

SHONDA RHIMES'S TGIT: REPRESENTATION OF WOMANHOOD AND BLACKNESS

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ABSTRACT

For the first time in television history, Shonda Rhimes, a Black female showrunner, obtained an entire prime time programming block on American broadcast television. She has been recognized as one of the most successful and influential TV showrunners and her shows are celebrated for promoting a strong feminist agenda that tends towards equality regardless of gender, race, class, religious belief or sexual orientation. Concentrating on ABC's prime time night "Thank God It's Thursday", our analysis focuses on *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-), *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014-) and *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), respectively a medical, a legal and a political drama. The main goal of the paper is to propose a hybrid methodology to investigate which aesthetics, identities and relationships of race and womanhood are represented in these three case studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Concentrating on ABC's prime time night "Thank God It's Thursday", which features Shonda Rhimes' *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-), *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014-) and *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), our paper proposes a novel hybrid methodology to investigate which relationships, aesthetics, and identities of race and womanhood are represented in these three TV series. We chose to focus our analysis on Shonda Rhimes' productions because her shows are celebrated for promoting a strong feminist agenda that tends towards equality regardless of gender, race, class, religious belief or sexual orientation (Kinane 2017).

Within the *peak TV era*, the offer of audiovisual content is continuously increasing; in 2019 alone the U.S. scripted 532 original series (Goldberg 2020). The rapid proliferation of TV series is deeply affecting the contemporary media landscape as well as the public consumption of audiovisual content in mainstream television. This topic has been the focus of scholarly attention since the early 2000s (Desjardins and Haralovich 2015), and since then numerous studies have investigated how the construction of womanhood and Blackness has evolved in fictional products (Carson and Llewellyn-Jones 2000, Helford 2000, Brooks and Hébert 2006, Akass and McCabe 2006, 2007, McCabe and Akass 2006, 2007, Tasker and Negra 2007, Holmlund 2010, Holtzman and Sharpe 2014, Desjardins and Haralovich 2015), in advertising on prime time TV (Mastro and Stern 2003, Collins 2018), as well as in adolescents' consumption of media content (Brown and Pardun 2004, Ellithorpe and Bleakley 2016).

In this era of TV series abundance, women have had a numerically inferior presence in the media industries' top positions. Considering the latest "Boxed In" report from Lauzen and the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film (Lauzen 2019), overall, women accounted for 31% of individuals working in key behind-the-scenes positions, which represents a recent historic high, besting the previous high of 28% set in 2016-17 (Lauzen 2019: 2). This data is relevant in as much as across platforms, "programs with at least one woman creator employed substantially greater percentages of women in other key behind-the-scenes roles and featured more female characters in major and speaking roles than programs with exclusively male creators" (Lazen 2019: 4).

With regard to racial diversity in the television industry, an investigation conducted on 50 showrunners working for the five main American networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CW) during the 2016-17 television season "reveals that

90% of showrunners are White, and almost 80% are male" (Ryan 2016). Conversely, "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2019" report reveals that during the 2017-18 season the number of women and people of color directing episodes of entertainment TV shows hit a record high for a second consecutive year. According to the Directors Guild of America, "Women directed 25 percent of all episodes, a rise of 4 percentage points from 2016-17; men directed 75 percent. Minorities directed 24 percent of all episodes, a rise of 2 percentage points from 2016-17".¹ However, non-White female showrunners are still a minority, thus, we decided to explore the production of one of the few successful Black female showrunners: Shonda Rhimes.

Shonda Rhimes is considered one of the most powerful women in the world of entertainment and media (Forbes 2018). She has won numerous awards and she is the wealthiest female showrunner in the U.S. (Berg 2018). In a 2016 TED Talk, Shonda Rhimes in describing her work revealed:

Three shows in production at a time, sometimes four. The budget for one episode of network television can be anywhere from three to six million dollars. Let's just say five. A new episode made every nine days, times four shows—so every nine days, that's 20 million dollars' worth of television. Four television programs, 70 hours of TV, three shows in production at a time, sometimes four, 16 episodes going on at all times. That's 350 million dollars a season. My television shows are back to back to back on Thursday night. Around the world, my shows air in 256 territories in 67 languages for an audience of 30 million people (Rhimes 2016).

Her serial products are a worldwide success. In 2017 Shonda Rhimes signed an estimated \$100 million four-year contract with Netflix making history as one of the first showrunners to ink an exclusive deal with this streaming service. This contract with Netflix is not the first historical turning point for Shonda Rhimes, in fact, she was the first African American showrunner ever (female or male) to obtain an entire prime time programming block of three consecutive hours (8-11 p.m. Eastern Standard Time) for three different shows in one night which ABC branded "Thank God It's

1 "Directors Guild: Count of female, minority TV episode directors hit all-time high", *The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2019*, p. 108. <https://tools.womensmediacenter.com/page/-/WMCStatusofWomeninUSMedia2019.pdf> (last accessed 28-01-20).

Thursday" (TGIT). The serial products of ABC's prime time Thursday constitute our corpus of investigation. Through our hybrid methodology, in the following sections, we show how, in our cases studies, Rhimes delivers numerous post-feminist, strong, independent, and complex female characters that persist through the various seasons. In regard to race, the corpus displays a colour-blind representation of the characters. Although racial issues are mostly neutralized, the corpus is dotted with episodes that specifically deal with issues of racial inequality and are relegated mostly to the past.

2. CORPUS OF INVESTIGATION

In this work, we chose to focus primarily on broadcast television as it still reaches the largest number of television viewers (Desjardins and Haralovich 2015), and since 2005 it aired 20 legal dramas (45% created by female showrunners, 45% by male and 10% by mixed teams), 58 legal dramas (9% created by female showrunners, 76% by male and 15% by mixed teams) and 7 political dramas (29% created by female showrunners, 57% by male and 14% by mixed teams).

Our corpus of investigation consists of the TGIT triptych, the three ShondaLand's² dramas are *Grey's Anatomy* (a medical drama), *How to Get Away with Murder* (a legal drama) and *Scandal* (a political drama).³ All three TV series frequently dominate the top ten list of shows viewed by African Americans (Nielsen 2015).

Grey's Anatomy (ABC, 2005-) has become the longest prime time medical drama in the U.S., breaking *E.R.*'s record (NBC, 1994-2009). The series tells the story of a group of doctors who learn how to interact with other people and themselves while learning and performing medical procedures. Surgeries and treatments here become the substrata that serves as a setting to the personal lives of the characters. The multistrand narration is shaped by three isotopies: the medical cases plot, the professional plot and the sentimental plot (Pescatore and Rocchi 2019).

How to Get Away with Murder, even though it was only produced by Shonda Rhimes and actually created by Peter Norwalk, it is a show that fully fits within the ShondaLand brand and follows the same distributive strategies of the oth-

er two case studies (Everett 2015: 35). Furthermore, this TV series reflects Rhimes' trademark in the form of legal drama: twisted plotlines, endless lies, sex scenes, mad characters, fast dialogues and a leading brilliant woman at the center of it all. It is a successful legal drama that takes place in law firms, courtrooms, penitentiaries, etc. The characters (lawyers, law students, clients, etc.) have to deal not only with a specific case in each episode (vertical detection) but also with the horizontal detection storyline: the main protagonist Annalise Keating,⁴ with five of her students, becomes entwined in several murders. The parallel relationship between two distinct plotlines (i.e., vertical and horizontal detection) in *How to Get Away with Murder* is the most distinctive aspect when compared with *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*.

Scandal, which has been acclaimed as "the most feminist show on TV," featuring "the first Black female lead on network TV in almost 40 years" (Tanzina 2013), is a political drama set in Washington DC that follows the predicaments of Olivia Pope,⁵ a brilliant Afro-American woman who becomes one of the most influential and skilled crisis managers in town. After running, and winning, the presidential campaign of Republican candidate Fitzgerald Grant, she is hired as White House Communications Director, a position that she gives up due to her adulterous romantic relationship with President Grant. She starts her own practice as crisis manager: 'Olivia Pope and Associates' where, in each episode (vertical detection), she handles the indiscretions of dignitaries and politicians, rehabilitating their public image. Through the seasons, the handling of the single cases is increasingly replaced by the horizontal detection storyline: the main protagonist's romantic and political involvement with the White House.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology we adopted to conduct this study is situated at the intersection between two approaches: a quantitative analysis combined with the analysis of a selection of textual elements. The findings are then problematized within the existing scientific literature that explores the post-feminist and post-civil rights debates in the media in general

2 ShondaLand is the name of the television production company founded by Shonda Rhimes.

3 During the 2018/2019 television season *Scandal* has been replaced by *Station 19* (ABC, 2018-).

4 The performance of Viola Davis in this role earned her an Emmy in the category of Outstanding Leading Actress in a drama series (she was the first African American woman to win it) and many others.

5 The series won numerous prizes and in particular for its leading actress Kerry Washington, who was nominated at the Emmy Awards for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series for her interpretation of Olivia Pope.

(Hurtado 1989, Lotz 2001, 2006, Patton 2001, Dubrofsky 2002, Mosley and Read 2002, McRobbie 2004, Brooks and Herbert 2006, Snyder 2008, Lazar 2011, Horbury 2014, Rottenberg 2014, Gill 2016, Gomez and McFarlane 2016) and on Shonda Rhimes' productions in particular (Long 2011, Horbury 2014, Erigha 2015, Everett 2015, Warner 2015a, 2015b, Williams and Golin 2017, Brüning 2019). The distinctiveness of the methodology we employed, consists in creating a dialogue between mixed approaches applied not only to the first seasons, as it has been done in other studies so far, but for the long haul: *Grey's Anatomy* is at its sixteenth season and *Scandal* is currently finished – allowing to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ShondaLand's peculiarities.

Therefore, firstly, we mapped the main characters for each case study, calculating the percentage of male and female presence in each series. Secondly, we explored the persistence of each female main character, that is, we weighted their presence throughout all the seasons of each series. The persistence is calculated on the number of seasons in which a main character appears. For instance, if a x_i female character is present in N_i seasons her persistence is N_i . Thus, when adding all the persistences of the k female main characters (where k is the total number of female main characters) we find that the total persistence of female characters is $\sum_{i=1}^k N_i$. Thirdly, to the wide-ranging vision that this mapping offers us, we coalesced an analysis of a selection of textual features from each case study to shed light on the effective representation that Shonda Rhimes gives of these women, and in particular of women of color. Lastly, we confronted our findings with the existing literature.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Representation of Womanhood

We investigate the representation of womanhood across the corpus considering multiple aspects. We firstly explore the female presence through quantitative analysis. Our findings reveal that out of the 31 main characters that populate *Grey's Anatomy*, 52% are female and there is a consistency in their persistence (54%) in the seasons placing this series at the top among our case studies (Figure 1). Considering *How to Get Away with Murder*, out of the 14 main characters, 43% are female and there is a consistency in their persistence (42%) in the series placing the show in second place among our case studies (Figure 1). *Scandal* places last, indeed the quantitative research discloses that out of the 15 main characters only

33% are female and there is a consistency in their persistence (36%) in the series (Figure 1). Considering the latest “Boxed In” data on speaking female characters on broadcast network programs (44% in 2018-2019), *How to Get Away with Murder* can be considered in line with other broadcast shows; *Grey's Anatomy* has a higher percentage and *Scandal* a lower one (Figure 1).

Considering textual elements within the sample, we have a variety of representations of womanhood. *Grey's Anatomy* for example is characterized by a group of strong and independent women (Wilks 2012). During the twelfth season the viewer is transported into a women-run hospital: Miranda Bailey finally becomes the hospital's first-ever female chief of surgery, and she is assisted by Callie as head of orthopaedics, Arizona as head of paediatrics, Maggie as head of cardiology, and Amelia, who runs the neurology department. As Callie points out (12.02): “badass... ladies, this place is run by ladies... it's ladies place”. *Grey's Anatomy* shows powerful and driven women, but who are also inexorably damaged, falling therefore within the anti-heroine category, a standard character within television series (Inness 2004, Lotz 2006, Tally 2016, Buonanno 2017). For instance, the protagonist, Meredith, de-

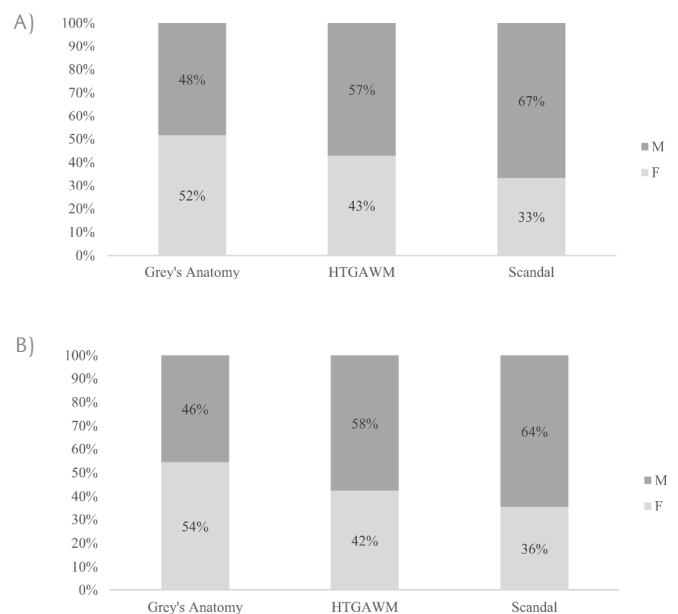


FIGURE 1. GENDER REPRESENTATION: (A) PERCENTAGE OF MALE AND FEMALE PRESENCE; (B) PERCENTAGE OF MALE AND FEMALE PERSISTENCE.

scribes herself as “dark” and “twisty”. She has to cope with child traumas when she was ignored and unappreciated due to her mother’s medical career. Amelia is another character who had to fight her way through life. Professionally, she lived for a long time in her brother’s shadow: always being identified as the other Dr. Shepherd and never receiving the praise and respect she deserves. Furthermore, in season 14 she is faced with a complicated case of brain tumour that seems impossible to remove, especially without Derek’s help. By successfully removing it she proves to everyone, including herself, that she can stand on her own two feet. This moment of empowerment and independence teaches Amelia not to doubt herself and speaks volumes about the potential of women in general. There are also women that have to fight against prejudices (e.g., Izzie must defend herself revealing that she posed as an underwear model to pay for her college debt, 2.04) and against social expectations connected to womanhood and motherhood (e.g., Cristina and Owen disagreement over having children, 8.01; Bayle’s difficulties in reconciling family life with her hospital career).

In *How to Get Away with Murder* everything revolves around the charming character of Annalise Keating, its career-driven female protagonists. She is a dynamic character who is both strong and vulnerable, confident and frightened. Black feminist scholars emphasize the relative invisibility of Black women in American media (Crenshaw 1989, 1991, Collins 1991, 2004, Hooks 1998, 2002) and how they are often conceptualized as “good only for their bodies”. In fact, Black women are frequently represented as difficult, unattractive and undesirable, sexually immoral and hypersexualized (Hooks 1992, Nagel 2003, Collins 2004, Springer 2008, Morales and Bejarano 2008, Feagin 2013, Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, Slatton 2015). *How to Get Away with Murder* challenges this one-dimensional characterization breaking down many common stereotypes and allowing viewers to meet a multifaceted protagonist. However, the portrayal of Annalise Keating also exposes some downfalls: she constantly tries to mould her persona to fit a White heteronormative prototype despite being a queer Black woman, and she manipulates other marginalized characters. In addition, Toms-Anthony (2018: 66-73) points out how Annalise Keating’s portrayal also shows three main stereotypical depictions of Black women: the Mammy, which refers to a “motherly, self-sacrificing Black female servant who is responsible for domestic duties and taking care of those around her” (Reynolds-Dobbs et al. 2008: 136); the Jezebel, which refers to a “fair skinned or mulatto woman” considered “a shapely, tempting seductress,

who uses her body and sexuality to get her way” (Reynolds-Dobbs et al. 2008: 137); and the Angry Black Woman.

Considering *Scandal*, its main female character, Olivia Pope, has become an icon and is acclaimed as “the strongest female leading character in TV history” (Putnam 2014). She is an unusual and revolutionary television character from at least two points of view. First of all, she is “an African-American woman [...] a non-mixed-race, or non-fair-skinned, Black woman” (Everett 2015: 37) who is both romantically and sexually desired by powerful Caucasian males, first among them the President of the United States, thus challenging the stereotypes surrounding Black femininity and interracial romances. Secondly, she is a successful, independent and highly educated woman who is outspoken about women’s rights “calling out sexism whenever she sees it” (Donahue 2014). She is ambitious, even ruthless in carrying out her job and trying to stay at the top of her game. She doesn’t cook, she doesn’t feel the urgency to settle down and have a family, and her interracial love affairs are complicated and at times co-dependent; these features combined have attracted a diversified and devout fan base (Chatman 2017, Clark 2015, Everett 2015). Olivia’s character opens up another discussion, namely the iconic elegance and femininity of Rhimes’ female characters. Olivia Pope in fact exercises her strength and power through stiletto heels, Prada handbags and expensive designer clothes. As Paola Brembilla (2016) suggests, some identification trends can be observed by the audience, not so much with the glamor of celebrities who play successful female characters, but through an identification with the characters themselves who “mediate the symbolic values of the pieces of fashion they wear, becoming icons of style that foster a desire for imitation” (Brembilla 2016: 37). Let’s take Michelle Obama, who at the 2016 State of the Union Address wore a dress designed by Narciso Rodriguez, the same that Olivia Pope had worn only three weeks earlier. As Michelle Obama wears this dress, she aligns with the meanings and values connected to the *Scandal* universe and identifies herself as powerful, professional, intelligent and resolute as Olivia. It is no coincidence that in 2014, Olivia Pope inspired a fashion line sold by The Limited, which launched the styles of the big designer garments worn by the protagonist at affordable prices for the spectators (Brembilla 2016).

Another central topic in the representation of womanhood concerns the power relations between women and men involved in sexual and romantic relationships. In particular, while Philips (2000) investigates the representation of women in the medical profession, Jubas (2013: 127) con-

nects “professional categories of identity to other categories of identity, notably gender, as well as race and sexuality” in *Grey’s Anatomy*. Indeed, this series presents the complex affair between Meredith and Derek since the first episode. At play in this liaison there is not only a romantic connection, but also an asymmetrical professional power relationship (Derek was her boss, 1.01). In *How to Get Away with Murder* this topic emerges in a different way because the professional power relations involved are those of the doctor-patient relationship – Annalise and her husband met when she was his psychotherapy patient. In *Scandal*, Olivia Pope is portrayed as strong and resolute in her profession, although in her love life she is vulnerable. Her illicit relationship with the President is dominated by an unequal power dynamic: the “resulting resemblance of a master/slave mistress situation” (Brüning 2019: 469).

Within the power relation topic, the theme of women in male-dominated professions (Nelson 2000) emerges both in *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Scandal*. In the former, it emerges both through the character of Annalise, an exceptional and competent lawyer who excels in what was once an exclusively male profession, as well as through her colleague Bonnie. The theme of women in male-dominated professions develops also in smaller examples referring to the anthology plot (e.g., Marren owns one of the main commercial companies, 1.04). Often, women are represented as judges, lawyers, as well as the president of the university (i.e., Soraya Hargrove, a Non-White woman). All this is the norm, there is neither the presence of White privilege, nor male privilege, the only privilege is for those who work hard. In *Scandal* both Olivia and Mellie Grant face the male-dominated American political scene which become even more apparent during Mellie’s presidential campaign.

Finally, taking into account the representation of different sexualities across the three cases studies, the quantitative analysis reveals that in *How to Get Away with Murder* 36% of the main characters are LGBTQ, and the lead female protagonist is bisexual. The 2014 “Where We are on TV” report, released by media monitoring organization The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), disclosed that out of 813 prime time broadcast series, 3.9% of the series regulars characters were LGBTQ. The same study conducted on the 2019/2020 television season revealed that out “of the 879 regular characters scheduled to appear on broadcast scripted prime time television this season, 90 (10.2%) are LGBTQ”. Considering the LGBTQ representation, *How to Get Away with Murder* is placing at the top among

our case studies, followed by *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Scandal*. In particular, despite the fact that *Grey’s Anatomy* has a good attitude both towards gender and LGBTQ themes (e.g., the lesbian wedding between Callie and Arizona, 7.20), it fails to delve deeper into gender issues. 35% of its relationships (sentimental and sexual) are interracial (Matthews-Hoffman 2016)⁶. This conspicuous presence, however, is not accompanied by a deep investigation of the complexities connected to interracial relationships. In fact, the characters’ roles are essentially neutral from a racial point of view. Therefore, the relationships are characterized by couples’ personalities and ongoing private (and medical) dramas rather than racial and cultural differences. In *Scandal* LGBTQ themes are addressed through the relationship between the Chief of Staff (and subsequently Vice President) Cyrus Beene and his husband, James Novak, and after his death to Michael Ambruso. In the *Scandal* universe, Cyrus is an influential politician and openly gay Vice President.

4.2 Representation of Blackness

In our corpus, *How to Get Away with Murder* is the series that mostly supports an intersectional feminism. Kathy Davis (2008: 68), referring to the concept of “intersectionality”, points out how it relates “to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcome of these interactions in terms of power.” Indeed, this show exemplifies Rhimes’ deliberate use of racial and sexual diversity: the main cast highlights the presence of female figures and also characters’ diversity, considering both different sexualities and ethnic background. Annalise is a Black woman, her husband is White, her male lover Black, her White lover a woman. Her two employees are White; considering other interns, Wes and Michaela are Black, Laurel is Hispanic, and Connor is gay. Our quantitative research reveals that 57% of the characters are Non-White and there is a consistency in their persistence (59%) in the series placing *How to Get Away with Murder* at the top among our case studies (Figure 2). Among the Non-White main characters 50% are female and 50% male and only two are Black and persist throughout all the series (Annalise Keating and Nate Lahey). Regarding the race issue, the cast of *Grey’s Anatomy* has been heterogeneous from a racial point

⁶ Comparatively, according to Parker et al. (2015), in 2013 U.S. interracial marriages had reached a record level of 13%.

of view since its inception in 2005. Indeed, in 2006 the civil rights groups gave to ABC the highest overall score among the four main networks (A-), thanks also to shows such as *Grey's Anatomy* (Long 2011: 1067). This heterogeneity results from the colour-blind casting adopted by Shonda Rhimes. She decided not to assign any physical description to her characters except for gender. This strategy allowed her to create a racially different imaginary world. The choice to “neutralize” the race issue is therefore an intentional one. However, we see how the presence of Non-White characters in *Grey's Anatomy* is lower than in *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Scandal* (Figure 2). Our quantitative research reveals that out of the 31 main characters that populate *Grey's Anatomy*, 32% are Non-White and there is a consistency in their persistence (37%) in the series (Figure 2). Among the Non-White main characters 50% are female and 50% male and the only two who persists throughout the seasons from the beginning are Black: Miranda Bayle and Richard Webber. *Scandal* presents only 4 Black main characters: Harrison Wright, that does not last beyond the third season; Olivia's father, Eli Pope, that becomes a main character only from season 5 onward; and Marcus Walker, a character that joins Olivia's firm from season 5 onward. This leaves Karry Washington as the only Afro-American female main character that persists throughout the series. The latest “Boxed In” report (Lauzen 2019) shows that race and ethnicity across platforms underline that in 2018-19 70% of female characters were White. Our quantitative analysis reveals a lower percentage of White main characters across the three case studies (Figure 2).

The issue of racial discrimination is rarely addressed in the first five seasons of *How to Get Away with Murder*⁷, and when it arises it is to underline the lack of female solidarity or to underline episodes of racial discrimination that occurred in the past. Let us think for example about the episode “Lahey v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania” (4.13). In this crossover episode with *Scandal*, Annalise Keating, while involved in a class action regarding the mass incarceration of Black people in the United States, declares “racism is built into the DNA of America. And as long as we turn a blind eye to the pain of those suffering under its oppression, we will never escape those origins.”

Conversations addressing the discriminations that women and Black people face within the medical profession are

7 During the sixth season, in “Let's Hurt Him” (12.06), Annalise brings up the race issue as central point during a press conference in order to attract attention and drop the death penalty.

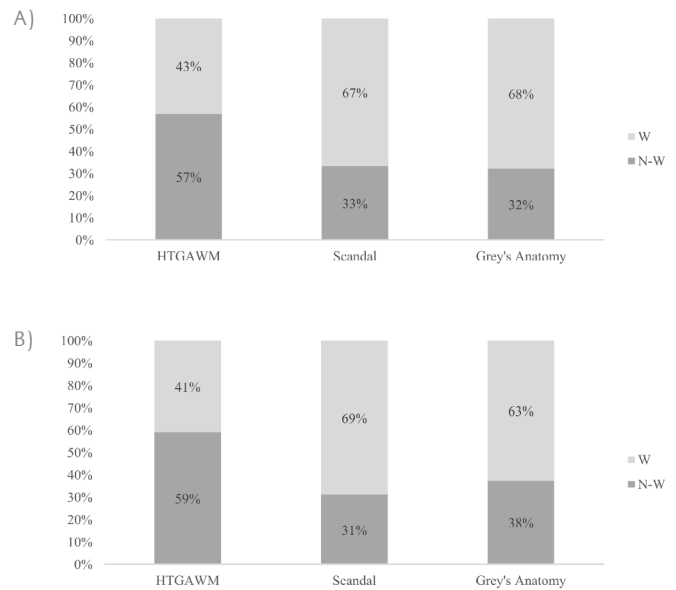


FIGURE 2. RACIAL REPRESENTATION: (A) PERCENTAGE OF WHITE AND NON-WHITE PRESENCE; (B) PERCENTAGE OF WHITE AND NON-WHITE PERSISTENCE.

marginal also within *Grey's Anatomy* and refer mainly to a past time. For example, in “The Time Warp” (6.15), through various flashbacks that narrate the life of those who are now senior surgeons we find for example a still specializing Bailey, who was continually subjected to discrimination by her attending, partly due to jealousy. We also find the storyline of Ellis Gray and Richard Webber, interns in the 80s, that reveals discrimination both against women and Non-White doctors. Ellis Gray was not only called a nurse in a derogatory tone (e.g., “This is no job for a nurse!”, says her boss, to which she retorts, “You know very well I'm not a nurse!”) but sometimes she was even addressed as “sugar” instead of her proper name. Richard Webber was told that 10 years earlier he would not even have been allowed into a surgical program.

Shonda Rhimes places the experiences of discrimination on the workplace either in a far-removed past when racial inequality still needed to be surmounted, or in single separate episodes. However, in “Something Against You” (12.07) there is a discussion about what it means to be a Black woman. Patients assume Maggie Pierce, the female African American chief of cardiology, is the assistant of the newly hired cardiologist (Nathan Riggs, a Caucasian male). Maggie complains about this problem with her Caucasian sister-in-law Amelia Shepherd, and tells her that the reason she felt like Riggs'

shadow is because: 1) he is a man; and 2) he is White. Amelia, certain that racism was dead, is shocked to learn that race still matters. Afterwards, a short conversation follows between the two about the centrality of race in contemporary society. This leads Amelia to remember when she sided with one of the hospital residents Jo Wilson (White female) instead of Stephanie Edwards (Non-White female). Clearly Amelia is not a racist, however she seems oblivious of the privileges that her social status affords. It is no accident that Maggie tells her: "If you feel uncomfortable having done it, check your White privilege and don't do it again". Through these examples we realize that Shonda Rhimes in her intent to create a diverse and post-racial narrative does not forget nor ignore that White privilege and racial inequality still persist in today's society.

Sandra Oh, an actress of Korean ethnicity who played doctor Cristina Yang for 10 seasons, after leaving the series confessed to the magazine *KoreAm* to be frustrated by her character's lack of cultural specificity (referring to the few words hinted in the first seasons about the fact that she was raised Jewish): "it bummed me out because I feel like, this could be a great story idea, or even like a joke. But [*Grey's Anatomy's* producers] would not go for it, because it was a show choice" (quoted in Press 2018). Although some critics (Warner 2015a) considered its color-blind casting a way to erase cultural specificity, and although it stimulates diversity in hiring practices, it doesn't fully grasp the implications of socioeconomic disparities and racial inequality.

In *Scandal* the issue of race is raised by Olivia's father who often reminds her that she has to fight and work twice as hard due to her skin colour. Also in this case, the discourse on racial inequality is stirred by the older generation who was involved in the civil rights movement. Discussions about race are also circumscribed to specific episodes, such as in the "Dog-Whistle Politics" episode (5.04), the "Trump Card" episode (5.20) and "The Lawn Chair" episode (4.14), which is particularly emblematic. Here Olivia is involved in a case of unjustified excess of police violence against a Black boy. In a dialogue with an African American "neighbourhood activist" graduated cum laude in Georgetown, Marcus Walker, the disavowal of Olivia with respect to the African American community emerges strongly:

Marcus – Nice purse. What? Prada?

Olivia – What's your point?

Marcus – Probably worth a year's rent at my place, 'cause I live right around the corner. This block, these people are home.

Olivia – Uh-huh.

Marcus – We live in the same city, Olivia, but this is probably the first time you ever stepped foot on this block. Probably never been to this neighbourhood except to get grits from Reggie's or chicken and Greens off of Wade Street.

Olivia – You have no idea what I'm about.

Marcus – You're about getting a White Republican President elected twice. Excuse me if I don't buy you're a real down-ass chick.

This is just one telling example uncovering one of the critical issues surrounding the productions of Shonda Rhimes: the representation of a post-racial society in which Blacks and Whites work together constructively, positioned beyond the problems of racial inequality. *Scandal*, despite depicting Black characters in prominent positions is still able to maintain an intimate closeness to White viewers as they follow the dictum "Black but not too Black" in order to circumvent the Racial Empathy Gap (Seewood 2014). In Rhimes' production, African American characters remain isolated from an African American community and distanced from a Black experience of the world, hindering the potential to germinate a Black identity embedded in a socio-political collectivity and conscience (Erigha 2015: 11, Guerrero 1993).

Finally, we consider some insights from the analysis of the audience's discursive production and reception within the corpus connected with the representation of both womanhood and race. Williams and Golin (2017) have demonstrated how *How to Get Away with Murder* allows the creation of discursiveness and a privileged entry point into a shared cultural history of Black femininity. *How to Get Away with Murder* is a particularly useful case thanks to the representation of Annalise Keating, a Black woman with markedly Afrocentric traits that contrast to common contemporary portraits of Black femininity on television, which typically depicts Black women with lighter skin and curls or straight hair (e.g., *Girlfriends*, UPN 2000-2008; *Scandal*; *Blackish*, ABC 2014-; *Empire*, Fox 2015-). Williams and Golin (2017) focused their analysis on the scene when Annalise takes off her make-up and wig (1.04): this ritual has given rise to passionate debates on Black Twitter, "watching a Black woman remove her straight wig to reveal her natural kinky hair on national television was cause for discussion" (Williams and Golin 2017: 993). The authors highlight how the word "real" is used several times by Twitter users who comment the scene in which

Annalise takes off her wig and makeup. Showing natural hair is associated with Black pride and rebellion against traditional White norms (Miller 2016).

Viewers of ShondaLand's programs can identify with Olivia Pope, and with other Non-White characters since the texts don't directly address "African American themes, [...] showcase African American cultural traditions, or highlight black vernacular" (Erigha 2015: 13) or deal with issues related to inequality that still permeates American society. Akin to *Grey's Anatomy*, in fact, the characters in *Scandal* undergo a "neutralization of race" (Warner 2015a: 632). Shonda Rhimes' texts depict "a fictional United States where Blacks and Whites work together constructively" (Erigha 2015: 11), where race fades in the background and does not play a role in the interactions between characters. Let us think, for instance, about Olivia's relationship with Fitz. In this interracial relationship, race is downplayed in the affair at the expense of an emphasis on Olivia's struggles as a post-feminist woman to reconcile her independence and strength in the workplace with her vulnerability in her love for Fitz (Brüning 2018: 470). Furthermore, in line with a colour-blind post-feminist agenda, emphasis is placed on Olivia's elitist education that allows her to access environments typically dominated by Caucasian males, achieving what her father defined as his "quest to do the impossible: raise an African American girl who felt fully entitled to own the world as much as any white man" (5.04).

5. CLOSING REMARKS

Through the hybrid methodology that we adopted in this study it was possible to integrate a more classic textual analysis with quantitative research in the investigation of the representations of race and womanhood in Shonda Rhimes' TGIT TV series. This approach allowed us to ascertain that for all three case studies, the presence of female characters is well represented and persistent through all the seasons, confirming what has been underlined by the literature and critics. However, this presence is not consistent through all of our case studies: *Grey's Anatomy* has 52% of female characters, followed by *How to Get Away with Murder* with 43%, and *Scandal* with the lowest female presence of 33%.

Thus, it is safe to say that in Rhimes' texts, women are numerically relevant. Furthermore, through a more careful textual analysis, we understand that these women are not only powerful, intelligent and resolute, but also elegant, feminine, sensual and dangerous. They overcome what Kathleen

Hall Jamieson (1995) calls double binds, that is, constraints that limit women's agency through an essentialization of the complexity of female diversified experiences: either brain or womb, immodest outspokenness or ignored silence, feminine or competent (Hall Jamieson 1995: 16). Such dichotomies curb women's potential, restricting their choices to either one or the other. Instead, following the "profound increase in programming explicitly targeting women [that] occurred on U.S. television at the end of the 20th century" (Lotz 2006: 6), which saw with *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) the inauguration of TV seasons with an "unparalleled proliferation of dramatic series featuring women protagonists" (Lotz 2006: 6), Shonda' women are multifaceted, complex, strong but also flawed.

However, at a closer look, these women embody the "post-feminist singleton" discourse promoted in TV series such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) in which the female characters "want it all" while struggling to find balance between the different spheres of their lives (Moseley and Read 2002, Lotz 2006, Brüning 2018: 466). The post-feminist woman "refuses to dichotomize and choose between her public and private, feminist and feminine identities" (Genz 2010: 98). This being said, however, within the post-feminist agenda representations of Black people are still problematic. The post-feminist tendency of commodifying racial differences is reducing the Black female body and culture into consumable goods in American media (Springer 2007, Brüning 2018), which in turn is reducing "Blackness to a visual characteristic devoid of political or historical meaning, thus allowing Black women to be portrayed in line with post-feminism's traditionally white vision of femininity" (Brüning 2018: 467).

This last consideration brings us to the second theme discussed in our paper: the representation of race in Rhimes' TGIT productions. Based on numbers alone, *How to Get Away with Murder* presents the highest percentage of Non-White characters, followed by *Scandal* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Furthermore, if we look at the representation of race from the standpoint of textual analysis, *Grey's Anatomy* still places last due to the strong neutralization of race and the blind casting strategy adopted by Rhimes. Conversely, *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* emerge as the two productions that predominantly depict elements recognizable by audiences as attributable to the experience of Non-White women. Let us think for instance about the iconic scene in which the protagonist Annalise takes off her wig, which elicited an animated discussion on Black Twitter, or the passionate discussions on the sentimental relationships be-

tween Olivia Pope and Fitz. Conversely, in *Grey's Anatomy* the race-blind casting strategy allows cast members to play roles independently of racial characterizations, obliterating, however, any specificity caused by their racial difference in favour of a feel-good sentiment. The elision of these specificities delivers us de-contextualized characters, separated from their groups of origin, downplaying power relations and experiences of marginalization and structural inequalities in favour of a representation of a post-civil rights society that has left racial discrimination and inequality in a long-forgotten past (Doane 2014: 15, Brüning 2018: 467). A similar argument can be made for the LGBTQ representations of queer couples getting married and co-habiting, which, as Jay Clarkson (2008) would argue, normalizes a post-queer representation that lacks the same cultural specificity that the Non-White characters in *Grey's Anatomy* are deprived of. In colour-blind television, racism is considered surpassed and Non-Whiteness is no longer an obstacle to climb the social ladder, conception that has also been expressed by Rhimes herself in an interview in *The New York Times* (2005): "I'm in my early 30s, and my friends and I don't sit around and discuss race. We're post-civil rights, post-feminist babies, and we take it for granted that we live in a diverse world". However, as Brüning eloquently points out in accordance with Kristen J. Warner, just because there is an increasing presence on screen of racial diversity doesn't necessarily mean that networks are responding to a wish arisen from Black people's "desire to be seen as much as they are responding to what and how much white viewers want to see of black life" (Warner 2015a: 634 quoted in Brüning 2019: 468).

Shonda Rhimes has undoubtedly achieved "unparalleled success for a Black female creator of prime-time television on a major broadcast television network" (Erigha 2015: 14) and should be commended for bringing "black characters in prominent positions" (Erigha 2015: 12). However, at the same time, we should be cautious of any quick identification of Rhimes' productions either as a reliable depiction of a supposedly post-racial American society or as a truthful depiction of Blackness as "mainstream television appears [only] to accept one version of black life –crossover blackness– but not a diversity of blackness" (Erigha 2015: 14).

Our analysis of the three case studies represents just the first step of a larger research project aimed at building a framework to analyse which aesthetics, identities and relationships showrunners depict and produce on the female representation and the race issue in contemporary U.S. serial products. Our future intent is to initiate comparative re-

search to investigate the politics of representation characterizing Rhimes' shows in relation to the three macro genres: medical drama, legal drama and political drama.

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Blackish (ABC, 2014-)
E.R. (NBC, 1994-2009)
Empire (Fox, 2015-)
For the People (ABC, 2018-2019)
Girlfriends (UPN, 2000-2008)
Grey's Anatomy (ABC, 2005-)
How to Get Away with Murder (ABC, 2014-)
Scandal (ABC, 2012-2018)
Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004)
Station 19 (ABC, 2018-)

