

English 280, Third Place; Professor, Dr. Timothy Helwig

**Scandalous TV: How Scandal and Olivia Pope are Redefining Black Women on Prime Time**

Christine Jordan

10.48 million viewers cannot be wrong about a television show that has been in ABC's prime time lineup since 2012. *Scandal* stars Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope, a black woman who operates her own crisis management firm while simultaneously having an affair. Critics and viewers alike have been torn about how to evaluate Olivia Pope. Some critics praise the show for having characters that are not defined by their race alone. Others critics believe that Olivia falls into black female media stereotypes. Olivia's class accomplishments are undermined by her race so much so that her achieved status is not highlighted. The media's stereotypes about race and class affect how real African American women are viewed in everyday life. Popular media, whether people know it or not, contribute to the idea that African Americans are not capable of being upper class and sophisticated. However, Olivia Pope is able to transcend all of the critics and serve as a role model. Olivia Pope serves as a positive representation of African American women on TV by not allowing her affair to stereotypically label her, her race to dictate her life, or her class to affect her character.

As revealed to viewers in season one and two, *Scandal* takes place in Washington D.C. and centers on the life of Olivia Pope. Olivia Pope is the former media consultant of the White House and has her own crisis management firm called "Olivia Pope & Associates." Her staff members comprise individuals she has helped in times of need, including an abused ex-wife (Abby), a former spy with PTSD (Huck), and an innocent terrorist (Quinn). After they get back on their feet, Olivia offers them a job as a "gladiator in a suit" (a fighter of justice). Olivia and

her staff of “gladiators” aim to handle any crisis as long as clients follow the golden rule: do not lie. The goal of Olivia’s firm is to deliver justice (when it is due) and protect the livelihood of her clients. After leaving the White House, Olivia earned an excellent reputation in Washington D.C. as being a legendary fixer with an excellent intuition. From time to time, she is called into the White House in order to handle a crisis by the Chief of Staff (Cyrus), or the President himself (Fitzgerald Grant).

Season five of *Scandal* opens with Olivia’s world being turned upside down. After denying her “on again, off again” relationship with Fitz, Olivia finally admits to having an affair with him. The White House is taken by surprise, including the President, the First Lady (Mellie Grant), and the White House’s Media Consultant (Olivia’s former staff member Abby). The media begin to create their stories of how and why the affair started, who is benefiting the most, and how race plays into it. As the media try to piece together how the affair started, seasons one and two provide a glimpse of how it all began.

The infamous affair between Olivia Pope and Fitzgerald Grant began before Fitz became the President of the United States. As revealed in Season 1, Episode 6, Olivia was hired by Cyrus to help with Fitz’s Presidential campaign. Although Fitz almost fired Olivia, the connection between them was undeniable. After the affair started, Olivia questioned her decision in Season 2, Episode 8: “Because I’m feeling a little—I don’t know—Sally Hemmings, Thomas Jefferson about all of this” (“Happy Birthday, Mr. President”). Olivia knew that because Fitz is a white man in a leadership position, people would be quick to say that Olivia fell victim to his charms and could not say no. Critics use Olivia’s comparison of Fitz and herself to Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings as a way to push the classic slave-master stereotype. However, critics completely overlook the fact that Olivia is not owned by Fitz. Fitz reminds Olivia that they are

two consenting adults who love each other and counters the critics' inaccurate arguments. Fitz says, "I exist for you. If I could escape all of this and run away with you...there's no Sally or Thomas here. You're nobody's victim, Liv. I belong to you" ("Happy Birthday, Mr. President"). Fitz understands that their interracial relationship can be compared to slavery: Olivia can be labeled as victim (slave) and Fitz as an abuser (master) (Mask 4). But because Olivia chose to have an affair with Fitz, she cannot fit into the slave-master love affair stereotype because she is acting out of her own free will. Fitz may be the leader of the United States, but he has never forced Olivia to have sex with him. This affair also does not allow Olivia to be labeled as a Jezebel. Critic Lydia Evans argues that Olivia uses Fitz for political capital.

Lydia Evans, a former student of Pepperdine University, argues that in this relationship Olivia uses the President for political power. Evans claims that Olivia fits the Jezebel stereotype (a seducer who is promiscuous and hyper sexualized) because she uses sex for power. Evans states, "Pope loves a man, but Pope manipulates the system in order to have a romantic relationship with the leader of the free world" (Evans 11). Although this is a valid point, Olivia has never used her affair with the President as a bargaining tool throughout the whole series. Olivia has never used sexual encounters with the President as a way of gaining power or control. Neither Olivia nor Fitz is using the relationship to gain social, political, or economic advantages. Evans' argument also portrays Olivia as a woman who planned to fall in love with Fitz. However, Olivia never planned on having an affair with him. The way critics determine if Olivia is a positive representation of African American women or not also comes from who has control in the affair.

As the affair between Fitz and Olivia has flourished over the course of five seasons, it becomes difficult to define who is in control of the affair. Critics assume that because Fitz is the

President of the United States, he commands the relationship. Stacia L. Brown, adjunct professor and freelance writer, strongly argues that Olivia “pursue[s] a dominant-submissive relationship with someone who is, as the script keeps forcing him to remind us, the Leader of the Free World... it’s hard not to connect her to the earliest, collective history” (Brown, “Is Olivia Pope the New Sally Hemings?”). Brown makes it seem as if Olivia is submissive to Fitz and gives in to all of his requests (professional and sexual). However, Brown has failed to realize that Olivia Pope is portrayed as a woman who is in control of the whole romantic relationship. Olivia and Fitz have broken up a few times over the past five seasons; Fitz actually longs for them to be back together every single time. Olivia’s life continues to go on without Fitz. Ironically, Fitz admits that Olivia is actually in control of the affair in Season 2, Episode 8:

You own me! You control me. I belong to you. You think I don’t want to be a better man?...You don’t think I want to be honorable?... My every feeling is controlled by the look on your face. I can’t breathe without you. I can’t sleep without you. (“Happy Birthday, Mr. President”)

Fitz is one of the most powerful men in the world and yet, he cannot live without Olivia. Olivia is able to break up with him and keep moving forward. Fitz is willing to do whatever it takes in order to win her back including apologizing, late night phone calls, and arriving to her apartment unannounced. Therefore, there are no clear ‘dominant-submissive’ roles in this relationship. Healthy romantic relationships that have an egalitarian sense of power (like Olivia and Fitz’s) show the advancement of relationships on TV. Fitz and Olivia both have equal amounts of power and describing their affair as a ‘dominant-submissive’ relationship show how little society has advanced. *Scandal* positively portrays race as well through Olivia Pope.

Being an African American character, Olivia Pope does not view her race as an obstacle in her professional and social life. Flashbacks throughout *Scandal* have revealed how intelligent and determined Olivia has become. As revealed in Season 5, Episode 4, Olivia went to an elite

board school, attended Princeton University, and went on to Georgetown Law School. From there, she worked on President Fitz's campaign and became The White House Director of Communications after he entered office. Olivia, at a young age, was able to mingle with aristocrats and created a positive reputation for herself. When other characters talk about Olivia Pope on *Scandal*, they praise her "strong gut" and her intelligence. Other characters talk about how successful she is as a person. They do not try to downplay her accomplishments by saying statements such as, "She is doing well for a black woman."

The media challenge Olivia's success when her affair is made public: "Olivia got a little arrogant... A little drunk on her own sense of power. So drunk that she forgets the most basic facts" ("Whistle Politics"). The media on *Scandal* are so quick to say that she became too conceited and forgot her place. What exactly is a black woman's place? The media stereotypically criticize Olivia based on her affair. As Tara-Lynne Pixley, a communication researcher, states, "Pope cannot be unabashedly strong and competent, sexually active, or act as a caregiver without being categorized as some variant of a stereotype" (Pixley 31). Pixley goes on to state that Olivia is supposed to put the fact that she is a Black American first when it comes to decision making and in turn, remember society's expectations for black people. The media on *Scandal* wanted to remind Olivia of her place by trashing her character. However, if Olivia were a white woman, the media would not be saying that the power she had (as a black woman) was not even earned and her egotistical nature made her forget she was black. Olivia's staff, later on, calls out the media for using dog-whistle politics when they are making statements about her in the media. Olivia defines dog-whistle politics as "...racism, sexism, anti-semitism, misogyny. It's bigotry in the form of a language so coded that... Only the person it's targeting is insulted by it..." ("Whistle Politics"). The media use this to attack Olivia in a 'backhanded' way. For

example, Quinn was interviewed on a news program and called out the media for describing her as ‘sassy, lucky, over-confident, etc.’: “Olivia Pope doesn't fit with the slutty-mistress stereotype. So instead of representing her as she is... a formidable, passionate advocate... you take the easy route, shading her, using all manner of coded language” (“Whistle Politics”). The coded language that *Scandal* uses is called out by characters on the show, which reveals progression toward positive representations of black women. *Scandal* brings up race as a way to counter the popular media’s perceptions and expectations for blacks. Olivia Pope’s class shows how television represents the class status of African Americans.

Olivia Pope has attended some of the most prestigious institutions. For example, the boarding school she went to was a Swiss boarding school where future billionaires and world leaders attended. Olivia has her own crisis management firm and manages her own staff. Olivia is able to pick and choose which cases she takes on and sets her own hours. She has her own apartment and an expensive wardrobe to match. It becomes clear to viewers that Olivia is an upper-middle class woman. However, her positive class representation is never mentioned by critics of the show. She was raised in an upper-middle class household and was able to sustain that lifestyle for herself after law school. Olivia parents owned their own home and paid for her education out of pocket. However, the media on *Scandal* ignore Olivia’s status. When speaking about her upbringing, they make it seem as if she was ‘lucky to be privileged’ and not that she was that way her whole life. “Eli Pope grew up an orphan on the mean streets of Detroit... He worked three jobs to put himself through college... He married Maya, a young secretary, and they had Olivia. They were living the American dream” (“Whistle Politics”). The media create a narrative that when an African American person has money or is successful, they had to experience a difficulty or ‘struggle’ in order to be successful. Popular media create this image

that African Americans are supposed to struggle and not be able to transfer wealth to future generations. When images of wealthy African Americans appear in real life and TV, people ask questions such as “In what hidden universe do black people exist who can actually distinguish a fish knife from a shoe horn? And are there more of them?” (Williams). Patricia Williams observes that class depictions for African Americans are limited.

Patricia J. Williams, a professor at Columbia Law School, states that the media do not choose to depict African Americans as being upper class or rich at all. The working class includes black people who do not hold steady jobs, and the middle class is any employed or educated black person. However, there are no mentions of upper-class and aristocratic African Americans in popular media: “...popular depictions frequently suppress the political presence of ...a black upper-middle class, to say nothing of those wealthy African Americans who are bankers or industrialists or computer geeks rather than just movie stars or sports figures” (Williams). *Scandal* portrays Olivia Pope as an upper-class woman who did not make her money from being famous or playing sports; her education and upbringing allowed her to be successful. This counters the popular media idea of all African Americans having financial difficulties before they are successful. There are hardworking African Americans who are lawyers, doctors, business owners, etc., in America who have gained wealth from their families and used it to become successful. They did not have economic difficulties and earn privileges later in life: they were born privileged and used that privilege to the fullest. Olivia Pope’s class combats popular media because she has no shame in her status. *Scandal* portrays class positively because Olivia represents the fact that the African American community has a class structure that includes the upper-middle, upper, and super-rich classes. However, Olivia’s class does not affect her character or her actions.

Olivia Pope treats her clients and staff members with the upmost respect. She cares about their wellbeing and understands the challenges that life can bring. One of her staff members, Huck, wanted to visit his family while a lot of work had to be done. Olivia allowed Huck to leave work and did not force him to choose between work and family. As mentioned earlier, Olivia helped each of her staff members in their time of need and never asked for anything in return. She actually rewarded them for their excellent progress and gave them a job. Throughout the five seasons of *Scandal*, Olivia worked with clients from all different class statuses and did quite a few cases pro bono. She may have made a debatable decision by having an affair, but Olivia actually can serve as a role model. Olivia allows for her intelligence and reputation to speak for her creditability. When people question her methods or what she stands for, she does not get revenge on these individuals. Instead, she proves them wrong by being a symbol of justice. As a viewer, I look up to Olivia because she is beautifully imperfect. Olivia has never let a choice in her past affect her future and she does not dwell on what could have been. She does not doubt herself and what she has become. It's so easy to think about what could have been, and when I do, I think about what Olivia would do. Olivia would think about what she did well, repeat it, and not overthink her past choices. Olivia Pope serves as a positive influence on the audience that watches her.

Since its premiere in 2012, *Scandal* has caught the attention of critics and viewers alike. Olivia Pope is a strong independent woman who aims to handle the scandals of her clients. Her affair with the President of the United States has been used by critics to undermine her impact on how race and class are portrayed on television. *Scandal* has opened many doors for more diverse TV shows and its impact will continue to affect prime time TV in the future.



## Works Cited

- Brown, Stacia L. "Is Olivia Pope the New Sally Hemings?" *Clutch Magazine*. Sutton New Media, 1 May 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2012/05/is-olivia-pope-is-the-new-sally-heming/>>.
- Evans, Lydia. "Representations of African American Political Women in Scandal." *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research* 2.4 (2014). Print.
- "Happy Birthday, Mr. President." *Scandal*. ABC. 6 Dec. 2012. Television.
- Mask, Mia. "A Roundtable Conversation on Scandal." *The Black Scholar* 45.1 (2015): 3-9. Print.
- Pixley, Tara-Lynne. "Trope and Associates." *The Black Scholar* 45.1 (2015): 28-33. Print.
- "Whistle Politics." *Scandal*. ABC. 15 Oct. 2015. Television.
- Williams, Patricia. "Obama and The Black Elite." *The Daily Beast*. Newsweek/Daily Beast, 21 Aug. 2009. Web. 13 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/08/21/obama-and-the-black-elite.html>>.

## Bibliography

- Cartier, Nina. "Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations." *Cinema Journal* 53.4 (2014): 150-57. Print.
- Erigha, Maryann. "Shonda Rhimes, Scandal, and the Politics of Crossing Over." *The Black Scholar* 45.1 (2015): 10-15. Print.
- Filoteo, Janie. "ABC's Scandal." *Humanity & Society* 38.2 (2014): 212-15. Print.
- Jeffries, Devair, and Rhonda Jeffries. "Mentoring and Mothering Black Femininity in the Academy: An Exploration of Body, Voice and Image through Black Female Characters." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 39.2 (2015): 125-33. Print.

Khanna, Nikki, and Cherise A. Harris. "Discovering Race in a 'Post-Racial' World: Teaching Race through Primetime Television." *Teaching Sociology* 43 (2014): 39-45. Print.

Khanna, Nikki, and Cherise A. Harris. "A Rebuttal to Jack Niemonen's 'Whither the White Working Class?'" *Teaching Sociology* (2015): 242-45. Print.