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Transgressing the Controlling Images of African-American Women? Performing Black Womanhood in Contemporary American Television Series

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Abstract: Drawing from intersectionality theories and black feminist critiques of white, masculinist, and racist discourses still prevailing in the American popular culture of the twenty-first century, this article looks critically at contemporary images of African-American women in the selected television series. For at least four decades critics of American popular culture have been pointing to, on the one hand, the dominant stereotypes of African-American women (the so-called controlling images, to use the expression coined by Patricia Hill Collins) resulting from slavery, racial segregation, white racism and sexism as well as, on the other hand, to significant marginalization or invisibility of black women in mainstream film and television productions. In this context, the article analyzes two contemporary television shows casting African-American women as leading characters (e.g., *Scandal*, 2012-2018 and *How To Get Away With Murder,* 2014-2020) to see whether these narratives are novel in portraying black women's experiences or, rather, they inscribe themselves in the assimilationist and post-racial ways of representation.

Keywords: African-American women, Shonda Rhimes, TV series, black feminism, intersectionality, racism

Introduction

For at least four decades the critics of American popular culture have been pointing to, on the one hand, dominant stereotypes of African-American women (the so-called controlling images, to use the expression coined by Patricia Hill Collins) resulting from slavery, racial segregation, white racism and sexism, as well as, on the other hand, to significant marginalization or invisibility of black women in mainstream film and television productions. The latter phenomenon was put in a larger context of diversity in Hollywood (or lack thereof) by Viola Davis during the Emmy ceremony in 2015, when she accepted the award for best drama actress: "The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there. So here's to … people who have redefined what it means to be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be black" ("Viola Davis's Emmy Speech"). Both critics and viewers have expressed frustration and exhaustion with the lack of interesting, multidimensional, diverse, complex, psychologically authentic, and socially important roles for black women that would transgress the schematic and degrading controlling images of, e.g., the welfare queen or the Jezebel stereotype. Hence, contemporary American shows, such as *Scandal* (ABC 2012-2018), starring Kerry Washington, or *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC 2014-date), with Viola Davis (both written by an African-American screenplay writer, Shonda Rhimes), have

generally been well received by audiences and welcomed by critics. Both television series and their leading heroines have been acclaimed not only for their unusual portrayals of black womanhood, but also for universal (pop)feminist[1] claims that they try to make.

Drawing from intersectionality theories and black feminist critiques of white, masculinist, and racist discourses still prevailing in American popular culture of the twenty-first century (e.g., bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Jacqueline Bobo), in this article I look critically at contemporary images of African-American women in the selected television series. The question I want to pose is whether these narratives are novel in portraying black women's experiences or, rather, whether they inscribe themselves in assimilationist and post-racial ways of representation. In particular, I will have a closer look at Viola Davis's acclaimed role of Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder*, which I want to perceive as a regeneration of African-American female subjectivity.

The performative character of these racialized representations is of particular relevance. I examine in what ways these heroines are formed as racial subjects by referring to controlling images and their limiting modes of depicting African-American women. Race is performative as it is not understood only through skin color, but rather should be "seen to be a discursively generated set of meanings that attach to the skin—meanings that, through various technologies and techniques, come to regulate, discipline, and form subjects as raced" (Ehlers 14). I argue that Annalise Keating from *How To Get Away With Murder* and Olivia Pope from *Scandal* "are regularly categorized through a certain racial schema and then must reiterate the norms associated with their particular racial designations through bodily acts such as manners of speech, modes of dress and bodily gestures" (Pfeife n.p).

I think that the two characters challenge traditional invisibility of African-American women in the mainstream media narratives, however, in my view, their performances contest the reception of their experiences and behaviors only through their racialized identifications and their position within the dominant discourse as black women. They try to transgress their blackness in order not to be solely defined through certain race-related expectations, not to be disciplined and controlled by the dominant racial stereotypes.

Looking at African-American Women's Experiences from an Intersectional Perspective

Undoubtedly, looking at the history of American film and television, African Americans in general have been marginalized, discriminated against and represented

1 Kate Farhall explains popfeminism as follows: "Feminism has been rebranded and marketed to a younger, more pop culture oriented generation, with celebrity royalty such as Beyoncé leading the charge.… Yet the progressiveness of this iteration of feminism is tempered by its ongoing commitment to the objectification of women. Feminist research consistently shows the objectification of women and the pressure of feminine beauty ideals to be problematic and limiting to women. Consequently, the dual emphases of women's freedom and adherence to feminine beauty standards seemingly render this popular form of feminism, not only internally incoherent, but also counterproductive to women's equality" (95).

stereotypically in all possible ways (Różalska, *One Hundred Years of Exclusion*, 55-63). However, as research conducted since the 1970s indicates, these are African-American women who have been mostly ignored, silenced and omitted in television narratives. Although the twenty-first century brought important television productions with strong and diverse female characters (such as *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, or *Girls*, to name just a few most popular in recent years), African-American women have still been largely invisible. As I will try to show, recently this situation has started to slowly change.

The presence of African-American women in television narratives needs to be approached from an intersectional perspective, acknowledging that black female experiences result from multiple axes of discrimination and the particular circumstances of their oppression. Since the 1970s black feminists have been criticizing white feminists for not including the voices of women of color and pointing to the overlapping processes of sexism, racism, classism, ageism, etc. that African-American women have to face.

The very term "intersectionality" was coined by an African-American scholar, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, in her article on women who were victims of domestic violence, wherein she justified the need to approach the problem with reference to the race and ethnicity of battered women because—as her research proved—their experiences significantly vary. Crenshaw draws attention to the fact that in many theoretical considerations various forms of discrimination are approached separately; that is why they fail to address those experiences that are influenced by various intersecting categories: "Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. Thus, when the practices expound identity as 'woman' or 'person of color' as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (357). Crenshaw underlines—similarly to other black feminist researchers such as bell hooks or Patricia Hill Collins—that women of color experience racism differently than men of color do and that they also suffer from sexism in a different way from white women, which in consequence leads to an inability to examine their positions and their marginalization. She uses intersectionality "to describe the location of women of color both within the overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism" (367). Such approach has a great potential to fill in the gap, because it focuses on intersections of different forms of discrimination: racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia and so forth.

Before Crenshaw's article, other activists and academics expressed the need to change perspective in investigating the socio-political situatedness of different women. Undoubtedly, one of the most influential texts that inspired feminist scholars was the manifesto by the Combahee River Collective—a group of black lesbian feminists—entitled "A Black Feminist Statement," which includes several assumptions that in my opinion provide important fundaments for the concept of intersectionality: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (232).

Other writers, such as Audre Lorde or bell hooks, criticized in their work the color-blindness of white feminism and its disregard for women's issues within their own communities. Lorde rightly contends that certain stereotypes concerning those who diverge from—as she puts it—"the mythical norm" are deeply ingrained in social consciousness and, for this reason, are maintained and reinforced by visual texts. According to Lorde,

> [s]omewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. (116)

These norms result in creating the sense of otherness, uncertainty and abnormality felt by certain people, which consequently results in an unequal division of power in society and the unprivileged groups' lack of impact on and access to social institutions, including the media. Thus, by devoting limited time and space to African-American women, the media reinforce their sense of powerlessness, marginalization or even absence.

bell hooks further problematizes the notion of the "mythical norm" by adding criticism of sexism and patriarchy within African-American community:

> When women write about race we usually situate our discussion within a framework where the focus is not centrally on race. We write and speak about race and gender, race and representation, etc. Cultural refusal to listen to and legitimize the power of women speaking about the politics of race and racism in America is a direct reflection of a long tradition of sexist and racist thinking which has always represented race and racism as male turf, as hard politics, a playing field where women do not really belong. Traditionally seen as a discourse between men just as feminism has been seen as the discourse of women, it presumes that there is only one gender when it comes to blackness so black women's voices do not count—how can they if our very existence is not acknowledged. (hooks, *Killing Rage* 1)

In other words, like many other black scholars, hooks questions the unity among women and claims that women are by no means a homogenous group experiencing gender discrimination within the white patriarchal system in the same way. She points to the need to reconceptualize the notion of sisterhood:

> Resolution of the conflict between black and white women cannot begin until all women acknowledge that a feminist movement which is both racist and classist is a mere sham, a cover-up for women's continued bondage to materialist patriarchal principles, and passive acceptance for the status quo…. The sisterhood cannot be forged by the mere saying of words. It is the outcome of continued growth and change. It is a goal to be reached, a process of becoming. The process begins with action, with the individual women's refusal to accept any set of myths, stereotypes, and false assumptions that deny the shared commonness of her human experience; …that deny her capacity to bridge gaps created by racism, sexism, or classism. (hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* 157)

A few years later, but in a similar spirit, Patricia Hill Collins' model of intersectionality aims at "reclaiming feminist intellectual traditions" (*Black Feminist Thought* 15) and reconceptualizing the politics of black feminist thought as a critical social theory by working "on the epistemological implications of thinking more fundamentally in intersectional terms about feminist theory and scientific research, that is, scientific knowledge and scientific practice" (Yekani 25). Hill Collins's research goes beyond intersectionality understood as interconnected ideas and experiences resulting from different social positioning as she is especially interested in how oppression affects black women. Therefore, she distinguishes between intersectionality and—what she calls—"the matrix of domination," with the former being closely interrelated with the latter:

> Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are structurally organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression. (*Black Feminist Thought* 18)

Hill Collins proposes "replacing additive models of oppression with interlocking ones," put forward earlier by the Combahee River Collective (*A Black Feminist Statement*), which, in her opinion, would present new possibilities of thinking about domination and exclusion: "The significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity" (Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought"). The matrix of domination, which permeates all spheres of life and social institutions, also affects popular culture and the media. Therefore, in the context of visual culture, Hill Collins underlines that intersectionality is crucial in investigating "controlling images" of black women in popular culture and the media. The concept of the matrix of oppressions is a means to deconstruct dichotomous divisions that have traditionally determined the representations of "Others" as well as the mythical norms that enlightened racism—which Hill Collins calls new racism (*Black Sexual Politics* n.p.)—rests upon.

In this context, Patricia Williams claims that "[t]he legacy of dehumanization of black people has been carried forward in such a variety of cultural contexts" (56) and this dehumanization of African Americans took many forms in popular culture and media texts. In particular, film and television have maintained a set of degrading images. Let me briefly examine the black feminist critical reflection on stereotypes of black womanhood.

Controlling Images

African-American women have been represented in television mainly through motherhood, sexuality, and troubled family and community. Oftentimes their images legitimize the racist patriarchal order and economic exploitation. Drawing from the

concept of "controlling images" by Patricia Hill Collins, I will shortly refer to these dominant depictions and their cultural variations.

The first stereotype of the mammy—a devoted caretaker of white children in the idyllically represented South—dates back to slavery. It emerged as a justification of "the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 72). She accepts her position as a "privileged slave," never questions the dominant social order, and symbolizes "the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power" (72). Usually represented as asexual and de-sexed, she can become an ideal surrogate mother for white children as she is not attractive to white masters/men. As hooks emphasizes, this racist and sexist logic assumes that "Black women have been mothers without children" (*Black Looks* 119)—nannies that devote themselves entirely to white children, their needs and upbringing. Consequently, "the mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 73).

The second controlling image indicated by Hill Collins is that of a matriarch—in a way a reverse of the mammy—a black "bad" mother that neglects her children, family, marriage, and community. In the words of Hill Collins, "[w]hile the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes" (75), which are often female-headed by single mothers. Unlike the mammy in white environment, the matriarch, who spends a lot of time working outside of home, is considered responsible for social problems in black family and community: poverty, unemployment, lack of education, children drop-outs from school, emasculation of black men (who in consequence do not want to stay with them, or marry them), etc. In other words, she is "a failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 75). Hardly ever is there a critical reflection on where, why, and in what conditions working-class African-American women perform domestic work as well as on the real reasons for black children's disadvantage: socio-political and economic inequalities, underfunded and low-quality public schools, employment discrimination, inferior housing, neglect on the part of the law enforcement to end violence, etc. (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 76). The matriarch serves as a warning to women of other ethnicities (also white) that "aggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 77). Strong black women's subjectivity resulting from slavery and years of segregation and discrimination as well as differently performed gender roles in black communities in comparison to the traditional white family are in fact perceived as deviant and endangering the patriarchal order. They transgress the traditional family ideal and also, with the absence of the father figure/black man, they are perceived as evidence to cultural inferiority (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 77).

Both the stereotype of the mammy and of the matriarch put African-American women in an impossible position in reference to black family, but also in the context of traditional patriarchal white society:

> For Black women workers in service occupations requiring long hours and/or substantial emotional labor, becoming the ideal mammy means precious time and energy spent away from husbands and children. But being employed when Black men have difficulty finding steady work exposes African-American women to the charge that Black women emasculate Black men by failing to be submissive, dependent, "feminine" women…. In essence, African-American women who must work encounter pressures to be submissive mammies in one setting, then stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes. (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 78)

Such self-excluding positions seem to characterize social expectations towards African-American women until today as reflected in some media narratives.

Two of the television series analyzed in this text—*Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*—echo this difficult role and presence of the mother in black family and the ambiguous position of the father in the leading protagonists' lives. Both Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating have uneasy, traumatic relations with their parents. Olivia's mother, always absent when she was a child, turns out to be a liar, a manipulator, and a terrorist. Annalise's mother finds it difficult to talk to her daughter about her hard childhood, the oppressive drinking father, and her uncle that abused Annalise sexually when she was a child. Both mothers, so different from each other, could be easily labeled bad mothers (Olivia's mom is a paid assassin, Annalise's mom is a conservative woman trying to protect the dysfunctional family); however, they are also strong female figures who protect their children at all cost (both are even capable of killing people that hurt their daughters).

The third controlling image, again connected to motherhood and sexuality, is the welfare mother (the welfare queen), who does not work, has a lot of children, and depends on welfare. This cliché grew in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s when black women started to use social benefits that had been previously denied to them. The discourse significantly shifted: under slavery, black women were supposed to reproduce to provide more unpaid workforce on plantations, but in the second half of the twentieth century, black women and their children have become a problem, a danger to the society (both due to their use of welfare and their reproduction) (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 79). In the logic of enslavism of the white supremacist anti-black capitalist society, it made perfect sense to use black women for reproduction of the enslaved population; however, with the changes after the Civil Rights movement and with the transition of an industrial society into a service society in the twentieth century, African Americans started to be perceived as "a surplus population," whose reproduction was no longer needed.[2] As Hill Collins claims,

> [t]he image of the welfare mother fulfills this function by labeling as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country the fertility of women who are not White and middle class…. Like a matriarch, the welfare mother is labeled

2 For more about contemporary considerations on surplus populations in the context of race, see James A. Tyner, "Population Geography I: Surplus Populations," *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2013, pp. 701-711, and Michael McIntyre and Heidi J. Nast, "Bio(necro)polis: Marx, Surplus Populations, and the Spatial Dialectics of Reproduction and 'Race,'" *Antipode*, vol. 43, no. 5, 2011, pp.1465-1488.

> a bad mother…. While the matriarch's unavailability [at home] contributed to her children's poor socialization, the welfare mother's accessibility is deemed the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring. (*Black Feminist Thought* 79)

In cinema and television, such a stereotype has been often used—the images of lazy, unemployed, arrogant black women, often addicted to drugs and alcohol, were mainstreamed not only by white filmmakers but also by the black independent cinema of the 1990s. Spike Lee in *Do the Right Thing* (1989) or *Jungle Fever* (1992) and John Singleton in *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) depicted women in such a way, partly blaming them for problems in black community and for having a bad influence on children (especially boys), which only supports what I have already considered above—that African-American women's experiences are marked not only by racism (often paired with classism), but also sexism on the part of both white and black patriarchal cultures (Różalska, *African-American Experience* 87-100).

Another popular stereotype of African-American woman is the black lady, which evokes a seemingly harmless image of a middle- or upper-class hardworking professional woman who is so focused on herself and devoted to her career, ambition, and work (often in white assimilated environment) that she does not have time for men, children, and family (being another version of the matriarch and the mammy, who is perhaps less feminine and less assertive than the black lady). They got their jobs through affirmative action, which in white patriarchal culture translates into taking up jobs that belong to someone else and, consequently, their achievements are questionable no matter how educated and accomplished they are (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 81). Their hard work and determined professionalism are often devalued and constantly questioned; therefore—as Olivia Pope's father rightly underlines on many occasions in *Scandal*— "You have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have" ("It's Handled").

Both Annalise Keating and Olivia Pope to a certain extent could be read through the stereotype of the black lady—they are both strong personalities: professional, mouthy, punchy, assertive, hard-hitting, and so overwhelmingly intelligent that they sometimes scare people off with their cleverness. They are both single, in and out of different relationships and love affairs; they need affection, sex, acceptance and understanding but in the end they will always choose themselves over their partners as they are not willing to compromise.

Finally, I want to refer to the very popular image of Jezebel (the whore) that is strictly connected with black female sexuality, which is perceived as deviant, promiscuous, and dirty. As most of controlling images, this stereotype dates back to slavery when alleged sexual aggressiveness of black women (and men as well, differently though) was used to justify sexual exploitation, assaults and rapes as well as the need to control their sexuality. In contemporary American popular culture (both white and black), the modern versions of Jezebels are ever-present, for example, the "Black Bitch Barbie," "who welcomes glamorization and embraces the profitability associated with the racialization, sexualization, and subjugation of Black women's bodies" (LaVoulle and Ellison 65). Importantly, as black feminist critics underline,

these stereotypical representations are not sufficiently questioned by African-American community, which seems to accept or even reinforce them, so that they are not merely constructs and fantasies of white men, but also "African-American men and women alike routinely do not challenge these and other portrayals of Black women as 'hoochies' within Black popular culture" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 82).

Controlling Images and Their Consequences

Black feminists and activists have been examining and explaining the reasons why these controlling images still dominate in society and the media, pointing to the fact that "by meshing smoothly with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, they help justify the social practices that characterize the matrix of domination in the United States" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 84). First, they are used to "make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 69). In other words, they subjugate African-American women to the patriarchal system of oppression and are key in maintaining the intersecting axes of discrimination unquestioned and intact.

Secondly, as Hill Collins summarizes, "[t]aken together, these prevailing images of Black womanhood represent elite White male interests in defining Black women's sexuality and fertility" (*Black Feminist Thought* 84), therefore women are simply reduced to their biology and "natural" duties as if their biology was their destiny. Relegating black women to nature is part of the dichotomous logic that defines the Other in American society through binary oppositions that reflect unequal access to and enjoyment of power. What Stuart Hall calls "the spectacle of the Other" is an assumption that "people who are in any way significantly different from the majority—'them' rather than 'us'—are frequently exposed to this binary form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes—good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange and exotic" (Hall 268), male/female, black/white, culture/nature, reason/emotion, subject/object, superior/inferior (to add just a few).[3] Such a way of thinking puts African-American women in an inferior position and represents them as exotic, emotional, oversexualized, uneducated, less intelligent, ugly (especially when dark-skinned), etc. Consequently, these controlling images help the process of objectification that is central to oppositional thinking: "In binary thinking one element is objectified as the Other and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 70)—in other words, to be looked at and thus disciplined. Objectification of African-American women permits dehumanizing them, depriving them of their agency, marking them as different (because of, among others, their skin color and dominating white standards of beauty) and identifying them with passively understood nature, i.e. something that can be conquered, exploited, and

3 See also: Dorota Golańska and Aleksandra Różalska, "Representation and Difference: Introduction to Feminist Approaches," *Gender and Diversity: Representing Difference*, edited by Dorota Golańska and Aleksandra M. Różalska, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2011, pp. 19-51.

controlled, as primitive and wild nature endangers the social order, the civilized culture represented by men. That is why "Black studies and feminist studies suggest that defining people of color as less human, animalistic, or more 'natural' denies African and Asian [together with Latin and Native] people's subjectivity and supports the political economy of domination that characterized slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, [and apartheid]" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 71).

In the context of cultural narratives, bell hooks rightly contends that "[a]s subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (*Talking Back* 42). As far as African-American female characters are concerned, the majority of American television series hardly ever put them at the center of narratives—they have been either completely absent, occasionally sidekicks, assimilated partners to white characters, or represented through controlling images—hardly ever at the center of narratives. Furthermore, we need to also remember about yet another aspect of African-American women's representations in film and television. In her famous book *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* bell hooks referred to the double discrimination of black women on screen: "Even when representations of black women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallocentric gaze" (119). In other words, African-American women in film and television narratives are neither to be identified with nor to be desired, as the object to be looked at by both white and black men are white women. The process of double discrimination and marginalization is particularly visible on their example.

Hence, it is not surprising that Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating—the two African-American female protagonists—have been on the one hand welcomed with acclaim and joy as they transgress certain myths and stereotypes so deeply ingrained in American culture. On the other hand, some critics and audiences have been watching these shows with some dose of suspicion and skepticism, sometimes accusing Shonda Rhimes of repeating rather than contesting old clichés and of "soaploitation"[4] (duCille 201).

In what follows, I want to have a look at some aspects of African-American women's representations in *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*, in particular at their contestation of the angry black woman's stereotype, the ways in which Kerry Washington plays with the legacy of the Jezebel image, and finally Viola Davis's revolutionary take on white beauty standards. All of these aspects to some extent show how these television series reflect real-life debates on racism and feminism in the US.

Transgressing the Angry Woman Image (Sapphire)

In her notorious *New York Times* review of *How To Get Away With Murder*, Alessandra Stanley writes:

4 The term "soaploitation" has been coined from the soap opera television genre and Blaxploitation films popular in the 1970s.

> As Annalise, Ms. Davis, 49, is sexual and even sexy, in a slightly menacing way, but the actress doesn't look at all like the typical star of a network drama. Ignoring the narrow beauty standards some African-American women are held to, Ms. Rhimes chose a performer who is older, darker-skinned and less classically beautiful than Ms. Washington, or for that matter Halle Berry…. Ms. Rhimes has embraced the trite but persistent caricature of the Angry Black Woman, recast it in her own image and made it enviable. She has almost single-handedly trampled a taboo even Michelle Obama couldn't break. (Stanley)

Evidently, some critics cannot help but read Keating's character through the stereotype of a strong, bold, mouthy woman (a combination of the matriarch and the black lady, sometimes also called Sapphire) who can deal on her own with all the problems and obstacles but whose anger (at family, job, friends, students, white men, etc.) is sometimes irrational and difficult to understand. One might argue that employing these stereotypes gives evidence to the persistence of controlling images and points to a limited understanding of black womanhood. The question is whether it is necessary to look at black female experiences through the same degrading and simplifying clichés I outlined above in order to show their persistent character. If the character was white, probably the critic would not use the expression "an angry white woman." Such a discourse points to the lack of progress in the fight against racism and sexism in the United States, decades after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

Meanwhile, it could be argued that anger is precisely what makes Annalise's character unique as it helps her solve cases and push the plot forward. Her character goes beyond the angry black woman stereotype. In fact, in contemporary American network television it is hard to find such a conflicted and hence interesting African-American female character. We see Annalise in different moments of her life—as a strong, bold, tough-minded and hard-hitting lawyer but also as a lost, traumatized, unhappy person who has to work really hard for the image that is required of her by her profession and the patriarchal white world she has to adjust to. Her life is complicated and full of secrets, and she has many flaws that make her a multidimensional and complex character—sometimes adorable, sometimes annoying. She has an alcohol problem, which in Season 4 almost results in her losing license; she is married to a cheating white husband who turns out to be a manipulator and murderer (Season 1); she is bisexual—she has an affair with a cop whose wife is terminally ill and maintains a romantic relationship with a woman; furthermore, she has many traumas of the past—she was sexually abused as a child and she loses her long-awaited baby in a car accident (Season 2).

At the same time, Annalise Keating is aware of her strength and worth, and although she doubts herself constantly, she also dares to angrily say to her student: "I'm trying to change the damn world here. Literally. I'm Martin Luther damn King trying to blow up the entire justice system. You want me to save the world and be nice at the same time. Well that's not me" ("It's Her Kid"). As Wallace underlines, it was Viola Davis herself who insisted that producers should make Annalise Keating a conflicted, vulnerable character—one that is uneasy to read; she wanted her to be "messy, multifaceted and complicated" (Wallace) in ways that African-American protagonists rarely are. "I am who I am; if you don't like it, I don't care," says Keating

("Best Christmas Ever"), and it seems that Viola Davis passed onto Keating's character some of her own anger resulting from being an African-American actress, always oscillating between the roles of either a victim or a villain, or being a background to white protagonists: "It's what I've had my eye on for so long. It's time for people to see us, people of color, for what we really are: complicated" (Wallace). She elaborated on it in more detail in one of the interviews:

> Colorism and racism in this country are so powerful that the Jim Crow laws are gone, and we know most of segregation is gone, but what's left is a mindset. As an actress, I have been a great victim of that…. There were a lot of things that people did not allow me to be until I got [the role of] Annalise Keating…. I was not able to be sexualized. Ever. In my entire career. And here's the thing that's even more potent: I've never seen anyone who even looks like me be sexualized on television or in film. Ever. (Maerz)

I want to illustrate my argumentation with two examples from Season 4 in which, evidently, Annalise Keating's anger and dissatisfaction with racism and sexism permeating the legal system in the United States lead her to win two cases in which African Americans were victims. The first example is a scene in which Annalise is interrogating a witness in court, a retired judge, regarding her client, Jasmine Bromelle, an African-American woman—a prostitute and a drug addict, who is an inmate Keating met while imprisoned. Jasmine is on-and-off jail all her life due to the fact that she was forced into prostitution by her father when she was a girl. For the first time she was charged for solicitation when she was 13 years old ("I'm Not Her"). Annalise thinks she can get Jasmine out of prison and—by saving her—rework her own trauma of sexual abuse as a child. Getting angrier and angrier she proves her point about Jasmine's race and class contributing to multiple discrimination she suffered throughout her life, being disadvantaged by the system. She proves to the judge that he charged teenagers to different sentences because of their skin color:

> My client is black, and all of these girls were white. If Jasmine was treated as a white girl, she would've been sent to a safe place to eat, sleep, maybe even given an opportunity to go to school. But, instead, she is treated as a criminal by the officers and prosecutor whose duty it was to protect her and save her from the hell that was her childhood. But you turn your back out into the streets until she had a criminal record that prevented her from getting a job, government housing, assistance…. The system that should've been protecting this vulnerable 13-year-old girl blamed her and doomed her to a life in-and-out of prison. Because that's what we do to black people, women, and gay people in this world. We turn a blind eye, and we tell them that their lives don't matter. But they do matter. Jasmine Bromell matters. ("I'm Not Her")

This is just one of many cases Annalise takes to reveal the discrimination and disadvantage of African-American women. Idyllically, she wins the case; Jasmine is acquitted, although the win is only seemingly rewarding—when outside of prison, Jasmine cannot cope with freedom she has so suddenly regained; she dies of a drug overdose, so she is hardly a stereotypical victim that wants to be saved. It is impossible to simply erase her

past and experiences resulting from racism and classism. Although, of course, one could also argue that this fragment of the series might perpetuate black stereotypes as Jasmine is not offered the opportunity to enjoy her freedom and turn her life around.

The second example also concerns discriminatory practices of the legal system, this time mass incarceration of black men—the topic that has recently started to be discussed more and more often in the United States by legal experts, journalists, and activists. Annalise Keating prepares a class action making a claim that people of color are denied the right to proper public counsel and hence they are given harsher punishments than whites: "One in three black men will go to prison versus one in 17 white men" ("Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania"). Interestingly enough, the plot was used as a pretext for a crossover between *How To Get Away with Murder* and *Scandal*. The latter benefited from including such African American-oriented and pro-civil rights plot, as it has often been accused by critics of being colorblind and not tackling the realities of African-American community in a sufficient way. As a consequence, Annalise Keating works closely on this case with Olivia Pope, who also needs a big win to gain back the respect of the White House.

Watching the two powerful African-American women working on a case so specifically resulting from black experiences of racism, classism, and denial of basic civil rights, presenting their case at the almost-all-white Supreme Court and winning is a completely new experience for both viewers and critics of network television. Importantly, their encounter and the joint forces of their teams (predominately African American) opened an opportunity (which Davis referred to in her Emmy acceptance speech) to go beyond controlling images. The two protagonists control the narrative, not the other way around. Pixley characterized Kerry Washington's role in the following way: "Olivia Pope is not a monolith. She is a black woman, but she is also more than that" (Pixley 32). I think the same can be said about Annalise Keating.

Annalise Keating's final argument during the Supreme Court hearing includes some powerful statements about race-related systemic discrimination:

> Race must always be considered a variable…. Racism is built into the DNA of America. And as long as we turn a blind eye to the pain of those suffering under its oppression, we will never escape those origins…. Due to the failure of our justice system, our public defense system in particular, Jim Crow is alive and kicking…. Some may claim that slavery has ended. But tell that to the inmates who are kept in cages and told that they don't have any rights at all…. And is this the America that this Court really wants to live in? … The Sixth Amendment was ratified in 1791. It's been 226 years since then. Let's finally guarantee its rights to all of our citizens. ("Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania")

Of course, on a more critical note, in Shonda Rhime's fictional worlds complicated cases are much easier to win than in real life, it is easier to reveal racist policies (within one or two episodes), and it is even possible to convince people that discrimination of African Americans still exists. Although not without problems, Keating and Pope succeed in convincing even conservative, white, Republican politicians (one former and one current US president!) to support their endeavors to make a case before the Supreme Court. Nonetheless, we must remember that these

shows are run on network television whose productions are directed at wide, diverse audiences with different attitudes towards race-related issues and different sensitivity to these problems. Network television has often been accused of offering such narratives to (white, middle-class) viewers that would present race relations in an assimilationist way and not addressing in much detail the complicated history of racism in the US. In this context, both Rhime's series, but *How To Get Away With Murder* in particular, bring these issues to the center of the narrative in a much more complex way and from an African-American perspective.

Transgressing the Jezebel Image

As mentioned above, the image of Jezebel and its various alterations have been one of the most popular stereotypes of African-American women, and, according to some critics, Shonda Rhimes in *Scandal* also makes a reference to it (duCille 154, Cartier 154, Maxwell). On the one hand, Olivia Pope is a brilliant and talented lawyer, a graduate of prestigious law schools, working for the White House, having influence on the elections (of two US presidents), and running a successful PR firm, which specializes in crisis management—fixing and handling embarrassing situations and mysterious problems of her rich clients: politicians, leaders and DC's VIPs. Olivia is manipulative, cunning, always ahead of her opponents, always winning, knowing dirty little secrets of the American political elite, and having devoted co-workers and a net of contacts that help her solve even unsolvable cases (Stępniak). Throughout the seven seasons of *Scandal* she gets more and more ruthless and hungry for power and influence; initially a skillful manipulator, throughout the series she becomes a blackmailer and finally a murderer.

On the other hand, she has one weakness—she is involved in a complicated, illicit, doomed relationship with the (white, Republican) US president, Fitzgerald Grant. The critics of Olivia Pope's love life accused her of reproducing a modern incarnation of the Jezebel and reinforcing other controlling images:

> Pope's character has met with a plethora of angry rants. Many of these criticisms claim that her interracial relationships with questionable power dynamics are outrageously offensive. Others insist that her lifestyle itself is unrealistic, and her depiction of black womanhood simply scandalous. Pope has been criticized for representing a composite of nearly every black female stereotype—the Jezebel, the Mammy, the Sapphire…. To many media critics, Pope's cunning maneuvers in service to the so-called "Republic" (read: primarily white, primarily wealthy, American political behemoth) smacks [sic] of Mammy-esque mothering and her "immoral" relationship with a white married man align with the notion of oversexed Jezebel. When Pope runs her own business to laudable success through iron-fist maneuvering coupled with a commandeering personality, critics then insist she fits snugly into the Sapphire trope. (Pixley 29-30)

When you read Pope's representation through the prevailing controlling images, which assume that each relationship between a black woman and a white man is a reference to slavery, sexual exploitation by white masters, and total dependency of black women on white culture, then indeed Kerry Washington's character may be associated with

the Jezebel. This logic of thinking assumes that "Pope cannot be unabashedly strong and competent, sexually active, or act as caretaker without being categorized as some variant of a stereotype. She cannot be Olivia Pope first—with all its intrinsic specificities and complications—and a black American second, with all the intrinsic specificities and complications of the role too" (Pixley 31).

However, there is a possibility to read Pope differently: she is very independent, goal-oriented, and powerful. In her relationship she is the one in charge—she influences the president's decisions and she is always right; she decides to abort an unwanted pregnancy without consulting him; he needs her more than she needs him. I also agree with Warner that "black women are rarely allowed to be main characters in stories about choice, desire and fantasy" (17) in a way that Olivia Pope is. She also educates the president about racial and gender aspects of American politics: although tailored to the needs of mainstream audiences of network television, *Scandal* made numerous attempts to talk about contemporary socio-political issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement ("The Lawn Chair") and #MeToo ("The List") (Rosenberg). At the same time, she is passionate, both while at work and in love, and sometimes makes flawed decisions, for example when she tries to formalize her relationship with Fitz and become the First Lady. At the end though, she will always choose herself (her subjectivity, independence, and career) over others; she will be nobody's mistress, nobody's trophy; she always has the last word. Says Pope, "I don't want normal and easy and simple. I want painful, difficult, devastating, life-changing, extraordinary love" ("Nobody Likes Babies"). I agree with Pixley that "Pope avoids primarily defining herself by physically embodied, racialized categories. Much like the whites and men on TV … her character is built on scripts of power, intelligence, leadership and the framework of her actions" (29).

Transgressing White Beauty Standards

Finally, I want to refer to the way Viola Davis contests some of the prevailing beauty standards on television (something that Kerry Washington in *Scandal* does not attempt to do). As Nicole Zhu underlines, "[i]n the process of determining one's attractiveness against white and Western beauty standards, things like skin tone and hair become racialized and politicized to varying degrees. As a result, systems of discrimination in social, political, and economic contexts operate differently based on one's appearance" (Zhu). The role of Annalise Keating is interesting in this context because she accommodates those dominant standards (picking outfits required of her profession, wearing high-heel shoes, make-up, and a wig with straight shiny hair, as well as lightening up her complexion, etc.), at the same time challenging them. In fact, Davis herself openly acknowledges the barriers she has encountered as a dark-skinned actress: "If your skin is lighter than [a paper bag], you're all the good things: smarter, prettier, more successful. If you're darker, you're ugly" (Zhu). In other words, "color is the ultimate test of 'American-ness,' and black is the most un-American color of all" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 90).

Davis challenges "preconceived notions of beauty, femininity, and sexuality typically associated with characters portrayed by dark-skinned actresses" (Zhu) in a

powerful final scene of one of the episodes of Season 1 ("Let's Get To Scooping"). We can see her in the private space of her bedroom preparing for her daily bedtime ritual. The scene lasts for almost two minutes, accompanied by rhythmic music, and we observe Annalise in a series of close-ups removing her jewelry, slowly taking off her wig, showing her short, natural hair, removing eyelashes. We look at her looking at herself in the mirror while wiping off her make-up, eyeshadow and foundation that is much lighter than her real skin color.

Davis, who was behind the idea of including this scene in the narrative, "through this 'simple act,' reveals Annalise's own internalized views regarding performativity and beauty, and how these non-negotiable requirements operate in private and public. This broke a long-standing taboo for black women on television because black women on television without a weave, wig, or hair-perfection are a rarity" (Zhu). In this way Davis/Keating "demonstrates that despite prevailing notions of white desirability, natural hair isn't something to be ashamed of, covered, or hidden, but acknowledged and embraced as one's authentic self" (Zhu).

Undoubtedly, "dealing with prevailing standards of beauty—particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture—is one specific example of how controlling images derogate African-American women" (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 89). Davis resists such white patterns of "attractiveness—and by extension, opportunity, privilege, and success…. Though her skin tone and hair has exemplified the discriminatory practices and attitudes within the film and television industry, she has also used her skin and hair to embody more realistic representations of black women and capture their depth and beauty" (Zhu). In this way she negotiates popular old clichés by offering a new understanding of black womanhood. As Everett rightly contends, "[t]he fact that Rhimes dares to construct dark-skinned black woman as romantically desirable, visually attractive and, yes, sexually desirable (beyond the stereotypical prostitute trope) is too much for some people to handle because it is so rare a sight on American mainstream television" (37). Thus, Davis offers a completely novel narrative, "in which her body is her own to embody or transcend, unfettered from the binaries of too black or not black enough (among many others) where she can be however she is—sexual not sexualized, desirous and desired—and free" (Cartier 153).

Conclusion

Summing up, I have chosen these themes and scenes from both shows to demonstrate that they introduce serious changes in contemporary network television and performative character of African-American women's depictions. *Scandal* succeeds more in promoting popfeminism and addresses both sexism and racism ever present within white American privileged political elites. The show does not try to suggest that the discrimination of African-Americans and women is gone; however, the narrative solutions offered to these problems are superficial—too easy, too fairly-tale-like, too unrealistic. *How To Get Away With Murder*, which I do not consider an assimilationist show, makes an effort to present race-related problems in a less simplified way. Racism (both individual and institutional) and racial tensions within American society are often at the center of the narrative in a variety of ways – for instance when Annalise

represents, often disadvantaged and unprivileged, African Americans in court or when she emphasizes the challenges she has to struggle with being an African American woman in a predominantly white environment.

Apart from Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating, television (both network and cable) has recently given some space to other strong African-American female characters that transgress traditional expectations towards black women. It is worth having a critical look at such productions like *Suits*, with Gina Torres as Jessica Pearson (2011-2019)*; Person of Interest*, with Taraji P. Henson as Joss Carter (2011-16), *Empire*, with Taraji P. Henson as Cookie Lyon (2015-2020), or a much acclaimed show *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019) to examine in what ways they contest the dominant controlling images.

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