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Kay Siebler

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Black Feminists in Serialized Dramas: The Gender/Sex/Sexuality/Race Politics of *Being Mary Jane* and *Scandal*

Kay Siebler, Missouri Western State University

ABSTRACT:

Starring representations of African-American women on television are rare. The versions of Black feminist characters on *Scandal* (ABC) and *Being Mary Jane* (BET) create a juxtaposition between a white supremacist Black feminism (*Scandal*) and an Afrocentric, female-centered rendering of Black feminism (*Being Mary Jane*).

KEYWORDS:

African-American television, Afrocentric, *Being Mary Jane*, Black feminism, Black television, Shonda Rhimes, *Scandal*

Introduction

When *Scandal* first aired on ABC in spring 2012, it received immediate attention by fans of *Grey's Anatomy* because of the show's writer/producer, Shonda Rhimes. However, *Scandal* was not just another well-written serialized drama. The featured character of the show, Olivia Pope, was a political power ball, a "fixer" in Washington, D.C., who was literally in bed with the president. And she was Black.¹ A television show starring a Black woman as a power-wielding professional felt groundbreaking. Not since *Finding Christie Love* (1974–1975, also on ABC) had a serialized drama featured a Black woman as star. As an attorney, Pope acts as a regulatory force in the white, male world of D.C. politics. But she is an island unto herself. She doesn't have any friends, let alone a Black community. Racism and race issues are rarely addressed and when they are, typically it is Pope or others around her who refer derogatorily to Pope's subordinate position as the Black mistress to a white president. The storytelling of a Black woman's reality in *Scandal* reinforces white supremacist beliefs of race, class, and gender, giving the primary white audience an easy viewing, but leaving the African American female audience largely experiencing a whitewashed version of contemporary identity politics and the realities of racism/misogyny experienced by African American women.

In contrast, the serialized drama, *Being Mary Jane* (BET), first airing the year after *Scandal*, also features a strong, professional Black woman. But Mary Jane Paul, unlike Olivia Pope, is extremely aware of issues of racism and misogyny both as they

manifest in her personal life as well as the culture around her (Atlanta, New York City, and the larger North American culture). In fact, addressing issues of race, class, gender, and family/community is central to each episode's narratives. Paul is a journalist and uses her platform as a television journalist to foreground issues of race/gender, acting as a regulatory agent against the white supremacist patriarchy. The Afro-centric storylines and cast of *Being Mary Jane* offer a refreshing and stark contrast to the whitewashed, post-racial *Scandal*.

The commercial success of *Scandal* indicates the U.S. viewing audience's commitment to the narrative of a post-racial, postfeminist worldview in which systems of oppression as they relate to race, class, and gender rarely need to be considered. The dramatic difference between how being Black, female, and professional is portrayed on *Being Mary Jane* and *Scandal* serves to illustrate the difference between ignoring the complexities of Black femaleness in a racist patriarchy (*Scandal*) and grappling with complex issues of racism, classism, and sexism from a Black feminist perspective (*Being Mary Jane*).

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Because there are so few Black female (and even fewer Black feminist) characters in film and television, when two emerge nearly simultaneously, they are worth examining. The statistics of Black women representations on television speak to a tremendous lack. According to Pixley,

An overview of the 12 narrative TV shows nominated for an Emmy in 2013 produces an unsurprising chart of white-dominated representation featured in and behind the scenes. Nine shows featured a white female lead, while only three have featured black female characters, even in secondary roles. None of these Emmy-nominated shows had black female leads or creators." (28)

The result of so few images of African American women in popular serialized dramas creates symbolic annihilation (Gerbner 155). Symbolic annihilation, when a person doesn't see herself in the media she consumes or only sees herself denigrated (Tuchman), has a direct effect on the audience. Whereas *Scandal*, on the surface, may seem like a break in this annihilation, the character of Pope is denigrated by lovers, acquaintances, and family. Pope could be described as existing in the post-racial media moment where race is recognized, but only to reinforce the myth that "skin color doesn't matter." Catherine Squires, author of *The Post-Racial Mystique* (2014), offers an extensive analysis of news media, social media, and comedy. These media outlets, by virtue of both fixating on skin color/ethnicity and ignoring the effects of this fixation, reinforce the myth that systemic issues of racism do not exist. In *Scandal*, the audience

recognizes and even celebrates Pope as African American, but that same audience never gets to see Pope struggling because of racism/sexism. Contrasting this type of post-racial ideology that permeates *Scandal*, *Being Mary Jane* offers a way into an Afro-centric world of Black feminist identity that acts as a counter narrative to systematic annihilation and post-racial media.

Much critical, thoughtful attention should be paid to both Pope and Paul and the shows that feature these Black feminist characters. Because there are so few representations of Black feminist protagonists, the ones we do see have a large impact on viewers. Careful analysis and open discussions regarding Pope and Paul are essential to bust myths of post-feminist, post-racial narratives.

There have been many articles written about *Scandal*, Shonda Rhimes, and her character Olivia Pope in popular press and scholarly publications. Fewer articles address *Being Mary Jane* and the character Mary Jane Paul. It is essential for scholars to interrogate these representations and particularly important that we open our classrooms for in-depth discussions of popular culture texts and how race, class, sex, and sexuality are written and consumed. It is of no coincidence that *Scandal* is the more popular of these two series and we are remiss to not discuss why through a critique of the white supremacist patriarchy that created the sensation of *Scandal*.

Theoretical Overview

Many scholars have noted recurrent stereotypes of African American women in the media, including The Mammy, The Matriarch/The Sapphire, The Welfare Mother, The Black Lady, The Jezebel, and the Tragic Mulatto (Smith 40–44; Hill Collins, *Black Sexual*). In *Scandal* and *Being Mary Jane*, some of these stereotypes manifest simultaneously in Pope and Paul, but most egregiously in Pope because she is caught in white world devoid of African American culture or community. Both Pope and Paul can be viewed as Matriarchs/Mammies, seen as female caretakers/leaders in their white-dominated work world, although Paul acts as matriarch in her family as well. Paul's mother is still alive and acting as a matriarchal presence, but she is older and ill and Paul takes care of many of her relatives both emotionally and financially. Fundamentally, however, unlike Pope, Paul's "caretaker" role deviates strongly from a Mammy/Matriarch that focuses on caretaking of *white* culture/people/family.

The Matriarch is not the only stereotype for easy reference in these shows. Chaney and Robertson see multiple stereotypes of Black women in Pope, arguing she manifests Jezebel and Black Lady as well as Matriarch: "she 'births' her own business" ... other characters "seek her advice and counsel, as one would a mother" (Matriarch) ... "Pope is a sexually aggressive female (Jezebel) who willingly engages in passionate and animalistic sexual relations with the married President Fitz" ... she is "physically

attractive, has incredible fashion sense, is a hard worker, and is highly respected because she is the best in her field" (143). Although one could also argue that Paul embodies the Matriarch, Jezebel and/or Black Lady stereotypes, as well, there is a fundamental differences in her being a caretaker (never of whites), matriarch (not a poor single mother), Lady (there are other Black and Latina woman who are at her career level), and/or Jezebel (she enjoys sex, but it is empowering and she is not used by men).

While both Pope and Paul can be seen as the Black Lady stereotype, they deviate from this stereotype because they are sexually active. However, this could push them into the Jezebel stereotype. Viewers and scholars tend to judge both women for their sexuality, describing them as "promiscuous," a sexist term reserved for women who engage in *any* sex deemed worthy of judgement, especially sex where she is the power broker or initiator (Jeffries and Jeffries 29). Even if she is monogamous, a woman can be called promiscuous if she has a desire for sex while unmarried. Instead of seeing sexual empowerment as a positive trait, these women are judged. The irony of the dueling stereotypes of Black Lady (she must be sexually neutered but professionally powerful) and Jezebel (hypersexual and judged as "promiscuous") create a bind where African American women have no road to positive, empowering sexuality (Jeffries and Jeffries 29). While Pope's primary relationship with the white, married president puts her squarely in the position of Jezebel, Paul's sexual relationships are almost always with Black men (she very briefly engages with a white man in Season 4, but she remarks on the novelty of her "first white man"). Paul's relationships with men are portrayed in complex ways, often with Paul being the empowered actor but also addressing a myriad of heterosexual dynamics for a feminist operating within a patriarchal system.

In academic scholarship, there is far more discussion of Pope's sexual/romantic relationship with the white, married president because it is such a fraught, historical model of African American female, disempowered sexuality. Mask writes, "Even in communities of color, folks are not certain whether Rhimes' *Scandal* is a progressive step in an anti-essentialist direction or a regressive move backward toward a reconstituted Jezebel-in-bed-with-Massa stereotype (4)." Kerry Washington, the actor who plays Olivia Pope, was quoted in the *New York Times* as rejecting the idea that the character is a Black woman who has any allegiance to race politics. Washington stated, "It's not that [Pope] rejects the [Black] community; she is not ashamed of being black. She's fully aware of her blackness. She just doesn't identify historically with the burden of blackness because she was raised with a sense of impossibility" (Tillet, "Saying" 21). Not only does the character Olivia Pope eschew a Black identity, but she embodies racist stereotypes of what the dominant white culture assigns to Black women.

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Pope's very lack of identity as a Black woman with any connection to a Black community represents a post-racial view for white fans where the color of one's skin doesn't warrant any oppression or discrimination. Pope's relationship with the president, for example, positions her as the “Jezebel-in-bed-with-Massa stereotype” due to her ongoing disempowered subject position in relation to the white man of power. Pope's disempowered subject position and the history of white men raping African American women are central to this character's sexuality (Painter; Washington; Childs; Kein; Hill Collins *Black Feminist*). In *Being Mary Jane* there is no such fraught relationship dynamic because the cast is almost entirely African American and Paul's love interests are Black, with one exception, and then his race is a topic of discussion.

In the context of Paul's Afro-centric community, issues of racism and sexism can be discussed, addressed, and confronted in complicated and interesting ways; contrasting this, in *Scandal* these issues are not addressed and so the audience is left to their own experience, either deliciously ignorant (white racist audience) or frustrated (audiences who rejects post-racial, postfeminist cultural views). In grappling with her frustration in reading Pope, scholar Mia Mask asks, “Is Pope an impressively complicated black female character struggling with the pressure-cooker of Washington's political machinery and the façade of respectability? Or is she an example of integration-means-capitulation to the white power structure?” (7). The viewer, if she chooses to ask such complicated questions, is left to grapple with them on her own. Pope—appealing to a primarily white audience—is a clear manifestation of a post-racial, postfeminist ideal. Pope represents a fantasy of white patriarchal culture: an African American woman who does not have to deal with systemic oppression; she is professionally powerful, but sexually disempowered; she is devoid of African American support/community, a Lone Wolf reaching into a void of “color-blind/gender-blind” white supremacy. The fantasy is of a race-free existence. McKnight argues that the absence any acknowledgement of race or racism is a deliberate attempt to make the show appealing to whites. McKnight writes, “What this absence [of race issues] reveals is not that the United States is a raceless society but that race matters so much that its presence in social relationships has to be erased on screen to make the show successful” (192). The white audience wants to believe in the fantasy of the post-racial world in which Pope lives and works. While some see this fantasy as a problem, others see it as a positive change. Some scholars, however, see the mere reality of a Black woman protagonist as revolutionary. One such scholar, Warner, writes, “*Scandal* is a fantastical imagining of an alternate world—one where black women wield great influence, agency, and passion, even up to the executive branch of the U.S. government... . [It] generates a space for black women

to finally partake in fantasy that has long eluded us” (119). However, such champions of Pope seem to ignore what a degrading, lonely fantasy Pope represents.

Pope is utterly alone in her white world of power and prestige; Paul is surrounded by a Black community of friends and family. Hill Collins (*Black Feminist*) writes that African American women seek out or create “safe spaces” where they can escape from the dominant culture's oppressive systems. These spaces are created through love relationships, intimate friendships, close family ties, or other self-created retreats. Pope doesn't have any such spaces, but Paul's world is full of them.

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Because Paul's world focuses on the Afro-centric community and culture of Atlanta, the show offers an example of a “future text” (Nelson 9) that is possible when the focus shifts from the dominant white, capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist culture to something feminist and Black. The viewer sees in Paul's experience an independent, highly educated and aware Black professional woman, who exists *not* in a post-racial society, but in a historical context of Black activism and struggle where she is fully aware and addresses issues of racism, sexism, and classism as they manifest in her daily life. Unlike Pope's world that is white, Paul's world presents something radically different, confronting issues of racism and portraying complex dynamics of Black community and culture even as Paul works in a white-dominated industry and professional space. *Being Mary Jane* offers complexities of a Black women's identity; *Scandal* offers a white-washed version where race and gender seem not to matter.

In appealing to white audiences, African American women/characters in popular media must be “racially specific enough to connote difference, desire, and exoticism, but enough of a colorblind, blank slate to acquire success in the commercial, white-desirous marketplace; be sexy enough to garner desire and media obsession, but be enough of a role model to earn a wide variety of corporate sponsorships” (Joseph 242). We see this attempt to neuter the Black feminist identity in Pope. Pope rarely confronts or experiences racism or sexism. She is sexy, but also submissive to her white lover, acting in ways that would suggest lack of agency. Pope “straightens” herself to assimilate to the world of white, patriarchal law/politics. Creating an analogy of “straightening” the unruly “Black”/natural hair to “straightening” one's ethnic markers to be as white as possible, scholar Morrison argues that Black, particularly female identity is “processed” like Black hair. She writes, “In the way that chemicals or heat are applied to kinky hair to tame it or straighten it out, identity markers more culturally assigned to Whites ... Straightening is essentially the assigning of Whiteness to any aspects of our identity that can be construed as positive” (89-90). Pope is “straightened” in the way she

wears her clothing/hair, by choosing a white lover, in her speech, and in her isolation from any sort of Black community. Paul, on the other hand, refuses to be straightened. She only dates Black men; her friend circle does not include white people; she may have relationship issues with her Black lovers, but she is an acting agent in these relationships, taking control of her destiny rather than submitting to white/male power in the context of her romantic relationships.

These fictional representations of African American women matter, both to white and African American audiences. In studying the effects of representations on Black-oriented reality shows, Tyree found that even African American audience members believed the stereotypes were accurate representations of Black culture (410). In case studies and focus groups of young African American women who consumed stereotypical images of African American women on reality television, Coleman et al. found that even though the young women identified the behavior they were viewing as stereotypical, it had impact on their own sense of self and personal decisions/actions (1,165–1,169). Through consuming narratives such as those on reality television or shows like *Scandal*, African American women come to believe stereotypes about themselves. In addition, white audiences' racist stereotypes or belief in post-racism/post-feminism are codified. Even as Black women live lives of disruption against the white supremacist patriarchy, they see these negative media portrayals and those portrayals inform their body, voice, and image (Harris-Perr).

In *Being Mary Jane*, however, Paul is empowered and defies stereotypes. Cultural scholar bell hooks asks, “What are the spaces we are making? Where do we find our sense of freedom? (especially in the capitalist, white supremacist, imperialist patriarchy?)” (hooks). When examining the spaces of Pope versus Paul, we get two very different perceptions of what it means to be a Black professional woman.

Romantic Relationships

In both *Scandal* and *BMJ*, the main characters' romantic relationships play a central part to the drama. Pope is a woman trapped in the role of a mistress. She is the one used/not chosen, at the mercy of her more powerful white male lover. She can't phone him or define the terms of the relationship because he is married (to a white woman). Paul, on the other hand, freely explores several different types of relationships. She does have problems with some of the men with whom she engages, but she is shown as an empowered partner. She may make bad decisions; for example, she answers the phone call from an ex-boyfriend, she keeps a condom full of sperm to self-impregnate herself (2014, episode no. 7), and she flees from a lover who says “I love you” (2017, episode no. 7). But she is the one making the decisions about her relationships and the role they play in her life. For Pope, caught in the dysfunction of loving a married white

man who happens to be president, the power she has is extremely limited against her lover's overwhelming institutional power.

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In *Scandal*, Pope uses disempowering, misogynistic language about herself in the context of her relationship. She is literally the white president's Black whore. Pope uses the word *whore* in regards to herself (2013, episode no. 11). By using the term *whore* to describe herself, the audience experiences the painfully isolated and unreciprocated dynamic of this relationship. The president's wife also calls Pope a whore (2013, episode 1), saying, "I wouldn't need to smile at Oprah if you didn't screw your whore every chance you got" (in front of Pope). Pope retorts, "I am going to need you to quit referring to me as whore, at least in front of my face" (2013, episode no. 1) Later in the same episode, in speaking with Fitz (the president), his wife says that his ultimate fantasy is "bringing that whore into the White House as your first lady"(2013, episode no. 1). Reiterated throughout these episodes, the audience experiences a powerful, educated, strong, professional woman being reduced to whore, lacking sexual agency.

Even when Pope attempts to rearrange the power structure, she fails. In Season 2, Pope says to the president, "You can't treat me like some whore you found on the street" (2013, episode no. 19). Yet, in fact, he does, time and again: professing his love, yet treating Pope in ways that would indicate she is dispensable. Later in the episode, Millie (the president's wife) tells him he can "shack up" with Pope, but *she* won't let it go on forever and when she decides the affair must end, she will stand on the White House lawn and hold a press conference "discussing my philandering husband who can't keep his pants zipped and his whore who has him on leash" (2013, episode no. 7). Despite these degrading dynamics, Pope doesn't sever ties with her lover. Regardless of professional successes Pope is lonely, sexually used, cast aside, and excruciatingly marginalized. She is degraded through language, her own about herself and others' in relation to her. She demonstrates lack of power through her actions. The audience sees her getting raped by the president in a nonconsensual sexual encounter late at night in her apartment. In Season 2, we see a sex scene between Fitz and Pope that is staged more like a darkly lit stranger assault (2013, episode no. 14). While Stevie Wonder's song "I never knew how much love could hurt until I loved you, baby" plays in the background, Fitz stalks and assaults Pope. He throws her into a room where he violently kisses her. She slaps him. They have violent sex. Afterward he tells her, "We are done. I may not be able to control my erections around you, but that does not mean I want you" (2013, episode no. 14). The scene plays out like an acquaintance rape of an entitled, white misogynist.

As a titillating aside, racism/misogyny is alluded to in the role of slave master/mistress. In Season 2, Pope tells the president that she is his Sally Hemmings. He becomes angry, telling her, "You are playing the race card on the fact that I am in love with you?" She replies, "My whole life is you. I can't breathe because I am waiting for you. You *own* me. You *control* me. I belong to you" (2013, episode no. 8) The language of slavery resonates in the words *own*, *belong to*, and *control*. The president retorts that she is his whole life, that she controls *him*. "You are nobody's victim, Liv." However, the scene ends with him walking away, leaving her. It is impossible not to see her as a victim of his whims. By attempting to cast himself as the victim, the white president deflects any responsibility for Pope's pathetic position.

In several contexts over the course of the series, Pope attempts to tell the president that their relationship is over, but every time he refuses to allow her agency. In Season 3, there is a typical interaction where Pope attempts to gain agency. She says, "I am not a hen. I am not a prize at the state fair. You can't win me." Fitz: "Would you just shut up and let me talk?" She retorts: "I am a person. I am not a hen. I am not a prize" (2014, episode no. 13). Later in that episode, Pope says to Fitz: "I can't spend all my time worrying about what you want, what you need" (2014, episode no. 13). Yet, she does. Time and again, throughout the series, Pope is unable to break ties with her abusive lover.

In *Being Mary Jane*, the audience sees Paul enact very different versions of romantic relationships. Unlike Pope, Paul engages in several different romantic relationships with different kinds of men, and in each we see Paul empowered, making decisions, and choosing how/when to engage with her lovers/boyfriends. Paul may have a dysfunctional relationship with a married man (Dre) at the beginning of the series, but she doesn't know he's married and when she finds out, she tells him to go away, *and he does*. Paul may still have feelings for Dre, but she resists his periodic advances (her phone displays "Never Answer" when he calls). Another lover, David, also provides fodder for strained romance in Paul's life. She loves David and is trying to move on because he is having a baby with another woman. Her phone displays "Let Him Go" when he calls; unlike the interactions between Fitz and Pope, the interactions between David and Paul are typically respectful even when they are strained.

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During the first season (2014), Paul saves David's sperm from a condom (without his consent or awareness) and puts it in her freezer, contemplating self-insemination without telling David (episode no. 2). Eventually, at a gathering of girlfriends, she tells

them about the frozen sperm and they insist she toss it out, that it would be unethical to inseminate herself with David's sperm without his knowledge. She follows this advice. Paul then goes on national television showing the process of freezing her eggs for a future pregnancy (2015, episode no. 6). Through this process of Paul's break-up with David, her ongoing desire to have a child, and her various approaches to achieve this goal with or without a partner, the audience witnesses a professional woman who knows what she wants and negotiates on her own terms.

After David and Dre, Paul gets involved with Sheldon, an African American historian, an attorney, an academic and intellectual several years her senior. Sheldon offers himself as a mature, thoughtful, and unconventional relationship partner. Paul assumes the relationship trajectory is one where they will live together, but Sheldon doesn't want to cohabit, causing Paul to question his commitment. Paul confronts Sheldon about the seriousness of his intentions to couple with her by saying, "You knew I was freezing my eggs." He says, "So have a baby." He tells her he wants a "mutually respectful relationship. You'd have your life and I'd have mine ... it's not hard to understand, just different" (2015, episode no. 12). Sheldon is willing to accept her desire to have a child with a sperm donor, but Paul seems unable to alter her image of the conventional relationship. She breaks up with Sheldon, saying, "I will never settle for anything less than what I want or desire." Later Paul tells Sheldon, "I don't know if marriage and kids are in the cards for me, but I do know I want to wake up next to the same person every day" (2015, episode no. 12). Paul's response to Sheldon indicates she would be willing to embark on a less conventional relationship, but she wants a commitment that he can't provide, so she is moving on. Instead of changing what she wants, putting his desires/needs before her own, or submitting to Sheldon's idea of a relationship, Paul takes stock and decides she doesn't want to compromise.

By moving on (and moving to New York City), Paul becomes involved with Lee, who seems to want the same thing she does: a conventional relationship (2017, episode 1). Although Lee already has children, he is open to having a child with Paul, fitting Paul's needs for a partner. By being direct and self-aware about what she wants in a relationship, Paul eventually finds a man who loves her, treats her with respect, and wants the same things from a union.

In both shows, the women go through the experience of an unplanned pregnancy and an abortion. Some critics point to Pope's response to the unintended pregnancy as a strong feminist message. In a November 2015 episode, Pope has an abortion and tells no one, not even the president. She goes to the appointment by herself (2015, episode no. 9). She experiences the pregnancy and abortion alone. During a question/answer panel at the Paley Festival (2016), Rhimes was asked about integrating an abortion into the story line. Rhimes replied, "A woman made a choice about her body that she legally has the right to make" (Wagmeister). There was no

trauma or regret. This is a feminist approach to abortion, but the abortion serves to reinforce how alone Pope is in her world, without friends or support. Later, a colleague finds out about the abortion, and Pope says she refuses to feel ashamed. Abby believes she is doing Pope a favor by refusing to publicly disclose the abortion as a way of gaining a political advantage for Abby's candidate. Pope seems unfazed by her colleague's attempt to protect her. "My abortion... the thing is, I'm not ashamed at all. The only person who would have really been hurt is him (Fitz). It would have hurt him." (2016, episode no. 20). With this statement, Pope implies that the president would be more affected by the abortion than she was. Because Pope does not articulate *why* the president would be hurt by her decision to terminate the unplanned pregnancy, the audience is left to speculate. Perhaps he would be hurt because it would be a decision that she made without him, a loss of control over her. By making the decision to terminate the pregnancy, Pope is deciding for both of them. By blocking him out of that decision, she frees herself from his demands on her, on what she should do or what he wants her to do. This is a rare moment of agency for Pope.

Paul's abortion in *Being Mary Jane* offers another version of a woman's choice. In Season 2, David (former lover) and Paul are talking about why their relationship didn't work and Paul mentions an abortion she had when neither David nor Paul were ready to be parents. Paul says, "I made that choice because I wanted to have kids under the right circumstances" (2015, episode no. 7). The two former lovers share a tender moment, acknowledging the difficulty of the decision and the happenstance of a pregnancy coming at the wrong time. Unlike Paul, Pope shows no acknowledgement of the difficulty of the decision or that there would be a reason to talk it through with anyone, particularly the man who was responsible for the pregnancy.

Pope's isolation from friends, family, and support, and her inability to gain agency in her primary relationship, differs from empowered womanhood as portrayed on *Being Mary Jane*. At nearly every point of comparison, Mary Jane Paul represents a feminist, Afro-centric counterargument to the dysfunctional and damaged representation of Black womanhood that is Olivia Pope. Paul is surrounded by girlfriends, both at work and in her social circle, who support her, confront her with honest evaluations of her life, and act as sounding board and emotional support. Whereas Pope's family exists to thwart her power and sabotage her, Paul's family, although not without problems, supports her, relies on her, and represents a positive dynamic in her life. Whereas Pope's romantic relationship models disempowerment, Paul's romantic relationships position her on equal footing with her male lovers/boyfriends, demonstrating not only agency but intellectual engagement and mutual respect.

At nearly every point of comparison, Mary Jane Paul represents a feminist, Afro-centric counterargument to the dysfunctional and damaged representation of Black womanhood that is Olivia Pope.

Afro-Centrism in *Being Mary Jane*

On *Being Mary Jane*, from philanthropic galas that the family funds/attends to circles of friends to social clubs, interactions with whites are rare and when they happen, they point to overt racism and white stupidity regarding issues of race. When a white newscaster colleague tells Paul she used to watch a show called *Fame* that featured a “feisty little Black woman,” MJ sighs, rolls her eyes and mutters, “Debbie Allen” (2015, episode no. 12). At work, Paul's manager, Kara, is speaking with a white, male marketing exec who is “concerned” about Paul's popularity with “Hispanic” viewers (Kara is Latin American). The scene then cuts to a woman who is part of a focus group (she could be Latina/she could be “white”) saying, “She's (Paul's) not relatable” (2015, episode no. 4). The comments by the executive and the member of the focus group highlight the latent and overt racism/sexism a Black woman faces in her professional life. These overt references to racism or race issues permeate *Being Mary Jane*, but these are missing from *Scandal*.

The musical soundtracks of both shows exemplify the split between a Black woman trapped in a white reality (*Scandal*) and a Black woman who has found “safe spaces” (Hill Collins, *Black Feminist*) that include a rich, affirming Black community. Although both shows integrate African American music in the background (jazz, hip-hop, rhythm and blues), the music in *Scandal* speaks to an oppressed experience of Blackness in a white context. Even as Monk-Payton argues that the music in *Scandal* points to complexities of racial politics, the songs chosen tend to whitewash these complexities (21). Whereas *Being Mary Jane* features music of socially conscious African American female songwriters/composers like Mary J. Blige, Nicki Minaj, Bittersweet, Stacy Barthe, Ella Fitzgerald, and Me Shell Ndegeocello, *Scandal* uses some classics that may allude to African American politics and perspectives, but just as easily could be seen as mainstream assimilation of African American music acceptable to white audiences and experiences. The tumultuous relationship between the president and Pope is shown through a sequence where Stevie Wonder sings “Don't Know Why I Love You” and Bill Withers' “Ain't No Sunshine.” Other artists included in *Scandal* are Marvin Gaye, Michael Jackson, The Temptations, Bettye LaVette, and Sam Cooke, mostly males singing for primarily white audiences.

In *Being Mary Jane*, each episode features classic R & B songs and soundtracks, jazz, hip-hop, and other songs/music by African American artists. In addition, we see sticky notes throughout Paul's home and in her work space that quote famous African American women and workers for social justice: Gandhi, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Walter Mosely, Erykah Badu, Susan B. Anthony, Nelson Mandela, Bob Marley; in some cases these quotations also end up as inserts in the storyline, acting as transitions between scenes. In the first episode of Season 2, the series begins with a

dinner party/book club where Paul reads aloud from Walter Mosely's book, *Life Out of Context*. What ensues is a political conversation about education, the Black church, activism, "American" culture as a rip-off of Black culture, the economy, meritocracy, and personal responsibility to Black empowerment (2015, episode no. 1). The plot, characters, music, and scene/episode titles are just a few examples of ways the show keeps its Afro-centric focus. In fact, these themes of race/class/gender/sexuality permeate *Being Mary Jane*.

The direct discussions of race/class/gender also manifest in characters and plot lines. Sheldon offers an example of how Afro-centrism is integrated. Sheldon has an academic interest in African American slave history. He collects slave papers so he can compile "love letters between slaves" in the hopes of creating an exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (2015, episode no. 7). In Season 4, Paul gets the opportunity to cover the thirtieth anniversary of Thurgood Marshall being named the first Black U.S. Supreme Court justice. She travels to Atlanta and interviews civil rights activist Dr. C. T. Vivian; Mayor Kasim Reed of Atlanta; and Wyche Fowler, the first African American Ambassador to the United Nations. (2017, episode no. 6). Sheldon's slave-letter collection and the Thurgood Marshall anniversary are examples of sub-storylines that give an Afro-centric focus to the show.

In other contexts, the Afro-centric focus confronts stereotypes of African Americans. Paul and her family openly discuss racist stereotypes of Black women as they manifest in Paul's niece (a teen mother with two babies by two different fathers) and brother (a recovering addict who lives with his parents). Niecy is Paul's niece who lives with her grandparents/Paul's parents, remains poor, does not get support from her two "baby daddies," and can't seem to stay in school. Niecy regularly asks Paul and others for financial support. There is clearly affection between the two women, regardless of how different their lives are. Paul's phone displays "Work in Progress" when Niecy calls and Paul rescues and provides respite to Niecy. Even as Niecy relies heavily on Paul and sees her as a role model, Paul becomes frustrated with Niecy's manifestation of cultural stereotypes. In one scene, Niecy apologizes to Paul for letting her down by being the stereotypical Black "baby momma." Paul scolds Niecy, "Aren't you tired of being sorry and making promises you can't keep ... Your life cannot revolve around a dude ... Being a baby momma is *not* career; *I'm* taking care of your kids" (2015, episode no. 7). The family—including Paul—rally around Niecy and support her as she cares for her small children and attempts to find her way. The storylines of Paul, Niecy, and the extended family confront the complexities of contemporary African American lives as well as the stereotypes about those lives in various iterations of class, gender, sexuality.

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Being Mary Jane creates a refreshing counter narrative to the dominant culture's mythologies of Black womanhood, an investment in African American culture, specifically from a female perspective. bell hooks has said, "We [African-American women] are so invested in the white supremacy it is tragic. It is more well-paying to remain enslaved... . Why don't we have liberatory images of 'What do I look like when I am free?'" (2014). Paul provides a look at what a strong, empowered Black woman can look like.

Working While Black and Female

Examining what it means to be a Black feminist working within traditionally white institutions of power remains unarticulated in *Scandal*. Perhaps this very racism/sexism is why Pope is so utterly disempowered within the context of her relationships (both familial and romantic). But her lower status as a Black woman is not addressed so the interpretation is left to the audience. On *Being Mary Jane*, the reverse dynamic is presented: the audience has concrete examples of how Paul is thwarted, treated differently, and denied access to power because she is female and Black. Despite these barriers, she persists and succeeds.

In Season 3, Paul is called out by her white, male boss for bringing her "Black agenda" to the news. Regardless, Paul achieves the promotion she seeks because she is that good. But she doesn't escape further critique and warning. Paul is reprimanded by a Latina boss. The woman tells her to tone down her "Black agenda." After Paul is ushered out of that meeting, the boss says to her white, male subordinate, "I want you to keep her on a short leash. The last thing we need around her is a Black woman running wild" (2015, episode no. 11). Laden with sexist and racist language, this comment demonstrates that, even with her overt position of power, Paul will have to "whitewash" her program instead of focusing on issues of social justice/empowerment that address Black lives and that a Latina boss can uphold the white supremacist power structure just as effectively as the white males.

Paul encounters a similar lack of sisterhood from higher-ups in New York City when she goes to work at a morning show. The anchor is an African American woman Paul deeply admires, but as the episodes unfold, we see the older woman sabotage and block Paul instead of helping her, ending the season with Paul turning the tables and getting the anchor out of the anchor chair so that Paul can occupy it (2017, episode no. 4). Through her interactions with colleagues and bosses, we see Paul maneuver around several levels of both support and encouragement and intentional road blocks for being

who she is, a Black, woman journalist trying to foreground the pressing issues of communities outside the white supremacist culture. The complexities of these portrayals offer a realistic narrative of what it means to be a professional Black woman committed to seeing and naming racism, sexism, and homophobia, even as these issues occur within her own community.

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Paul has strong support; the only central relationship in Pope's life is a disempowered romantic relationship. The audience experiences Pope stuck in a degrading position even as she succeeds in professional contexts. Whereas Paul is resistant to the white, patriarchal power structure, Pope supports it, regulates it, and is a victim of it even as she financially benefits. Paul offers her audience a full view of oppression, but still she rises and thrives, professionally, financially, and personally. Pope is a Black woman in a white universe; she is a silent in any evaluation of the systems of oppression that affect her.

Conclusion

Unlike the sad, lonely island that Olivia Pope finds herself on, bereft of supportive family, a core group of friends, and lovers/partners who treat her with respect, Mary Jane Paul offers an empowering, complex portrayal of Black feminist womanhood in a contemporary setting. Whereas Pope is belittled, manipulated, yelled at, and bossed around by her married white lover, Paul finds her way through the bramble patch of contemporary dating lives, but typically finds men who respect her and treat her as an intellectual equal. Whereas Pope is rarely (if ever) seen laughing, smiling, and enjoying the camaraderie of friends, Paul is regularly in social settings that offer positive female friendships, a strong bond of sisterhood, and mutual support. Whereas Pope's relationship with her family (mother and father) is destructive, dysfunctional, and lacking in any demonstrated love and support, Paul has rich and complicated relationships with her siblings and parents, a line of love, caring, and support running through the family core. Regardless of where she is and what she is doing, the audience sees that several people have Paul's back and that she is a strong, sure, Black feminist voice for social justice. With Pope, the takeaway is one of loneliness and utter isolation. Why, then, is *Scandal* the more popular serialized drama? Because it is a narrative of Black womanhood that white audiences want to see. In the white-supremacist patriarchy, white audiences do not want to see an empowered Black woman in the context of her community, fighting for social justice and professional success. Instead, these audiences want to see what Pope represents: a professional, powerful Black woman

who is a lonely island, used by her powerful white lover as a sidebar to his marriage, the “drama” of *Scandal* being the way this Black woman is marginalized and degraded by all the people who purportedly respect, care for, and love her.

Notes

When referring to a specific political/social identity of race, the term *Black* is used as a historical reference to Black Power movement, Black Pride, Black Panthers, and Black Lives Matter. When referring to a generic racial category, the term African American will be used. In contrast, the term *white* (not capitalized, as it is not associated with a specific political movement) will be used in lieu of European American or Anglo-America because “white” denotes a system and expression of racial power as well as a racial identity in the United States.

Notes on contributor

Kay Siebler is Gender and Power Studies Coordinator and Professor of Rhetoric/Writing/Pedagogy at Missouri Western State University. Siebler has published various articles on Black feminist rhetoric, queer identity, and feminist teaching practices in scholarly journals. Her most recent book, *Learning Queer Identity in the Digital Age*, was published by Palgrave McMillian (2016).

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