

Re-mixing Old Character Tropes on Screen:
Kerry Washington, Viola Davis, and the New Femininity

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Film Studies

2017

This thesis entitled:
Re-mixing Old Character Tropes on Screen:
Kerry Washington, Viola Davis, and the new Femininity
written by Melina Kristine Dabney
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Date:

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Thesis directed by Professor Melinda Barlow

While there is a substantial amount of scholarship on the depiction of African American women in film and television, this thesis exposes the new formations of African American femininity on screen. African American women have consistently resisted, challenged, submitted to, and remixed racial myths and sexual stereotypes existing in American cinema and television programming. Mainstream film and television practices significantly contribute to the reinforcement of old stereotypes in contemporary black women characters. However, based on the efforts of African American producers like Shonda Rhimes, who has attempted to insert more realistic renderings of African American women in her recent television shows, black women's representation is undergoing yet another shift in contemporary media. Moreover, the career choices of African American actresses are an indication of a push for positive representation. Through identifying historical tropes of African American femininity, and through utilizing the insights of black feminist thought, this thesis will explicate the portrayals of black womanhood in contemporary film and television. The recent film and television roles Kerry Washington and Viola Davis, two prominent African American figures in film and television today, will be case studies for this analysis. The films and television shows of Kerry Washington and Viola Davis contain moments of resurgence and moments that refute stereotypes of black femininity. Black actresses must constantly negotiate their stake in the representation of African American women and the problematic standards of mainstream studios.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following individuals for their unyielding support and assistance throughout this project:

My thesis director, Professor Melinda Barlow, for her professional guidance and constructive suggestions during the development of my thesis. I am sincerely grateful for her meaningful feedback and for her compassion throughout the writing process.

I want to thank Professor Suranjan Ganguly for his classes and lectures that helped expand my critical thinking and writing capabilities. His courses gave me a thorough appreciation for cinema throughout the world.

I would like to express my deep gratitude for Professor Reiland Rabaka for his enthusiastic encouragement throughout this project. His Harlem Renaissance class provided invaluable critical thought on African American history and culture.

I would also like to thank the following people for their help and support:

Professor Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz

Professor Tiel Lundy

Professor Bianca Williams

Kristen Drybread

Catherine Cartwright

Rhonda McCuan

Larisa Netterland

My parents, Terry and Pamela Dabney, and my sister, Serena Dabney, for their unwavering confidence in my abilities.

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Introduction

Film and television are both currently undergoing a shift in the representation of African American women. While film is recognized for its hand in black women's representation, through the identifiable movements in black cinema, television today is setting a new precedent for more accurate portrayals of African American women. Mainstream network television shows like *Scandal* (2012-) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-), with their complex leading black women characters, exemplify the prevalence of African American visibility on screen. However, there are still moments of triumph and moments of turmoil for African American women's representation in mainstream film and television. My research is therefore geared towards the transformative moments in contemporary media that have either expanded or restricted positive representation for African American women. Through identifying historical tropes and myths of black femininity, this thesis will analyze contemporary films and television shows featuring African American women in leading roles to assess the evolution of African American women's representation. The contemporary work of Kerry Washington and Viola Davis in film and televisual roles will be used as case-studies for how black actresses resist, refute, submit to, or *re-mix* the stereotypical images black women have had to portray throughout history.

The careers of Kerry Washington and Viola Davis have recently exploded due to their prominent visibility on the big and small screen. A September 2015 Nielsen report titled "Black Influence Goes Mainstream in the U.S." asserted the following:

From movies to sports to music and everything in between, black culture resonates broadly extending deep, cultural traditions that span generations and all consumer groups. The power of black influence is something businesses and content creators should consider when developing strategic marketing campaigns and programs not only for African-American audiences, but for the general population, too.

African Americans have remained visible in both the past and in the present in visual media, especially in film and television. However, the contested issue in African American studies and media studies alike is the difference between visibility and representation: even though African Americans are visible on screen, how are they being represented at any given moment in media history? In other words, the mere *visibility* of African Americans on screen can make actual African American life-experiences virtually *invisible*. Americans should be skeptical of this Nielson report: the hypervisibility of “black culture” is still operating in a capitalist system that profits from that culture, because of this, images of African American women that have increased in quantity may not have undergone a positive change in quality.

African American Women Stereotypes: Mammy and Jezebel

The most enduring images of African American women on television and film screens are that of the sex-less “mammy” and the “dominate ‘oversexed’ black female predator” (Manatu, 33). This contradiction of black women being on opposite poles of a spectrum of femininity has historical roots. Caricatures of African Americans are anchored in American material culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Riggs, 1986). The iconography of the nineteenth century and the later repetition of these grotesque images in minstrel theater and vaudeville cinema stamped a lasting ideology of American blackness for white consumers and viewers. The “mammy” (quotes hereafter omitted), a stereotype of African American femininity that dates back to the late 1800s, is usually a dark-skinned maid who takes care of white children and the household. She is “usually big, fat, and cantankerous” (Bogle, 9). The mammy is the eternal server and caretaker of white families, while consistently ignoring or being terse with her own family. What is prevailing about the mammy is her continual, unyielding support of white institutions, such as the family and her overall “place” in a society dedicated to white supremacy.

The mammy is the most persistent stereotype of black femininity in American film and television. The mammy lasted well into the 1960s only to be replaced by the hypersexual icons of the Blaxploitation period of the 1970s. Black women have also been portrayed as hypersexual. Hyper-sexuality is the trademark of the stereotypical Jezebel. The Jezebel is often dangerous, cunning, and uses sex as a weapon for her benefit. Hypersexual images of black women stem from this trope of the Jezebel. While the Jezebel continues to be a prevalent stereotype, especially in music and advertising culture, contemporary film and television cling to aspects of the mammy.

Historically, based on her overall look, an actress will usually either play the sex-less mammy or the hypersexual Jezebel. Obviously, there has been variance in these designated roles since the 1980s; however, the images still work as a foundational framework for representing black femininity on screen. Contradictions are always at the heart of most contemporary on-screen characterizations of black women. These stereotypes pop up in contemporary film and television as *remixed* versions of the original. This constant remixing of stereotypical images contains a strong level of resistance to the original image.

African American Women Film and Television Icons: A Brief History

Television has historically lagged behind the given present social atmosphere (Riggs 1992). Even though the black middle class was growing after the war, which placed many African American women outside of their previous, subsumed vocation as domestics, television in the late 1940s saw fit to perpetuate the mammy stereotype. *The Beulah Show* (1945-1954), starring Hattie McDaniel and later Louis Beavers, was about a maid, Beulah, who worked for a middle-class white family. Beulah was often shown helping the family and their ten-year-old son but never living her life outside of her domestic vocation. *The Beulah Show* is indicative of

America's embrace of the mammy character. The mammy is always happy to take care of the household, which includes troubleshooting situations concerning the white family she works for. Mammy figures like Beulah tend to strip African American femininity down to motherhood (and not even of their own children), making the mammy a sex-less character, unlike the sexually "desirable" white women actresses of the time period.

As television fumbled to portray African American women as anything other than mammies and shrews in the late forties and early fifties, one particular film actress paved the way for progress on the big screen: Dorothy Dandridge. Dandridge is known for her starring roles in all-black cast films such as *Carmen Jones* (1954) and *Porgy and Bess* (1957). These films were marketed to mainstream film audiences (Mask, 2009), which made Dorothy Dandridge "the first major crossover film starlet" among her African American women contemporaries (Mask, 14). Mia Mask argues (2009), "With [the starlet] air of bourgeois respectability, elegance, and sophistication, [Dandridge's] persona broadened the image of black womanhood in the public sphere" (ibid). Dandridge's charismatic beauty allowed her to navigate through the racially biased atmosphere of Hollywood cinema in the 1950s.

Julia (1968-71), starring Diahann Carroll, is a show that marks what Bambi Haggins (2016) calls the "idealization paradigm." Carroll plays Julia, an African American mother and nurse who is widowed after her husband dies in the war. In order to gain the support of white mainstream audiences, film and television imagined characters like Julia that would be "respectable" and unthreatening. It is important to understand that television's goal, since its inception, has always been to present images that please rather than startle. African American women actresses could garner more work because they were seen as less "threatening" than African American men to the (white) American public.

One contention with *Julia* is the show's need to make the main character, Julia, into an ultra-perfect mother figure. *Julia* is an example of the "be black but not too black" decree imposed on black creative work in media professions, which was also imposed on the film roles of Sydney Poitier at the time (Sieving, 2011). However, *Julia* was groundbreaking because it portrayed an alternative image of African American life that was set in a middle-class environment rather than impoverished and crime-stricken areas. Moreover, while Julia is portrayed as the perfect mother figure, episodes of the show were often racially-charged even though the show was meant to be a lighthearted sitcom. The show also boasts having a woman, of any color, dating various men as a single mother, which was uncommon on television (which usually preferred to show a nuclear family for situation comedies). Thus, even though *Julia* employed a saint-like character to achieve a higher retention of white audiences, the show was a substantial stepping-stone for African American *and* women's representation on TV. However, aspects of the "idealization paradigm" (further discussed in Chapter Two) can be observed in contemporary film and television today.

Where Julia was too sweet and perfect to be true, the Blaxploitation period of the 1970s introduced the sassy, sexy black woman figure. While the Blaxploitation period of the 1970s helped to change the image of the "angelic" black man that Sydney Poitier often occupied in the sixties, the exploitation of motifs of the movement—including poor urban neighborhoods overcome by crime; African American men as aggressive and sexually potent; and the hypersexual African American woman—led to a troubling influence on African American representation. Studios capitalized on and exploited the black action-heroine. As Blaxploitation films starring African American men such as Richard Roundtree (*Shaft*, 1971) and Ron O'Neil (*Super Fly*, 1972) attracted black and white audiences alike, the studios wielded films with

similar plots featuring African American women leading actresses. Among the most popular and prolific Blaxploitation starlets are Pam Grier (*Foxy Brown*, 1974) and Tamera Dobson (*Cleopatra Jones*, 1973).

With the popularity of the Blaxploitation film, television's ABC network launched its own made-for-TV film, *Get Christie Love!* (1974) which was extended into a television series. *Get Christie Love!* starred Teresa Graves, playing an undercover detective busting drug dealers. The character of Christie Love follows the same patterns as other Blaxploitation women. For example, the costuming of Graves often shows off her slender body and skin and her interaction with her fellow detectives (usually white men) is sultry and often involves sassy back-talk to her superiors. *Get Christie Love!* was another significant crossover installation in that it portrayed a black woman surrounded by mostly white characters, which is a criterion for most crossover shows post-*Star Trek* and *Julia*. Joshua Wright (2014) argues, "*Get Christie Love!* is often cited as the last dramatic series on network television to feature a black woman prior to *Scandal*" (26).

The same year of the premiere of *Get Christie Love!* (1974) *Good Times* also aired its first show on CBS. *Good Times* was one of a string of "ghetto sitcoms" on network television, which included *Sanford and Son* (1972-77) and *What's Happening* (1976-79). The intention of ghetto sitcoms was to portray African American life in inner city areas ("ghettos") such as Chicago's south side, filling a void in TV's class portrayals of African Americans. In theory, ghetto sitcoms would utilize comedy to show the mainstream some aspects of African American life-worlds. While ghetto sitcoms provided critical commentary on being black in the United States, they also ended up mollifying the effects of poverty in urban areas (Riggs, 1992). Class is a driving factor in the representation of African Americans in the media.

By the 1980s, the situation comedy genre dominated the televisual representation of African Americans. *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) introduced America to a wealthy black middle-class family, and, importantly, a new image of black womanhood through the character of Claire Huxtable (Phylicia Rashad), the refined, sophisticated black woman. *The Cosby Show*, and many following shows and films, are a response to the association of “blackness” with poverty. The 1990s and early 2000s brought diverse figures of African American women to television. Most notably on *A Different World* (1987-1993), *ER* (1994-2009), and *The Game* (2006-2015). NBC’s *Deception* (2013), a detective drama starring Megan Goode, which aired nine months prior to *Scandal*, was the second *network* television show to feature an African American woman lead after *Get Christie Love!* The show only lasted one season before *Scandal* entered the prime-time scene on ABC.

The representations of African American women in historical films and television shows have had a ripple effect, if you will, on contemporary portrayals of African American women. It is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the shadow of the old images of black womanhood. However, each new stage in African American women’s representation strives to do better than the last. Film and television still witnesses this sense of endurance today. But despite the best efforts of actresses and creators who have come before, industry standards threaten to hold back significant progress for representation. If change is to occur, advocates for change must consider industry practices that have continually stifled positive representation.

Film and Television Industry Practices

While a historical analysis will show an exponential increase in the visibility of African American women on screen, the various mainstream representations of African American women often succumb to stereotypical tropes. Despite the hypervisibility of African Americans

in the media, diverse, non-stereotypical roles on film and television available for actresses are scarce. Because of the way Hollywood film and network television industries work respectively, African American actresses experience major competition amongst themselves due to the limited range of characters they have the opportunity to portray. Industry practices considerably drive the lack of opportunities available for African American actresses.

In the late 1980s, James Ulmer recognized incongruences between actors negotiating high salaries and the payoff the production studios actually received. Ulmer later invented The Ulmer Scale, a system used to calculate an actor's or actress's *bankability*. Bankability "refers to the degree to which an actor's name alone can raise full or majority financing up front for a picture" (Ndounou 169). The Ulmer Scale calculates bankability by assessing four aspects of an actor's stardom: (1) willingness to travel and promote, (2) professionalism, (3) career management, and (4) talent and acting range. The actor or actress is ranked with a number out of 100 with respect to low, medium, and high budget productions. The sum of these is the final scale which markets an actor's bankability to power heads. By these criteria, power brokers can assess the financial risk of hiring a certain actor for a certain picture. "Career management" refers to the types of roles an actor or actress star in throughout their career. For black actresses, the type of roles they usually star in, which are likely to be niche films featuring all-black casts, drive down their Ulmer score. If executives of mainstream Hollywood films rely on The Ulmer Scale for determining financial success and the bankability of an actor, then black actors and actresses, whose Ulmer scores are consistently lower than their white counterparts, will consequently be continually rejected for leading roles.

Television, on the other hand, works on a system driven by viewer ratings and advertising. Even if producers venture to try something new in regard to representation, viewer

ratings drive a show's life on primetime. Sponsors will also only provide funding for a network television show if there is a high probability of viewership from their (mostly white) targeted demographic. However, since TV is a social outlet, criticism and pressure from groups can (temporarily) effect change in the system. In his essay "Black Content, White Control" (2005), Darnell Hunt maps the cyclical nature of primetime TV content since 1999. The cyclical pattern basically consists of this: (1) periodic circulation of insensitive representation, (2) "public outrage and/or pressure, (3) release of depressing statistics about minority exclusion from the industry, (4) token or symbolic industry diversity initiatives designed to appease critics, and (5) return to business-as-usual practices..." (Hunt, 269). The industry practices of Hollywood and network television limit the opportunities of African American women to star in more diverse roles or roles that would be more accurate in depicting African American women's life-experiences. Shonda Rhimes, the showrunner for *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* may be a response to the "cycle" Darnell Hunt describes, but her television installations on primetime have made her a formidable executive whose success is likely to keep her making shows with multiracial casts and black women leads.

Shonda Rhimes, Kerry Washington, and Viola Davis

The shows of Shonda Rhimes, who is a black woman and television producer, (re)introduced black women in starring roles in two drama series: *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*. Both of these shows feature a black woman in the lead: Kerry Washington in *Scandal* and Viola Davis in *How to Get Away with Murder*. Rhimes' position as a black female showrunner and her success garnered from her hit TV shows has made her a household name. After producing the immensely popular *Greys Anatomy* (2005-), Rhimes was able to install her own brain-child, *Scandal*, and produce *How to Get Away with Murder* shortly after *Scandal's*

huge success. Kerry Washington's popularity as an actress boomed as a result of her starring role on *Scandal*, allowing her to heighten her acting career and star profile through television rather than film. Viola Davis, a frequent film actress, also gained more attention and critical awareness through her television role. I concentrate on Kerry Washington and Viola Davis because they are actresses who reside in both film and television, which is useful in tracking the nature of their roles in both realms of entertainment.

Literature Review

Melissa Harris-Perry's work, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (2011), has proven invaluable in understanding the on-screen and off-screen actions of Kerry Washington and Viola Davis. Harris-Perry's extended metaphor of "the crooked room" creates a dialectic of how black women resist or conform to the status quo. The crooked room metaphor is based on "post-WWII cognitive psychology research on field dependence" (28-29). Research participants in the field dependence studies were placed in a crooked room and asked to make themselves stand upright. Many participants aligned themselves with the objects in the room, which provided an illusion of standing upright when they were actually leaning up to 35 degrees. The phenomenon that the research participants experienced mirrors black women's constant day-to-day "adjustments." Black women metaphorically twist and contort themselves to fit into a given situation and sometimes they manage to remain standing upright in "crooked" societal spaces. The leading ladies in *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* are case-studies of the crooked room phenomenon. Harris-Perry's pivotal work within black feminist thought enriches the discourse on black women's conscious effort to either submit to or resist their real-life and portrayed positions of inferiority.

Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks* (1987) is a definitive authority on the history of African Americans in American film. Bogle's work is concise in tracing the "types" of African Americans portrayed on screen since 1903¹. The book also informs the foundation for the "controlling images" of black women that will later be explicated in black feminism.

Patricia Hill Collins, one of the fore-mothers of black feminist theory, coins the term "controlling images" in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000). "Controlling images" refer to the variety of negative images of black women that permeate the mass media and, as a result, become understood stereotypes that effect black women in real life. Collins also stresses that race, class, gender, and sexuality are intersecting identities² that are used as tools of oppression. For this reason, any study on black women must take into account their various imposed social identities that can either privilege or oppress. The mammy, welfare queen, and Jezebel are the main controlling images Collins emphasizes in this work.

Collins presents a modified account of "controlling images" in *Black Sexual Politics* (2004). In this text, Collins analyzes black women's sexuality and Anglo-America's obsession with black bodies and sexuality. Collins delves into the myth of the hypersexual black woman starting from slavery and leading up to black women in popular culture. Additionally, Collins hypothesizes the image of the "modern mammy," which paradoxically has added visibility and a degree of agency to black female television and film characters while preserving the same

¹ 1903 is the year Edwin S. Porter the twelve-minute motion picture *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a micro-adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's book. While the character Uncle Tom is the first black character to appear on screen, the actor who plays him is a white man in blackface.

² See Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics." *U. Chi. Legal F.* (1989): 139.

fundamental characteristic of the mammy figure: her loyalty to white institutions no matter the stakes.

Marlon Riggs's documentary films, *Ethnic Notions* (1986) and *Color Adjustment* (1992), are greatly informative about race, television, and iconography. *Ethnic Notions* gives an account of negative the iconography circulating in America that fueled stereotypical images and ideological "notions" of African Americans. In *Color Adjustment* Riggs chronicles African American representation on mainstream television. Riggs cites the various adjustments that have been made in the portrayal of African Americans on television.

Joshua K. Wright's article "Scandalous: Olivia Pope and Black Women in Primetime History" (2014) presents the historical backdrop of African American women's representation leading up to Shonda Rhimes's *Scandal*. The article assesses the representation and reception of Kerry Washington's character, Olivia Pope, and *Scandal*'s place in the history of black women's representation. Wright analyzes *Scandal* and the significance of Shonda Rhimes's primetime spotlight.

Maryann Erigha discusses some of the pitfalls of a crossover series—a series that has African American leading characters but is liked by both white and black audiences, making it able to "crossover" to mainstream television—in her article "Shonda Rhimes, *Scandal*, and the Politics of Crossing Over" (2015). Erigha explains that, when a show is designed for a mainstream audience, it's African American characters can lose cultural signifiers in order to be more palatable for white audiences.

Mia Mask provides a rich analysis of popular African American film starlets in her book *Divas on Screen* (2009). The book contains historical context and a critical review of stars like Dorothy Dandridge and Halle Berry. This book aids in a deeper understanding of black film

starlets. In the same vein, Lakesia D. Johnson's *Iconic: Decoding Images of the Revolutionary Black Woman* (2012) examines the depiction and actions of iconic women in media history such as Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama, whose term as first lady in the White House was highly televised.

It is important to note here that since *How to Get Away with Murder* was created in 2015, little scholarly research has been written about the show. Therefore, my analysis of that show and Viola Davis's performance relies upon black feminist theory. Additionally, my work is informed by what Viola Davis herself has said about the show, being casted in the leading role, and her creative choices on set.

Kerry Washington and Viola Davis are "crossover" stars who have garnered large fan bases in the American mainstream populace. The crossover status of the actresses is significant in interpreting the type of image the studios have them portray and why. Moreover, even though both actresses star in primetime shows produced by an African American showrunner, Shonda Rhimes, their characters are still able to fall into the same "traps" of negative representation seen throughout history. The two chapters in this thesis are divided into each actress's significant film and television roles. Chapter One focuses on the most recent roles of Kerry Washington—*Scandal* and the made-for-TV movie *Confirmation* (2016). Chapter Two discusses Viola Davis's award-winning role in *The Help* (2011) and her performance in *How to Get Away with Murder*.

While there have been numerous strides in African American representation within the independent film circuit—with the films of Spike Lee (*Girl 6*, 1996), Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991), and the recent televisual work of Ava DuVernay (*Queen Sugar*, 2016)—my work focuses exclusively on mainstream representation because of the hypervisibility of African American women within mainstream media outlets. The mass media can act a "substitute" for

meaningful public discussions on race and gender, (mis)educating Americans and promoting specific ideologies about a specific race or gender (Collins, 2004). If the majority of the American populace is exposed to mostly mainstream media sources like popular film and television, then it is imperative that we consider the types of images of African American women that are being regularly consumed. In short, mass media has broader implications and a substantial influence within the public sphere of American society.

Chapter One

The Modern Mammy and “Black Lady” Decoded: Kerry Washington in *Scandal* and *Confirmation*



The women who have made strides and paved the way for newer, fairer representations of black femininity have become icons. Whether it is Hattie McDaniel (*Gone with the Wind*, Victor Fleming, 1939), Dorothy Dandridge (*Carmen Jones*, Otto Preminger, 1954), Pam Grier (*Foxy Brown*, Jack Hill, 1974), or Halle Berry (*Monster's Ball*, Mark Forster, 2001), black actresses and their respective roles become signposts that show the progression (or regression) of African American representation throughout history. Today, history is coming up on new icons, women who are challenging the previous visual roles prescribed to African Americans. One new, popular face of African American women on screen is Kerry Washington, who is well known for her role as Olivia Pope on Shonda Rhimes' *Scandal*. This chapter will analyze the most recent roles of Kerry Washington in *Scandal* (2012-) and *Confirmation* (2016). Through identifying various “myths” of African American femininity, with regard to black feminist criticism, this

chapter assesses how Kerry Washington's recent roles have challenged and/or conformed to stereotypical depictions of African American women's sexuality and femininity.

Part I

Subverting Old and New Tropes of Black Femininity: Kerry Washington in Scandal

Scandal is about Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), Washington, D.C.'s most prominent "fixer" and her crisis management firm, Pope & Associates, which routinely works to remedy scandals that occur in the political milieu of Washington, D.C. This includes fixing scandals in the White House itself. In the first season, the scandal at hand is the alleged affair between White House staff member, Amanda Tanner (Liza Weil), and the president of the United States, Fitzgerald "Fitz" Grant III (Tony Goldwyn). The show is all the more "scandalicious" since Olivia Pope has an off-and-on romantic relationship with the president. The love triangle between Fitz, Olivia, and First Lady "Mellie" Grant (Bellamy Young) is the driving force of the show's addictive drama. Typically, the show will have a subplot of Pope & Associates dealing with various high-profile scandals in Washington that interconnects with the main drama between the leading characters. While the show implicitly deals with infidelity, Olivia and Fitz's tender romance plays out like two star-crossed lovers caught in the middle of a complicated political marriage.

Seasons one through three center around the erupting secret involving election rigging. Olivia and Fitz fall in love during his presidential election campaign, which she is hired to run after voters lose interest in the Republican governor, Fitz, from what Olivia assesses as his obviously cold, distant marriage. Olivia Pope does everything she can to run a clean campaign but the momentum is thwarted by the dubious voting trajectory of Defiance, Ohio. After Olivia

fervently opposes the idea of rigging the election, she and the campaign team, unbeknownst to Fitz, reluctantly decide to rig the voting machines in Defiance to save Fitz's potential election.

The pilot episode of *Scandal*, "Sweet Baby" (season 1, ep. 1), immediately establishes Olivia Pope's high-profile professional status. The episode opens by having Harrison Wright (Columbus Short) interview Quinn Perkins (Katie Lowes) for a chance to work for "*the* Olivia Pope." The sequence cuts to Olivia Pope in a two-shot frame set up in a dimly lit service elevator—she is standing side by side one of her comrades, Stephen Finch (Henry Ian Cusick). Olivia wearing a trendy, white pea coat and white blouse underneath. Washington's costume design stands out in comparison to her coworker Stephen's downplayed costume color scheme of dark greys, blues, and forest green. The key lighting directed on her and Stephen against the dimly lit backdrop of the elevator makes her visually pop in her bright white clothes in the two-shot. When the scene cuts to the two of them walking out of the elevator and then toward the shady Ukrainian ransom kidnappers (we later find out), Olivia is cool, calm, and collected—another juxtaposition against her frazzled male counterpart, Stephen. The dialogue, lighting, and costume design within the mise-en-scène portrays Olivia Pope as someone who is powerful, competent, high class, and always in control. Additionally, Kerry Washington's performance is key in creating a strong, confident, alluring character: Olivia Pope's walk is a hip-swaying stomp, her chin is always tilted upward with an air of sophistication, and her gaze toward others is always direct and intentional.

While the visual composition of Olivia Pope exudes power, finesse, and respectability, her narrative function on the show could be construed as problematic based on her relationship with Fitz and her occupation as a "fixer." Even though Olivia Pope may look like an African American woman who is in complete control of herself and her surroundings, the degree to

which prevailing images and assumptions of African American women exist on the show must be interrogated. Olivia Pope's character can be linked to what Patricia Hill Collins has described as the "controlling images" of the over-worked "mammy," the sexualized Jezebel, and even the domineering Sapphire (Collins, 2004; Harris-Perry, 2011). While Olivia Pope is obviously not the "mammy" of the antebellum slave days, especially in her physical attributes and her sexual prowess that are far removed from the stereotypical mammy figure, the mammy-like quality of keeping stability in the (White)house can be construed as a "distant cousin," so to speak, of Olivia Pope's occupation as a "fixer" for the white elite.

Disrupting the Trope of the New Mammy: Olivia Pope as "Fixer" of White Problems?

The trope of the "mammy" has imprinted itself on African American representation for decades; however, I want to make it clear that African American women's representation on screen would be nowhere without the contributions of Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers, who had to routinely take on roles of maids in order to establish their legendary careers in acting. Because the mammy trope was popularized in minstrel theater (Anderson, 1997), it had a smooth transition into mainstream film and television. Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar for her role as "Mammy" in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind* and carried on the mammy-figure role in *The Beulah Show* (1945-1954), later starring Louise Beavers. The mammy trope lasted well into the 1960s; she is characterized as ignorant, often with a caricatured type of humor, and "the symbol of black motherhood as perceived by whites" (Anderson 10). She is usually a large woman, with darker skin and a jolly yet strict demeanor (Riggs, 1992). In addition, the mammy is the mythic construction of an African American "caretaker of the whites' homes and children first, her own second" (ibid). The mammy has been the most prevalent, the most recognizable, and a

continuously repeated image of African American womanhood and sexuality (Anderson, 1997; Wright 2014).

Patricia Hill Collins (2004) extrapolates new forms of the mammy found in contemporary film and television, which are tied to the need to construct an image of middle-class African American womanhood. Collins describes this connection between the “modern mammy” and middle-class black womanhood:

More recent images of Black professional women also negotiate the slippery terrain of distancing Black women from the assumptions of aggression and sexuality attributed to working-class Black women while not making middle-class Black women unsuitable for hard work. To address this dilemma, the image of Mammy, the loyal female servant created under chattel slavery, has been resurrected and modernized as a template for middle-class Black womanhood. Maneuvering through this image of the modern mammy requires a delicate balance between being appropriately subordinate to White and/or male authority yet maintaining a level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middleclass occupations. Aggression is acceptable, just as long as it is appropriately expressed for the benefit of others. (140)

This contemporary remix of the “mammy” takes leave of *literal* housekeeping and caretaking of white families. Instead, the modern mammy contains three main attributes: (1) aggression only for the benefit of others; (2) no life outside her job, which is usually a white-male dominated career field; and (3) remaining “loyal to social institutions run by white men” (Collins 2004: 141-142). The aspect of “ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middleclass occupations” is key when identifying how the modern mammy differs from the “traditional” mammy.

The modern mammy is linked to another popular modern portrayal of black womanhood: the “black lady.” Black “ladies” are characters who conform to things labeled as “white” such as only speaking standard English (or not speaking in vernacular coded as working-class “black” language), wearing professional, polished clothing, and always displaying a dignified,

sophisticated demeanor (Collins, 2004). The “black lady” is thus an extension of the “idealization paradigm” that situates black women only in the guise of high respectability. Just as with the modern mammy, class is a fundamental signifier for a “black lady” character, who must perform her class status through language, clothing, and sophistication.

There are two good television examples of the modern mammy: Ella Farmer (Lynn Thigpin) from *The District* (2000-2004) and Lieutenant Anita Van Buren (S. Epatha Merkerson) from *Law and Order* (1991-2010). Ella Farmer is a high-level analyst at the Washington D.C. police department. The character of Ella Farmer is at once refreshing and still conforming to the modern mammy/black lady dyad. Collins notes,

Ella’s commitment to African Americans is clear—she takes in an orphaned nephew and displays qualities of care and competence that are refreshing after decades of traditional, familyless mammies. She is clearly a Black lady. She uses standard American English, dresses impeccably, and always has a dignified demeanor. Her character is also staunchly devoted to the “Chief,” her White boss. Ella is loyal, and this is an important quality in depictions of modern mammies. (141)

Indeed, Ella Farmer is so loyal to her job that when she receives a call from her chief the night before her wedding about a quarantine of the office based on a deadly virus they may have been exposed, she leaves her husband and child to go support her coworkers, putting herself at risk in the process.

Anita Van Buren has similar qualities of being in a high-level position. However, Van Buren challenges the established order by filing a discrimination suit after remaining unpromoted for years. Even so, Van Buren remains loyal to the police department throughout the series. Moreover, she conforms to the attributes of a “black lady” just like Farmer. While these two characters do things to transgress the image of the modern mammy, and “break new ground” by being black women in job positions in charge of white men, Collins holds that in the shows

the two women “both remain loyal to social institutions of law and order that are run by white men” (142). Thus, the modern mammy and “black lady” at once break with old tropes of the traditional mammy figure by establishing the presence of black middle-class femininity; but these two images also uphold the tradition of placing black women in positions that are loyal to white institutions, which is the most basic provision of the mammy.

In season three Olivia Pope’s mother, Maya Pope (Khandi Alexander), accuses Olivia of falling into the modern mammy trap. Her mother states, “I’d rather be a traitor than what you are Livvie. Cleaning up those people’s messes, fixing their lives, you think you’re family but you’re nothing but the help.” Here the show is self-conscious its own criticism surrounding the character of Olivia Pope, namely, that she might contain some traits of the modern mammy.

Joshua Wright (2014) condemned one critic’s connection between Olivia Pope and the mammy stating,

The Mammy was generally less educated. Olivia Pope is a cosmopolitan woman who graduated from Princeton and Georgetown. Her father is an alumnus of Princeton too. She is not rearing anyone’s ‘chillum’ or frying chicken in a White person’s kitchen. Her thin figure and lighter brown complexion is what has historically been appealing to White men. No one will ever accuse her of being asexual or overly religious. (24-25).

All of Wright’s assertions here are true. However, Wright is alluding to the pre-1960s mammy, not possible offshoots of the image. Furthermore, Wright identifies attributes of the “black lady” such as her education, which fosters a sense of sophistication in the character.

After describing the characters of Ella Farmer and Anita Van Buren, it is tempting to see aspects of Kerry Washington’s character in *Scandal* as a modern mammy—she does indeed help solve a lot of problems for white folks in the show, but, as Joshua Wright points out, “the comparison ends there” (24). The notion of Olivia Pope as a modern mammy is evoked in her occupation but quickly subverted in the show as her character evolves. While it does at times

seem like Olivia Pope's only priority in life is to get Fitz in office and keep him there, her romantic involvement with him and other men make her sexuality far removed from the definition of what it means to be *any* sort of mammy. Olivia repeatedly goes against the wishes of the White House and the established order, quitting her job and her influence multiple times throughout the show. Unlike Anita Van Buren and Ella Farmer, Olivia Pope's character evolves significantly throughout the series—the idea of Olivia Pope as a modern mammy/black lady is set up and smashed down throughout the course of the show, particularly through the portrayal of her sexuality and independence. However, black women working for white-dominated institutions is one way to insert middle-class black women into the storyline of a show or film. This strategy gives black women visibility without disrupting hegemonic social norms. Additionally, in order to create an accessible black middle-class woman character, that character must be everything the stereotypical working-class black women are not (Collins, 2004). This especially includes the negative association of black working-class women with promiscuity. But the character of Olivia Pope subverts the notion of black middle-class femininity being contingent upon a “respectability” that essentially excludes female sexual desire.

Subverting the Image of the Black Lady: The Sexuality of the African American Woman on Scandal

Stereotypes associated with working-class African American women include “bitchiness, promiscuity, and fertility”³ (“fertility” being a condemnation of the “welfare queen”) (Collins 138). Thus, middle-class black women form their identity by being the opposite of the stereotypes associated with working-class black femininity. Collins explains,

Middle-class African American career women encounter a curious repackaging of the controlling images generated for poor and working class Black femininity, now reformulated for middle-class use. Images of middle-class

³ See Collins, 2004, pp. 132-137.

Black femininity demonstrate a cumbersome and often contradictory link between that of modern mammy and Black lady. The Black lady image is designed to counter claims of Black women's promiscuity. Achieving middle class status means that Black women have rejected the unbridled "freaky" sexuality now attributed primarily to working-class Black women. At the same time, because middle-class Black women typically need to work in order to remain middle class, they cannot achieve the status of lady by withdrawing from the workforce. Images of the Black lady are designed to resolve these contradictions. (139)

The term "lady" has roots in American-Victorianism, which emphasizes "respectability" through piety, submissiveness, and sexual conformity (Foucault, 1978; Harris-Perry, 2011). Claire Huxtable from *The Cosby Show* encompasses the idea of the Black lady whose image "is designed to counter claims of Black women's promiscuity" (ibid). While Claire Huxtable is classy and beautiful, she and her husband are only seen cuddling together at most, which is usually interrupted by one of their five children (Collins, 140). Claire Huxtable's sexuality is limited to the space of home and family, making her a matriarchal figure whose sexuality is mollified by her constantly being depicted in spaces that contain her husband and children. Moreover, Claire Huxtable is a successful lawyer but never shown at work. Even though Claire Huxtable is always seen in domestic space, her "ladylike" qualities, including her education and certain air of respectability, act as an image that resists the "mammy" or the hypersexual jezebel.

The first and second seasons of *Scandal* grapple with Olivia Pope's position as a black woman in a high-profile position at the White House who is sleeping with a married president—not particularly "ladylike" behavior. What's at stake for Shonda Rhimes as a black woman showrunner is to implement a sexy, flawed, multifaceted character with the extra burden of representing "blackness," womanhood, and black-womanhood well. My goal here is not to stamp a verdict on whether or not the show accomplishes that end, but rather to explicate the contradictions that arise in the show. Olivia Pope resists stereotypes of black womanhood that

have come before her, but the shadow of those stereotypes still linger at times in her characterization. Thus, the contradictory loving relationship of illicit infidelity with a man who represents a political institution that has historically excluded black women from positions of power is immediately called into question. In other words, to put it bluntly: Is Olivia Pope another sleazy iteration of the Jezebel through her adulterous affair? Is she also the “help” that her mother accuses her of being, a “new mammy” in disguise?

In *A History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault mentions the burden of sexuality placed on Americans through the borrowing of Victorian values. Followed by the relatively free sexuality of the early seventeenth century, the support of Victorianism lead to an extended period where “[s]exuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction” (Foucault, 3). While the private home became the designated space for sexuality, slavery brought it out into the public streets of the auction. Melissa Harris-Perry puts it best as she explains,

The promiscuity myth [attributed to African American women] has roots in Southern slaveholding society, which operated by a gendered social and moral code. The Victorian ideal of true womanhood required a strict adherence to a code of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—virtues believed to be inherent in feminine nature. (55)

African slaves were often forced to stand nude at slave auctions. Additionally, African American women working in the plantation fields alongside men would often have to hike their skirts up to gain some relief from the heat and working conditions. Thus, “[t]he myth of black women as lascivious, seductive, and insatiable was a way of reconciling the forced public exposure and commoditization of black women’s bodies with the Victorian ideals of women’s modesty and fragility” (ibid). Later renditions of black women, such as the “tragic mulatta” in literature and D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1914) further exacerbated this form of black female sexuality.

Modern-day commercial hip-hop also contributed to the hypersexuality of black women, and let's not forget the sex-symbols of the Blaxploitation period.

With a history of negative associations of black women and sexuality, positive images of black women *owning* their own sexuality ought to be celebrated. With the advancement of women's rights, the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, and feminist dialogues in the last two decades, a character like Olivia Pope can be understood as her own sexual agent. However, race complicates her character: Shonda Rhimes's decision to have Pope be a mistress of the president of the United States is risky in regards to the advancement of black women's sexual representation on the silver screen.

The sexual allure of Olivia Pope is exemplified through her sexual actions, desires, and fantasies that center her as her own sexual agent. The steamy love scenes in *Scandal*, are usually either with Fitz or Jake Ballard (Scott Foley), Olivia's other on-again-off-again love interest. With Fitz, their sultry, albeit adulterous sex life has an element of place that adds to Olivia's willingness to unhinge her love and desire—because they are engaging in an affair, space in which they fornicate is usually surreptitious, dark, and improvisational. This creates the “steaminess” of Fitz and Olivia's love life—they “do it” in a hotel room on the campaign trail, on the desk of the Oval Office after the inaugural ball, and in the isolated Vermont house of their dreams, which is empty, nothing but sheets and the floor. In one episode, after Olivia and Fitz's relationship is on the rocks once he finds out about Defiance and the election rigging, the camera faces Olivia and Fitz and she walks brazenly down one of the White House hallways and he follows her. The sexual tension between the two of them is so thick you could cut it with a knife—the frontal camera tracking them down the hallway shows Fitz's pursuit of her, and the expression on Washington's face suggests that she can feel him approaching behind her. Fitz

quickly pulls her into an electrical closet. There is a visual rhyming between the two shots: first Fitz is approaching her from behind in the first shot and then kissing her from behind in the second shot. The closet is illuminated with electric lights and the shots of the two of them are occluded through the extensive wires and steel shelving. The camera is handheld, creating a messy, passionate look and feel. This scene illustrates how desired Olivia is by Fitz—he looks as though he is teeming with testosterone as he approaches her. It also shows her as enjoying the sexual encounter: through the occluded, handheld shots, the focus is on Olivia's face, not Fitz, capturing her euphoric facial expressions as they embrace.

It is important to note here that one of the reasons why the mammy trope began was because of the tendency for the white lady of the house to prefer a domestic worker who was unattractive so that her husband would not be lusting after the help in antebellum slavery days (Riggs, 1986). While Olivia Pope does help the elite keep their lives together, she is also the cautionary, black-bodied, object of desire for Fitz. Olivia's presence disrupts the white hegemonic order. However, this paranoia of an African American hypersexual "hussy" stealing the attention of a white married man and threatening the sanctity of Western filial values is inverted through Olivia's sexual agency—that is, her preference of Jake Ballard, who is not married but is white—and the through-line of romance on the show. In short, Olivia Pope is a contradiction: she simultaneously shows attributes of the modern mammy at times, putting her own wishes aside for the sake of the Republic; the upper middle-class Black lady with education and poise; and still a cautionary tale for allowing an attractive African American woman into the white American home. Thus, because the show positions her as someone having an affair with a married man, her sexuality cannot escape the shadow of the hypersexual African vixen of the past. However, the way the show centers Pope as the one to be pleased, it also appeals to its wide

range of woman audience members: the sex in the show is about the woman's pleasure, rarely the man's.

While their affair has the hot-and-heavy quality of melodramatic romance, the sexual dynamic between Olivia and Fitz is intricately tied to their different racial identities and power. The episode "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" (season 2, ep. 8) is the follow-up episode after the president, Fitz, has been shot in the head by an assassin. The episode is not subtle in its historical reference to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The title of the episode blatantly references JFK's affair with Marilyn Monroe, who sang her iconic "Happy Birthday" song to him in her sultry, breathy voice in front of the nation. The title alone introduces America's history of presidential extra-marital affairs. "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" confronts the affair Olivia and Fitz are having through a series of flashbacks intercut with the panic ensuing after the assassination attempt. In one of the flashbacks Olivia says to Fitz, "I am feeling a little, I don't know, Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson about all this." Fitz looks shocked and a little hurt by her association of the long-lasting affair between Thomas Jefferson and one of his slaves, Sally Hemings.⁴ The issue here is not only a master/slave narrative connotation but also a relationship that can never be solidified or recognized without its scandalous components attached.

The Hemings-Jefferson comment also connotes white ownership of black (female) bodies, which is connected to the roots of the mammy trope since African American maids were often treated as property even after the abolition of slavery. In the next flashback, Olivia has been avoiding Fitz after their brief run-in at the White House when she made the Hemings-Jefferson comment. Fitz is angry; he sees the comment as "below the belt" and as "belittling" to

⁴ The affair between Hemings and Jefferson is widely believed to have yielded several children. See "Sally Hemings." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 29 Apr. 2014. academic.eb.com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/levels/collegiate/article/Sally-Hemings/608350. Accessed 7 Feb. 2017.

their relationship. However, Olivia's concerns are more about their infidelity than the fact that they are of two different ethnicities. Olivia feels consumed by her relationship with Fitz. She says, "I smile for [Mellie] and I take off my clothes for you. I wait for you. I watch for you. My whole life is you... You own me. You control me. I belong to you." Not only is there implicit guilt in Olivia's statement about keeping the affair secret from Mellie, but also an aspect of control, ownership, and desire. However, desire is key. Olivia Pope is not a victim of control, her "waiting" and "watching" for Fitz is part of an unfulfilled desire, an unquenched love that they both admit to. The episode tries to justify Olivia's pathology by having Fitz pour out his similar feelings for her—to Fitz, Olivia owns *him*. Fitz explains how he would like to be a better man, to honor his marriage, but she is "the love of [his] life... *You* own me, *you* control me," he says. So, the feeling is mutual, supposedly. However sincere Fitz's feelings may be, and however satisfying the syrupy romance of this scene is to viewers, the aspect of ownership is more complex than the infatuation of these two characters for each other would have us believe.

As Olivia's mother indicates, Olivia might be "owned" or belong to not only Fitz but the extended political office-space of the White House. The evocation of "ownership" in the scene invokes a master/slave dynamic that the scene ultimately rejects through its gushy romance. Because ownership is brought up, however, it is as if the writers of show are conscious of the potential for Washington's character to be construed as kin to subservient images of black femininity such as the mammy. Along with the asexuality of the mammy and sexual repression of the "black lady," which are traits of black femininity that the characterization of Olivia Pope destroys, there is also the aspect domesticity and submissiveness that goes along with these tropes. Once Olivia becomes a quasi-First Lady in the White House, she faces additional public scrutiny in regards to how she is expected to perform "ladylike" femininity.

“Playing” First Lady: The Performativity of the “Black Lady”

By the fourth season of *Scandal* Fitz divorces Mellie and Olivia moves into the White House as an impromptu First Lady. Because of the affair, and because Olivia and Fitz are not married, the legitimacy of Olivia as First lady is intrinsically called into question. As a black woman who was also the president’s mistress, Olivia has to do double-duty in making sure that the American people and the social aristocracy of Washington accept her. She must essentially make sure that she is *playing the part*, if you will, of a good First Lady. This narrative decision to move Pope into the White House as First Lady is intriguing given that Michelle Obama, America’s first African American First Lady, came under similar scrutiny simply for being a black woman in the White House. For example, in an October 2008 interview with Larry King, just after her husband had been nominated, Michelle Obama was bombarded with questions designed to reveal her “angry black woman” nature, another contemporary myth black women have to face. Lakesia D. Johnson (2012), describes the Larry King interview:

King was focused on exposing some deeply repressed anger that, presumably, was being disguised by Mrs. Obama. Tim Graham—not a Barack Obama supporter—analyzed this interview in his article “Larry King Kept Asking Michelle Obama: ‘Attack Dog’ Palin Doesn’t Make You Mad?” and noted that King posed “13 anger-management questions in all.” Graham’s observation is significant because it raises an important dilemma faced by black women. The question “Are you angry?” or “Are you mad” is a loaded one, recalling long-standing fears and negative images of strong black women. (1-2)

Michelle Obama’s answers to King’s questions were poised, saying things like “we can disagree without being disagreeable” (3). However, African American women in televised, high-profile occupations and positions can be seen as exhibiting what Judith Butler (1988) calls “performativity,” or the “stylized repetition of acts” in order to garner a desired outcome. Furthermore, “performativity becomes all at once a cultural convention, value, and signifier that is inscribed on the body—performed through the body—to mark identities” (ibid). While

performativity is a social phenomenon with contested definitions and theory (Madison and Hamera, 2005), the notion of performing—of playing the part one is expected to play in a given situation—can be useful in deciphering Olivia Pope’s “role” as First Lady, a role that must be played correctly to the tee if she is to be accepted in the political and social milieu of Washington D.C. and America at large (much like what Michelle Obama went through).

Olivia is expected to take on all of the tasks of the First Lady, which the show depicts as a slew social schmoozing, picking out which china to have at events, and reading to children. A montage of magazine covers shows headlines nearly identical to what Michelle Obama came to be known for as First Lady. Yet, the term “First Lady” has codifying implications: the First Lady should, as the name indicates, be a “lady” above all, an exemplary lady of American-Victorian standards for all women. How does being black and the First Lady complicate or challenge this notion? *Scandal* is commenting on a black female body (and the stereotypes imprinted on the black female body) in the historically white-body filled White House. Ironically, Olivia Pope rejects her new role as First Lady; she longs to be back to her old life, her old self, doing what she does best, fixing scandals.

In the introduction of the episode “Baby It’s Cold Outside” (season 5, ep. 9) the camera peers into the closet of the new First Lady of the White House. The camera slowly pans over the front-displayed dresses. The white outfits that Olivia usually wears are neatly behind bright red-and-white dresses, many with a floral design. Olivia steps into the frame and appears overwhelmed by the shift in her wardrobe that has been employed to appease the American public. She finally settles on a dress that Fitz suggests and the next scene takes place later that day at a Christmas party, where she is wearing the dress. Olivia is making friendly but empty small talk. The dialogue is inaudible at this point; Olivia’s faked yet pretty smile sets the tone for

this social gathering—it is all a performance. Since Olivia is a professional at softening scandals, she knows that image is everything in a situation like the one she’s in. Being the new First Lady at a Christmas soiree requires a modest diplomacy: smile, nod, befriend, repeat.



The next shot closes in on the conversation Olivia is having as Elizabeth North (Portia de Rossi) comments on Olivia’s changed demeanor: “See that over there? Looks like Olivia Pope, sounds like Olivia Pope, but that is not Olivia Pope.” The scene cuts to a close-up shot slightly from below of Olivia, who is looking downward and chatting with an older woman who is seated. The conversation in the scene is then carried out with a shot-reverse-shot format but the camera is tighter on Olivia in order to capture her subtle facial reaction to what comes next. The woman states that she has a problem and needs Olivia’s help. Olivia leans in, intrigued, hopeful, her brow furrows, concerned but ever so lightly excited. The prospect of someone needing her professional guidance again is the only thing that snaps her out of her Stepford-like trance. The

woman's "problem" is that the name of a certain cookie she once tasted at a different party has escaped her. The woman describes the cookie and ardently inquires, "Do you think you could get me that recipe?" In this scene, Olivia's professional life has been dwindled down to *the mystery of the cinnamon-flavored cookie*. She has unwittingly traded professional space for domestic space and begins to long for an escape. Even though her fantasy has always been living openly with Fitz, the domestic role of First Lady is utterly unfulfilling. This is another example of how the modern mammy/black lady stereotype is undercut by Olivia Pope's character in *Scandal*. Washington recently has played a role that demonstrates how the modern mammy/black lady dyad can work in contemporary visual images.

Part II

Kerry Washington in Confirmation: Paying Tribute to Anita Hill



In *Confirmation* (Rick Famuyiwa, 2016) Kerry Washington plays Anita Hill, the now iconic voice of anti-sexual harassment in the work place. This made-for-TV film is an accurate account of the events that took place during Clarence Thomas's 1991 Supreme Court Justice

confirmation hearings. The film is significant because it portrays a highly-televised moment in black women's rights in regard to their sexuality (and women's rights in general). The film opens with news footage surrounding the resignation of Thurgood Marshall and questions about who President George H.W. Bush will appoint and whether or not that person should be black. President Bush chooses Clarence Thomas (Wendell Pierce) as his pick for the lifetime post of Supreme Court Justice. Meanwhile, Anita Hill is a professor of law at the University of Oklahoma. She gets a phone call from investigator Ricki Seidman (Grace Gummer) from Senator Ted Kennedy's office, who is doing background checks on Judge Thomas before his confirmation. Hesitant to answer Seidman's questions about possible mistreatment of women who worked for Thomas at the EEOC, Hill says, "In my experience in a case like this, when someone comes forward the victim tends to become the villain." The film is foreshadowing the upcoming events as well as the televised nature of the later hearing with Hill watching news images of Judge Thomas on her TV in the background as she talks on the phone.

Reluctantly, Hill decides to tell Seidman her story over the phone, so long as it is only for the intelligence of the Senate Judiciary Committee and "not [for] public consumption." History knows that her request goes unfulfilled: the story is leaked and the media has a heyday with the scandal. Anita Hill reveals that Judge Thomas consistently tried to date her and made sexual jokes and comments in the workplace, making her highly uncomfortable and putting her in a very vulnerable position as a woman working beneath a man in a man's-world environment like the government offices of the early 1990s. The scandal called for immediate hearings performed by the Senate Judiciary Committee which was essentially a televised as a "he-said, she-said" scenario.

The remainder of the phone call is intercut with Judge Thomas giving a preliminary speech about why he should be appointed to office. The intercut scene employs a voice-over of the speech, which is about “values.” The audio track of Thomas’s diegetic speech plays over the inaudible conversation between Hill and the investigator. Medium close-ups on Washington’s face and hand gestures is indicative of the tension of what story is being told and by who throughout the film. In other words, the intercutting of the scenes with the voice-over begs the question: whose “values” will be upheld in the upcoming trials? The Senate Judiciary Committee is comprised of white men, including Joe Biden (played by Greg Kinnear), all of whom have their own political agendas concerning the appointment of Judge Thomas; Hill gets caught in the crossfire. The men are only concerned with how the outcome will affect their political engagements, not her (or women’s) voice on the issue.

One brilliant sequence early on in the film starts out with a slew of the male members of the Senate Judiciary Committee convening in a gym, since Biden happens to be there lifting weights. Most of the men are wearing suits in the weight room while they stand around Biden as he continues his workout. High-key, phosphorescent lighting is juxtaposed against the shadowed bedroom of Anita Hill in the next shot. The camera is placed at a downward angle then there is a cut to Hill looking in the mirror. Anita Hill sitting alone in her pink night robe in the dark with a worried look on her face. The juxtaposition of many white men and one black woman, masculinity and femininity, brightness and darkness, and Biden’s phrase “nothing to worry about” immediately contrasted against Anita’s very worried look signifies the tension between dissident groups during the trials.

Confirmation displays the modern mammy/black lady dyad in different ways—Washington is now playing a character that completely rejects the one requirement of the modern

mammy: she puts herself before her job and is “disloyal” to the current establishment. Anita Hill advocates for her rights in the work place as a woman. During the actual trials, Hill “was regularly maligned as a race-traitor who allowed her story of sexual harassment to be used by powerful white opponents to harm the credibility of an African American man” (Harris-Perry, 54). Gender is pitted against race in this story. Race and gender are characterized as having potentially opposing agendas.

Judge Thomas, when speaking his side of the situation, called the court proceedings a “high-tech lynching.” With the invocation of lynching, Thomas stirred up memories of a violent, turbulent, and traumatic past in many African Americans. His approval ratings among African Americans went up fifty percent (*ibid*). The “race-card” used here was a smart tactic—no white member of the senate wanted to challenge Thomas after that comment since they might lose favorability among African American and many white American supporters. This leaves Anita Hill to play the only card she has left: protecting the image of her sexuality so as not to make the American public associate her with working-class black stereotypes of promiscuity that would implicate her in any way as “inviting” advances from Thomas. In the news footage of Anita Hill speaking on her own behalf in the trials, she is notably demure. She never once gets angry, always keeps her voice steady and calm, and sits a bit slouched as she reads from her affidavit. The filmic adaptation is nearly identical, but it further drives home Hill’s demeanor by showing a fictive version of her life and state of mind outside the trial. Washington stands in a mirror moments before the trial buttoning her turquoise suit up to her neck and placing her dainty heart-shaped pendant in front. Despite members of the Senate Judiciary Committee repeatedly “blaming the victim” with aggressive comments such as “why in God’s name did you wait till

now to say something” and “why didn’t you say something or leave then,” Hill never gets emotional or flustered, never loses her cool.

The hearing is an extreme example of how black women “code-switch” or behave in a very particular, self-conscious way based on the given environment they are confronted with. While the scene of Hill with her family ascribe to her cool, collected demeanor, the trials at the Senate Judiciary Committee amplify her need to not act “bitchy,” or aggressive. As the above shot in the mirror shows, even her cloths must be codified to be as appropriately feminine and dowdy as possible—the “Black lady” image is projected on her for her own survival in this case.

The film contains character foils of Anita Hill to subtly emphasize the position of her character. First, there is Judy Smith (Kristen Ariza), who is working for Senator Jack Danforth against Hill’s testimony. Judy is in many ways a “modern mammy.” Even though she does not fit the physical description, she is at times visually annoyed by the sexism and racism that goes on in the campaign against Hill, yet she continues to work for Danforth. Judy’s effectiveness at her job is solely for the benefit of the white men around her and, besides her facial expressions in some scenes, she does not seem to have an open opinion on the issue, she is just a “team player” (Collins, 140). She also lacks meaningful relationships with her team members. Judy is the team player everyone wants Anita Hill to be; even when she is visibly uncomfortable with a racist or sexist comment she says nothing and works for the benefit of the established order.

Second, there is Jennifer Hudson’s character, Angela Wright, who is another woman who comes forward to testify against Thomas. Wright is a louder character, not speaking in the calm, docile timbre of Hill. Hudson’s portrayal of Wright is arguably more aggressive than Washington’s performance of Hill. Wright is shown in one scene continually interrupting the leading investigator, not letting her get a word in edgewise. This small comedic moment in the

film nevertheless reveals an assertiveness to Wright's personality. Wright is thrown out as an uncredible witness after Thomas claims that "She refer[s] to a male member of [his] staff as a faggot" (which Wright denies). It is telling in the film that Angela Wright would be discredited for making an awful slur that is a challenge to hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. In the end, Wright is simply kept waiting in a hotel room until her name can be cleared from the witness list. But before that moment, it is Wright's failure to perform the part of the smart but docile "black lady" that silences her in the first place.

In both the media frenzy and Angela Wright's characterization in the film, the verdict is clear: black women who speak out against the regime and defy their gender and race codes and stereotypes will face an uphill battle toward change in the real-world. Olivia Pope's character is more refreshing because it invents a character who can be both competent enough to solve problems (including her own) and stand up for herself; someone who can be smart and sexy; someone who can take ownership of their own sexual well-being and survive any adversity about that decision. Likewise, Anita Hill's story is inspiring because, while it was probably hell to go through at the time, she sparked a national awareness of sexual harassment for women orienting themselves in the workplace.

African American and Latina actresses tend to attain much success after shooting a biopic. This is true for Halle Berry, who got her "big break" in the TV-movie *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999); Angela Bassett, who received a lot of praise for the Tina Turner film *What's Love Got to Do with It* (1993); and for Jennifer Lopez, who was able to transition from music to movies through *Selena* (1997). Even though all of these are examples of actresses playing some major woman figure in show business, given the success of these women, one can see why a TV-movie biopic would appeal to Kerry Washington. However, Washington's social

activism as an advocate against violence towards women and her support of the Obama administration makes this role a significant move that stands out as reflecting her own political and social leanings.

Both *Scandal* and *Confirmation* demonstrate how “myths” of African American womanhood can either work for or against black women when it comes to how they are represented on any type of screen. Kerry Washington’s performance on *Scandal* starkly contrasts her rendering of Anita Hill. Olivia Pope subverts the “controlling images” of the modern mammy and “black lady” in her sexually explicit and flawed character. However, Olivia Pope’s middle-class status distances her from her own “blackness” on the show. In being everything that working-class blackness is not, Olivia Pope gains the cultural capital more closely associated with “whiteness.” Kerry Washington’s performance of Anita Hill highlights the performativity of class and “respectability” more acutely than her performance on *Scandal*. While Olivia Pope, as a purely fictional character, is an instantiation of a black women resisting the conformism of “ladylike” behavior, Anita Hill had to “play up” the image of the “black lady” to survive the media frenzy and Senate hearings. To be clear, I am not negating the fact that the image Hill put forth might simply be an intrinsic part of her personality; but “black lady”-like behavior, whether conscious or unconscious, helped her maintain her dignity in the public eye. Anita Hill arguably used the trope of the “black lady” to refute popular stereotypes of black women. Thus, the “black lady” image is just one of the many masks black women have to wear in any given situation. Black women, whether actors or characters, navigate the unsteady terrain of the public sphere in which they are constantly bombarded with ideologies and images that they may or may not identify with. In the next chapter I will discuss how another prominent black actress, Viola

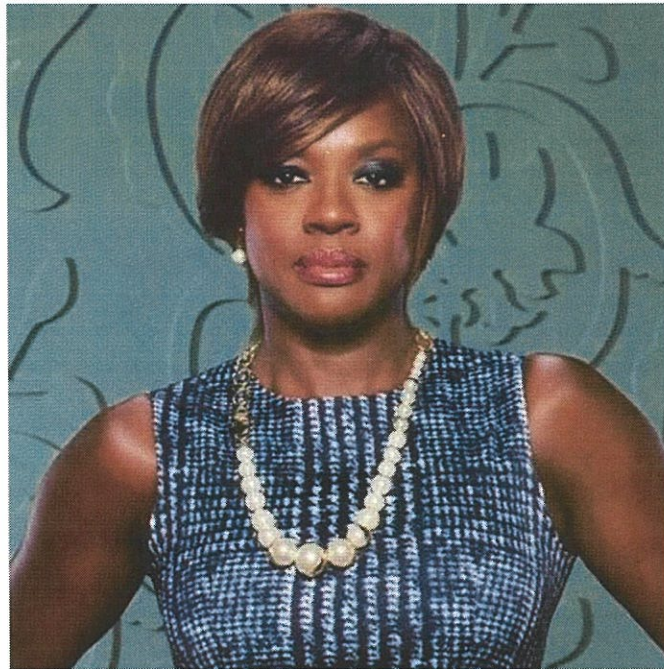
Davis has had to negotiate the representation of African American women through her starring roles on film and television.

Chapter Two

Navigating the Crooked Room: Viola Davis in *The Help* and *How to Get Away with Murder*

Here's the thing, we're in crisis mode as black actresses, not only in the sheer number of roles that are offered and that are out there but the quality of the roles, the quality. And therein lies the problem...

-Viola Davis (*Oprah's Next Chapter*, 2013)



“Quality” roles for African American actresses—that is, roles that are dynamic, complex, and truthful in their rendering of African American life-experiences—are rare in mainstream media outlets. Viola Davis fervently makes the above declaration in a 2013 interview on *Oprah's Next Chapter*. Davis, sitting with Gabrielle Union (*Being Mary Jane*, 2013-2017), Alfre Woodard (*The Family that Preys*, Tyler Perry, 2008) and Phylicia Rashad (*The Cosby Show*, 1984-1992), speaks to the limited opportunities black actresses have had in film and television. The limited number of quality roles creates high competition among black actresses in Hollywood. In the interview, Davis goes on to say that African American actresses experience friction with each other because of the competitiveness for quality roles. Moreover,

the pool of opportunity becomes even smaller once an actress is over 50 years old. In the following quote from the same interview, Davis explains how age stifles the opportunities of African American actresses perhaps more so than Caucasian actresses, she states,

Me, Alfre, and Phylicia, and you [to Oprah], we're in the same category, whereas if you take a Caucasian actress, you have the ones who are the teens, in their twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, and they're all different, there's roles for each of them. But when you only have two or three categories for black actresses, therein lies [the problem] because [we all] want to work...

Unlike white actresses, who can choose from diverse roles at virtually every age in their career,⁵ black women who look a certain way and who are over a certain age are type-cast as mammies and "black ladies," which are the "controlling images" Patricia Hill Collins defines throughout her work on black feminist thought. Actresses who are "in the same category"—i.e. the category of black women over 50—are only cast for specific, stereotypical roles that are usually in the guise of at worst the mammy and at best the "black lady." In other words, black actresses are left with limited options once their race, gender, and age are taken into account by Hollywood and television executives. A lot of the time, the roles black actresses who fit this "type" take on are in alignment with popular (mis)conceptions about black women.

Because Davis is essentially talking about how black actresses must often portray a certain image of black femininity, Davis's statement evokes Melissa Harris-Perry's (2011) notion of the "crooked room." When the research subjects of post-WWII field dependence testing were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room, many would perceive of themselves as straight as they aligned themselves with the crookedness. Harris-Perry explains how

some people could be tilted as much as 35 degrees and report that they were perfectly straight, simply because they were aligned with images that were equally tilted. But not everyone did this: some managed to get themselves

⁵ Note: Caucasian actresses undergo gender discrimination in the two industries, with a male actor more likely to star in the lead role.

more or less upright regardless of how crooked the surrounding images were.
(29)

Like the literal crooked room, black women have to constantly try to either align themselves with the surrounding popular images of African American womanhood and femininity or try to “get themselves more or less upright regardless of how crooked the surrounding images [are].”

Harris-Perry explains that “[w]hen they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (ibid). I argue that black actresses face an acute version of navigating themselves through the crooked room since they must decide to portray, resist, or deny stereotypical acting roles. Thus, Davis and other African American actresses must often take on type-cast roles that align them with stereotypical, “crooked” images of black femininity. As a black actress Viola Davis has had to navigate the “crooked room” of African American representation in Hollywood by taking on popular yet stereotypical roles, particularly her Academy Award nominated role in *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011). However, Davis’s recent television role on *How to get Away with Murder* (2015) comes closer to an “uprightness,” if you will, of African American women’s representation.

Part I

The Resurgence of the Mammy: Viola Davis in The Help

The Help, based on the book by Kathryn Stockett, is about an aspiring young writer from Jackson, Mississippi, Skeeter Phelan (Emma Stone) who chooses to write about the experiences of African American maids in Jackson during the volatile time of the Civil Rights movement. After graduating from college, Skeeter comes back home to find her family’s maid, Constantine Jefferson (Cicely Tyson), mysteriously no longer working in her family’s home. Skeeter

remembers the bond she and Constantine shared—in many ways Constantine was more of a mother than Skeeter’s biological mother was to her. Skeeter’s personal connection with Constantine, coupled with her liberal college degree and her drive to become a writer, encourages her to interview the maids in the town and write a book retelling their stories. The stories Skeeter documents of the help in her small Southern town begin with Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis), and Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer), who are the maids of Skeeter’s girlhood friends. Aibileen works for the Leefolt family, taking care of Elizabeth Leefolt’s (Ahna O’Reilly) young daughter, Mae Mobley (Emma and Eleanor Henry), as if she were her own. Minny, who has the reputation of being the best cook a white family in the town could hire, works for the Holbrooks. Minny is skeptical about trusting Skeeter at first, but after Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard) refuses to let Minny use the bathroom in the house and spreads a false rumor that Minny is a thief, Minny decides to tell her story of working for the Holbrook family. After Minny is on board, Skeeter slowly accumulates the stories of most of the maids in town.

Awakened to the disparities the African American help face, Skeeter becomes an ally for the African American maids. At its core, the plot of *The Help* is about the coming-of-age of Skeeter Phelan. Through analyzing key scenes in *The Help*, it is apparent that the representation of African American women in the film depends on old tropes of the mammy character that continue to plague African American femininity. Katrina Dyonne Thompson (2014) best summarizes how the maids in the film function as mere reiterations of the mammy figure when she acknowledges that “The memories of Constantine, Aibileen’s devotion to Mae Mobley, and Minny’s superlative cooking skills invoke [...] the fictional black caricature of the mammy...” (Thompson, 59). *The Help* is a film re-selling the image of the mammy, and the re-imagined

vision of this old trope. The film also anchors itself in the life-experiences of a white woman who grew up with an adoring black maid. Thus, it evokes a nostalgia for how the South was under American apartheid, which embraced African American women as surrogate mothers to white families.

The Help as an Instantiation of White-Authored Stories of Black Life

In the opening scene of *The Help*, the camera focuses on a blank sheet of notebook paper. A white woman's hands come into the frame and write the words "the help" at the top of the page. There is a cut to a medium close-up of Aibileen (Davis) who looks toward her interviewer. The following exchange ensues:

AIBILEEN: I was born 1911 Chickasaw County, Piedmont Plantation.

WOMAN: And did you know as a girl growing up that one day you'd be a maid?

AIBILEEN: Yes, ma'am I did.

WOMAN: And you knew that because?

AIBILEEN: My mama was a maid, and my grandmama was a houseslave.

At this point, there is a cut to the white woman's hands and notebook; she is jotting down what Aibileen says under the title "the help." Aibileen is then shown in a wide shot, which opens up the frame to show that she is standing in her kitchen, drying dishes. To the direct right of her is a large shelf full of canned goods and spices—through this opening shot the film is already establishing Aibileen in the context of the kitchen, a traditionally domestic space. The exchange between Aibileen and the voice of the woman (Skeeter) continues:

WOMAN: Do you ever dream of being something else?

AIBILEEN: (nods)

WOMAN: What does it feel like to raise a white child when your own child is at home being looked after by someone else?

AIBILEEN: It feels...(trails off)

As Aibileen trails off there is a cut to the wall in the kitchen to the right of where she is standing. On the wall is a picture of a young African American teenage boy wearing a graduation cap and

gown. Above his photograph is a picture of a blonde Jesus, which establishes her religiosity, another traditional characteristic of the mammy. The camera cuts back to Aibileen, this time another medium close-up is employed, revealing the sadness on her face as she looks out toward the window in the background.

That the scene opens with a white woman's hands writing the narrative of "the help" significantly suggests that the unfolding story will be shown through the lens of a white author—this is true in both the diegetic space of the film and of the meta cinematic and literary space of the author and co-screen writer, Kathryn Stockett. This scene is deceitful in that it suggests that Aibileen's story will be paramount; the scene makes it seem as though it is her story that the audience is about to witness for the next two hours of the film. Instead, the film is the coming-of-age story of the woman writing the words "The Help" in the scene. As the film continues, Aibileen's story—as well as the stories of the other maids—gradually dims and shrinks in comparison to Skeeter's. While it can be argued that each character receives a good amount of screen time, given the historical portrayals of the mammy figure in popular American entertainment, the film essentially re-constructs (i.e. rather than *deconstructs*) myths of African American womanhood and femininity. *The Help* places the mammy in a historical comedy-drama hybrid that nonetheless utilizes stereotypical notions of black women as domestics.

As Aibileen looks out the window and trails off after Skeeter's question, a voice-over of Aibileen begins to narrate: "I done raised 17 kids in my life. Looking after white babies, that's what I do." The voice over interrupts the interview and immediately shifts the plot way from Aibileen's story as a mother of her own child and towards her occupation that centers around her white "family." After the first few words of the voice-over the scene cuts to a day in the life of Aibileen in the Leefolt home, which revolves around taking care of the young Mae Mobley

Leefolt. Aibileen happily coos and smiles upon entering Mae Mobley's pastel pink room; Mae Mobley responds by excitedly calling out, "Aibee, Aibee." Aibileen picks up Mae Mobley and sits down with her on a rocking chair so that Mae Mobley is sitting on her lap, facing her. Even though Viola Davis is not a large woman, the script points out the importance of the physical attributes of the mammy, as Aibileen's voice-over in the shot illustrates: "Babies like fat. They like big fat legs too. That I know." Aibileen is referring to her own "big fat legs" since the shot shows Mae Mobley happily propped on Aibileen's lap. It is ironic that even when the actress playing the mammy figure is not fat by any means, the evocation of the oversized black woman as mammy is still maintained. Nevertheless, this scene's priority is to establish the nurturing relationship Aibileen has with Mae Mobley. From the time her story is interrupted, the film shifts its focus to Aibileen as a surrogate mother of the young white Mae Mobley. Thompson underscores how "as mothers to their own black children Minny and Aibileen are never fully developed. Similarly, while Aibileen's relationship with her son is neglected, her adoration for the young white Mae Mobley appears as a constant theme" (67). The close up, shot-counter-shot structure of Aibileen and Mae Mobley sitting together reveals this loving, nurturing relationship as Aibileen recites the daily affirmation to Mae Mobley, "You is kind, you is smart, you is important." The sentimentality in the scene distracts the audience from realizing that the film has completely skipped over Aibileen's account of what it feels like to "mother" white children as a maid, a condition that takes away from her time to nurture and care for her own child.

The (Extremely) Short Story of Treelore

It is later revealed that Aibileen's hesitation in talking about her own child stems from her grief over his sudden death years before. Because the opening scene shows a picture of Aibileen's son as a young man, his absence from the film is not easily forgotten. The scene in

which Aibileen finally tells Skeeter what happened to her son, Treelore, is the moment the audience has been waiting for—her son’s absence creates a suspense in the film that is alleviated once Aibileen finally tells the story of how he died. Aibileen sits across from Skeeter, her body is tense as she stares into Skeeter’s eyes. The camera pans and closes in on Aibileen’s face as tears roll down her cheeks. The story of her 24-year-old son’s death is significant to Aibileen’s life-story as an African American in the South in the sixties. While at work at a mill, Treelore falls as he is carrying heavy materials and is run over by a work-truck. The Caucasian foreman throws Treelore’s body on the back of a truck and drops him off at a “colored” hospital and honks the horn, leaving him to die. Her son dies due to racial prejudice—the diabolical belief under American apartheid that African Americans are sub-human. This is the most important story of Aibileen’s life yet it is given approximately two minutes of screen time in the two-hour and twenty-minute film. This moment, this “point of view of the help,” this pivotal story in the narrative that is Aibileen’s life, is remarkably short in comparison to the moment when Aibileen must part with Mae Mobley. Thus, the film is less concerned about the anecdotes of the help and more concerned with showing black women as maids and mammies to the white children they adore.

The end of Aibileen and Mae Mobley’s relationship, which is thwarted after Hilly pressures Elizabeth to fire Aibileen, is more melodramatic than the scene in which Aibileen tells of the death of her own son. In this scene, Aibileen walks in the front door of the Leefolt’s, groceries in hand, to find Hilly and Elizabeth standing in the living room, talking. Hilly’s look and stance with her hands on her hips is reproachful while Elizabeth’s is more worrisome. The women go back and forth about whether or not Aibileen stole pieces of silverware, which she did not, Hilly is just trying to pressure Elizabeth into firing Aibileen. As Hilly (not Elizabeth, who is

Aibileen's actual employer) tells Aibileen that she is fired and threatens to call the police, Mae Mobley emerges from her bedroom and goes up to Aibileen complaining that her throat hurts. Elizabeth leaves the room to get some cough syrup. While Skeeter's book never explicitly divulges the identities of the white women, the maids, or the town, Hilly knows that the book is referring to the maids of Jackson because of her own uniquely embarrassing story within the book. Therefore, Aibileen and Hilly both know why Hilly is trying to get Aibileen fired: Hilly wants revenge for Aibileen taking part in the book Skeeter wrote. Hilly, who has already had one maid sent to jail for stealing, sneers at Aibileen: "Maybe I can't send you to jail for what you wrote but I can send you for being a thief." After Aibileen calls Hilly a "Godless woman," Elizabeth returns followed by Mae Mobley. There is an emotional confrontation between Aibileen and Hilly, who storms off. Elizabeth meekly tells Aibileen that she "has to go now," an ambiguous statement since Aibileen later states that she is "retiring" from being a maid.

Aibileen then turns and crouches beside Mae Mobley, meeting her at eye-level for another sentimental close-up between the two. Aibileen is crying and Mae Mobley is insisting that she stay. Once Aibileen walks out of the house, the camera tracks her outside in a frontal view. The scene cuts to Mae Mobley pounding on the window inside of the house, screaming out for Aibileen. Fraught with emotion, tears running down her face, Aibileen nearly collapses at the sound of Mae Mobley calling for her and banging on the glass of the window. Aibileen regains her composure and walks down the empty street. The camera lifts up and out and Aibileen is alone but pridefully walking for a long time before the credits roll, the scene fades to black, and the film ends.

Thompson astutely notes that "At the time of Aibileen's dramatic termination from her job at the Leefolt residence, her only concern is not for her personal safety or livelihood but for

her separation from Mae Mobley” (67). This scene thus reaffirms the most pervasive quality of the mammy: “her relentless adoration for white families, especially white children” (ibid). While the connection between Aibileen and Mae Mobley is endearing, it is a narrative trope that propels the image of black womanhood as innate caretakers of white children. It is important to point out that even though Aibileen’s best friend, Minny, has several children, Aibileen’s “maternal instincts” are never exercised on those African American children but are reserved for Aibileen’s interactions with Mae Mobley. Indeed, the black children in the film are mere extras that allude to the rampant “fertility” of black women. The film therefore diminishes the importance of family and community for African American women. The best of black motherhood is reserved for white children.

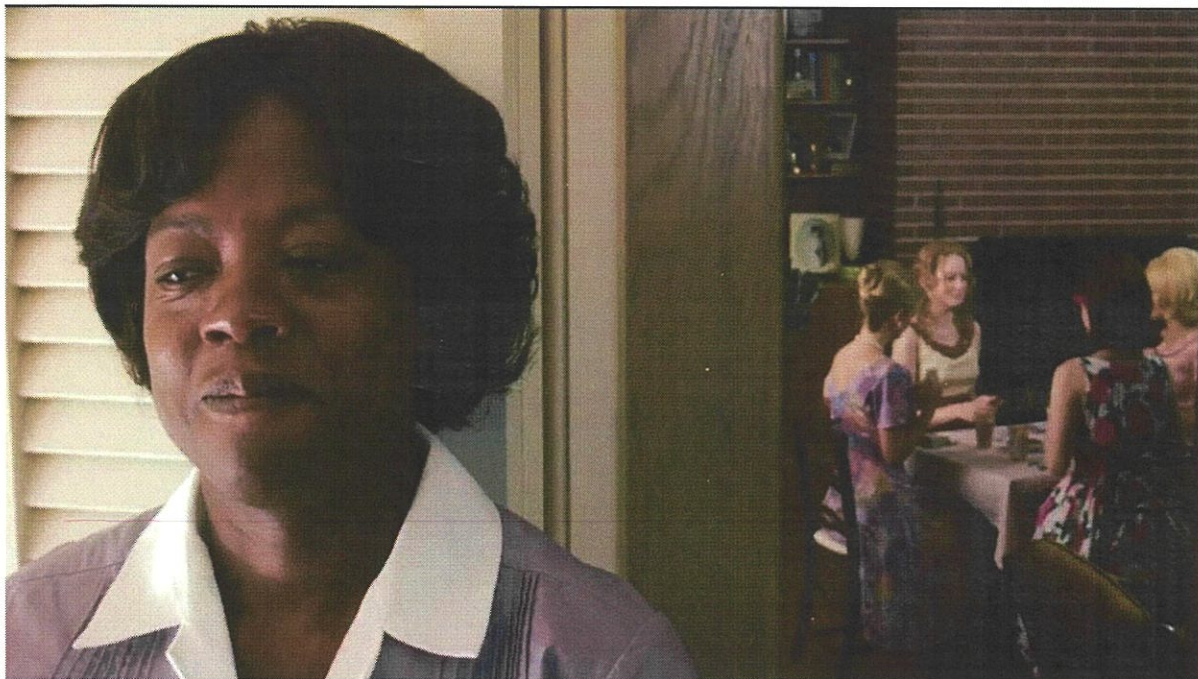
Black Femininity Compared to White Femininity in The Help

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) explains the controlling image of the mammy as one that hinges upon racial servitude and subordination:

By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and “family” better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal black female relationship to elite white male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white “family,” the mammy still knows her “place” as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination. (72-73)

In this passage, Collins attests to the most insidious trait of the mammy: she cares “for her white children and ‘family’ better than her own.” Collins also defines how that position works within the powers structures of race. The mammy’s characteristic love for the white children she raises compared to the very little attention she is able to give to her own children is a narrative trope that solidifies white superiority and black inferiority. Thus, the image of the mammy is about preserving racial norms that encourage black women to “know their ‘place’ as obedient servants” to whites.

The theme of white authorship of African American stories is at odds with itself in the film. An allusion to Margret Mitchell's 1936 novel, *Gone with the Wind*, is made by Skeeter in film adaptation of *The Help*. When Skeeter is on the phone with a well-to-do publicist to pitch her idea for a book told "from the point of view of the help," she laments the following: "Margret Mitchell glorified the mammy figure who dedicated her whole life to a white family. But nobody ever asked Mammy how she felt about it." Ironically, the film is also guilty of romanticizing the mammy figure. In a flashback sequence Skeeter is a young girl sitting on a bench under a green, swaying willow tree as Constantine consoles her for being called "ugly" by boys at school. While Skeeter's remembrance of Constantine takes on a nostalgic tone through the picturesque mise-en-scène of the South, the tender and ultimately sentimental relationship between Aibileen and Mae Mobley is a reincarnation of the romanticized mammy. But the film imitates earlier versions of the girlish white woman and the loyal mammy dyad on another front: the depiction of white femininity in contrast to black femininity.



The visual image of the loyal mammy figure in film emanates from Hattie McDaniel's 1939 award winning performance in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Thompson acknowledges the impact of *Gone with the Wind* on the division between white femininity and black femininity. Thompson points out that "the main character Scarlett O'Hara is childlike and is only able to become a somewhat autonomous figure under direct duress [...]" (66). Despite her childlike behavior, Scarlett, as a white woman, has the power to "supervise" Mammy. Similarly, the white women in *The Help* are clueless when it comes to domestic work (which is why Skeeter becomes close with Aibileen in the first place in need of help for the *Mrs. Myrna* cleaning column in the local paper) but are able to dictate and control the domestic lives of the maids. This is a curious dynamic that is propagated by the irrationality of racism.

The mammy projects an ideal type of black femininity that is oppositional to white femininity (Collins, 2000). This oppositional relationship is complicated by the domestic expectations placed on white women and black women. Both in the film adaptation and in Stockett's book, black women are assumed to be "good with domestic duties, while white women lack those abilities" (Thompson, 66). Thompson further stresses this interesting distinction between white and black womanhood in film and literature:

White women hold a conflicting duality in society: they are both naïve domestics and fully capable supervisors. Simultaneously, this aspect of narratives supports the role of black women as innate domestics...Also, the idea of white women as unsuitable for full domestic duty supports the need for the dutiful mammy and rewrites a history of forced labor and limited opportunities to a tranquil society that is rational, in which whiteness dominates and the cult of domesticity is protected. (ibid)

"The idea of white women as unsuitable for domestic work" is apparent when Elizabeth is shown standing in the doorway of Mae Mobley's room as Aibileen dresses Mae Mobley. Elizabeth hurriedly asks if Aibileen has prepared everything correctly for the women's bridge club, then

she asks if her party dress looks handmade. Elizabeth twirls around for Aibileen to see the whole of the pink and blue floral dress that she has bought. Clearly, domesticity, or the ability to sew, hem, and tailor an exquisitely beautiful dress, is a standard of white womanhood Elizabeth is worried about meeting.

While the black women in the film are designated to the position of innate domestic and caretaker, the white women have access to different forms of femininity. While white women supervise the domestic chores of the maids, they themselves are depicted as never having been exposed to the effective execution of those chores. This paradoxical dynamic is exemplified through Skeeter's need to ask Aibileen questions about her *Mrs. Myrna* column, which is a call-and-response newsletter to let women know how to clean and care for their own homes. Skeeter, having grown up with a maid all her life, is completely clueless about how to carry out household chores. In the first bridge club scene, Skeeter informs her old friends that she has acquired a job writing the *Mrs. Myrna* column. The scene takes place at Elizabeth's house, which is set up with three card tables and finger foods for bridge club. Even though this is a casual event taking place at someone's home, the white women are all dressed to impress. Hilly is wearing a bright pink and purple floral dress and sporting a perfectly hair-sprayed hairstyle indicative of 1960s fashion. All of the women are wearing elaborate dresses, including Elizabeth who is passing her store-bought dress off as homemade. The only exception is Skeeter, who wears a dress-suit that is neutral in color. When Skeeter mentions getting a job, there is a moment of pause; the women at the table wait to see what Hilly has to say about Skeeter choosing an occupation over marriage. Hilly has a sort of unapproving stare before she says politely, "They'd be a fool not to hire you."

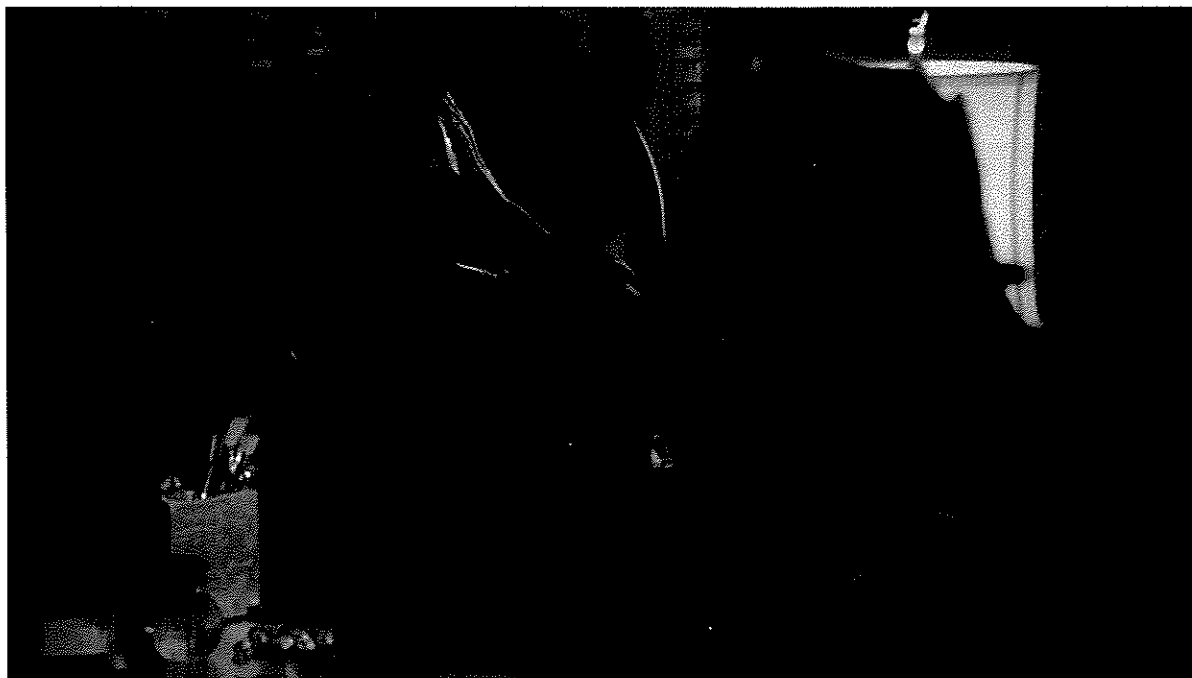
Hilly is the dominant 1960s “mean girl” who the white women in the film try to appease for the sake of their status in the community. The other women know that if they do not gain Hilly’s approval and acceptance, they will be ostracized. Such is the case with Celia Foote (Jessica Chastain), whose phone call during bridge club is ignored by Elizabeth, who wants to show her loyalty to Hilly. White womanhood is thus depicted as catty, shallow, immature, and ultimately based on the status and actions of one woman who shepherds the actions of the others. Hilly also represents racial bigotry, a character trait that runs parallel to her controlling, dominant relationships with other women. Hilly only understands dominance and subordination, which is amplified when racialized. None of the other women dare to challenge Hilly at the bridge club when she expresses her disdain (and phobia) of black women by refusing to use Elizabeth’s bathroom because Aibileen uses it as well. Hilly’s discomfort and racism push Elizabeth to hire a contractor to build an outdoor restroom for Aibileen, which is essentially a shack with a toilet in the hot garage. Middle-class white womanhood is therefore wrapped in a “keeping up with the Jones’s” mentality, which exacerbates the issues of race (e.g. the indecent outhouse for Aibileen).

Black femininity in *The Help* acts as the antithesis of white femininity. Southern, white, middle-class women are seen as too fragile, too “good” to take care of household chores yet, they are given the privilege of supervising black maids. Black women are viewed as intrinsically adept at taking care of white families—an ideology that serves to protect the social order of white superiority and black inferiority. The depiction of Aibileen, who is a 2011 reincarnation of the nineteenth century mammy, confirms that the mammy is still idolized and romanticized as a palatable image of black womanhood for white audiences. That Viola Davis (and Octavia Spencer) would take on such roles is an acute example of how black women continually have to

contort and compromise themselves in the “crooked room” that is Hollywood and mainstream entertainment.

Part II

Standing Upright: Viola Davis, the Wig, and How to Get Away with Murder



While her role in *The Help* immediately threatened to type-cast her acting abilities to that of the matronly mother or mammy, Davis’s star persona shifted once she considered TV acting on the Shonda Rhimes show *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-). *How to Get Away with Murder* (hereafter *HTGAWM*) is another Shonda Rhimes installation starring an African American woman lead on primetime television. Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) is a prolific Philadelphia defense attorney and a professor at the fictional Middleton University, a prestigious law school. Keating teaches public defense in her class titled “How to Get Away with Murder.” The class is designed to teach first-year law students about how to think like a defense attorney; the irony is that eventually a select group of students, the “Keating Five,” will cover up an actual

murder and get away with it. While the plot reaches “binge-worthy” status by having continuous cliff-hangers and shocking surprises, what makes *HTGAWM* stand out is its unconventional star: Viola Davis.

Davis paved her own way from asexual mammy to smart-witted lawyer by speaking out about her public image and the limited opportunities black women face in the entertainment industry. African American women’s hairstyles and use of wigs is a key talking-point for Davis, who has openly expressed her opinion on this issue on daytime talk shows. Davis often voices her insights and opinions on talk shows such as *Oprah’s Next Chapter*, *Anderson Cooper Live*, and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. On these talk shows Davis consistently takes risks by exposing the nuances of being a dark-skinned African American woman with tight, curly hair. Davis makes it a point to highlight the significance of her winning acting awards in Hollywood as a black woman who has struggled with industry standards and practices. In this way, Viola Davis is a pioneer of our age, a voice to many real-life African American women’s life-experiences with marginalization.

The “Shady” Annalise Keating: or, Potential Problems of Being an African American Anti-Heroine

Most crime-genre television shows feature a Caucasian woman lead, such as Mariska Hargitay in *Law and Order: SVU* (1999-) and Emily Deschanel in *Bones* (2005-). But crime-dramas with a non-white, non-male lead is rare in and of itself.⁶ *HTGAWM* breaks new ground in having a dark-skinned African American woman play the lead in a television crime-drama. However, Annalise Keating also has anti-hero qualities such as lying, infidelity, and, obviously, covering up a murder. This makes her more dynamic than previous African American television

⁶ The top-rated crime-genre TV shows are cable shows, including *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter*, and the *Sopranos* and all feature white male leads.

women but also associates her with crime and mischievousness. Simply put, white women stars of crime-dramas solve crime, Annalise Keating manages crime. After exceeding Keating's rigorous academic standards and showing a thorough knowledge of the law in her classroom, five students are selected to work on defense cases alongside Annalise Keating. However, the students and Mrs. Keating get more than they bargained for when Keating's husband, Sam (Tom Verica) is found to be connected to the murder of a young college girl with whom he also had an affair. In a suspenseful squabble, Wes (Alfred Enoch), the perceived favorite of the five students, accidentally kills Sam. Because of the complex circumstances surrounding Sam's death, and because she feels she owes a certain debt to Wes (which is revealed in the second season), Annalise helps the five students get away with the murder of her husband.

In various ways Annalise Keating is, as Bambi Haggins in a 2016 issue of *Flow*⁷ puts it, "shady." Keating often manipulates the legal system in order to either cover up her illegal activities or to save the Keating Five from detriment. One example of this is when the Assistant District Attorney is about to raid Keating's office for evidence linking her and her students to a crime. Annalise coolly has one of the Five impersonate a clerk from the judge's office saying that the search warrant has been signed when in reality the warrant has not yet been signed, making anything the police find in the search inadmissible in court.

Haggins notes that the characters of Annalise Keating and Olivia Pope, with their anti-hero qualities, marks a shift in the "idealization paradigm" (Haggins) in which black characters had to be exemplary or near perfect to garner acceptance from white audiences. The term "idealization paradigm" refers to how African Americans were presented on film and television in the 1960s, which showcased idealized notions of race relations and "exemplary" African

⁷ *Flow* is an online journal published by the University of Texas at Austin; it is a critical forum on media and television. Bambi Haggins, a professor at Arizona State University, frequently writes for the publication.

American citizens. Examples of “exemplary” or “exceptional” black characters include Diahann Carroll in *Julia* (1968-71) and Sidney Poitier in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967).

“Exemplarism” is one way to make African Americans characters palatable for white audiences (Haggins, 2016). The strategy of exemplarism within the idealization paradigm is used as a tool to depict African Americans as non-threatening to white American audiences. But this paradigm stifled an array of human emotion and personalities in black characters. Only saint-like and ultra-perfect characters were able to penetrate the American mainstream media throughout the 1960s and early 1970s⁸. I would argue that the idealization of black women characters in particular resurfaced in the 1980s with *The Cosby Show*, which pictures Claire Huxtable as an ultra-perfect, “super-mom” figure. A leading character like Annalise Keating directly reject the portrayals of the idealization paradigm—she is far from perfect. Representations of African American women that break with the idealization paradigm are important in that they show the variation, diversity, and multiplicity in African American culture. However, while a flawed, morally questionable character like Annalise Keating is refreshing, a black woman anti-hero can also be problematic. Unlike white male stars of crime-dramas, or any genre for that matter, black woman characters who exhibit transgressive actions have the potential to stigmatize *all* black women since mainstream media images of African Americans tend to shape real-life popular ideology. Therefore, Annalise Keating as an anti-hero paradoxically humanizes her and adds to the conception of blackness equating to moral inferiority.

Haggins asserts that the only thing audiences find redeemable about the actions of Annalise Keating and Olivia Pope is their suffering. This dynamic of suffering for their sins is exclusive to African American women anti-heroes. After all, suffering as a form of redemption

⁸ The response to this paradigm is of course the Blaxploitation era of the 1970s where black characters created by black filmmakers exhibited aggression, sexuality, and an open dislike of authority.

definitely does not apply to white male anti-heroes. For example, Walter White (Bryan Cranston) of *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) actually embraces his wrong-doings as the show progresses and audience still root him on; and on *Dexter* (2006-2013) the serial killer protagonist kills people regularly but is still beloved by fans. Even though Annalise Keating has a substantial fan following as well, her actions deem her a horrible person who must suffer the consequence of mental instability and emotional breakdown. The aforementioned male characters are rarely required to show sentimental remorse for their more egregious actions.

Even though Annalise Keating is “ethically-challenged,” Keating is occasionally wracked with guilt, so much so that she will experience emotional breakdowns that she only shares with one person: her mother. At the end of the episode “There’s My Baby” (season 2, ep. 14), Annalise leaves the students after Laurel (Karla Souza) drunkenly blames Annalise for all their troubles and mistakenly accuses Annalise of knowing that Frank (Charlie Weber) murdered Sam’s lover. The shock and discouragement of the tiff between Annalise and Laurel is enough to cause Annalise to leave the students and flee to the familiar comfort of her mother’s house in Memphis, Tennessee. Keating’s bouts of guilt may be evidence of a new trope that would have a flawed African American character punished for those flaws, but her guilt, suffering, and “punishment” is simultaneously undermined by the presence of a loving relationship with her mother who validates her right to be an imperfect human being. Unlike many anti-heroes, when Annalise Keating suffers from guilt she turns towards family, which is an important aside that the show continues to place within the narrative.

At the beginning of the next episode, “Anna Mae” (season 2, ep. 15), Annalise is laying on her side in her old bed in Memphis. The bright lighting and her sleepy disposition indicates that it is just morning. The scene displays the walls of her childhood room, which are covered

with mainstream African American icons such as Michael Jackson, Prince, and Whitney Houston. The wall over Annalise's bed is wrapped in family photos and African American iconography. Annalise's shares a commemorative moment with her adult sister, who playfully scares her by surprisingly being in the bed next to her when she turns over. This small moment in the scene is significant since it establishes a *positive* portrayal of a kinship relationship for the African American protagonist, Annalise. Ophelia (Cecily Tyson), their mother, comes in to inform them of the family and neighborhood get-together in honor of Annalise. The next scene shows a living room full of people with more walking through the door to greet Annalise. The title of this episode, "Anna Mae," is Annalise's true namesake. Annalise returns to both her home and her Southern African American identity. That the walls of her room are littered with African American memorabilia and filial ties signals her return to her roots, family, and community for solace. This sequence has the potential to be more *redemptive* than her guilt-filled suffering—for it redeems her character, her morality, and tries to let the audience glimpse into Keating's background and origins. In a similar way, this sequence could potentially redeem the show itself for using "shadiness" as a conditional character trait for an African American woman lead.

While the sequence affirms the presence of Annalise's supportive extended family, which can be a rarity in crossover TV shows, it brings up more questions about Annalise and her family than answers. Watching the sequence one cannot help but wonder: "Why wasn't it mentioned in the show before that Annalise had a sister if they have a good relationship? Why does Annalise only reach out to her family when she's in crisis mode? Did Anna Mae change her name to Annalise to distance herself from her Southern roots?" The sequence depicting Annalise at home is endearing but unsatisfying; it falls short by being too short: it leaves audiences wanting more

information and insight into the life of Anna Mae before she became the morally questionable Annalise Keating. It also falls short in its execution of Keating's other filial relationships. When Annalise sees her father for the first time her reaction is one of anger and disgust. It is not clear until after Annalise's biting remarks to her father at dinner that he left her and her family when she was young. The absentee father trope prevails yet again. Like many depictions of African American families in film and television, *HGTWM* emphasizes the absence of African American fathers. Annalise's strained relationship with her father undermines the episode's positive, loving, and *un*-stereotypical images of an African American family; it is as if the studio could not resist.

Picking Up the Slack: Viola Davis' Creative Agency

Even though the studio flounders in its representation of how African American women connect to their families and their communities, Viola Davis picks up the slack by exercising her own agency in one pivotal episode. The plot of *HTGAWM* is less appealing in its complicated details and more by Davis's Golden Globe and Emmy nominated performance. Davis's performance in the episode "Let's Get to Scooping" (season 1, ep. 4) and her star persona catapulted the show into being a discursive television series that illuminates the cultural politics of African American femininity. Davis effectively implements the dialectic of African American hair and its relationship to hegemonic beauty and femininity in this episode.

After a long day of work, Annalise Keating retreats to her bedroom. As she pulls off her wedding ring she gazes into her own image in the mirror. She has changed into a turquoise silk robe but still has her hair and makeup intact. Her makeup is flawless. Her hair is a sleek, straight chestnut-colored bob. She takes off the bulky fashion bracelet on her wrist; it lands in the jewelry compartment of her vanity with a soft clank. The shots alternate between medium close-ups on

her face and close-up shots of the actions of her hands as she takes off her jewelry. After the camera gives a wider, medium shot of her sitting at the vanity her arms reach up towards the back of her head. The scene cuts to a close-up of the back of her head where her long brown fingers grasp the back of her wig. A gentle lift of the wig reveals the nape of her neck and her short, black, coarse, woolly hair. For a brief moment, the straight hair of the wig dangles in front of her in the soft-focus background of the frame; her kinky-curly hair seen from behind is subtly juxtaposed with the straight, disembodied wig. The camera switches to a profile shot of Viola Davis playing Annalise Keating; there is a slight halo of soft yellow light around her head that reveals the scant burgundy color of her pinned-up hair.

The scene cuts back to Annalise framed by her circular mirror, she lifts her hands to touch her soft, packed curls. Then the camera closes in on her face in an extreme close-up. She peels off her false eyelashes, slowly, one after the other. A quick cut shows her hand reach for a makeup-removing toilette. She rubs the moist cloth across her face, taking off the dark, smoky eyeshadow, the copper-toned foundation, and red lipstick. As she presses and rubs the cloth into her skin, her face twists and stretches; her expression is almost one of pain. She sits with herself for a moment—no wig, no lashes, no makeup, just her. Annalise Keating looks back into the mirror and gazes at herself unmasked.

The centerpiece of the *mise-en-scène* is the mirror. Because of the mirror there are shots in this scene where the audience is literally looking at two Annalises Keatings: the Annalise Keating in the mirror and the Annalise Keating outside the mirror looking in. Mirrors are a common pictorial signifier for doubling or duplicity—they show that the subject within the frame is multifaceted. Because Annalise Keating is a black woman, this “two-ness” carries a certain significance. The mirror image technique echoes W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of “double-

consciousness,” or the way in which African Americans internalize American racial prejudice by being consciously aware of how whites view them in society. Thus, when Annalise looks into the mirror it is as if she is confronting her own identity, peeling away the layers of her constructed, performative self and presenting her unapologetic self to the audience. Thus, the “two Keatings” in the scene are the all-made-up Keating who dresses to conform to the homogenized standards of American beauty, and the racial Other, the black woman underneath the wig.

Wigs and Viola Davis’s Star Persona

The wig scene in the episode “Let’s Get to Scooping” acted as another catalyst for Davis to accurately represent African American women through her agency as an actress on set. But Davis also takes advantage of other television genres as a platform to speak out. Viola Davis’s most popular blurbs of black feminist thinking comes from daytime talk shows such as *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and *Anderson Cooper Live*. In a 2014 interview with Ellen DeGeneres, Davis discussed the wig scene of *How to Get Away with Murder*:

ELLEN: Both Portia [di Rossi] and I were looking at [the scene] and I thought *how beautiful of a scene is that!* [...] I heard it was your idea to completely take your wig off, take your makeup off—

VIOLA DAVIS: It was and I was so adamant about it. I said listen, she can’t go to bed with her wig on, she *cannot* be in that bedroom with her wig on, because women don’t go to bed with their wigs on [...] There’s a whole portion of women out there who are marginalized—I want to be a *real* woman.

This talk show interview exposes the ways in which African American actresses maintain a degree of agency on the set. Davis’s adamant decision to perform without a wig and makeup provided the show with a more realistic interpretation of the daily routines of African American women. Like Davis says, African American women “don’t go to bed with their wigs on.” Through performing without a wig in the scene, Davis creates a counter-narrative to the hegemonic codes imprinted on African American women, such as having to wear their hair

perfectly straight. Davis recognized the absurdity of having her character sleep in a wig and have done so would be an injustice to the “portion of [black] women out there who are marginalized.”

It is difficult to discern how much agency African American actresses had before the era of daytime talk shows, twitter, and celebrity magazines featuring black actresses where they can give an insider’s account of processes on the set. For instance, in the Dorothy Dandridge biopic, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (Martha Coolidge, 1999), Dandridge (played by Halle Berry) tries in vain to talk to the director on the set of one of her debut films *Drums in the Congo* (1942). The director essentially tells her to shut up and look pretty. The biopic assumes how Dandridge was probably treated on a set of predominantly white cast and crew members in the forties. Decades later, at the ebb of the Black Power Movement, Esther Rolle of the hit sitcom *Good Times* (1974) successfully demands a fairer portrayal of African American families for the show (Riggs, 1992). Rolle prepared to turn down the role upon realizing that the show would not have a husband for her character—a long standing trope to exclude black men from the household, perpetuating the image of absentee black father figures. Rolle was considered an important lead to have, thus the producers negotiated and inserted a husband/father into the show played by John Amos. Fast forward to 2014 and Viola Davis exercising creative autonomy as an actress. Thus, not only does Davis fall into the category of black actresses who have moments of asserting their agency on set, but Davis also utilizes other TV outlets to let her viewers know that she is an agent of her own black femininity.

The hair scene in *How to Get Away with Murder* is not the first time Davis made the choice to make a bold statement about African American hair politics. Viola Davis also went on record on an episode of *Anderson Live* discussing the politics of black hair and her own aesthetic choice to not wear a wig on the red carpet of the Oscars in 2012. Anderson Cooper inquires

about the media attention both Davis and Olympic athlete Gabby Douglas have faced about their hair:

ANDERSON COOPER: On the red carpet for the Oscars last year you changed your look kind of, and it seemed to flip people out, like people were writing about this, bogging about this, and Gabby [Douglas] at the Olympics recently, when she did really well, I also saw people commenting about her hair and stuff, and I just found it really odd that people notice this so much. Do you find it strange that people comment on how you appear so much [*sic.*]?

Cooper's question points to the politics of hair in general and African American women's hair in particular. African American hair, when natural and not conforming to the "straightness" of Caucasian hair, disrupts hegemonic norms to the point that it is called out and identified by its difference. Even though hair is a biological appendage of the human body, it is treated within society as a marker of social identity that is manipulated and constructed to either meet societal norms or disrupt them completely. Kobena Mercer (1987) suggests that

when hair-styling is critically evaluated as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, all black hair-styles are political in that they articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both personal and political 'meaning' and significance.
(37)

Because hair is an "ethnic signifier," its construction in everyday life can have personal and political "'meaning' and significance." Davis marks her hair journey as both personal and political—personal in the sense that she became aware of her own obsession with the way white and black audiences interpreted her hair and political because she is also aware that wearing her hair a certain way takes a stance and/or draws attention to the issue of hair that black women face.

Davis tells Cooper about how unsurprised she is at the attention she has gained by the simple act of embracing her natural hair. Her response to his question about whether or not she is surprised at the attention her various hairstyles get is:

VIOLA DAVIS: No, because I'm an African American woman and there is not enough time on this show to explain hair issues [Anderson and audience laughs]. But that being said, I took off my hair, I took off my wig, because I wanted to step into who I was. And I felt like—and listen, I love wigs, I do, I still will wear a wig every once in a while, [...]. But for me what it felt like was every time I put on a wig, that I was apologizing for who I was being a dark-skinned woman [with] very curly hair, I felt like I was hiding it. And I felt like I was saying “Okay my characters aren't very glamorous but look at me, you know, see me aren't I pretty?” and I felt that I didn't want to do that anymore and that the Oscars was a perfect time to do that; so, I stepped into who I was.

Davis's account of her feelings surrounding her hair of “apologizing” and “hiding” prior to and leading up to the 2012 Oscars evokes Melissa Harris-Perry's notion of *shame* revolving around African American women and hegemonic standards of beauty. Harris-Perry describes shame as the “psychological and physical urge to withdraw, submit, or appease others” (104). When expressing the sentiment of “Okay, my characters aren't very glamorous but look at me, you know, see me aren't I pretty?” Viola Davis is speaking to this “appeasement” when she alludes to her need for approval from a public that is used to only seeing stars conform to Eurocentric ideas of beauty, straight hair being one of those prevalent ideas.

Kobena Mercer also speaks to the way in which “racism 'works' by encouraging the devaluation of blackness by black subjects themselves, and that a re-centring [*sic.*] sense of pride is a prerequisite for a politics of resistance and reconstruction.” (36). Since racism is predicated on what W.E.B. Du Bois called the “color line,” that is, the spectrum of value placed on human beings with whiteness being on the good/desirable/superior end and blackness being on the bad/undesirable/inferior end, it follows that “black subjects themselves” begin to see their own blackness through the lens of inferiority which leads to devaluation. What Viola Davis describes in her interview with Anderson Cooper is a type of “devaluation” that she struggled with in her acting career based on her hair and darker skin tone. Once Davis decided to limit her wig

reliance and embrace her natural hair, she personally liberated herself and politicized basic (mis)-conceptions about the aesthetics of black hair.

The epigraph of this chapter quotes Davis emphasizing the “crisis” African American actresses face. The crisis she alludes to is not only the intense competition among black actresses because of limited access to dynamic, diverse roles, but also the crisis of how to articulate oneself in the “crooked room” of the entertainment industry that bombards black women with fallacious notions of racial hegemony. While *The Help* aided in propelling Mrs. Davis’s career, with an Oscar nomination, it also threatened to permanently type-cast her as an asexual mammy whose main concern is white children. But with the help of her own personal convictions that bled into her star persona, Davis was able to land the lead role on *How to Get Away with Murder*, and became the main attraction and appeal of the show, which enabled her to bring up complex political and cultural issues surrounding black femininity and its connection to the issue of hairstyles. Throughout her acting career, Viola Davis twisted and contorted herself to fit the Hollywood model of the crooked room; however, she is one African American actress who occasionally manages to stand up straight.

Conclusion

The 2015 Nielson report at the beginning of this thesis shows that African Americans are highly visible in contemporary media in the U.S. But a closer analysis reveals that the hypervisibility of African Americans in general and African American women in particular does not equate to fair, accurate, or progressive representations. The two television shows initiated by Shonda Rhimes are a breath of fresh air in their rendition of flawed African American women. However, Rhimes' shows are limited in their portrayal of African American women given their mainstream "crossover" status. To be "mainstream" is to water-down the "blackness" of these African American characters. Moreover, mainstream film and television often rely on age-old stereotypes that have been perpetuated throughout film and television history.

In *Scandal* the character of Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington, sets up and refutes the "modern mammy" and "black lady" tropes. The modern mammy is a remixed version of the "old mammy" in that the precise details of the caricature have changed but the overall function remains the same. For instance, while the modern mammy is no longer required to have the traits of obesity, dark skin, and taking care of white children, the modern mammy nonetheless reinforces asexuality and servitude for white, male-run institutions. The 1990s exhibited television characters that fit the new mammy construct, like Ella Farmer and Anita Van Buren. *Scandal* introduces this notion of the new mammy by presenting a character that fixes scandals for the (mostly) white elite and supports the institution of American government and politics that favors white men in power. But as soon as this possible "type" of black woman on screen is even remotely introduced, it is refuted by the actions and characterization of Olivia Pope. Olivia Pope resists the new mammy issue by (1) her character as an agent of her own sexuality, and (2) putting her own well-being above the needs of the Republic and her occupation. Similarly, Olivia

Pope refuses the role of “black lady” by embracing her sexuality and valuing her profession over the domestic tasks assigned to being First Lady.

Much of the contention critics have with the character Olivia Pope lies in her lack of cultural markers that would identify her as “black.” I argue that, like the insertion of the middle-class “black lady” in many shows, Olivia Pope’s “blackness” is subverted by her bourgeois status. Because of the socioeconomic stratification in the U.S., blackness has been linked to poverty. The connection of blackness to poverty can be seen in a show like *Good Times* and the other “ghetto” sitcoms of the late 1970s. *The Cosby Show* stands as a counter-narrative to the ghetto sitcom, showing the diversity of black American families. However, *The Cosby Show* also employs the “black lady” trope in the character of Claire Huxtable. Whenever there is the counter-narrative of a black middle-class, respectability is usually the main tool for black folks to assert their “difference” from poorer black folks. In film and television, class helps alleviate the racial unfamiliarity by trading black cultural markers for “classiness” and respectability that is more closely associated with “whiteness.” The creators of *Scandal* trade black cultural markers for “white” cultural capital: Olivia Pope is Ivy league educated, has access to the most powerful politicians in Washington, and a substantial income that places her in close proximity with white folks and “whiteness.”

But Olivia Pope also subverts the paradigm of propriety that was epitomized by Diahann Carroll in *Julia*. Even though Olivia Pope has finesse, with her education, upbringing, commanding attitude, and impeccable fashion sense, she is a fundamentally flawed character. No matter how sensational the romance between her and Fitz is, she is still sleeping with a married man, which is pretty “shady” on anyone’s moral scale. She also sabotages relationships and ruins whole careers on the show to meet her own ends, not to mention the election rigging. While her

faults make her more human and less a poster-child for the race (as was customary throughout the history of African Americans on screen), the shadow of stereotypes and negative representations of black women, particularly the (modern) mammy and the lascivious black woman, still hangs over her character. While Shonda Rhimes succeeds at creating a flawed, sexy character, Olivia Pope's involvement with infidelity threatens to undermine her more positive anti-hero attributes. The shadows of the past that loom over black characterization on screen today is what prompts critics like Haggins to ask the question "Is shadiness the new 'black'?" And rightfully so, for Haggins, "shadiness" is a red flag for misrepresentation. Can black women be portrayed in no other way than to be connected with corruption, mischievousness, and sexual transgression?

In the actual hearings of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas that were televised Anita Hill presented herself to the committee members and her fellow Americans as an educated, calm, and well-put-together black woman asserting her rights as a woman in the workplace. Kerry Washington's performance, however, and the film itself, show how the trope of the "black lady" functions through its fictive depiction. The media hype of the hearings brought attention to how race and gender effect public policy. But the context of the 2016 film adaptation of the hearings allows for a retrospective look into how images—particularly Anita Hill's premeditated image on TV at the time—affect ideology about a race or gender. Because Anita Hill is a black woman, her race and gender are intricately intertwined. Black women negotiate how they will act, what choices they will make, and how they will present themselves based on the situation. In the case of Anita Hill, as the film shows, speaking out on something that is "against" racial solidarity (i.e. the importance of a black man being on the Supreme Court), can be an isolating experience. It is as if Hill had to choose her identity as a woman over some people's expectation of her as a *black*

woman. The contrast made between Kerry Washington as Anita Hill and Jennifer Hudson as Angela Wright shows how black women will be treated when they do not conform to codifying behavior in white spaces. In the end, all that Hill can retain from the experience is her dignity and the way the film depicts that dignity is connected to the trope of the “black lady” that has real-life ramifications.

The mammy as an enduring image for African American femininity is not as explicit today as the in the years of *Beulah*; however, echoes of black servitude and loyalty remain. Contemporary images of African American women are in constant dialogue with depictions of African American women from the past. *The Help* is a bona-fide reiteration of the portrayal of black women as mammies. *The Help* is the most explicit form of a “controlling image” used to perpetuate a long-standing image of black femininity in popular, mainstream, contemporary film. The title of the film begs the question “who is helping who?” The title also alludes to the obvious referent: maids of white households. It is true that Skeeter Phelan does help the black maids gain a voice through writing her book. But what does the *film* do for the voice of the modern African American woman of 2011, the time the film was made? While this movie was the film that catapulted Viola Davis’s career, making her eternally grateful for the role, it is an extremely problematic film to be so egregiously popular in 2011. The disparity of this film is that, seventy years after Hattie McDaniel’s Academy Award win, Mammy’s story still is not being told. Instead of telling the story of the help, the film tells the story of how Skeeter Phelan came into her own and decided to write about black maids in Jackson. While it is undeniable that public acclaim for a rendition of white advocacy of black rights is incredibly significant, I would be remiss if I said that *The Help*’s plot, which centers on a Caucasian ally, is redemptive for the film as a whole. Unfortunately, because of its nostalgic tone, its reliance on stereotypical imagery of

black women, and its refusal to actually tell the story of black women that Skeeter wants to tell, the film falls terribly short in terms of new, positive, and un-stereotypical representation. If by 2011 the top-grossing film to feature African American women leading actresses is one in which they are playing maids, then the American public is clearly not experiencing a “post-racial” society by any standards.

Viola Davis’s move to television saved her from her usual “motherly” roles bequeathed by Hollywood. In landing the role of Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder*, Davis set a new path for herself and her career. In the “wig sequence” in season one of the show, Davis exercised her own creative autonomy, an action that Davis can take advantage of today because of the women of the past. Even though Annalise Keating is “shady” she nonetheless presents a new face on television of black femininity. The show makes strides particularly in representing dark-skinned, curly-haired, middle-aged women in a leading role. Television also provided a platform for Davis to advocate for fairer portrayals of black women. While Davis has never said anything negative about *The Help*, the actress is sober about the types of roles that have been continuously offered to her in Hollywood. In unwittingly alluding to the “crooked room” of Hollywood on television talk-shows, Davis raises awareness about the limited opportunities for black actresses.

The questions raised in this thesis revolve around the extent of contemporary film and television’s dependence on stereotypical tropes of the past. The studio systems for each media outlet are the driving force of the continual resurgence of old stereotypes. Thus, if change is to progress further in mainstream media outlets, it is not enough to only look at the images, the attention must also be on the system that is creating them. Recall in the introduction the traits of the film and television industries comparatively. Hollywood to this day relies on The Ulmer

Scale for the “bankability” of a star. Stars and starlets with lower scores on the scale, which usually include African American woman actresses, are denied the opportunity to be cast in certain roles over others. This is what makes a movie like *The Help* be made in Hollywood and a movie like *Middle of Nowhere* (Ava DuVernay, 2016), for example, to only be successful in the independent film circuit. Viola Davis as a maid is more profitable (or so Hollywood execs would like to believe) than Viola Davis as the lead in any number of films featuring Meryl Streep. This is not for lack of talent, as Davis has won multiple awards throughout her career, but for the sake of guaranteed profit for industry stakeholders. Likewise, Kerry Washington is obviously capable of playing a lead role that garners fans, but still retains more success and popularity when she switched to television.

But even mainstream television employs a problematic business schema. The ratings system stifles the potential for black women to play in leading roles, and even when there is a black female lead, her “blackness” is so toned-down that it becomes nearly impossible for someone to identify a character like Olivia Pope as “black.” In other words, Olivia Pope lacks so many African American cultural signifiers—vernacular, hairstyles, fashion, kinship relationships, cultural traditions—that the show begs the question: Is Olivia Pope really a black character or a character who *happens* to be played by a black woman? In order to drive up ratings, crossover shows must appeal to white audiences. Period. This means that white audiences, more often than not, determine the content of what’s aired and have the power to control what is cancelled. *Scandal* has maintained its ratings because Olivia Pope is black but not *too* black, making her a palatable, safe character for white mainstream audiences.

The larger question for further research is if the phenomena of black actresses moving from film to television is based on more opportunities on television than on film, giving them

more access to success and stardom. In other words, are black woman actresses “living in both worlds” of film and television in order to propel their careers in a way that Hollywood alone cannot? Why is there a lack of black actresses in starring roles (such as that of the romantic love interest to a white male counterpart) in mainstream film? What is it about television that makes black starlets more “accessible” to white audiences than film? These are interesting questions given the contemporary moment and the recent films of 2016. The Oscars, as an award show of big-budget Hollywood films, is a good way to track mainstream standards in film. The 2016 Oscars had an unprecedented number and quality of roles played by African Americans. *Moonlight* (dir. Barry Jenkins), *Hidden Figures* (dir. Theodore Melfi), and *Fences* (dir. Denzel Washington) all mark a shift in the construct of African American representation because they deliver complex characters with real African American life-experiences. The women in these films, portrayed by superb actresses, undergo more diverse characterization than in previous years of mainstream film history. The fact that this thesis is being written at a time of yet another transformative moment in history for African American women’s representation is perhaps the most salient indicator of the constant fluctuation of the image of African American womanhood.

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