

## Summary

### **The Politics of Primitivism: Objectification and the Black Female Body**

This section will examine primitivism as a strategic attribute cast onto the black female body throughout history. Long before millions of Americans would watch *Scandal*, *Being Mary Jane*, or *How to Get Away with Murder*, Europeans gathered in front of the Hottentot Venus, known to some as Saartje Baartman. The young KhoiKhoi woman from South Africa faced exhibition and exploitation as her nearly nude body composed a lucrative circus attraction during the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Baartman appeared nearly nude to exhibit her protruding derrière, an attribute regarded as a genetic deformity by whites.<sup>2</sup> Scientists deemed Baartman's extended labia (also referred to as The Hottentot Apron) in addition to her nose and lips, a line of demarcation between animals and white women.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, confined to the four perimeters of the small screen, the contemporary black heroine works to subtly prove her own inferiority through a contemporary primitivism. Harriet Washington outlines the primitivism extended to black bodies in *Medical Apartheid*, "Whether one was gawking at a 'white negro,' a 161 year old black wet nurse an African giantess or a Hottentot 'missing link' in a cage, the subject was usually forced to display his body" (Washington 79). While predecessor Saartje Baartman physically showcased her body as a testament to fictional black disfigurement, contemporary black heroines Olivia Pope, Annalise Keating and Mary Jane Paul mirror this primitivism sans physical nudity. The series consistently

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<sup>1</sup> hooks and Washington thoroughly discuss Baartman as a sexualized spectacle.

<sup>2</sup> See Washington, Harriet A. *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. Harlem Moon, 2006. Chapter 2

<sup>3</sup> Both hooks and Washington discuss Saartje Baartman as an early example of black female exploitation.

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depicts the black female body in scenes where she engages in intercourse with married men or in a public place. This depiction confines the black female body to her sexual organs, thereby rendering actual imagery of her body trivial.<sup>4</sup> For example, *Being Mary Jane* depicts protagonist Mary Jane on her knees performing fellatio on married lover Andre. The scene features no nudity, yet the positioning of a well-educated, professional black body on her knees strips the black female protagonist of feminine modesty. Positioned close to the ground, the media powerhouse viewers meet in the pilot transforms into the four-legged stature of an animal. Similarly, the *How to Get Away With Murder* pilot shows a then-married Annalise on her desk receiving oral sex from a lover who is also married. This double treachery enlists a dissonance that suggests primitivism in Keating's inability to distinguish where she engages in intercourse from where she works. In juxtaposing Keating to Baartman, Baartman also experienced an indistinguishable public and private sphere. This indistinguishable public and private domain contradicts the seventeenth century dynamic where white women only appeared publicly when completely covered.<sup>5</sup> As slaves, black women frequently appeared nude and as spectacles they frequently exposed their body.<sup>6</sup> The nakedness of the African female serves as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability (hooks 18). Baartman epitomizes a black female body forced to make her private public, ineluctably evolving into a sexualized object. This dichotomous union between professional and personal subjects Baartman and contemporary manifestations Olivia Pope, Mary Jane Paul and Annalise Keating to a surveillance which renders them coerced spectacles to an unseen observer.

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<sup>4</sup> Franz Fanon speaks of sexuality as a limiting factor in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>5</sup> bell hooks references the white woman dynamic extensively in *Ain't I A Woman* to illustrate black female dehumanizations.

<sup>6</sup> Both Washington and hooks reference and analyze black female nudity to explicate racist-sexist ideologies.

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The surveillance displayed in series *Scandal*, *Being Mary Jane* and *How to Get Away with Murder* corresponds to Foucaultian ideas surrounding the panopticon. Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* analyzes the panopticon and its embedded power in the following: "This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead — all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism." (Foucault 197)

Secured to a location within the grey area of public and private, the black female body becomes displaced into a sea of gazes. Always observed but never the observer, the black female body sustains animal-like circumstances as her most intimate tasks meet an impenetrable gaze. The architecture in practice employs the body to encompass a subconscious hyper visibility in which the body acts as a vessel to dehumanize the mind. This hyper visibility acts as erasure for separating the public and private sphere, inducing a primitive hyper sexuality that operates without limitations. Hyper visibility also intensifies black female hyper sexuality, issuing the black female body visual penetration by imposed gazes. These imposed gazes afforded Baartman, like contemporary tragic black heroines Olivia Pope, Mary Jane Paul and Annalise Keating, a dissonant centrality rooted in their status as other. Maintaining images of black women as the other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression (Collins 68). Thus, contemporary figures of black femininity, like Saartje Baartman, suggest that black female centrality works solely to illustrate fictive depictions of black female bodies as fact.

### **Racism and Reading the Black Female Protagonist Trajectory**

*This section reflects a reduction implemented to meet the length requirement. The omitted portion details the following historic controlling images: mammy, tragic mulatto, jezebel and the strong black woman.*

Like "heroine" Pam Grier as Foxy Brown, contemporary tragic black heroines solve cases and save the day. Despite their fancy clothing, each protagonist encompasses Mammy's dedication to service. Furthermore, like the black female slaves and spectacles before her, the contemporary tragic black heroine garners purpose and profit from serving whites. The tragic mulatto and jezebel, much like contemporary black heroines Pope, Paul and Keating, possess an intense sexuality attributed to their black blood. Olivia Pope, Mary Jane Paul and Annalise Keating serve as an amalgam of past controlling images, constructing what this paper will reference as the tragic black heroine. Donald Bogle credits Fredi Washington as Hollywood's first tragic black heroine— her sophistication discordant to the low ceiling Hollywood allotted her talent.<sup>7</sup> Fredi Washington's fate mirrors the inevitable obscurity that awaits the contemporary tragic black heroine once her timely portrayal proves transient. These transient portrayals from mammy to the tragic black heroine limit black female potential and longevity, casting an oppressive gaze onto the black female body.

### **Hyper sexual Heroine: Contemporary Series and Black Female Sexuality**

This section will analyze how hyper sexuality attaches itself to the black female body as a means of both exploitation and control. Olivia Pope, a paramount political figure, possesses a sexuality that operates with few inhibitions. From maintenance closets, to Camp David, to the White House desk, viewers watch Pope engage in a diverse range of sexual activity. The most anticipated *Scandal* sex scenes feature the adulterous union between President Fitzgerald Grant and Olivia Pope on the biggest plantation of the United States — The White House. While some

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<sup>7</sup> See Bogle Chapter 3.

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attribute Olivia Pope's sexuality as merely a means to obtain ratings, her sexuality paints her as a "problem." As the President's mistress, Olivia Pope not only rattles the first family, but disrupts the nation with her immutable sexuality. Viewers also witness Olivia Pope's romantic ambivalence regarding two lovers—both of whom are white. Her relations with Fitzgerald "Fitz" Grant (Tony Goldwyn) and Jake Ballard (Scott Foley) mirror traditional sexual transactions between white men and black women where the black female body endured sexual objectification from multiple white men.<sup>8</sup> Olivia Pope also mirrors the trajectory of the traditional jezebel — her black female body sexualized to pursue a collaborative objective—white male supremacy. In season two, viewers observe First Lady Mellie Grant approach Olivia Pope with the following:

We all want the same thing: you, me and Cyrus. We are a team. We got him in the White House and we are going to keep him here. We are doing our patriotic duty, serving our country, working for the greater good. We just go about it differently I suppose.<sup>9</sup>

Mellie's statement asserts the white woman as an additional beneficiary to black female sexuality. In her statement, Mellie asserts black female sexuality as assisting her and Fitz to gain and maintain the Oval Office. The black female body as mutually beneficial for white men and white women mirrors the plantation where the black female body, in its exploitation through rape and

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter 2 of *Ain't I A Woman* where bell hooks thoroughly discusses a history where black females face continued exploitation.

<sup>9</sup> "Happy Birthday, Mr. President." *Scandal*. ABC. 6 December 2012. Television.

backbreaking labor, afforded white families privilege and mobility. bell hooks discusses this dynamic in the following, “White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages, a non-human, an animal that cannot be raped” (hooks 52). Thus, while *Scandal* seduces its viewers to perceive the Olivia Pope and Fitzgerald Grant interactions as romance, *Scandal* depicts a plantation pyramid where, at the expense of her bodily integrity, both the white man and white woman find purpose and profit in the black female body.

*How to Get Away With Murder* employs a similar troubled dynamic with protagonist Annalise Keating. Keating, although contractually bound to white husband Sam, engages in an affair with a married local detective. In addition to juggling two men, the second season reveals that during her courtship with husband Sam, Annalise was also involved in a romantic relationship with Eve, a white woman. Portraying an otherwise remarkable woman as a sexual deviant depicts the black female body as possessing a primal sexual appetite that exists beyond heteronormativity and race.

Commonly, Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating intertwine sexuality with interracial unions. In intertwining sexuality with color, Pope and Keating correspond to the countless black women with whom they hold hands with across centuries. Slavery too intertwined black female sexuality and interracial relationships, citing a black women’s assumed sexuality as the catalyst for her oppression. A devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years (hooks 55). As a sexually deviant slave, physical bondage and legal jargon that deemed the black body inhumane seemed justified. This hyper sexuality in contemporary and traditional

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form also works to justify excluding black female bodies from the “woman” concept. As a sexually selfish female, or a non-male who engages in intercourse outside of motherhood and marriage, the black female body challenges traditional womanhood simultaneously validating her exclusion.

Contemporary tragic black heroines Pope, Keating and Paul resurrect the tragic black heroine to combat this exclusion, symbolizing the black female journey to “woman” through acquired education, wealth and conventional beauty. This overt journey to woman however, veils a covert quest toward an allusive whiteness. In *Black Faces, White Masks*, Franz Fanon discusses the black female’s journey to an allusive whiteness in the following “ She could be recognized by her overcompensating behavior. She was no longer the girl wanting to be white; she was white. She was entering the white world” (Fanon 40). Pope and Keating’s devotion to aiding mostly white clients corresponds to what Fanon labels as “overcompensating behavior.” Furthermore, Pope and Keating seek to evolve from overcompensation to consummation in their romantic relationships with white men. In rendering discourse regarding color, it is imperative to note that “blackness” and “whiteness” are as authentic as fictional contemporary heroines Olivia Pope, Mary Jane and Annalise Keating. Race, while yielding real privilege and consequence, is a fictive means to assemble the western power structure. This paper implements Dr. Michelle Wallace's definition of race asserted in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Black Superwoman*. Wallace defines race as "a discourse or series of discourses concerning a matrix of material conditions, social relations, economic, political and cultural issues —beginning with the onset of the African slave trade in the seventeenth century and continuing today” (Wallace xxv). Contemporary tragic black heroines inevitably stride towards an allusive whiteness to wash away the stain of black female sexuality. Wallace implements the following analogy to illustrate the

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plight towards whiteness, " ...wanting to be 'white,' therefore, is an ideological fantasy, socially constructed and yet utterly impossible to achieve, like wanting to be without sin." ( Wallace xxv). This "sin" in which the protagonists aim to live without is the sin of black female sexuality. Thus, in working to acquire an allusive whiteness through education and romantic selection, the black female body strives to become a remarkable *woman* rather than a remarkable *black* woman.

Conversely, *Being Mary Jane* abandons interracial romance as a focal part of the series. The series instead employs colorism to encompass Mary Jane's journey towards whiteness. During the course of the show, viewers see Mary Jane entertain a mirage of suitors. All suitors whom Mary Jane is most attracted to and considers "dating material" are men of a lighter hue. Conversely, her casual engagements occur solely with men of a darker hue. The color line of demarcation Mary Jane implements between coitus and commitment depicts black male value as correspondent to color. While Mary Jane possesses education and success, her success exists outside the white collar conservatory that encases lawyers Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating. Thus, the dynamics of these series suggest that Mary Jane can very well find love in a black man of a lighter hue, but the only worthy mates for white collar black women are white men. In embodying both an infatuation with white men, or men of a lighter hue, and acquiring wealth, Pope, Keating and Paul nearly culminate their journey to whiteness. Incidentally, western society solely permits black female bodies to chase whiteness, as it is the chase not acquisition that reinforces white supremacy. Just as the church remains central as long as individuals seek to be without sin, white supremacy remains central as long as there are individuals, or in this case entire demographics, working to become white. This dynamic demonstrates what Dr. Bobby Wright outlines in *Psychopathic Racial Personality and Other Essays* "...it is possible to 'delude'

people into believing that they have the essence of life — freedom and dignity — and still control them" (Wright 19). As a hyper sexualized figure, the tragic black heroine remains a controlled substance that inevitably works to dispense a fictively deviant blackness for the implied elevation of an allusive whiteness. Thus, the hyper sexual tragic black heroine employs traditionally deprived attributes to the contemporary black female body yet corresponds to its traditional trajectory which implements the black female body as a tool to enforce ideas of white superiority.

### **Challenge to Tradition**

This section contemplates ways in which the contemporary tragic black heroine challenges systems that initially shunned her participation as a means to reinforce white superiority. Tragic black heroines Olivia Pope, Annalise Keating and Mary Jane Paul challenge traditional western chastity in their attraction to unavailable men. Black female affinity towards unavailable men intensifies when the atmosphere that launches each series drastically changes. In season five, viewers watch *Scandal* president Fitzgerald Grant III tender divorce papers and move Pope into the White House. Grant even stages an elaborate proposal to which Pope vehemently denies with the words "Please get up."<sup>10</sup> The proposal offers conventional legitimacy — but it also seduces Pope into a submissive position. To accept Grant's proposal circumscribes the prodigious Olivia Pope to the domesticity traditionally extended exclusively to white women. Namely, accepting the proposed union transitions Pope into a "trophy wife" — a silenced female draped over the arm of a powerful male. The proposal, strategically set in dim lighting amidst rose petals cast along the White House balcony, seduces viewers into a collective amnesia that forgets Pope was once a White House employee. Fitz's proposal mirrors traditional

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<sup>10</sup> "Get Out of Jail Free." *Scandal*. ABC. Television. 29 October 2015.

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compartmentalizing of black bodies as field or house servants. As campaign manager and on-call White House consultant, Pope occupies a field-like position. As a fiancée, or wife, Pope endures conjugal and domestic duties — acquiring the position of a house servant. Thus, the public castigation of Pope's actions reflects an unearned deference to deeply ingrained western standards while overlooking the necessary challenge Pope poses in objecting to systems and concepts established in her exclusion. Similar to predecessor Olivia Pope, Mary Jane also rejects a marriage proposition from a once married lover. Andre, like Fitz, takes pivotal steps to end his marriage. Mary Jane adamantly protests his efforts and instead rekindles a sexual relationship with another man romantically involved with another woman. Similarly, Annalise Keating receives an offer to leave Philadelphia and move in with ex-lover Eve. With Sam dead and Nate grieving his wife's death, the offer seems a germane option for Keating. Yet Keating, like Pope and Paul, overtly expresses extreme opposition to an "official" or "legitimate" relationship simultaneously resisting a system that originally forbade her participation.

Similarly, the contemporary tragic black heroines evoke sex as a weapon to challenge notions of conventional femininity. Making it nearly impossible to adhere to “womanly” demands such as domesticity, piety, chastity, and frailty, western society nurtures black female bodies to adopt sexuality as a form of beauty and power. The thought behind the President of the United States' every action, Olivia Pope asserts weaponry over the President inspiring his incorrigible valor to win and maintain her love. For example, during season four, *Scandal* viewers watch Grant launch war in Angola to free Pope from imprisonment. The black female body as war-launching mirrors the mythical Helen of Troy, whose beauty fomented the Trojan war.<sup>11</sup> Comparatively, Pope's sexuality as beauty launches an international feud. *Being Mary*

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<sup>11</sup> During season 4, *Scandal* character Tom refers to Olivia Pope as “the face that launched a thousand ships,” alluding to the mythic Helen of Troy.

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*Jane* also features the trope of sex as weapon through Mary Jane's niece Niecy. In episode

"Blindsided," Niecy candidly states the following:

You don't think I know what it means when people say I have a nice smile and nice eyes. Ain't no man ever fall for me. But they keep coming back don't they? That's because I put it down. In the bedroom. In the car. In the movie theatre. I've probably done things you never even heard of.<sup>12</sup>

Niecy's words present two interpretations. On one hand, Niecy's declaration appears a testament to an ingrained inferiority. Seduced to refute her own beauty by a society that deems her purely sexual, Niecy assumes the role of her oppressors in articulating her own exclusion from conventional beauty. Niecy does not need the white-only signs that once dominated the Jim Crow south. Instead, Niecy forfeits victory in simply refusing to run the race. Alternatively, Niecy's declaration reasserts beauty. In her exclusion from western beauty as a full-figured, sun-kissed, and short haired woman, Niecy's assertion forges an alternative path for the black female body to encompass perhaps the most coveted feminine attribute.

### **Closing Thoughts**

In contemplating hyper sexuality as pernicious and powerful, my mind shifts to the late Henrietta Lacks. Upon her death, doctors scraped Lacks' most intimate areas to obtain cells that would go on to foster countless medical advancements. Not afforded the visibility, recognition,

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<sup>12</sup> "Blindsided." *Being Mary Jane*. BET. 25 Feb. 2014. Television.

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and glamour allotted to contemporary heroines Olivia Pope, Mary Jane Paul and Annalise

Keating, Henrietta Lacks depicts a real-life personification of the sexualized black female bodies depicted on prime-time television. Though Pope, Keating and Paul do not physically have their legs cast aside with doctors scraping their insides, as hyper sexualized figures their genitalia illustrates the black female body as a literal pedestal in which her white male and female counterparts stand.

In analyzing present manifestations disturbingly reminiscent of past projections, many questions continue to surround the contemporary tragic black heroine. Do these portrayals advance black femininity? Do they pose the necessary challenge to preconceived notions that plague the black body? Or, are these representations merely fostering this fictive narrative? These queries intensify as the awarded images of past and present black female characters display disturbing attributes eerily reminiscent of one another. Hattie McDaniels as the first black female to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, Halle Berry as the first black female to win an Academy Award for Best Lead Actress, and Viola Davis as the first black female to win an Emmy for Best Leading Actress in a Drama Series all received high honors for their on-screen portrayals. However, these portrayals, like off-screen counterparts Henrietta Lacks and The Fultz Quads,<sup>13</sup> demonstrate a preference and place for black female bodies as sexual spectacles. These awards demonstrate that whether magnifying white female beauty through asexuality or composing the binary opposite to piety and chastity, high honors await images that caricature black female sexuality.

Thus, while it is absolutely necessary for the black female body to resurrect, perhaps this resurrection is best executed in origin and not form. For resurrection in form is nothing new to

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<sup>13</sup> The Fultz Quads illustrate black female sexuality through hyper fertility.

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western culture. The black female body resurrected countless times throughout history. Hardly an anachronism, the central black female body coincides with other historical occurrences upon each resurrection. Baartman earned centrality when white supremacy sought a means to validate their social behavior with “scientific” evidence. Mammy surfaced to present congruency between black female domestic labor and black female contentment. Otto Preminger’s *Carmen* opened in 1954 when frustrations regarding racial injustice bustled at their allusive seams. A hyper sexual, man-stealing female indifferent to her destructive behavior, *Carmen* challenged western tradition yet silently solidified a space for the self-destructive yet beautiful black female harlot.<sup>14</sup>

The contemporary black heroine resurrects Carmen’s image, in a time where black female faces maintain prominent positions in the white house, technology and television. However, this black female abundance illustrates integration not revolution. As an integrated figure, the resurrected heroine assumes a silent responsibility to educate the masses on black female possibility. Audre Lorde discusses this dichotomy in *Sister Outsider*:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an odd and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of color to educate white women— in the face of tremendous resistance—as to our existence, our differences, our relative rules in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.

(Lorde 113)

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<sup>14</sup> See Bogle chapter entitled “Dorothy Dandridge: The Apotheosis of the Tragic Mulatto” where he references Carmen Jones as a self-destructive character.

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The fictive black female performs the work of her oppressors despite her hopeful exterior.

Furthermore, the tragic black heroine is not a heroine but a tool of white supremacy. Hence, the western world need not justify the murders of young black females like Reneisha McBride and Sandra Bland. Instead, prime time series *Scandal*, *Being Mary Jane*, and *How to Get Away with Murder* subtly suggest the world is both greater and safer without the treacherous black female body. As long as black female bodies desire visibility and acceptance, they inevitably function as tools of white imagination. As a tool, the black female body cannot stymie the white supremacist ideologies that shape her identity simply because the black female body cannot combat real issues in fictive form. Resurrected in fictive form, the black female body resumes a demonized correspondence to sex. If the world continues to celebrate rather than contemplate the tragic black heroine, she inescapably resumes the trajectory seen in the black female bodies that precede her—exhibited, poked, prodded then left to dissolve in the disenfranchisement she helped justify. The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde 110).

Furthermore, as long as black female bodies strive for integration they remain an essential tool for building a house that will never truly grant their entry.

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