her own terms. *Chewing Gum* also does not rely on horrific childhood events to mark Tracey's transition from adolescence into adulthood, like most story lines of black women do¹⁵⁸. Instead *Chewing Gum* subverts this trope, and many others commonly held about black women, by allowing the black female lead to make unwise decisions

¹⁵⁶ Shannon Miller, "'Chewing Gum' Matters, And Here's Why," Ravishly, April 13, 2017, accessed March 04, 2018, <https://ravishly.com/chewing-gum-matters-and-heres-why>.

¹⁵⁷ Jackson McHenry, "5 Reasons to Check Out Chewing Gum, a Netflix Hidden Gem," Vulture, December 09, 2016, accessed March 04, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/chewing-gum-is-a-netflix-hidden-gem.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Shannon Miller, "'Chewing Gum' Matters, And Here's Why," Ravishly, April 13, 2017, accessed March 04, 2018, <https://ravishly.com/chewing-gum-matters-and-heres-why>.

without the threat of grave consequences¹⁵⁹. Simply put, the character of Tracey Gordon's story is allowed to resemble the of coming-of age story of a white female character.

Tracey is not presented as a hypersexualized jezebel or sex-crazed. Instead, the show deals with the openness about sexuality and Tracey's agency in her sexuality. The character and roles of Tracey is not one where sex is a given, like most television shows featuring black female lead characters. Instead, the show is radical in its openness about sexuality and how it allows Tracey to explore, develop, and tell her own story about sexuality¹⁶⁰. Tracey is not having affairs with married men or using sex as a means to an end. Tracey's narrative rejects the traditional expectations that are put upon black women to have an established sex-life. Tracey is given the power to choose and is not presented as having no control over her urges, like a jezebel.

Tracey just wants to be loved and to be validated as a person. Society has told her that as a black, working-class woman, her prospects for finding jobs and love are limited, because she is neither intelligent nor attractive enough; simply put Tracey does not fit the Eurocentric beauty standards, meaning she is not white enough¹⁶¹. There is a moment in, Series 2, Ep. 2, where Tracey develops a weird relationship with a too-good-to-be true guy who turns out to have an African fetish. He makes her dress up in his homemade "African tribal" costume and upon their first encounter asks her, "but where are you *from* from?"¹⁶². Michaela Coel, does not appear to

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Jackson McHenry, "5 Reasons to Check Out Chewing Gum, a Netflix Hidden Gem," Vulture, December 09, 2016, accessed March 04, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/chewing-gum-is-a-netflix-hidden-gem.html>.

¹⁶¹ Christabel Nsiah-Buadi, "In 'Chewing Gum,' Tracey Is The Quirkiest And Freest Character On TV," NPR, April 24, 2017, accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/24/515228121/in-chewing-gum-tracy-is-the-quirkiest-and-freest-character-on-tv>.

¹⁶² Mike Hale, "Review: In 'Chewing Gum,' a Young Woman Hilariously Tries to Lose Her Virginity," The New York Times, April 07, 2017, accessed March 04, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/arts/television/netflix-chewing-gum-season-2-review.html>.

be critiquing interracial relationships; instead, what Coel explores are the “potential pitfalls of dating someone who cannot see past a person's skin color and acknowledge their humanity”¹⁶³. Humanity historically denied to black women. Tracey's lack of shame when it comes to her sexuality is rejecting and critiquing the dominant tradition of black women's sexuality.

Rarely do media consumers get to see a black woman openly wanting sex, but also being “fully in control of her own sexual choices”¹⁶⁴. That probably why in the moments, like above, where she is not in a position of power or control of what happens to her, audiences get a deeper understanding of the ways sexism and racism can have a negative and lasting impact on her. This episode is aimed at the racial and sexual, historical injustices black women have faced at the hands of white men¹⁶⁵. By Coel creating a character who appears to be an inexperienced and sheltered woman, she gives herself, and the viewers, the freedom to raise questions that people often ask themselves privately¹⁶⁶. For example, "How can I get the person I like to like me back?," "What would happen if I really told people what I thought" and — the show's most fundamental question — "What's the worst that could happen?"¹⁶⁷.

¹⁶³ Christabel Nsiah-Buadi, "In 'Chewing Gum,' Tracey Is The Quirkiest And Freest Character On TV," NPR, April 24, 2017, accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/24/515228121/in-chewing-gum-tracy-is-the-quirkiest-and-freest-character-on-tv>.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ The jezebel stereotype was created in order to place the blame on black women instead of placing the blame on white men who raped them. The white men could not help themselves, because black women were too sexual.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

Coel also tackles the entertainment industry's preference for lighter skin. Watching own her beauty not only stands out, but feels radical¹⁶⁸. Tracey has a monologue about how white people are bad kissers, but it is not their fault. "It's just that they've got really small lips," Tracey explains in one monologue, "and they can't embrace the challenge of lips like mine, and then they try and compensate for their lack of lips with the tongue, and then the tongue ends up everywhere, just flapping around."¹⁶⁹ Coel is directly challenging and flipping the predominant narrative about black people, black women in particular, being running jokes for having fuller lips. In series two, Coel asks direct and pointed questions and examines the impact of Eurocentric beauty standards.

During a rare crisis of confidence, Tracey asks her friends why the men she wants are not interested in her and she also asks them if she is ugly. They respond by telling her that she is "niche" and that she is beautiful in a "Whoopi Goldberg in the *Color Purple*" kind of way (Series 2, Ep. 3)¹⁷⁰. Without saying it directly telling her, Tracey's friends have told her she's undesirable because of her darkness as a black woman¹⁷¹. The narrative is not new and the statement on "colorism is clear: Women who have African features can't be attractive"¹⁷². This exchange between Tracey and her friends is powerful because, by understanding the comparison to Whoopi Goldberg, viewers also come to understand why Tracey is not considered

¹⁶⁸ Shannon Miller, "'Chewing Gum' Matters, And Here's Why," *Ravishly*, April 13, 2017, accessed March 04, 2018, <https://ravishly.com/chewing-gum-matters-and-heres-why>.

¹⁶⁹ Jackson McHenry, "5 Reasons to Check Out Chewing Gum, a Netflix Hidden Gem," *Vulture*, December 09, 2016, accessed March 04, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/chewing-gum-is-a-netflix-hidden-gem.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Christabel Nsiah-Buadi, "In 'Chewing Gum,' Tracey Is The Quirkiest And Freest Character On TV," *NPR*, April 24, 2017, , accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/24/515228121/in-chewing-gum-tracy-is-the-quirkiest-and-freest-character-on-tv>.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

conventionally pretty¹⁷³. Tracey Gordon’s character is unapologetically herself, because she mostly succeeds in breaking free from what society and her faith have told her who she should be and how she should act. The character of Tracey is subtly confronting and critiquing the role that has been given to her, exactly what deformation of mastery is about.

Issa Dee and *Insecure*

Summary

Like *Chewing Gum*, what *Insecure* does is show us the awkward, insecure lifestyle of a black girl¹⁷⁴. *Insecure* is a show about blackness — just normal, everyday blackness, not the stereotypical cliché coolness or struggle of being or existing as a black woman. It does show black viewers the struggles of being a black woman, but in a way where black viewers can develop a relationship with the life and situations of Issa, because it reflects their lives on a more personal level¹⁷⁵. *Insecure* was created and written by Issa Rae, and debuted on HBO on October 9, 2016.

Throughout the first season, seven episodes show Issa cheating her on “faithful” boyfriend who is temporarily unemployed. The season’s narrative follows Issa as she battles trying to figure out if she wants to stick it out with her long-term boyfriend, who she lives with, or to end things¹⁷⁶. The life of Issa and her messy drama is more petty than an epic vengeance story. The season also follows awkward situations that arise when one is a black female in a

¹⁷³ Shareca, "How "Insecure" And "Chewing Gum" Changed Black Female Television," The Odyssey Online, October 26, 2017, , accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/how-insecure-and-chewing-gum-changed-black-female-television>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

white driven world. Issa's friend, Molly is constantly in a battle with herself and her job, where predominantly white people work¹⁷⁷. Issa works a non-profit that benefits middle-school students of color; she is the only woman of color at her job and is often asked her opinion since she is a black woman. *Insecure* is about exploring social and racial issues that relate to the contemporary black experience, and what it means to be a black (millennial) woman.

Issa Rae's *Insecure* provides a different narrative of black love on television. It shows black women loving black men, not just using them as place holders to get over their white ex as in *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*. Like *Chewing Gum*, audiences see an awkward, not so confident, black woman on screen¹⁷⁸. Issa Rae was intentional about her creation of *Insecure*; it is not for white people, but simply a show that she imagined for *her* family and friends¹⁷⁹. The raunchiness is essential to the show's perceptive, and often "raucous, portrayal of the struggles and absurdities of being young, black, and striving in a big city"¹⁸⁰. *Insecure* does not go out of its way to translate the specificity of the world it portrays; instead it relies on similar experiences shared by black people. The choice of not explaining instances of black life, to white audience, is defiance, rejection, and a critique of the traditional narrative.

At another point in the first episode of season two, while Issa is collecting her mail on her way out of her apartment complex, "an elderly neighbor peeks her head out of her door to tell Issa to "put some lotion on those ankles," a phrase that most black aunties have uttered at some

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Brittany Spanos, "Issa Rae: Why 'Insecure' Is Not Made 'for Dudes' or 'White People'," *Rolling Stone*, September 01, 2017, , accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/features/insecure-issa-rae-on-hbo-show-not-made-for-dudes-w500665>.

¹⁸⁰ Alexis Okeowo, "What Issa Rae's 'Insecure' Gets Right," *The New Yorker*, July 24, 2017, , accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/what-issa-raes-insecure-gets-right>.

point to their younger relatives”¹⁸¹. The same episode the show explores the gender pay gap, with an added issue to unpick: is Molly being paid less because of her gender, or her race, or both¹⁸². There is a show-within-the-show too, an antebellum-era television drama that several of *Insecure*’s characters are addicted to. During the same episode, Chad, a friend of Issa’s ex Lawrence, is seen watching a fictional slavery series in which a slave woman and her master are having an affair—seemingly making fun of the interracial love story in *Scandal*¹⁸³. As the master’s wife comes across the slave with a book and then snatches it away, Chad groans. “Aw, bitch,” he exclaims. “Let the bitch *read*.” Chad’s reluctant fascination, and accompanying frustration with this scene captures the obsession that black communities have with shows that have entertaining yet deeply flawed representations of black people and story lines¹⁸⁴. The frustration is with allowing a black female character to be more than just a stereotypical role that follows the dominant narrative of being a slave, a Jezebel, a Sapphire, or a Mammy.

What *Insecure* also does well, is to show and continue to deepen its depiction of the relationship between Issa and her best friend, Molly. These are two black women who are, in many ways, radically different but equally supportive of each other¹⁸⁵. This friendship between black women is extremely important being shown on television. Often, like in *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, black female characters are represented as having little to no

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Jane Mulkerrins, "Issa Rae: 'So Much of the Media Presents Blackness as Fierce and Flawless. I'm Not'," *The Guardian*, August 05, 2017, accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/aug/05/issa-rae-media-presents-blackness-fierce-flawless-insecure>.

¹⁸³ Alexis Okeowo, "What Issa Rae's 'Insecure' Gets Right," *The New Yorker*, July 24, 2017, , accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/what-issa-raes-insecure-gets-right>.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

relationship with other black women. Or, black women's relationships are shown as being toxic, vindictive, and/or competitive. This friendship between black women takes them out of the role as being a BBF/best black friend to white women, and being each other's helpers instead. This harkens back to a part of black women's history that is often forgotten or left out, which is the kinship developed between enslaved women in order to survive during slavery, and thus has followed since.

Free from Expectations

Chewing Gum and *Insecure* are a huge reinforcement to audiences that they are watching black women. Before *Insecure*, "there were *no* prime time shows that so vividly depicted the black, female, millennial experience. At least, not ones that mattered"¹⁸⁶. This is important, because these two shows, finally have characters that black women watching the shows can relate to, not just simply because the lead character is black, but because these shows are talking about things that relate to them¹⁸⁷. Issa Rae and Michaela Coel are writing these shows based on their own experiences as black women; they are based on what they know and what they dealt with in life. This translation of their experience from real life to on screen is what makes these shows so special for black women¹⁸⁸.

¹⁸⁶ Zeba Blay, "The Radical Importance Of Issa Rae's 'Insecure'," The Huffington Post, July 25, 2017, accessed March 05, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-radical-importance-of-issa-raes-insecure_us_5976241de4b0aad8e51c5bfc.

¹⁸⁷ Shareca, "How 'Insecure' And 'Chewing Gum' Changed Black Female Television," The Odyssey Online, October 26, 2017, accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/how-insecure-and-chewing-gum-changed-black-female-television>.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

So much of how the media presents blackness now is as “being cool, or able to dance, or fierce and flawless, or just out of control”¹⁸⁹. There is no relatability or authenticity about blackness in these shows, just historical and contemporary stereotypes and expectations placed on blackness. Zeba Blay says, “the industry was incredibly slow to realize, to even consider, that representations of black women on television can also span age and socio-economic status, that the genre doesn’t always have to be a hard-hitting work drama, that black women *do* in fact have coming-of-age stories worth telling”¹⁹⁰. There is simply more to black women than has been shown. However, to fail to acknowledge the impact of shows like *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* on shows like *Chewing Gum* and *Insecure* would be wrong. The way in which *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* succeeded and opened up space in an industry dominated by white men provided the freedom and flexibility for black women to exist as more than just stereotyped expectations and roles.

¹⁸⁹ Jane Mulkerrins, "Issa Rae: 'So Much of the Media Presents Blackness as Fierce and Flawless. I'm Not'," *The Guardian*, August 05, 2017, , accessed March 05, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/aug/05/issa-rae-media-presents-blackness-fierce-flawless-insecure>.

¹⁹⁰ Zeba Blay, "The Radical Importance Of Issa Rae's 'Insecure'," *The Huffington Post*, July 25, 2017, , accessed March 05, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-radical-importance-of-issa-raes-insecure_us_5976241de4b0aad8e51c5bfc.

Chapter 4: In Perspective

Although shows like *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* opened up space for *Chewing Gum* and *Insecure* to exist, there is still importance in analyzing and critiquing how these shows portray black women. *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* are not necessarily “sell-outs” and fully compliant to the Eurocentric, heteropatriarchal norm; instead, they are working within the space they have been given. The Eurocentric, heteropatriarchal norm is also related to how network broadcast television limits certain narratives of its shows¹⁹¹, versus television that is subscription based. Even the shows like *Chewing Gum* and *Insecure* that push back on negative portrayals the creators and writers have to work within the system so their work can be seen.

However, as Gammage says, regardless of what “optimistic observers—encouraged by the momentary success of a few Black actresses or films—[say] about the improvement of Black women’s representation” in Hollywood movies and television, the real picture is not encouraging¹⁹². In fact, it is business as usual. The movie and television industries are infected by the same racism and sexism present in other institutions in our society. Gammage says that “any affirmative steps taken to eliminate white supremacy and to address and solve the pervasive racism and sexism around the world should help better the content of movies so they represent Maat”¹⁹³. So, it should come as no surprise that representations of black women in the television, even when created and/or produced by black women, reflect mainstream American expectations

¹⁹¹ Through the rules and regulations of what can be shown on television, and the type of audience that has to be catered to.

¹⁹² Marquita Marie Gammage, *Representations of Black Women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood* (S.l.: TAYLOR & FRANCIS, 2017), 192.

¹⁹³ Maat is ancient Egyptian concepts of truth, balance, order, harmony, law, morality, and justice. This piece was published in 1998 and still rings true 20 years later. *Ibid*, 192-193.

about Black womanhood¹⁹⁴. These women have to work in a television industry that is structured within the frames of male whiteness; essentially they are given their traditional language and black women have to work with and within this. There is a complexity of compliance. Black women have never had, up until now, control of their image, because it has always been shaped by how white people needed them.

It is reported that younger women, ages 18 to 29, are more likely than older women to be aware of negative images and also more likely to find them compelling since they consume more media overall¹⁹⁵. Suggestions for further study would be to investigate the influence of both negative and positive images of black women in media on younger women, aged 18 to 29. Conducting interviews with black women from a range of demographic perspectives, in order to receive a variety of feedback on black female characters in television, would greatly contribute to the discussion in the complexity of compliancy when it comes to black women in the television industry. Any future studies also need to take into consideration if and how viewers of these shows are perceiving these narratives as a call to action. This can be compared to how *A Different World* (1987-1993) supposedly influenced black youth to strive to attend college. In accordance with this, it would also be interesting to see how and why white women watch these shows that feature black female lead characters, and what they get out of their viewing experience.

Taking a look at the success of the shows, and how they either reject or perform the white dominate culture, begs the question where do we go from here. Since the premiere of *Scandal* in 2012, numerous shows featuring black female lead characters have come and gone. There have

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 95.

¹⁹⁵ Rebecca Ann. Lind, *Race/gender/media: considering diversity, across audiences, content, and producers*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2013).

been films like *Girl's Trip*, black women directing big budget films like Ava Duvernay for *A Wrinkle in Time*, and even record breaking films like *Black Panther*. But it still begs the question of how do we change an industry so deeply rooted in racism and sexism. How will the release and success of *Black Panther*, the #MeToo movement, and the acknowledgment of InclusionRiders change this industry, when writer and director Brad Bird, of *Incredibles 2*, reportedly says, that Honey, a black woman and wife of the only black superhero in the film, is “funnier as a voice”? Even with the success of black people in film and television, oppressive structures still exist. The traditional stereotyped black female characters co-exist at the same time black female writers, directors, producers, and viewers are beginning to reject these stereotyped narratives¹⁹⁶. Houston Baker’s theories are just the beginning in understanding the shift that is happening with the film and television industry, and even social codes. It takes a long history of people pushing for the next generation’s success in order for change to happen.

¹⁹⁶ For future studies, I suggest looking at how *Black Panther*, the #MeToo movement, and the acknowledgment of InclusionRiders might change the television and film landscape over the next couple of years.

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