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Representations of African American Political Women in *Scandal*

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Abstract

Since its debut on April 5, 2012, ABC's *Scandal* has become one of the most popular, mainstream dramas on television. *Scandal* features one of the only, African American female lead characters on network television, Olivia Pope. This paper utilizes scholarship regarding intersectionality and stereotypical representations of African American women to analyze the character of Olivia Pope. I argue that Pope's education, confidence, and boldness help to confront the lack of complex African American female characters, but her affair with the president simultaneously reinforces negative stereotypes regarding African American women's sexuality.

Introduction

Women are consistently underrepresented in the media. A study by the Women's Media Center found, "females accounted for forty-one percent of all fictional television characters" in the 2010-2011 season (Mitsu Klos, 2013, p. 41). Secondly, the female characters were "typically younger than male counterparts...[and] less likely than males to be portrayed as leaders of any kind" (p. 42). The numbers are even more dismal when examining African American women in Hollywood. Since the majority of women in television and films are Caucasian, they are the dominant perspective that is portrayed in the media. However, several shows have worked against this and offered narratives from the experiences of African American women.

We begin seeing the rise of African American women perspectives during the early 1980s. Phylicia Rashad, as Claire Huxtable, in *The Cosby Show* provided an admirable portrayal of African American women. As the wife of a doctor, the mother of five children, and a distinguished partner in her law firm, Rashad embodies the narrative

of the successful and respected black woman: one who can balance both family and work. In 1993, *Living Single* debuted as another popular African American sitcom reflecting the lives of black women. Starring Queen Latifah, *Living Single* surrounds around the personal and professional lives of three independent black women living in Brooklyn. Latifah and her friends are often portrayed as one-dimensional and lacking depth (Viera, 2011). However, one ABC show has flipped the script on what we are used to seeing and has become one of the most popular television shows.

Debating on April 5, 2012, *Scandal* surrounds the life and work of Olivia Pope who is played by Kerry Washington. Kerry Washington has become the first African American female lead on a primetime network drama since Teresa Graves starred in *Get Christie Love* which premiered in 1974. Since the presence of African American female leads has been literally non-existent for the past four decades, viewers, especially African American women have been supportive and excited for the newest ABC drama. Joan Morgan, in a New York Times article, stated “There’s an audience of African-Americans who just want to see themselves in a good story, not necessarily a race-specific show” (Vega, 2013). As an educated and politically active African American woman, Olivia Pope brings a provocative persona of Judy Smith, a CEO of a crisis management and PR firm. The purpose of this study is to comprehend the character of Olivia Pope and discover if she challenges or reinforces stereotypes of African American women in politics. I will argue that the intersections of Pope’s identity in some instances do provide a positive representation of African American women and in one specific case reinforce a negative stereotype.

Literature Review

In order to better understand the character of Olivia Pope, we first need to recognize the intersections of gender, racial, and political identities. Frederick (2013) characterizes intersectionality as “an approach within feminist theory that prioritizes examination of the complex ways in which interlocking forms of oppression shape people’s life chances and identities” (p. 115). Intersectionality argues that the priorities and perspectives of middle-class white women have been universally applied as the criterion for all women. Consequently, the consciousness of women of color around the world have remained unacknowledged (Hill Collins, 2000). This first article by Hill Collins (2012) mirrors her findings in another article where she discusses intersectionality “whose purpose has been to analyze social inequality, power, and politics” (p. 449). Hill Collins also uses the term matrix of domination to delineate the intersecting classifications of oppression. Under this system, women will endure gender oppression differently, and at differing degrees, based on how gender intersects with class, race, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and other categories of identity in their lives. How do scholars utilize the intersectional approach to understand the nuances of power structures within society? Bedolla (2007) indicates that “an intersectional approach would, by definition, deconstruct the ‘conceptual practices of power,’ both discursively and empirically” (p. 238). It aims to identify power structures and its impact on an individual or group. However, this also implies careful consideration of not essentializing the categories we seek to question. As Bedolla explains, the intersectional approach can aid in our understanding on how privilege and oppression impact individuals’ and

groups' life opportunities and experiences. In particular, intersectionality affects politics in several ways.

Historically, men have a greater presence in the political sphere, and intersectionality indicates why women lack presence. By studying the differences in political ambition between men and women, Moore (2005) discovered that for women, "ambition develops out of activism in high school government, experiencing gender bias...Democratic party identification, increased political interest, and self-perception as a leader" (p. 593). In essence, women are more likely to enter politics if they had former experience in high school or identify with leaders who want to fight against gender bias. Moreover, Fox and Lawless (2005) found that "if traditionally excluded groups are less likely to have [elected] role models to emulate, they may be less likely to consider running for office" (p. 646). Women become politically active when there are other publically involved women already in place. When women and minorities do run for office, they fill lower political positions. For instance, Fox and Lawless concluded that in comparison to whites and men, "women and blacks are significantly more likely to state that their initial entrance would be at the local level," instead of the state or federal level (p. 654). The racial and gender differences demonstrate the significant underrepresentation of African American women in the political sphere.

Moreover, this study must understand stereotypical representations of women in politics portrayed in the media. One such stereotype is the beauty queen narrative. As explained by Sheeler (2010) the beauty queen frame "objectifies the female candidate and reinforces the notion that politics is a man's game" (p. 47). By analyzing the campaign of Jennifer Granholm, Michigan's first female governor, Sheeler recognized the focus on

Granholm's style and appearance instead of the substance of her political proposals. Ultimately, the beauty queen narration imposes that "women can achieve agency by virtue of their appearance, that good looks are the way to public success, but not too much success" (p. 47). Politically active women are seen as spectacles and are undermined as leaders. This negative stereotype of women has contributed to the lack of women in politics.

In addition to women in politics, African American women have been negatively stereotyped. Davis (2013) discusses how the Jezebel depiction entrenches deluded messages about African American women and their sexuality. From the Book of Kings, Jezebel was married to King Ahab and was incriminated in leading the Israelites into sexual immorality and idolatry. She is understood to be a seductress and unable to control her sexual desires. The Jezebel depiction is equivalent to a woman with a ravenous sexual craving and promiscuity (Ladson-Billings, 2009). With the Jezebel representation, African American women have been and constantly are illustrated as "freaks, gold diggers, divas, and baby mamas" in mass media (p. 113). Because African American women are characterized as promiscuous and sensual, these understandings affect their credibility and image in politics. We see this in the discussion of former Representative, Cynthia McKinney. McKinney was repeatedly described as "a ghetto slut" because of the fact that she was an African American woman with "big hair" (Erin, 2006). The focus of McKinney's appearances reinforces the "mythologized black women as ungroomed, uncouth, and hypersexual" (para. 5). Therefore, the Jezebel narrative is prominent in the portrayal of African American women in politics.

Analysis

I argue that the character of Olivia Pope possesses different components that are integral to her identity; furthermore, she both challenges and reinforces these stereotypes of politically active African American women. For one, Ms. Pope is educated. Although the details of her education are not revealed in the first season, we understand that Pope was at the top of her graduating class and received her law degree. During the first series premiere, viewers learned that Pope once served as the Communications Director at the White House and led the campaign for President Fitzgerald Grant (played by Tony Goldwyn). She is also head of her own crisis management firm, Olivia Pope & Associates. Throughout the series, viewers constantly witness Ms. Pope's intelligence.

For instance, in season one, episode two, Olivia Pope & Associates receive a new client, Madame Sharon, who is an owner of a brothel agency. Sharon presents a client list dating back to 1986. Pope is surprised to discover that one of the clients is Patrick Keating who will be nominated for the Supreme Court by the President. After confronting the Supreme Court nominee with the evidence of him meeting with a hooker named Stacey, Keating denies the prostitution claims. Moreover, Keating's wife concedes that he never employed hookers. After a dead end with Keating, Pope works to track down the supposed hooker named Stacey. By following every lead, the firm can't find Stacey: until Ms. Pope has a brilliant idea. Pope goes to Keating's office, finds his wife, and indicates that she is Stacey. Keating actually stayed with Stacey after their first night together. President Grant's Chief of Staff, Cyrus Beene, compliments Pope on her intellect, and the media hails Pope as the crime solver in the scandal. This episode and many others demonstrate Pope's brilliant mind. With this episode, we have witnessed Pope challenging the

stereotypes of women. As mentioned by Sheeler (2010), women in politics are merely examined by their appearances. Just as Jennifer Granholm experienced, the brilliance of a woman's mind is overshadowed by what they are wearing or their hairstyle. The writers of *Scandal* confront this by highlighting Pope's acumen. When characters of the show describe Pope, they do not mention her outward appearance, but how she exhibits her intelligence. Likewise, Pope maintains several other characteristics.

Olivia Pope possesses a poised and confident demeanor as she interacts with her colleagues. As the audience begins to understand the main character of *Scandal*, she is repeatedly described as a "gladiator". This expression indicates the level of professionalism, dedication, and execution that Olivia Pope embodies. She is extremely confident and articulate. When conversing with clients or speaking with D.C. officials, Ms. Pope clearly and boldly states her case. For instance, when Amanda Tanner, a woman working at the White House began telling her coworkers that she was sleeping with the President, Pope approached Tanner and verbally decimated her: telling Tanner that all of her private business would be plastered over the news and she would lose all credibility if she continued telling lies about the President. Furthermore, Pope utilizes her impeccable persuasive skills to help people. In episode six, entitled "The Trail", Pope convinces the presidential candidate to follow her plan. Pope states:

"I know this is a terrible time for you, and I understand how you feel about me. But if we're going to work together, if I'm going to help you here, you follow my rules. It's up to you – you know what's at stake, you've seen what I can do" (Rhimes, 2012).

Olivia is consistently convincing high officials. Her eloquence is intriguing and illustrates African American women possessing the ability to have a bold attitude. Pope's confident mannerisms coincides with her successful career.

African American women are largely seen as weak and lacking high profile careers. Some shows like *Grey's Anatomy* who have characters like attending physician Miranda Bailey, demonstrate career driven African American women. However, they do not go as far as including a black female as at the top of the career ladder. *Scandal* sets the example by positioning Pope as the previous White House Communications Director and the CEO of Olivia Pope & Associates. Not only does Olivia Pope get to make all of the decisions, she bases all of the decisions off of her gut. Ms. Pope trusts her intuition to dictate whether or not Olivia Pope & Associates will take on particular clients and the methods to use in order to respond to crises. As Cyrus Beene, stated, "Olivia's gut is never wrong." In episode one "Sweet Baby" there is a disagreement on accepting Sully St. James, a Lieutenant and a rising pillar in the Republican party, as a client. St. James comes to Pope's office covered in blood, indicated his girlfriend was dead, and assured the firm that he did not murder her. All of five associates believed St. James was guilty, but Olivia Pope said he was innocent: taking the case. At the end of the episode, St. James was proven innocent when a video depicted him kissing another man at the time of the murder. With an air tight alibi, Pope's gut was correct. Ultimately, Pope's intuition and mannerisms greatly contributed to her success as a crisis manager. Pope's characterization, nevertheless, has a flaw.

Even though Olivia Pope is a strong, confident, and articulate woman, she does perpetuate one main negative stereotype of African American women. Although Olivia

Pope handles high profile scandals, the irony is that she is involved in a huge scandal herself: she is sleeping with President Grant. Pope and Grant fell in love during the campaign. However, in the series premiere, the President kisses Pope and shares that he is still in love with her. In “The Trail”, there are flashbacks to the beginnings of their affair. Grant and Pope are talking in the hallways of the campaign office, and Grant indicates that he just wants to look at Pope for one minute. They do not kiss. They do not even hug. They just stare into each other’s eyes for a full minute and foster their emotional intimacy. Several days later, Pope is walking toward her hotel room with Grant behind her. After telling Pope to go in her room and pretend like they were not in love, but Pope instead walks towards Grant’s room and the two make love for the first time. Consequently, Pope initiates their first sexual encounter.

Olivia Pope invokes the Jezebel narrative. As season one continues, Pope and Grant have several intimate encounters and grapple with their relationship.

Pope is also devious. In the season finale, “Grant: For the People,” it is revealed that the presidential election was rigged. At the end of the campaign, Grant was behind the Democratic candidate. The finale concludes with the implication that Olivia Pope was apart of the rigged election. Going behind Grant’s back, Pope, Beene, and the First Lady all were involved with the deception. At the point where Pope was involved with rigging the election, her affair further promoted the Jezebel depiction. The portrayal of Jezebel is associated with power. Jezebel’s do not have sex just to have sex; they have sex for power. The perception of power and the level of Olivia Pope’s control drastically changed when she is suggested in rigging the election. For one, Olivia Pope controlled Grant’s emotions. This is evident since Grant risks his marriage, his image, and the

possibility of reelection to continue having a relationship with Pope. Yet, Pope also controls Grant's position. If Pope had not agreed to defraud the election, Grant would not have made it to the White House. Pope loves a man, but Pope manipulates the system in order to have a romantic relationship with the leader of the free world. In essence, Pope is the scandal. Regardless of how much Grant loves Pope, Pope represents the Jezebel archetype and reinforces a stereotype that viewers are tired of seeing.

Conclusion

How are viewers supposed to reconcile the Jezebel depiction juxtaposed with the strong, educated, and respected characteristics of Olivia Pope? Are the transformative characteristics able to overcome the negative stereotypes of a promiscuous woman who also exploits the foundations of democracy? As evidenced by the feedback from the show, the answer is yes. Viewers understand that Olivia Pope is a complex character. She is a role model due to the fact that she is highly ambitious and well respected in politics. Her achievements while working at the White House and as a "gladiator" represent Pope's great strength and credibility. Furthermore, Pope possesses a brilliant mind and can manage any scandal, regardless of how slanderous it is. Compared to the portrayal of political women in the media, *Scandal* presents a narrative that can be identified with a variety of people. More specifically, for African American women, Olivia Pope displays a character that women can positively identify with. Pope also reflects the depth that African American women typically lack in Hollywood. The complexities within Pope's identity are quite interesting as they reinforce negative stereotypes. Although Olivia Pope is not a perfect representation of politically active African American women, her

character offers a fine starting point for a minority group that at this point has not been represented in a rectified manner.

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