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### Letting the Narrative Unfold: Black Female Storytellers of the 21st Century

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Letting the Narrative Unfold: Black Female Storytellers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Communication Studies

Bridgewater State University

April 28, 2023

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## Introduction

Back in high school, one day I was sitting in my living room after eating dinner with my mom and sister. After a stressful day at work, my mother retired to her room to enjoy some much-needed rest. I scrolled through the television channel looking for something to watch.

My sister shouted from the kitchen as she washed the dishes, “Have you heard of *Insecure*?”

“No, what’s that?” I asked.

My sister hurriedly sat next to me and snatched the remote out of my hands.

“It’s this show about this Black girl. I watched it the other day. It’s really funny.” She smiled as she quickly pressed the white buttons on the black remote and stared at the television.

As my sister put on the show, I stared in amazement as Issa Dee captivated my screen with her chocolate brown skin and short kinky hair. I remember hearing another character ask Dee why she talked like a white girl. My sister and I chuckled at the recognizable comment that had haunted us for years and still does to this day. I watched the rest of the episode and enjoyed how comfortable it felt watching Black women discuss their everyday issues. At the time, I did not truly understand every situation portrayed by these young Black millennial women. Now as a senior in college, I have come to realize the importance of how safe and comfortable it feels relating to a show whose stars and creators shared my skin tone.

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The important aspects of film and television are the stories that are portrayed. Everyone has a story to tell. However, who tells the story is equally important as who portrays the story.

This thesis analyzes three Black female auteurs and the work they have created with Black women at the center of those narratives. Shonda Rhimes, Ava DuVernay, and Issa Rae are Black female auteurs because they are Black female storytellers each with their own story to tell. They each have created and produced content that portrays Black women in a three-dimensional light.

After this introduction, I will provide a literature review, a research methodology section, a primary research section, and a conclusion. The literature review consists of previous work from different scholars that encapsulate the overarching themes of my thesis about race, culture, identity, gender, representation, and narrative. This emphasizes the importance of Black women changing the sphere of the television and film industries by creating distinctive content about Black female characters and issues. Then, in my methods section I dissect how I approached this research by conducting an auteurist analysis. Following that is my primary research of my thesis: I look at the work from Rhimes by analyzing the premiere episodes of *Scandal* (2012-2018) and *How to Get Away with Murder* also known as, *HTGAWM* (2014-2020); then I turn to DuVernay by analyzing *Middle of Nowhere* (2012) and the premiere episode of *Queen Sugar* (2016-2022); lastly I look at Rae and examine the first episode of the first season and the first episode of the second season of the series *Insecure* (2016-2021). In the conclusion of this thesis, I analyze the similarities between the different auteurs and how to expand this research further in the future. For the remainder of this introduction, I investigate the career backgrounds of Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae, the changing scope of the entertainment industry, and the audience ratings and critical acclaim from each of the series and the film.

### ***Career Background***

Shonda Rhimes is an executive producer, television creator, and writer. Her journey with network television started in the early 2000s when she created the television series, *Grey's*

*Anatomy* (2005- ). *Grey's Anatomy* premiered on the television network ABC and is the longest-running medical drama show in television history. Along with *Grey's Anatomy*, Rhimes launched her production company, Shondaland in 2005 ("About Shonda"). After *Grey's Anatomy* became a popular show, Rhimes continued to produce hit shows for network television such as *Scandal* starring Kerry Washington and *HTGAWM* starring Viola Davis. Shonda Rhimes created *Scandal* and is one of the executive producers. *Scandal* played a pivotal role in breaking boundaries in network television. When the first episode premiered in 2012, Kerry Washington was the first Black woman to lead a network drama in 40 years (Simon). The last time ABC network audiences saw a television series centered around a Black woman was *Get Christie Love!* (1974-1975) starring Teresa Graves ("Get Christie Love!"). The series only lasted for one season, so *Scandal* had a lot to prove to demonstrate that a Black woman's story was complex enough to maintain the attention of a television audience. *HTGAWM* was created by Peter Nowalk and he is the executive producer. While Rhimes did not create the series, she still served as the co-executive producer and it was produced by her production company, Shondaland ("About Shonda").

Ava DuVernay is a director, writer, television creator, and producer. She did not pick up a camera until she was 32 years old and created her first short film in 2006 called *Saturday Night Life*. DuVernay wrote and directed *Middle of Nowhere* starring Emayatzy Corinealdi with an estimated budget of \$200,000 ("Middle of Nowhere"). This was her second feature-length film. DuVernay is the executive producer and creator of the television series *Queen Sugar*. The series stars Rutina Wesley and Dawn-Lyen Gardner. Similar to Rhimes, DuVernay started her own company that reflects the stories she wants to tell in the world of film. DuVernay's film distribution company was called African-American Film Festival Releasing Movement.

However, the company rebranded in 2015 under the name ARRAY. The company focuses on racial and gender inclusion in filmmaking. Also, new opportunities arose for DuVernay with films such as *Selma* (2014) and the Netflix documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016) (Alexander). These films made DuVernay a bigger name in the film and television industry.

Issa Rae is a writer, actress, producer, and television creator. *Insecure* was created by Rae and Larry Wilmore (Giorgis). Before this, she began making YouTube videos. Her series, *The MisAdventures of Awkward Black Girl*, with Rae portraying a character named J, tackles the oddness of the life and love of Black women in their 20s. The series won a Shorty Award for Best Web Series in 2012 (Subair) and launched Rae's career as a writer and actress. Rae and Wilmore then wrote the pilot episode for *Insecure*, and the series was picked up by HBO (TvSeriesFinale). The series stars Rae and Yvonne Orji. Like Rhimes and DuVernay, Rae created her production company, HOORAE, in 2020 which highlights representation in media and storytelling (Hoorae). Each of these three auteurs has not only created impactful stories, but it ensures that each auteur will continue to do so through their production companies which promote the longevity of Black women in the television and film industries. They emerged at an opportune moment of technological transition for the changing television and film industries.

### ***Cable Network to Streaming and Audience Ratings***

The first episode of Rhimes' *Scandal* aired on April 5, 2012, on ABC. The first episode premiered with 7.33 million viewers. The series lasted for seven seasons with the last episode airing on April 19, 2018, drawing in 5.46 million viewers (TvSeriesFinale). *Scandal* provided audiences with a fun and interactive process of enjoying network television through live tweeting (Turchiano). As audiences enjoyed the twists and turns of *Scandal*, it was easy to assume that more network series coming out of Shondaland would have a popular fate with network

audiences. The first episode of *HTGAWM* premiered on September 25, 2014, with 14.41 million people tuning in to watch it on ABC. *HTGAWM* stunned audiences with its, “wildly successful, unimaginably progressive first season on ABC” (Fallon). The series lasted for six seasons with the last episode airing on May 14, 2020, with 3.21 million views (TvSeriesFinale). By the time *HTGAWM* aired, Rhimes was the first African American showrunner to have a 3-hour block on ABC. *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *HTGAWM* all aired Thursday nights on ABC, gaining the name, “Thank God It’s Thursday” (TGIT) (Rocchi & Farinacci 31). However, after serving as executive producer on other ABC television series, Rhimes signed an exclusive multi-year development deal with Netflix in 2017. In this deal, Rhimes moved her production company, Shondaland to Netflix to create new projects as Netflix Original Series (Hale). As streaming platforms gained more popularity, Rhimes decided to move away from network television. This gave her more freedom to produce specific and direct content through her production company.

DuVernay began her television career on emerging cable networks. DuVernay turned *Queen Sugar* into a series after reading the novel, *Queen Sugar* by Natalie Baszile, which Oprah Winfrey suggested (OWN). *Queen Sugar* first aired on the Oprah Winfrey Network on September 6, 2016. It found its audience: 2.68 million people viewed the first episode. This was an incredible accomplishment for a cable network drama, “It averaged more than a million weekly viewers in its first seasons—a major feat for a boutique cable network during the rise of streaming” (Ford). The series lasted for seven seasons with its final episode airing on November 29, 2022, with 0.51 million viewers (TvSeriesFinale). DuVernay has continued to create television shows and films for different streaming and cable services because she has a multiyear deal with Warner Bros. Television. This deal with Warner Bros. Television allows DuVernay to use it as the production home for her projects while being able to air and stream her content

across a wide range of entertainment services (Goldberg). Unlike Rhimes, DuVernay's content is not central to one streaming service but can be created for multiple streaming platforms.

Similar to DuVernay, Issa Rae's series never premiered on network television. She is the youngest auteur out of the three which shows how far premium channels and streaming services have come. The first episode of *Insecure* officially aired on HBO on October 9, 2016. However, the first episode was released two weeks early online through HBO Go and HBO Now. The actual HBO premiere brought in a viewing of 0.37 million people (TvSeriesFinale). Unlike Rhimes and DuVernay, Rae's series did not only have one chance to premiere. Through various HBO viewing platforms, *Insecure* made its debut to audiences watching online, streaming, and through the premium cable network. The series ran for five seasons. The last episode of *Insecure* aired on December 26, 2021 with 0.30 million views (TvSeriesFinale). Deals are still in the works for Rae. She signed a five-year overall deal with WarnerMedia. Under the deal, she will create television projects for HBO, HBO Max, and Warner Bros. through her HOORAE media company (Porter). The world of television and film now embraces individual creators to make their content available for streaming, instead of network television.

### ***Critical Acclaim***

All three auteurs have had significant critical success. For instance, Rhimes' *Scandal* proved to be a hit show over its seven seasons. It won awards such as the American Film Institute Award for Television Program of the Year in 2014, the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actress in a Drama Series in 2014, and a Peabody Award in 2014 ("Scandal Awards"). Audiences were captivated by the intense drama and moving acting performances. *HTGAWM* proved to be another hit, winning awards such as the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Drama Series in 2015. Viola Davis won the 2015 and 2016 Screen Actors Guild



Awards for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Drama Series. Davis also became the first African American woman to win a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series in 2015 (“HTGAWM Awards”). Not only did the series engage audiences, but it also created history.

Similarly, DuVernay’s *Queen Sugar* won awards like the 2022 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Drama Series and Rutina Wesley won the 2017 Black Reel Award for Outstanding Actress in a Drama Series (“Queen Sugar Awards”) over the course of seven seasons. The series stands out for its dramatic narrative and powerful acting. *Middle of Nowhere* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2012 and won the award for Best Direction (Alexander). Even in a low-budget film, DuVernay was able to powerfully direct a poignant story.

On the same note, Rae’s *Insecure* has been nominated for and won numerous awards during its five seasons. For example, Rae and Yvonne Orji have each been nominated for Primetime Emmy Awards for their work on the series. The series has won awards such as the American Film Institute Award for TV Program of the Year in 2018 and the African-American Film Critics Association Award in 2018 for Best TV Comedy (“Insecure Awards”). *Insecure* became very popular during its run and was well-known. The comedic timing and powerful acting skills made the series stand out to viewers.

Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae have all demonstrated that Black female leads can captivate audiences and display the importance of telling diverse poignant stories. When a Black woman is behind the camera, there is an authentic and creative display of Black female individuality. People no longer rely on stereotypes to portray a negative narrative of the Black woman. Each of these auteurs created personal and unique storylines that emphasize how important it is for Black women to tell their own stories to create a more accurate and well-rounded representation of the

Black woman. Before analyzing these texts, let's consider some key themes that will emerge and review the previous academic literature whose conversations I seek to engage with my own auteur study.

## **Literature Review**

Film and television are unique versions of storytelling that speak to many aspects of human nature and the circumstances of life. They serve as a foundation for understanding and connection. Multiple layers of individuality allow a person or even a group of people to better align themselves with what is shown on a global scale. However, this can only be done when the corresponding people oversee creating and portraying their specific narratives. For this literature review, I will tease out conversations on race, identity, culture, gender, representation, and narrative to display how each of these terms encapsulate the importance of Black female representation on and behind the screen.

### ***An Insight into the Black Experience***

Black people have tried to shift a balance of power within their cultures and identity; this emphasizes the different displays of the Black experience through specific mediums and media. In the world of media, one's race will always be at the forefront of presentation. One's skin tone is a typical first impression of who they are to the world. Specifically in the United States, Gray expresses how the media does not give people of different races and ethnicities the attention they deserve. People have learned to disavow race, rather than celebrate individuality and diversity (Gray 163-164). While the label of race forcefully divides people, it further emphasizes the need for Black people to create a space for themselves. A space where they could highlight aspects of their specific cultural identities for others to relate to and connect with.

Nevertheless, this racial outlook is typically lumped into a general Black experience. The overall Black experience in America contributes to the identities Black people propel forward today. This experience rooted in colonialism and slavery takes heavy precedence over the other experiences many Black people face and discover. Edman & Gozen demonstrate that the horrid history of African Americans is still psychologically inherited by modern Black people. There is a racial duality of Black and white interactions that has led to a split in Western society. Many Black people face the haunting spirits of the colonial past which is the most popular and the most recognizable racial experience for Black people today (Edman & Gozen 7). Therefore, it is common to see films and series that dominate this aspect of the Black experience. Many films focus more on the narrative of slavery which equates to only one part of the Black experience.

For example, Stokes emphasizes the popularity of narratives about slavery in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through films such as *Lincoln* (2012), *Django Unchained* (2012), and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) (Stokes 1). The beginnings of the Black experience in America are often disguised as trauma and only give a narrow point of view as to who African Americans have become as a people. While this is an experience many African Americans faced, this is not the only narrative that provides insight into the Black experience. There is always more to every story. The roots of the Black experience will always be fundamental and resonate with others, but those are not the only popular stories African Americans have to showcase to the world. There are more complex and diverse voices within the Black community that highlight a unique aspect of the Black experience and Black identity.

### ***The Connection to Identity***

One's identity is a key component for a person to be able to recognize and solidify their place in the world. There is value in being seen and heard while connecting with others. The

notion of identity can be simple yet complex as scholars have tried to define how important it is for people to be aware of who they are and where they come from. Furthermore, Hall & du Gay explain that identity is constructed on the recognition of a common origin or a shared characteristic with another person, group, or idea (Hall & du Gay 2). Therefore, identity comes from connecting with something that is mutually alike. For instance, when I saw Issa Dee on my screen for the first time, I connected with her because I identified with her. I identified with her looks, her words, and her experiences. When people can identify with what is in front of them on screen, then a deeper appreciation of oneself can occur. This emphasizes that when one is more aware and cautious of who they are and what they represent to the world, their identity can only be found, never lost. Their identity will only become more complex, more vivid, and more valued. The essence of who they are can be visualized and seen as something real and is no longer a fantasy. The stories they have can be seen on a global scale. One's identity is the establishing foundation of shared attributes that can create and enhance connections with others.

Nevertheless, not everyone's identity can be so easily found. When a person does not see who they are, then it becomes harder for them to acknowledge aspects of their identity purposefully and completely. The mere concept of identity is a clearer and easier notion for some people to grasp compared to others. Georgiou mentions that the more information that becomes available to people about the particularity of their own identity, then the larger range of identities can be shared among others. However, on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, class, and location, there is an uneven number of representations of identity in media, which complicates people's journey to identify aspects of themselves on a larger platform (Georgiou 95). Knowing one's identity is a distinct privilege only a few can obtain. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have access to seeing their identities represented on the big and small screens. Even the concept of

identity can dawn a devalued sense of oneself in the world of media because of the unfair and unequal representations that occur.

Specifically, African Americans understand the internal and external conflict of fully recognizing and establishing their identity. Most of the time, many African Americans are unsure of their identity because of how their ancestors were stolen from their homes and how race became a way to divide people. Peters' study examines YouTube videos from Black content creators that reveal their genetic ancestry tests online. By studying these videos, Peter found that genetic ancestry tests serve as a way for people to "prove" their racial identities and that genetic ancestry tests offer meaningful identity language for Black people. However, one's identity should not be proven merely by the social construction of race. For Black people to "prove" their Blackness through genetic ancestry tests can also be seen as oppressive and further perpetuates the need for Black people to find their missing identity. Thus, emphasizing the confusing and complex cycle of the search for African American identity due to the political and social construction of racial hierarchies (Peters 228). Black people already have difficulty identifying themselves ethnically and racially. However, this is further shown through how the identity of Black people is unevenly represented due to historical factors as well. Therefore, all identities need to be well represented on screen. This investigative concept of identity displays the want and need for African Americans to not only be sure of their "blackness" but for them to also claim and create a space for their identity to shine. Identity gives people a more authentic sense of self, by connecting them to a shared and similar characteristic of human nature and cultural belonging.

### ***The Evolving Black Culture***

African Americans have had to create their own hybrid culture. For example, as a Black American woman, I connect with both terms African American and Black to describe my cultural identity. I use the terms African American and Black interchangeably. Black people look to create their specific cultural identities in other forms to find authentic representations of themselves. One's culture is closely linked to one's identity. The customs and capabilities of a particular person highlight a sense of purpose and perspective that is shared among a group of people. However, terms such as Black and African American are very important aspects of one's culture. Hall discovered that while the terms Black and African American are used synonymously, it still impacts how one's culture is perceived and viewed by others, which can lead to stereotyping and other forms of discrimination (Hall et al. 190). Labels hold a lot of power and greatly influence the cultural view of oneself. Black people must have mediums that showcase authentic and dimensional aspects of Black culture and identity. On the other hand, Parker explains that when Black people overly emphasize their blackness, they began to act like a racist cliché of themselves. This further propels a confusing cycle of one's cultural awareness and conflicted identities (Parker 304). That is why it is so imperative for Black people to step out beyond their cultural normalcies and further enhance a culture and identity that is less tainted by the history and corruption of others.

Yet, Olaniyan acknowledges that many African Americans are left with "a conception of cultural identity by way of an intrusion of difference" (Olaniyan 536). Culture is forever enhancing to either change or remain the same. There is a need to feel secure within one's culture which becomes a dutiful mission. Now Black people no longer want to only discover culture but to embrace and showcase it which can be done through Black cinema. Every aspect of Black culture deserves to shine through stories from Black creators. This can be a difficult

mission to accomplish because there are still unexplored specialties within the Black community that have not been given the attention it deserves. However, the use of Black films and television series can make way for all aspects of Black culture to fully emerge and be expressed, especially for Black women.

### ***The Black Female Voice***

The voices of Black women are often plagued by a bicultural dissatisfaction with their specific identities. Gill shows that there are multiple layers of oppression and exclusion in the world of media. As race is always a factor, the “additive” distinction of being a woman challenges the dominant view of whiteness and feminism that the media so willingly portrays (Gill 78). Very rarely do people offer Black women the same treatment and understanding as they do for other women. Through the theme of intersectionality, Black women are often overlooked because they must battle the influence of racism and sexism in life. Cole reflects on intersectionality by emphasizing how, “...women of color, subordinated by (at least) racism and sexism, are additionally vulnerable to having their presence and contributions overlooked, erased, and even appropriated” (Cole 1038). Sadly, a Black woman's race and sex are used against her to invalidate who she is. And in doing so, the specific obstacles, encounters, and cultural moments Black women experience are not widely publicized or shown. Black women are never in charge of catering to their own experiences. When people assume that Black women are invisible, then their stories become invisible as well. This propels the idea that Black women have no authenticity, no creativity, and no relatability that deserves to be shared in a specific manner.

Moreover, Black women deal with harmful stereotypes about their bodies and images of themselves. These unpleasant stereotypes have a long-rooted history that emphasizes the

dehumanization of Black women, their bodies, and their femininity. In a specific case study, Montle examines how colonists characterized and sexualized the body shape and appearance of an enslaved Black African Khoisan woman named, Saartjie Baartman. She was sexually violated, body shamed, and displayed as a "freak show" (Montle 15884-15885). This marks the beginning of the disenfranchisement of Black women feeling devalued and ashamed of their natural beauty. They were tormented for their natural beauty, which has led to a modernized objectification and bleakness linked to Black women today. Hence, the need for Black women to be the stars as well as the creators of their own stories. No longer would Black women deal with negative stereotypes and the feeling of invisibility in society. By Black women creating the narratives that star Black women, then Black women are uplifted by their race and gender rather than degraded by it.

### ***Representing Black Women on Screen***

What we see in the world should be represented on screen. The world is made up of so many different stories, and it is important to highlight the individuality of life through diverse representation. Henderson explains, "the question of representation must capture not only the world as we know it but the world as we would like it to be" (Henderson 175). Representation matters because it promotes the uniqueness of one's race, identity, culture, or gender. Not everyone has the same experience, but representation allows the audience to deeply connect to different stories shown on screen.

Moreover, scholars have noticed the typical one-dimensional roles Black women have become the center of. The representation of Black women on-screen is slim. Różalska explains that Black women are mainly represented through themes of sexuality, motherhood, and troubled family (Różalska 277). With these narratives becoming so prevalent in their association with



Black women, it controls the representations of Black women. These images have dictated and controlled the essence of Black women which is an unfair assessment of who they are. These one-dimensional roles do not speak to the individuality of who the Black woman is. She can be bold, intelligent, awkward, resilient, weird, and so much more.

With Black women constantly being scrutinized for their true form, that leaves little room for dynamic representations of Black women to occur on the big and small screens. Ponce De Leon & Rosette describe how Black women have always dealt with the notion of not being seen or represented. Black women tend to fall under the "nonprototypical" category of race and gender. As white women are the star representation of women and Black men are the star representation of Black people (Ponce De Leon & Rosette 785). Black women often find themselves being left out of the circle of expressing their most dominant identities. This exclusion causes Black women to feel like their voices and stories do not matter. But Black women's stories do matter because they showcase a narrative only a Black woman can tell. No one can tell a Black woman's story the same way a Black woman can.

### ***Black Female Storytelling***

The only way for Black women to have authentic and complex portrayals of themselves shown to the world is for Black women to tell their own stories. Black women deserve to be in front of the screen as well as behind it. Therefore, no more lies, stereotypes, and generalizations will occur to belittle the humanity of the Black woman. Only a relatable truth can come from a Black woman being in charge of the narrative she portrays. Mills emphasizes the indistinguishable voice a Black woman has behind the camera. Black female filmmakers, writers, and producers generate a unique and realistic outlook on the narrative portrayed for Black women on-screen (Mills 7). This allows Black women to not have their identity and

culture confined to the constraints of a societal box. Black women will be able to find value and individuality through stories told by Black women that are about Black women. There is no singular Black female experience, which is why it is essential to have multiple Black female television and filmmakers create a multitude of stories for Black women. One's identity and culture are expressive and expansive and cannot be told by an outside observer.

Furthermore, in her critique of the Black female-led film, *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), hooks argues that the film did not illustrate an authentic portrayal of Black women and their identities and cultures because the screenplay was written by a white man. *Waiting to Exhale* is not considered a “black film” because a Black voice was not truly behind the creation of the film. And the same can be said about, *The Color Purple* (1985) (hooks 66), a film centering around a Black woman’s narrative but directed by a white man. No one can write or direct a Black woman's experience realistically but a Black woman. If she is not the creator and star of her narrative it becomes an unrealistic sentiment on who society believes a Black woman should be, but not who she truly is.

Contrastingly, Malone demonstrates that Black women have been behind the camera for a long time trying to convey the Black female narrative. Julie Dash’s film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) was the first feature-length film given a theatrical release that was written and directed by a Black woman. Even though her film made history and received positive attention, it was still difficult for Dash to continue to create important stories, "Afterwards, however, Julie Dash wasn't given many opportunities to make another feature film" (Malone 99). Even in terms of creating their own stories, Black women have not gotten the attention they deserved. In so many areas, Black women have been pushed aside. They are not given the same opportunities to showcase the most dynamic and vulnerable versions of themselves to the world. However, the

landscape of film and television is changing enough to showcase dynamic Black female stories through auteurs like Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae. Black women deserve a chance to have their voices heard through television and film. Black women deserve a chance to not be invisible anymore.

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Through all the scrutiny, belittlement, and criticism Black women have experienced, Black women are now, more than ever, obligated to create their own identities and display their own cultures on the small and big screens. For so long, someone has spoken for the Black woman, not represented the Black woman, or only showcased a fraction of the Black woman. If there is one thing anyone deserves, it is the ability to speak for themselves. Black women should not be strangers to all their truths, nor should anyone else. My thesis seeks to explore how three Black female auteurs have articulated their truths. First, though, I will briefly talk through my own research methodology choices in conducting the research for this thesis.

## **Research Methodology**

My research question for this thesis is: how have Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae created an authentic and three-dimensional representation of Black women on screen as Black female storytellers in the television and film industries? I wanted my thesis to focus on Black women in the television and film industries, but I did not initially know how to narrow my object of analysis. As I thought more, the series *Insecure* stood out to me because it starred a Black woman and was co-created by a Black woman. Then, I began to explore other narratives that followed the same structure. Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae each have created complex and diverse narratives about Black women and became the objects of my analysis.

To further my understanding of how to approach this thesis, I analyzed Jane Stokes' *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies*. Stokes guides the reader through an array of research approaches that promote an understanding of textual, industrial, and audience-centered analyses of media and culture. Upon reflection, the best way for me to answer my research question was to conduct an auteur analysis of the works created by Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae. An auteur analysis is a textual analysis of a particular director and the strategies they use to convey a specific theme throughout their work. The French term "auteur" is used to describe the study of the director of a film as the essential author of the film's text (J. Stokes 156). I extended my research by analyzing the works and connections of three different auteurs. Additionally, I examined how each auteur functions in the changing landscape of the film and television industries and the critical acclaim their works have received.

But what truly makes a director an auteur? Sarris's notes on auteur theory explain that a director must show a specific recurrent characteristic of the style, which serves as their signature. Also, the director's personality must shine through the film, which gives it meaning and proves that cinema is a unique art form of storytelling. He credits directors like Ford, Welles, Hitchcock, and Griffith as auteurs (Sarris). Yet, the one thing that remains the same about these esteemed directors is that they are all white men. As white male directors, their stories cannot speak to the inner truths of a Black woman. hooks emphasize that the film and television industries were not originally catered to Black audiences; "When most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy" (hooks 308). Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae each bring their own creative and distinct vision and themes that are widely seen through their works of film and television as art. Not only as television and filmmakers but

as Black women. Their work speaks to Black audiences, and more specifically Black women, by displaying dynamic stories through the roles of Black women. While Rhimes and Rae may not be film directors, their roles as executive producers, television creators, and writers demonstrate the importance and high value of the artistic control they have in their series.

To textually analyze the content from each auteur, I read Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. Corrigan explains that the foundation of analyzing a film begins with identifying a significant theme within the film. Then, it is important to identify and analyze the different stylistic and formal conventions used in the film that displays the theme (Corrigan 39). Such as character, point of view, sound, cinematography, editing, mise-en-scene, and more. I followed this method as I textually analyzed the works of each auteur. I took extensive notes on the storyline, character traits and appearances, relationships, and on-screen dialogue to understand and demonstrate how DuVernay, Rhimes, and Rae have painted Black women in a transformative manner. These findings further emphasized how distinct the voices of Black women are, the role Black female storytellers have in the Black community, and how Black women are shown to the world. Many stories about Black women are not written or created from the perspective of a Black woman. Therefore, it becomes harder for Black women to experience an authentic and relatable narrative on the big and small screens. However, examining the creations of Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae highlights that Black women need to be in charge of their storylines.

Since I am looking at multiple storylines, I wanted to focus on how each of the auteurs introduces these Black female-led narratives. While the storyline changes throughout the film and episodes, I mainly looked at how viewers initially meet these characters and then dissect how these Black female-led narratives become more dynamic throughout the film or episode.

These works were chosen because they each show a dynamic portrayal of a Black woman as the star on the screen and the star behind the camera. Continuing on, I will textually analyze the works of Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae in the primary research section.

### **Rhimes DuVernay, and Rae: Three Black Female Auteurs**

In this primary research section, I will be textually analyzing the works of Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae as auteurs. I will be examining a specific theme from each auteur and the stylistic and formal conventions each auteur uses to convey that theme. First, I will analyze the premiere episodes of *Scandal* and *HTGAWM* from Rhimes.

#### ***Rhimes: The strain of perfection and the cost of moral ambivalence***

*Scandal* takes place in Washington D.C. and follows Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington. Olivia runs a successful crisis management firm where she helps various clients with a multitude of issues with the assistance of her team known as “gladiators.” She is also having an affair with the President of the United States, Fitzgerald “Fitz” Grant. *HTGAWM* takes place in Philadelphia. The series focuses on Annalise Keating, played by Viola Davis. Annalise is a highly respected law professor who also runs her own law firm. She uses her students to help her win various court cases. Both Olivia and Annalise appear to be Black women who display an air of perfection. Yet, as the audience learns more about them, their perfect image begins to fade into a more complicated and complex narrative. In this section, I explore how Rhimes showcases the theme of the strain of perfection and the cost of moral ambivalence through characters, cinematography, and mise-en-scene.

Nobody is perfect. Olivia and Annalise come off as highly esteemed characters but as the audience learns more about them, they each demonstrate a theme that perfection comes at a cost. Rhimes understands that the cost of being great is not an easy feat after the success of her first show, *Grey's Anatomy*, "One of the most surprising things about *Grey's Anatomy's* becoming a big hit was how unhappy it made me. How scared and sad and nervous. And ashamed" (Rhimes 197). Rhimes is one of the most respected showrunners and executive producers in the industry, but even she knows how difficult it is to be the object of perfection in the face of success. In *Scandal* and *HTGAWM*, even the strongest and most respected characters are not the most morally just characters. Black women are capable of portraying stories where they do not have to only be seen as the strong Black woman. Olivia and Annalise take their work very seriously to remain on top, but to be seen as great, challenging choices must be made.

For example, in *Scandal*, Olivia's boldness is not a virtue. A strong Black woman is seen as a person who is independently fierce and in complete control of her life. The audience no longer believes that Olivia embodies the typical trope of being a strong Black woman. Olivia uses her fierceness as a weapon to assert her dominance over others. As an auteur, Rhimes creates a world in which Black female leads do not have to be fair-minded to prove the power they have. True perfection and goodness do not exist in these stories because it is difficult to only be seen as one thing. Olivia mixes the essence of good and evil to remain superior. Olivia is also mistress. Olivia willingly breaks down another character because she interferes with Olivia's view of perfection. She can do the right thing and be a just character. Yet, she also can hurt people and is not afraid to use it, when it threatens something she desires. So, where do Olivia's true intentions lie? The audience is never fully aware of what Olivia stands for and that expands

her storyline. She is not boring. She is not good. She is not bad. This sense of moral ambiguity makes her story feel creative and dimensional.

Whereas in *HTGAWM*, Annalise's moral ambivalence is clearer to the viewer. She uses her students to help her get ahead. She is not doing the work solely by herself but merely using her students to help propel her career forward. While the students are gaining experience, Annalise still uses her power to enforce the notion that gaining respect equates to using others. The audience cannot tell where she stands in a court of righteousness. She also cheats on her husband. Any form of adultery is not looked at with good judgment. Annalise practices law and fights for justice, but she cannot even find justice within her marriage. It is difficult for the audience to judge her actions because when we meet her in the first episode, she is not a clear character. She manipulates her lover to win a case. Annalise is mysterious and the audience is unaware of the right or wrong she will commit. Rhimes further demonstrates that Black female characters can have stories that are puzzles; they are three-dimensional. The audience is now invested in figuring out the story of Annalise. Again, she is not perfect, and her actions further propel that narrative. But her story is complex and layered with a take on what good and evil looks like through the eyes of a Black female lead character.

### *The Deconstruction of the "perfect" Black woman*

When many people think of a Black woman, they assume she is indestructible, powerful, and forthright. She defies the odds and holds her own. Rhimes is no stranger in pushing this narrative forward about Black women. In *Scandal* and *HTGAWM*, the audience is introduced to powerful Black female lead characters: Olivia and Annalise. These main characters are the pulse of their respective shows and seem invincible the moment we hear about them and seem even stronger the moment we see them. These Black female leads are the sensational leaders of their



own stories and are held to impeccable standards. But what makes these Black female characters so strong? Each character displays an air of confidence, sophistication, and a relentless pursuit to be the best. Often, we see Black women as the sidekick. She is never in charge of her own story, but Olivia and Annalise are the main stories.

Olivia and Annalise are both fiercely respected individuals. Malcolm X once said that the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman (Malcolm X). Yet, when Annalise and Olivia are on-screen, we do not see any disrespect coming their way (that they cannot handle). Olivia has her team of gladiators waiting to hear her instructions before they make any move. In the first episode of *Scandal*, the audience learns that Harrison, Abby, Huck, Stephen, and newcomer Quinn all work for Olivia. A gladiator represents someone who fights for what they need and will not stop until they get it. Olivia is the head gladiator. She works hard for what she has, and she does not stop until she gets her job done. She requires nothing but excellence from herself and her team. Rhimes propels a similar narrative with Annalise. She is the ultimate figure of authority and commands perfection from herself and her students. Not only do Annalise's students respect her, but they fear her. Typically, Black women are seen as inferior, but in this introduction, Annalise reigns superior. She sets the rules in the classroom and the courtroom. In the first episode of *HTGAWM*, we see each student ambitiously think out of the box to be seen as best in the eyes of Annalise. Wes, Connor, Michaela, Asher, and Laurel become the chosen students to work with Annalise and this is seen as a high honor. While the work they do is to become a good lawyer, it is also to gain the esteem and continued respect of Annalise. Annalise has people under her, which makes her powerful. Both Annalise and Olivia not only command respect when we are introduced to them, but they are also given an esteemed amount of respect from the people around them.

In pursuit to be the best, she must know she is the best. Olivia and Annalise are powerful Black lead characters because they both are good at what they do and are not afraid to let people know it. By focusing on narratives that place Black women in a world of achievement, Rhimes demonstrates that Black women are stars. Olivia runs her crisis management firm. She has connections to one of the most powerful people in the world. And she knows how to handle herself in any situation to get what she wants. But the most notable trait about Olivia is that she trusts her gut, which means she trusts herself. She does not need anyone else to validate what she believes is true when her judgment is clear. In the first episode of *Scandal*, Olivia keeps herself poised and assured through her different interactions with her colleagues, clients, and lovers. For the most part, she remains in charge of her life and her decisions. People understand that Olivia and her team of gladiators are the best at what they do and that is why they choose her for the job.

Similarly, Annalise has a lot of accolades to her name. She is a university law professor. She has her law firm. And she knows how to win her court cases. The audience watches a Black female lead character remain victorious among others and does not associate her with the concept of failure. For Annalise, her most defining character trait is that failure is not an option. She will do whatever it takes to win and remain on top. It is not often that we see Black women "winning" in this world. Yet, Annalise still figures out how to win by herself because she feels like she is the only one who can truly get the job done, even with the aid of her students and colleagues. Annalise puts her most ambitious step forward. As characters, Olivia and Annalise symbolize success. A Black woman's success emphasizes how far Black have come in life and on-screen.

*An Intimate Perspective of Moral Ambivalence*

The main director of photography on *Scandal* is Oliver Bokelberg (Larsen). The main cinematographer on *HTGAWM* is Michael Price (“Full Cast and Crew”). Even though *Scandal* and *HTGAWM* have different cinematographers, the cinematography in both shows represents the intimacy between characters and further portrays the moral ambivalence of Olivia and Annalise. The audience gets a deeper insight into the inner workings of Olivia and Annalise through the composition and image reflected in the scene. As the audience watches Olivia and Annalise, the camera does not only focus on them but also their surroundings. The camera is constantly moving. For instance, in the scene with Olivia and Fitz in the Oval Office, the camera begins to shake. This shaky camera work looks chaotic and represents the chaos that fuels Olivia and Fitz's relationship. Olivia cannot seem to shake Fitz no matter how hard she tries. The cinematography helps capture the essence of what makes Olivia such a round character.

Not only do we see and hear her morals compromised through her actions, but the movement of the camera mimics how unsure Olivia can be of herself. This is the first time the audience sees Olivia crack and the camera movement demonstrates the unstableness that follows Olivia and breaks down her being seen as a strong Black woman. At one moment the camera stays focused and moves sharply with Olivia, especially during the first half of the episode. That is when we meet poised, confident, and go-getter Olivia. Yet as the viewer learns that Olivia is not the typical strong Black woman and there are cracks within her identity, the camera must keep up with demonstrating a sense of imperfection and arguable virtue.

Moreover, further into the episode of *HTGAWM*, the camera follows Annalise closely in various ways. The camera almost feels like a bug on the wall, as the audience watches every move Annalise makes with intense focus. In the scene with Wes and Annalise in the bathroom, the viewer receives multiple perspectives of Annalise. The cinematography in *HTGAWM*

represents the questionable integrity of Annalise as the audience watches her from different camera shots. Having multiple views of Annalise demonstrates the many layers to Annalise as she will go to extreme lengths to keep her power which shows she is not a fully complete character as the audience may have assumed of her at first. When Annalise stares at herself in the mirror, this is the first time the viewer sees Annalise truly by herself. She is not showcasing her talents in front of a jury or her students. The camera placement in this scene adds to the mystery of Annalise. Her air of mystery also isolates her. She is not exactly who she says she is. This is also seen as a moment of breakdown for Annalise. As the audience watches Annalise's reflection in the mirror, it demonstrates a falseness to her identity: she is not the typical strong Black woman. The audience is not looking at her directly, rather the audience sees her through a reflection of herself. This causes the viewer to see that her imperfections are not so secretive and lie outside of herself.

Additionally, *Scandal's* cinematography shows Olivia in a morally questionable and complex state. In the scene when Olivia watches Stephen propose to his girlfriend, the camera's close shots of Olivia show the deepness and internal conflicts Olivia hides from others. The spatial relationship with the camera showing Olivia in the closet displays the discomfort Olivia has in her own life. Olivia in the closet with low lighting and circular light reflections represents the loneliness and isolation she feels. As the camera strictly focuses on her, the audience can better see how her righteousness and principles get the best of her as she aims high on the ladder of perfection.

### *The Imperfection of Beauty*

Olivia and Annalise always need to look like perfection to show that they cannot be easily broken. For instance, when the audience meets Olivia, she is wearing a white dress coat. It

seems to act like her body of armor as she is the head gladiator. Her hair is straightened but has bouncy curls. She is wearing a light amount of makeup, nothing that distracts too much from her face because she always means business. Throughout the entire episode, she remains in a grey pantsuit with a peach-colored blouse. She always looks sophisticated and classy through every interaction she has in the episode. Her skin does not have bumps, bruises, or pimples. Olivia's outward appearance demonstrates that she takes herself seriously because of the effort she puts into making herself look indestructible. The only time when her outward appearance looks slightly disheveled is when she kisses Fitz in the Oval Office. Her hair becomes messy, and her lipstick is smeared from kissing him. This contributes to her moral ambivalence and her imperfect humanity as she is willingly treated as a mistress which causes the crack in her persona of perfection.

Similarly, in *HTGAWM* Annalise enters the classroom with a strong amount of class and sophistication. She is wearing a maroon leather jacket with a black pencil skirt and heels. She keeps her black briefcase by her side. She appears to be wearing a brown straight short-cut wig. After Annalise introduces herself to the class, the camera zooms into a medium close-up of her face. The audience can see that Annalise is wearing a lot of makeup. Such as dark lipstick, deeper blush, and eyeliner. The higher amount of makeup she is wearing demonstrates that her natural self is a mystery to the audience, yet she still seems to look like the perfect professional professor. Throughout the episode, she wears various polished and refined dresses, blouses, and skirts. Yet, when Annalise confronts Wes about her affair in the bathroom, the audience sees her display of perfection break down and her moral ambivalence begins to show. She almost seduces one of her students into keeping her affair a secret, which is not a justifiable act. She has tears coming from her eyes and snot coming from her nose. Her hair is messed up and she tries to put

it back into place while she stares at herself in the mirror. The audience sees how Olivia and Annalise's hair, makeup, and costumes further display that their need for perfection comes at the cost of exposing the darkest parts of themselves.

In *Scandal* and *HTGAWM*, Olivia and Annalise are flawed characters who strive for perfection. The cinematography closely examines the many complicated layers of Olivia and Annalise that make the audience question their morals and righteousness. The mise-en-scene demonstrates that the look of perfection can break just as easily on the outside as it can on the inside. Both works display a dramatic and soap-driven narrative. Olivia and Annalise keep audiences guessing what will happen next. Through Rhimes' visual control, she has created a complex world of fantasy and intrigue that stars a Black woman. A Black woman is in power, and she is controlling the juicy narrative for audiences to enjoy. As an auteur, Rhimes shows how Black women can display the strain of perfection and the cost of moral ambivalence and create a complicated and engaging narrative. Next, I will textually analyze *Middle of Nowhere* and the first episode of *Queen Sugar* from DuVernay.

### ***DuVernay: Love, Pain, and the Journey of Fulfillment***

*Middle of Nowhere* focuses on Ruby, played by Emayatzy Corinealdi, and takes place in Compton, California. Ruby is a nurse who tries to keep her marriage alive while her husband, Derek, is incarcerated. After more secrets about her husband come to light, Ruby goes on a journey of self-discovery. *Queen Sugar* is about three siblings, Charley, played by Dawn-Lyen Gardner, Nova, played by Rutina Wesley, and Ralph-Angel, played by Kofi Siriboe. The siblings must take over their father's sugar cane farm in Louisiana after their father suddenly passes away. Ruby, Charley, and Nova each experience the difficulties that come with leading a family and a career. As each of these characters tries their best to do what is right, sorrow still has a way of

getting the best of them at times. In this analysis of DuVernay's texts, I explore the theme of love, pain, and the journey of fulfillment with an emphasis on character, cinematography, and sound.

Love is a very powerful force. It can cause people to act out of character in pursuit of it and love can also cause harm to those deeply intertwined with it. Everything DuVernay creates she can connect with. For instance, in an interview, DuVernay mentions how she knows many women who feel incarcerated in their own free lives because they are attached to men in prison (Array). In *Middle of Nowhere*, the audience roots for Ruby as she fights endlessly to ensure Derek can get a minimal release from prison. She has been extremely devoted to him as a wife and loves him enough to continue to fight for his justice. Yet, at his parole hearing, when Ruby learns that Derek had consensual sexual contact with an officer, the audience remains sadly stunned with Ruby. Ruby crying on her sister's shoulder represents a crucial breaking point in her relationship with Derek. Not only does Ruby have to deal with her husband being incarcerated, but her husband still breaks her heart by committing another bad deed. Was Ruby's consistent love and care from the outside not enough to keep Derek loyal on the inside? For love to truly work, honest love must come from both partners. But Ruby was putting in more love than Derek was. Ruby acted beyond herself to cater to her love for Derek. Instead of only looking out for herself, the love she shared with Derek drove her to work hard to set him free, while she became more trapped.

In the pursuit of love, Ruby deals with sadness and scrutiny from her sister, Rosie. For example, Ruby's love for Derek causes her pain, but it also causes Rosie pain to watch her sister fight for someone who is not equally fighting for her. Ruby's love should not be so closely linked with pain and dishonesty. Ruby's sister and mother both feel that Ruby deserves better.

DuVernay shows the closeness of Black sisterhood and Black female relationships. Love can also come from other Black women on screen. Black women are not single entities, but they work together to solidify a Black female community and culture.

Moreover, *Queen Sugar* also demonstrates how love does more harm than good for these Black female lead characters. Charley is the wife of a famous basketball player, Davis West. Towards the middle of the episode, Charley makes it publicly clear that she stands by her husband, Davis, and his teammates even with the rape allegations being further highlighted. Yet, as the episode continues, Charley learns of Davis's true involvement in the sex scandal. Charley did her duty as a wife and supported her husband to only have him lie to her in the end. Charley came up with a plan to keep her family's image from being destroyed, but Davis's infidelity has destroyed the image. When Charley confronts Davis on the basketball court, the audience can hear the pain in her voice as she screams at Davis. Not only did he lie about the sex scandal on television, but he broke Charley's trust by lying and cheating on her. Charley's love for Davis was not enough to keep him as a loyal partner. Unfortunately, Charley's support of Davis makes her look foolish because of how blindly she trusted the man she loves.

Furthermore, the audience sees Charley's sister, Nova's reaction to finding out about Davis's sex scandal as she sadly watches Charley's meltdown on television. Nova's sad expression demonstrates the pain she feels as she watches her sister's world fall apart. Love continues to have an impact on more than just the two people in the relationship because it can cause others to feel agony as well. On the other hand, Nova's love life is also complicated. Nova is a civil rights activist and journalist. Nova's relationship with Calvin, a police officer, contradicts what she is fighting for in her community. Nova speaks out against police brutality through her articles, yet she is in love with someone who works for the police department. Nova



and Calvin must express their love in secret because their love and beliefs find difficulty coexisting with each other. Nova can never share her true feelings with Calvin because their attitudes toward their community and views of justice are not the same. The love they have for each other is further suppressed because their work takes precedence over their love. Nova can never share her love with Calvin openly which makes their relationship a struggle.

In addition, Nova and Calvin's love can never go beyond the bedroom because he has a wife and family that Nova already knows about. When Nova sits in her car and stares at Calvin being happy with his family, she cries. While Nova accepts that her love for Calvin can never fully be sincere, it is still hurtful for Nova to watch his love extend to someone else. It is heartbreaking to know that love can bring just as much pain as happiness. While these Black female leads have such selfless and thoughtful traits, these traits ultimately hurt them when it comes to the aspect of romantic love. The theme of how painful and one-sided love can be extends across the narratives DuVernay showcases as an auteur. The audience watches Black women fight hard for love when love hits them back harder, which is a theme many people can relate to.

### *The Strength of Black Female Matriarchy*

DuVernay pushes narratives that showcase Black female leads as the head of family dynamics. *Middle of Nowhere* and *Queen Sugar*, portrays Black female lead characters in a matriarchal light as they fight to keep their lives, homes, and families together and legacies alive. When we are first introduced to Ruby, Charley, and Nova we learn that they are all fighting for something. Ruby fights for the release of her husband from jail. Charley fights to clear her husband's name and Nova fights for her community and her family. Showcasing Black female lead characters in this light demonstrates that Black women can be unique selfless matriarchal

characters. The essence of Black women taking care of their families runs deep in DuVernay's work. In *Middle of Nowhere*, Ruby is fiercely committed to her husband and is passionate about saving her marriage. She will not let something as grand as incarceration stop her from fulfilling her duties as a wife. Ruby is a very selfless character. Even though her husband has committed a crime and was not honest with her, she still feels the need to be there for him and make things right. Ruby is not only focused on herself; she always considers Derek and has more of a concern for his well-being than herself. For much of the film, she remains loyal to Derek and values the love they share.

On a similar note, in *Queen Sugar*, Charley has a reputation and an image to protect. Her family appears to be the quintessential famous basketball family. And keeping that image and family name intact is very important for Charley. Yet, when rape allegations against her husband's basketball team come to light, Charley is the first to stand up for her husband and the team. Charley is mainly worried about what these allegations will do to Davis. She is worried about how this news will affect him as a player. Charley's concern for herself is there, but it is not higher than the concern she has for her husband and his career. Charley is known to always have a plan. Nevertheless, it is up to her to stand in front of the press and answer questions. Charley fights to clear her husband and the basketball team's name. Her character is considerate and intelligent as the audience watches her protect her family and legacy.

Additionally, Nova also fights for what she feels is important in *Queen Sugar*. Nova may not be as traditional as her sister Charley with a household to protect, but she still shows how Black women can be passionate and determined about causes that matter to them. Nova believes she can help make a change in her community with her political activism and as a journalist. Nova notices that the world she lives in is not equal for everyone. So, she tries to influence

others to make a difference. As a journalist, Nova demonstrates that she wants to call attention to the inequalities in her community and campaigns for change. Not only is the audience seeing a Black woman further envelop herself in her surroundings, but Nova displays a deep care for others around her. She shows her selflessness through how she treats her neighbors and customers who come to her for spiritual healing. She often does not make them pay for her help, she does it to help the people in her community prevail. Black women can be the leads of stories that center around more than just themselves.

### *The Burdens of Loneliness and Isolation*

Ruby, Nova, and Charley each face a sense of loneliness and abandonment as the audience watches them on screen. However, the cinematography helps display a sense of emptiness and isolation each of the characters feels at one point without making the scene look too flat or dull. In *Middle of Nowhere*, the cinematographer is Bradford Young. Young has worked with DuVernay on various projects such as *Selma* and *When They See Us* (Petrusich). DuVernay mentions how she works very hard to diversify the film and television crews for the projects she works on (Chang). Not only is there a need for people of color to act out these narratives, but it is important to have people of color shaping how those narratives are presented to audiences. The opening of *Middle of Nowhere* emphasizes a sense of loneliness as the audience watches a single bus drive by. The road is open and bare. There is not much of anything that surrounds the prison. DuVernay shot the scenes at an actual prison which emphasizes the sincere feeling of isolation, and the lack of freedom Ruby has as she fights for her husband's freedom through her love (Array). Right from the beginning, the viewer is aware of the lonely state Ruby is in. She is unaccompanied as she makes this long and lonely drive to prison. Ruby dedicates a lot of time and effort to seeing Derek. Yet, as she goes further out of her way to see

him, she becomes more isolated. Even though Derek is the one who is legally incarcerated, Ruby also becomes incarcerated spiritually. She locks herself into taking care of Derek, and therefore her marriage. The bareness around her symbolizes the lack of freedom she has in her marriage and life. As Ruby stares out the window, the dark shadow on Ruby's face displays a void in her life. She is missing a part of herself as she tries to keep her marriage whole.

Additionally, the lighting in the scene, when Ruby learns of Derek's infidelity, is dark and grey. The lighting helps fuel the air of abandonment and isolation Ruby feels as she seems to be the only one working so hard for her relationship to prosper under difficult circumstances. The cinematography highlights how secluded a relationship involving two people can feel. In *Queen Sugar*, the main cinematographer is Antonio Calvache (Bright). When Nova watches Calvin's family from her car window, only one side of Nova's face is illuminated as she sits in the darkness. The only light hitting her car's window is the bright white light coming from the window of Calvin's house with his picture-perfect family. As the camera switches to show Calvin and his family, their life looks bright and happy. There is no room for Nova in it. The cinematography displays the ostracization that Nova feels as she watches her lover live a seemingly perfect life without her.

### *Fueling the Mood and Conveying the Narrative*

Music helps connect the audience to what exactly is happening in the scene. The music used in *Middle of Nowhere* and *Queen Sugar* fuels the mood of different scenes. Meshell Ndegeocello scores and Aamina Gant music supervises the series (Emp). For instance, in the opening scene of *Queen Sugar*, the song, "Faithful" by Ndegeocello plays in the background. The scene is of Nova and Calvin waking up in bed together. This song not only helps set up the mood of the sweet and passionate moment between Calvin and Nova, but it also helps tell a

story. The song conveys a sense of untrustworthiness. The song displays the theme that people can be unfaithful but can still be forgiven. This theme is prevalent throughout the first episode. The theme is that loving a husband, a family, or a career comes at a cost. Even Black women in these strong matriarchal roles can break and feel that their faithfulness is tested by the ones they love. The music caters to this concept of storytelling.

Moreover, *Middle of Nowhere* uses music that does not overpower the scene. Most of the music used in *Middle of Nowhere* is key to the atmosphere of the scene. The background music is more instrumental in scenes that focus on Ruby's emotions. For example, when Ruby learns about Derek's infidelity at the parole hearing, the tone of the music is eerie and sad. It represents the disappointment and betrayal Ruby feels. Whereas earlier in the film, when Ruby gets good news about Derek's possible release, the tone of the music is lighter and daintier. The sounds in the film coincide with the actions taking place on the screen. All the music the audience hears directly relates to what the audience sees. The music helps emphasize specific emotions, which helps the audience better connect with the range of emotions Ruby has during the film.

As an auteur, DuVernay exposes the intricacies of Black women overseeing their families and lives. Ruby, Charley, and Nova experience the hardships of fighting for family and one's desires at the same time. Their stories include hardships and resilience to portray them as well-rounded characters. The cinematography emphasizes an inner fear the characters have, and the sound further encapsulates the deeper messages within the film and series. DuVernay displays a realistic and melodramatic narrative that caters to the individuality of the Black female identity. She displays how Black women are hopeful and loving humans that deal with pain and loss as they discover the realness within themselves. Finally, I will textually analyze the premiere episodes of seasons one and two from Rae's *Insecure*.

## ***Rae: The Authenticity of the Modern Black Female***

*Insecure* takes place in Los Angeles and follows Issa, played by Rae, and Molly, played by Yvonne Orji. Issa and Molly are best friends and are both young college-educated modern Black women who encounter different obstacles in love, work, and family life. In this section, Rae demonstrates how Issa and Molly are not perfect and may not handle things correctly. I analyze how Rae shows the theme of authentic and modern Black female issues through specific scenarios that Molly and Issa experience. Additionally, the sound and mise-en-scene in *Insecure* emphasizes the unique balance of Black women creating their own realm of reality and staying true to themselves.

We all have insecurities, especially at work and in romantic relationships. These are the main areas of life where we are constantly judged. Yet, Black women know this fear all too well. Black women must deal with discrimination in the workplace and must fight to be treated equally among others. Also, Black women are the least likely to be married (Raley et al.). With the many hardships that Black women face, it makes sense that they might feel insecure. *Insecure* introduces the audience to Issa and Molly. Two Black female leads that seem to have their life together, but as the audience learns more about them, reality sets in and life is messier and more uncomfortable than expected. *Insecure* displays the theme of the difficulty and confusion that comes with navigating modern Black female womanhood. Many Black women can relate to the experiences of Issa and Molly because they are real experiences. As Issa and Molly develop as characters, they take different steps in life to ensure they remain true to themselves and their friendship as they go through many bumps along the way.

For instance, romantic relationships are difficult for anyone to understand. Yet, romance and love are the main themes in the lives of young people. In one scene, Molly receives a text

from an Arab guy she went on a couple of dates with. Instead of texting him back, Molly immediately calls him, but he does not answer. She begins to tell her coworker how she never thought she would end up with someone who was not Black. Molly immediately assumes she is in a relationship with someone she just started getting to know. Molly is very concerned about her love life and assumes that every person she goes out with wants to be in a relationship with her. Soon, Molly checks her phone again and the guy says he is not looking for a relationship at the moment. This scene also shows that Molly has difficulty dating Black men. She finds it hard to have a romantic relationship with someone who shares the same skin tone as her. Finding a partner is a concern for many women and Molly demonstrates how complicated finding love as a Black millennial woman can be.

Furthermore, Issa does not like where her relationship with her boyfriend of five years, Lawrence, is headed. When Issa comes home from her birthday dinner with Molly, she sees Lawrence laying on the couch in his pajamas. Lawrence mentioned that he bombed his job interview and did not want to go out for Issa's birthday. Instead, he tells Issa he will take her to 7-Eleven for her birthday. While Issa is in a committed relationship with Lawrence, she does not seem happy with where their relationship is going. It feels like she is settling for less in this relationship. Many people find that their relationships look different after being together for many years. However, in this scene, Issa settles for less and she feels like her wants and needs are no longer being met in her relationship with Lawrence. Both women deal with a complicated love life as they struggle to find the exact things they need and want out of love. Issa and Molly show how love and relationships are difficult and confusing issues for Black women to navigate.

*Black Female Workplace Realities*

Issa's character shows how comical and awkward different exchanges in life can be. However, Issa's skin color seems to be the focus when others interact with her. It becomes unnecessarily draining for Issa to ensure her Blackness around others. Issa's work life is a prime example of how others view her based on her skin color. The audience sees Issa deal with such scrutiny over her Black identity at work. For instance, in the pilot episode of *Insecure* when Issa is discussing her position at "We Got Y'all" with the young students of color, most of them comment on her outward appearance. They mention how she speaks like a white girl. This interaction demonstrates how difficult it is for modern Black women to be themselves in a world constructed on whiteness. Is it because she sounds "proper" that the students immediately connect her to whiteness? To many, Issa symbolizes the "oreo" archetype. She is Black on the outside and white on the inside (Jones 149). Since Issa is not loud, angry, or inarticulate the students assume she has a form of whiteness within her. Issa rejects these typical stereotypes associated with Blackness, but she still must defend her Blackness. Black women are constantly judged on what they bring to the table and being black enough is one of them. Issa mentions that she went to college, came from a good family, and has been in a romantic relationship with her boyfriend for five years. Yet, these qualities do not make the students believe that Issa is a round character, but that she is closer to being a white person than a Black person. Questioning anyone's race or ethnicity would make anyone insecure within themselves but Issa tries to combat these remarks and stand up for herself and not play into what people assume her to be.

Even though Issa may be awkward at times when her Blackness comes into question, she does not let that stop her from standing up for herself. In the first episode of the second season, the audience notices the progress Issa makes in demonstrating her ability to speak up for herself. For Black women, it can be difficult to show their passion and defend themselves without being



labeled as too aggressive. These instances can cause them to feel insecure within the workplace. However, when Issa speaks to her boss, Joanne, about keeping “We Got Y’all” in place at a particular school, she demonstrates that she will not let what others think of her distract her from what she believes is right. She stands up for herself. Issa stays calm and poised throughout the conversation, which shows that Issa defies stereotypes and makes the situation better for herself.

Additionally, Molly's character represents Black female success. She is a lawyer at a predominantly white law firm and is well-educated. Also, she understands the notion of “code-switching.” Many Black women feel that they must act one way at home and another way when they are at work. They must change their identity to feel connected to their work environment (Jones et al. 223). When Issa mentions in the first episode of *Insecure* that white and Black people love Molly, she emphasizes a real scenario that Black women go through. Molly must act one way with one group of people to feel accepted and change her behavior around another group of people to feel accepted. Most modern Black women can relate to code-switching in the workplace because a certain type of Blackness may not be acceptable around others. It may promote certain negative stereotypes that Black women want to stray away from. Yet, if Black women act “white” that is also looked down upon because people are comparing Black female authenticity to another race, if that Black woman does not act according to the stereotype.

Nonetheless, Molly does not let that issue stop her from working hard. In the first episode of the second season of *Insecure*, Molly accidentally receives her white male coworker's paycheck. She notices that he is paid a significantly higher amount than her, even though they have been at the firm for the same amount of time and are in the same position. *Insecure* shines a light on the unequal pay gap that many Black women face, for example; “Black women earn 63 cents for every dollar paid to White men, compared to the 80 cents White women earn”

(Malveaux). While Molly is successful and intelligent, it comes at a cost while working in corporate America. It forces her to look at how others view her worth when she is not paid equally. Are Black women valued enough in the workplace? Molly is expected to give her all and she is proud of her accomplishments, but others do not see her as an equal entity.

However, Molly does speak her mind to her white male coworker, Travis when he mentions that their female coworker should have spoken up if she did not feel valued at the firm. When Molly says that people do not "automatically" listen to a woman when she speaks, she emphasizes the hardships women encounter while trying to defend themselves. And for Black women, this task is much more difficult because they have race and gender playing against them. People tend to look down on Black women because they are not seen as good enough. Yet, when Molly speaks her truth to Travis, she stands up for herself while calling attention to the disparities Black women face and only Black women can understand. Molly and Issa are not perfect characters, and they may not handle every situation in life correctly, but they grow from the circumstances presented in front of them. They are relatable Black female leads. They demonstrate the modern issues that fuel Black female womanhood that show Black women they are not alone in the struggles they face today.

### *The Importance of Self-appreciation and Black Culture*

Rae demonstrates her authenticity within *Insecure*. Not only does she bring real-life issues many Black women face to the forefront, but she also adds a piece of herself into the show through the music. Rae dedicates a whole chapter in her autobiography to how she discovered her love for music and the different types of music she listened to as a child and as a teenager. Rae works with composer, Raphael Saadiq and music supervisor, Kier Lehman to bring the musical score of *Insecure* alive (Madden et al.). The opening scene of the first episode plays the

song "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar from his third studio album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, released in 2015 (Limbong). Lamar and Rae are both from southern California. The first line the audience hears is, "All my life I has to fight nigga." This immediately draws attention to Black culture and the experiences Black people face. The song defined a decade and has been used as the anthem for the Black Lives Matter movement. The song represents a time for Black people not to give up. It also represents a celebration of Blackness. *Insecure* is about showcasing the modern anxieties and issues Black people face, and what better way to introduce the series than with such a powerful song? *Insecure* can be seen as a protest to rejecting Black stereotypes people of color of faced over the years and "Alright" perfectly encapsulates that message.

Moreover, Rae has always had a love for rap. In her autobiography, she mentions how she started a rap group in college with her friends called JAM'D. Rae recorded their rap session and uploaded it to YouTube (her very first YouTube upload), and it gained more than 150,000 views (Rae 156). Then, in her YouTube series she stars in, *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, Rae raps about what she is going through in life, and she does so in a similar manner in *Insecure*. In the pilot episode of *Insecure*, Issa raps to herself in the mirror about how sorry she feels for herself on her birthday. She uses rap to emphasize her feelings and the viewer connects with her on a deeper level. A lot of people do "weird" stuff when they are alone, but Rae shows how comical and vulnerable releasing those feelings can be. Are we judging her because she raps alone to herself in the mirror? Maybe, but she is showing the reality of her situation and her life in a different medium, which is through rap. Nonetheless, her rapping takes a unique turn, in the premiere episode of Season two of *Insecure*.

In the opening scene, we see Issa going on a montage of dates, after her breakup with Lawrence. When one of her dates asks her a question, Issa begins to make a beat with her

silverware and rap. She steps out of the narrative and raps to the audience in a non-diegetic way. She raps about how she cheated on Lawrence and does not like dating again. She demonstrates that her love life is in shambles through rap. It is still about Issa, but she interacts with the audience more directly than before. Rae's musical ability still emphasizes her relatability and pushes the authenticity of dealing with the mistrials of life in *Insecure*.

### *Modern Black Female Identity*

Issa and Molly continue to embody the theme of trying to remain true to themselves as they navigate Black modern womanhood. For instance, Rae mentions that hair is a very important aspect of Black female identity in her autobiography. It is the "ultimate form of expression, an opportunity to be noticed and/or to be understood" (Rae 80). However, not everyone sees it that way. Rae was taunted for her natural hair in middle school as her classmates called it "nappy." Yet, Rae did not let those comments define her love for her hair. When the audience first meets Issa, her hair is short and appears to be in its natural state. Her tight curls are an orange-brown color that compliments her brown skin. Issa showing her natural hair demonstrates the confidence she has within herself over something that many Black women have insecurities about. Even though Issa can be awkward, she stays true to who she is through her appearance. Also, in the long shot in the first scene of the pilot episode, Issa faces the camera directly as she talks to the students. We see every part of her: her hair, her funky jacket, and her baggy jeans. Through Issa's clothing and the setup of the scene, the audience can tell she is a free spirit who sticks to what feels natural for her.

Additionally, whenever the audience sees Molly, she is in professional work clothes. Whether it is a blazer, pantsuit, or dress, Molly dresses to impress and to look the best at work. Her office is full of white walls, glass doors, and appears boring. While Molly dresses for her

environment, she still adds her own flare by wearing outfits that still have ruffles and flare. Also, she wears her hair silky straight which appears to be a weave or a wig. Most Black women must wear a wig or a weave to achieve such bone-straight hair. But for Molly's work environment, this makes sense. She is one of the few Black people there, so wearing her hair straight helps her fit in with her environment and is easier to maintain than her natural hair. A lot of Black women stray away from wearing their natural hair because it is not always socially acceptable. Molly shows how most Black women in corporate America must adapt their hair to their environment, even though it serves as a strong aspect of their identity. Through hair and costume, Rae demonstrates the spectrum of how modern Black women connect their hair and style to who they are and what they do.

Issa and Molly face many obstacles as they navigate modern Black female womanhood. Yet, the audience can connect with them on a deeper level because the difficulties they face are confusing but authentic to the Black female experience. As an auteur, Rae emphasizes the distinct realities Black women face through characters like Molly and Issa. The music shows the importance of expressing one's culture and the mise-en-scene displays the uniqueness of Black female individuality and identity. The stories of Issa and Molly represent the dynamic and relatable aspects of the modern Black woman. *Insecure's* authentic and comical view on the everyday and common issues in life demonstrates that Black women's stories do not have to be overly dramatic to appeal to audiences. Rae's fresh and upbeat work as an auteur emphasizes the need for Black women to create narratives in every genre to appeal to the wide range of Black female identities and culture. In the conclusion section of my thesis, I will be looking at the similarities between each auteur and possible further research.

## Conclusion

I remember walking into my kitchen one night as my mother cooked dinner on the stove.

“Did you watch the final episode of *Insecure*?” I asked.

“Yes, I watched it. Now I’m sad the series is over,” she said as she brought a hot pot of water to the sink.

“Aww, you didn’t like the ending?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that...I see so much of you and your sister when I watch that show. I hope there will be more shows like that...or you can create something of your own.”

I smiled and looked down.

“I hope I can too, but maybe you should watch *Scandal* next. It’s not exactly the same but it does star a Black woman.” I mentioned softly.

“Okay, I’ll give that one a try.” She said.

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The power of Black female representation is a major theme across the works of Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae. Since they created these narratives as Black female storytellers, Black women and others can experience different stories of Black female identity and representations from a distinct perspective. While each auteur is unique and complex in her own right, there are still similarities between the auteurs that each of the narratives share. For example, each auteur showcases the topic of love either through theme, character, cinematography, sound, or mise-en-scene. Love is complicated. Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae expand the many layers of what love

looks like. For instance, Rhimes and DuVernay each portray narratives that have independent Black female lead characters as the “other” woman. Olivia (*Scandal*) and Nova (*Queen Sugar*) are willingly in relationships with men who are married to other women. Olivia and Nova are intelligent and self-assured characters. Yet, the men they love do not love them in the same way. Olivia and Nova each have intense moments of sadness and loneliness because they are treated as the “other” woman. Olivia cries alone in the closet after she watches one of her associates propose to his girlfriend. Nova cries alone in her car after learning about her father’s death. Both women cannot go to the men they love and share their vulnerabilities. They must love in secret and be vulnerable alone. Olivia cannot tell Fitz (*Scandal*) and Nova cannot tell Calvin (*Queen Sugar*) their full truths because these men are not their true partners. These men do not pick Olivia and Nova, so Olivia and Nova must rely on themselves to take care of their heartache and emotions. Love can cause more sorrow than joy. It can make people feel isolated and estranged as they long to be with the one they desire. This shows that even the love lives of Black women can be messy and unpretty. Love is not simple for anyone. Rhimes and DuVernay both demonstrate the agony of the desire to be loved through characters like Olivia and Nova.

Additionally, Rhimes and Rae demonstrate how Black women can also be their own worst enemy in the realm of love. For instance, Annalise (*HTGAWM*) and Issa (*Insecure*) both cheat on their partners. Annalise is married to Sam, another professor at the university. However, she is having an affair with Nate, a police detective. Annalise is a wise woman, but her actions show otherwise. Through her affair, she gains something she is missing within her marriage. Similarly, the audience learns that Issa eventually cheats on her boyfriend Lawrence, with an old fling, Daniel. Annalise admits to her student, Wes, that things are not going well with her marriage to Sam. Issa confides in her friend Molly that she feels like Lawrence is not trying hard

enough in their relationship. Both characters step out of their relationships in exploration of something more and to feel fulfilled. Their actions demonstrate a complicated journey of self-pleasure. Both women deserve to be satisfied romantically, yet they do not look for it in a morally just way. Not only are they putting their morals at risk, but they are also risking hurting their partners' feelings. They further showcase how Black women can make mistakes when it comes to love and that they are not always the perfect romantic partners. Rhimes and Rae emphasize that everyone can have a complicated and intense love triangle. Annalise and Issa display how one's selfish actions can have consequences for all.

Another theme that is apparent between the auteurs is Black female sisterhood. Specifically, DuVernay and Rae illustrate the importance of Black sisterhood and friendship. While Ruby (*Middle of Nowhere*) experiences a lot of loneliness in her relationship with Derek, her sister Rosie is always by her side. When Derek's infidelity is mentioned at his parole hearing, Rosie is sitting next to Ruby as she hears such devastating news. Rosie holds Ruby close as she watches her sister sob. Later in the film, Ruby reminisces about the activities Derek lied to her about before he went to prison and blames herself. Fed up with seeing her sister upset, Rosie says, "It's too much Rube. Get a grip." Even though Rosie wants to be there for her sister who's hurting, she still feels the need to tell her sister the truth, no matter how hard it is to hear. Nobody wants to see their loved one in pain, but Ruby has kept herself in this situation for the sake of love. Ruby and Rosie spend a lot of time together throughout the film and their bond as sisters is strong. But Ruby's questionable support of Derek after he hurts her, causes Rosie to notice that her sister seems to value the well-being of Derek too much, rather than the well-being of herself. This scene allows the audience to see these close sisters challenge each other because they want



the best for each other. While what Rosie says to her sister comes off as tough, it is only because she loves her sister and thinks she deserves better.

Moreover, Issa and Molly (*Insecure*) always look out for each other, even when one does not make the best decisions. In the first episode of Season 1, Molly tells Issa she does not think it is right for her to go out with Daniel while she is still with Lawrence. Molly mentions that Issa can be selfish and only thinks about herself. Molly is harsh in her delivery, but it is also because she is passionate about her friendship with Issa. This causes Issa to reevaluate her relationship with Lawrence and try to give their relationship another chance at the beginning of the series. Molly holds Issa accountable for her decisions. She creates an honest understanding between them which makes their bond as friends stronger.

Furthermore, in the first episode of Season 2, Issa and Molly are taking a walk in the park as they evaluate their lives. Molly has recently started seeing a Black therapist. Molly talks about her time in therapy and that she does not want to get “deep” with the therapist. Issa mentions that the only way for therapy to work is for Molly to get “deep” and that Molly should stick with it. This shows that Issa and Molly listen to each other, which creates a comfortable environment for the women to be themselves with each other. They are not faking their friendship because they value and want the best for each other. Issa gives Molly effective advice that will hopefully make her life better. The audience sees that Black women can have valuable and constructive friendships where they support each other. Whether by blood or by circumstance, DuVernay and Rae display how Black women thrive when they can have open and honest conversations. This allows for Black women to share personal and vulnerable versions of themselves to others.

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This thesis focused on how Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae have created and produced three-dimensional Black female led narratives as Black female auteurs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, there were Black women creating these types of narratives before them. To extend this research further, I would look at other Black female auteurs from the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and the work they have created with Black women at the center of the narratives. Black female auteurs such as Julie Dash, Yvette Lee Bowser, Gina Prince-Bythewood, and Mara Brock Akil each began their pivotal work as an auteur during the late 90s and early 2000s. I would analyze the stylistic and cinematic conventions used back then to convey impactful themes of Black female representation and identity during a time where Black women behind and in front of the camera was much less than it is now. Additionally with this current research, I could further analyze how Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae have changed what Black female love looks like. Such as what romantic Black love, platonic Black love, and interracial love looks like on screen through the eyes of Black female auteurs. Each of these concepts demonstrate the individuality of Black women in charge of showcasing narratives that do not generalize but conceptualize the image of Black women today.

Representation matters. Black women deserve to be represented on screen in a way that is meaningful and enforces connection. For so long, others have created the narrative for Black women or have pushed them to the side. Rhimes, DuVernay, and Rae emphasize the need for Black women and other creators of color to tell their own stories. As a Black woman, not only do I connect to their brown skin tones but, I am inspired by Ruby's perseverance. I admire Olivia's boldness and I relate to Issa's awkwardness. I see different versions of myself in each of these stories and I connect with each story in a specific and direct manner. As Black women create

more stories, then more dynamic portrayals of Black women are shown to the world. And the world is better for it.

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