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Scandal

Same Ol' Stereotypic Shit, Just a Different Day

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JUST FINISHED WATCHING YET ANOTHER EPISODE OF MY FAVORITE primetime television show *Scandal* and I am feeling somewhat torn. The emotional incongruence I feel is that on one hand, the evolving storylines, characters, politics, and drama have kept my closest friends and I intrigued for over three seasons. On the other hand, something is painfully familiar, disingenuous, and even shameful about all of the aforementioned constructs that keeps the eyes of 10.5 million viewer (including me) fixated each week. After soul searching for awhile, I think I may have figured out what makes the show so juicy as well as disconcerting is America's favorite Black darling, Olivia Pope.

While the premise of the show is multi-layered, the main plot is the love affair between the President of the United States and Olivia Pope. Olivia serves as a consultant to the President by assisting him with political strategy engagement. The intrigue of the attachment that these two characters have is that the President is married and Olivia is the girlfriend to the President's assistant. Although she previously dated a Black man, she maintains a relationship with two white powerful men. Both men have professed their love for Olivia to which she does not accept. She wants President Grant's love but refuses his marriage proposal because he is married. Moreover, he is willing to divorce his wife and give up the presidency, if and only if, Olivia would agree to marry him. The show depicts Olivia's willingness to suffer in silence than to see him ruin his career. Jake, the boyfriend, appears to be someone who she cares about and has sex with—but her true love is with President Grant. Phew!!

As you can imagine, the show is compelling and the overall acting is cinematic brilliance. Some of my closest friends and colleagues have literally spent hours reflecting and talking about why we will watch the next episode week after week. But sometimes our discussions move to a place that enables all of us to critically examine the character positioning of Olivia Pope and how she embodies the same old stereotypic, Mammy, Jezebel, "looking for love in all the wrong places" bullshit that Black women have tried to escape since day one.

Jezebel and Mammy

The traits of a Jezebel includes that the female is a light-skinned Black-American woman who is slender, beautiful, sexually alluring, worldly, seductive, oversexed and manipulative (Collins, 2000; Jewel, 1993). The de-

piction of the Jezebel was created as a rationale for the sexual and abusive treatment that Black women received from Southern slaveholders (White 1985; West, 2007). The creation of, and the reason that society accepted the negative stereotypical images were to justify the horrors of slavery and poor race relations that existed at the time (White, 1985).

The traits for the Mammy includes that the caricature is a dark-skinned, obese Black-American female eager to serve a white household; she is bossy and asexual (West, 2005). Christian (1980) provides a different side to the romanticized and stereotypical image of a loving, nurturing and a member-of-the-family that the Mammy is associated with. The Mammy is:

black in color as well as [in] race and fat with enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children in the world . . . Tied to her physical characteristics are her personality traits: she is strong, for she certainly has enough girth, but this strength is used in service to her white master and as a way of keeping her male counterparts in check; she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother (pp.12–13).

The combination of the two stereotypes is supported by White (1985) who suggests that the image of the Mammy cannot be independent of the Jezebel for they are “inverse images that existed simultaneously in the Southern mind” (p. 61). The writers of *Scandal* have created the character Olivia Pope to be the intersection of the two archetypes in that she is intelligent, petite, attractive, assertive, manipulative, sensual, and occasionally hypersexual. Like Mammy, she manages the (White)house and keeps everything in order. She is confident and certain and able to maneuver, negotiate, and manage chaos at both micro and macro levels. Like Jezebel, she serves as the mistress of two men and finds herself emotionally shackled with chains of love. I often wonder if there were more Black women on television or in the movies who showcased the continuum of femininity and womanhood, would I experience such a visceral reaction to her character. The answer is, “Probably not.”

The backdrop of an exploitative history, systemic oppression, sexism, racism, and skewed media representations impact all of us and our interpretations of events. The show *Scandal* is no different. As a Black woman, I hate that I cannot watch a good show without considering the sociohistorical context. With each show, my research background in literature and African American studies empowers me intellectually and at the same time, saddens me when I confront the truth about who Olivia Pope is and repre-

sents. I can only imagine the interpretive meanings of the show that are created by Black teenage girls who struggle to find their identity.

Below are a few process/reflection questions that I pose to my students/peers that address intersectionality as it relates to the show,

1. Why might it be detrimental for women of color to engage in multiple romantic relationships at their jobs?
2. What might some of the differences in treatment be between Black women and other women who are assertive?
3. What role does race place in building and sustaining romantic relationships?
4. In what ways are Black women exploited in cinema and on television? Who exploits them? Why?
5. What other television and cinematic shows feature characters like Mammy? Jezebel? Olivia Pope? Do you watch these shows regularly? If so, why?
6. If you could create an ideal character on television or cinema about Black women, what would they/she look like? What kind of romantic relationship would they/she have?
7. Do you think that if Olivia Pope was of a different race or ethnicity that the storyline would be as compelling?
8. Do you think that if the President and the assistant were women, that a man could be torn between two lovers? Why? Why not?
9. What stereotypes exist about successful women? Black women? Other women of color?
10. Why do some Black women continue to buy into negative historical sexual stereotypes?
11. What are some other stereotypes that exist about Black women's sexuality?
12. In one episode, Olivia's father, Rowan Pope, told his daughter, that she "[raised her] skirt and opened [her] knees and gave it away" (Scandal, 2013) What role should Black fathers play in the lives of their adult Black daughters?

Have Black women really made any progress as it relates to media portrayals and socioeconomic advancement? I would say “Not really.” *Scandal* is the same ol’ stereotypic shit, just a different day . . . but like the other 10 million or so viewers, I will continue to watch.

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