

**'The woman saying this is Black like us': Black Women's Fandom and  
Intersectionality Discourse on Tumblr**

By

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## Abstract

The politics of representation has served as a lingua franca for how we understand discourses around marginalized stories and characters on TV. Though there have been exceptions, much of the academic conversation around historic debut and pop culture status of the US television show, *Scandal*, had been overdetermined by a representational politic. Those contributions are necessary and continue to be valid, but alone, remain inadequate. This dissertation is a departure which seeks to examine race, gender, and sexuality from the embodied subjectivities of a significant portion of the show's fanbase: women--many of whom present as Black in social media spaces.

I will argue why a representation framework alone, serves to undermine the works of Black artists and Black subjectivities. I will then present why the context of the fan and fan studies, in this contemporary moment, is so important to the ways in which we consume and analyse media—specifically Tumblr--regarding issues around Black and female identities. By focusing on the praxis of the Black female fan, Fan Studies can broaden how we think of 'the fan', fan practice and power. Furthermore, I will make the case for choosing micro-blogging platform, Tumblr, as a creative and commercialized data-gathering site, wherein the plenitude of Black epistemologies, is made possible. Because Blackness critically intersects with race, gender, sexuality and more, the contours of fan discourse can take on complicated and contradictory trajectories.

Whilst the television show, *Scandal*, is the case study for examining Black subjectivities beyond representation in this dissertation, I do not seek to frame the study through only my own intellectual framework. Through Critically Engaged Ethnography, I will be analysing a variety of themes from data collected from Tumblr, that have been produced by fans of *Scandal*, including original contributions made by me, the researcher, whilst I was

an active member of the fandom. These will include exchanges with members of the fandom that, at times, include my participation. The analysis will rely primarily on a Black feminist lens, including Intersectionality theory.

**This thesis is dedicated to**

The *Scandal* fandom

For your insightful analysis, wit and support for my blog. Without your words, this project  
could never be

To my mom and my grandmother

Your guiding force in my life continues to propel me forward

And

To Gillian,  
My wife and rock

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

#### **What is the 'Black' in this Representation?**

#### **Background**

When W.E.B Dubois was commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania to undertake the sociological study of African Americans, in what became *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), it was the first time the lives of Black people were seen as worthy of study in western universities. Indeed, it had been not much more than thirty years since Black people legally had lives and subjectivities to claim as their own. More noteworthy than Dubois' study being the first of its kind, is the deft ethnographic treatment of these subjects. What was intended as a study to legitimately frame the Black presence, in Philadelphia's seventh ward, as an intractable blight on an otherwise successful white city became, instead, a testimony of the Black fight against the deliberate obstacles of white supremacy. The study framed the Negro 'problem' as not pathological, but sociological. Dubois notes that "the real foundation of the [racial] difference is the widespread feeling all over the land...that the Negro is something less than an American and ought not to be much more than he is" (1899, p. 284). The 'feeling' all over the land engenders a perception that Black people should be 'less' or try not to be American (read: white), which is to say be entitled to full humanity. The tempering of this expectation, and sociology of the Negro's perception under the white gaze would go on to be the persistent subject matter of the then burgeoning American film industry.

One short-coming of Dubois' study is a lack of gendered analysis. This lack includes short shrift to Black women's labour practices and the power relations enacted therein (May 2015). Across subject areas gendered insights are important because embodied materialities impact both perceptions and experiences of society and its challenges. Nearly a century later, amidst the controversies over negative Black representation (particularly male) and white directors in the screen adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1985), scholar Jacqueline Bobo (1988) had a novel idea: ask Black women about their thoughts and affective responses to the film. Before Bobo, some of the strongest voices were those denouncing the film's portrayal of Black men as 'racist', 'a Nazi conspiracy' or 'exploitative' (Bobo 1988, pgs43-44). The voices were not all male, and not all male voices hated the film. Of the film, critic, Armand White, proclaimed, "[The Color Purple] is not simply a movie of Black social history. It is particularly a history of Black women than about Black people" (1986, quoted in Bobo (1988), p. 45). Much as Dubois' study was oriented predominately around the plight of Black men, wherein women represented part of the overall Black household. The 'representation' evaluation of Spielberg's adaptation largely zeroed in on what Black men thought, how they were portrayed, and what this portrayal meant under the gaze of whiteness. Because their representation mattered to the perception of the entire race. Much less criticality was paid to what it meant to render a very particular slice of Black life, grounded in the Jim Crow era, through narratives of Black women in the film. In writing about the baggage and the biases we bring with us when judging an artist's work, Alice Walker (1983), in her essay, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own", writes that Black women often have to be their own models, and fearlessly push against narrow views to find the larger perspective and common thread. The entire orientation of the book and the film

is framed by the intersectional lives of Black women. In the words of one Black woman quoted in the New York Times' review of the film, "Black women should not be sacrificed for Black men's pride. Let the film roll" (Shipp, in Bobo 1988, p. 44). If Dubois' Philadelphia designed to show the humanity of Black people, Bobo's work aimed to make us consider the interior lives and negotiated readings of Black women, in response to Black material.

Black women's readings of and responses to media depicting them continued to develop. Bobo's interviews with women precede hooks' theorizing of the oppositional gaze (1992), in part a response to Mulvey's male gaze theory (1975). hooks theorized that Black women's relationship to looking undergoes a process of subverting the white patriarchal gaze, thus transforming their relationship to a given media object and its representational politic. I bring up these works as foundational to both what is at stake and regarding what this dissertation purports to do. More recently, scholars like Sobande have complicated both the idea of the oppositional and resistant gaze of Black women (Sobande 2017, Sobande et al. 2019), and the overlap that exists between those Black feminists' readings and more individualistic (read: white, post-feminist) media theories (2019) of Gill (2007, 2010, 2017) and McRobbie (2009). It is this in between space--where Black women can create, project, and wonder about themselves—with which this dissertation is most concerned.

*Scandal*, the ABC network's television show (2012-2018) about an African American crisis manager, Olivia Pope, who is having an affair with the white, married President of the United States was the first show, in thirty-seven years, to have Black woman at its centre. The short-lived *Get Christie Love!* (1974-1975) was the first. What's more, like Walker's *Purple*, the story was written by a Black woman (Shonda Rhimes) and inspired by the real life professional exploits of current crisis manager and former White House Deputy Press

Secretary to George Bush, Judy Smith, who is also a Black woman. Olivia Pope was a long time coming for so many in the Black community who hungered for “positive” and “powerful” Black women on TV. Yet from the outset, the persistent and pervasive representational tropes of “the Mammy”, “the Jezebel”, “the Sapphire” and the legacy of slavery itself have shaped the discourse of the Olivia Pope character in relation to either intersectional oppression or Black resistance, particularly the failing of (Maxwell 2013; Evans 2014; McClearen 2015; Erigha 2015). Such critiques reflect the tendency to interpret Blackness primarily through the framework of the white gaze, including those who use postfeminist critique to emphasize a sociological disconnectedness to blackness. These modes of seeing reductively define powerful depictions of Black feminine subjectivity as a function of political expressiveness that should explicitly advocate on behalf of a Black collective. While the publicness of Black identity will always matter, exclusive focus on that leaves little room to appreciate the force of desire as a valid and necessary way of engaging Black cultural subjects (Pow 2019). Addressing the portrayal of Olivia Pope from a lens of representation, fraught with binary notions of good/bad, positive/negative, proves too limiting. Instead, I am more concerned with how the Black women who consume and dissect Pope’s image engage her blackness and femininity beyond dominant, externally defined and performative tropes of Black feminine social identity. As Jacqueline Bobo proved, examining negotiated readings through a dominant lens of representation misses possibilities for accessing the rich interiority of *Scandal*’s significant Black women’s audience, and the dynamic tension with which they hold the character’s external representation with the force of her interior impulses, of which the romantic affair is but one.

Examining Black interiority as a necessary source of power upon which blackness (and femininity) draws, is a way of queering the portrayal of Olivia Pope’s character beyond

the binary of representation. *Pope* and *Scandal* serve as the case study for this dissertation because it is the first modern shown on a terrestrial (non-subscription based) network to star a Black woman, in nearly forty years. Secondly, the fan community built around the show was highly engaged with the show, producing smart, insightful, and sometimes contradictory content in response to the show. The 'first' Black anything always matters because, under the unfair system of white supremacy, Black works never solely exist for their own value, instead potentialities of other successes hinge on that of the first. Black 'firsts' are expected to do well enough for other Black media project potentially in the works and prove the viability of blackness itself to carry a prime-time slot and attract the valuable white 18-42 marketing demographic. The show, on the urging of Kerry Washington (Weinstein 2014), the cast deftly took advantage of social media to help build up their audience. They may not have been the first show to implement live tweeting (using a give hashtag to tweet reactions and comments about a show in real time), but they helped make *Scandal* 'appointment viewing' with the live tweeting on Twitter. There is an obvious investment on the part of the cast to garner support so that they can keep the show (and their jobs) alive. But from an affective fan perspective not only was the show something to consume, but viewers could feel as if they were all experiencing Rhimes' roller coaster writing as a collective.

This leads to my second reason for choosing *Scandal*'s fan base as the subject of this dissertation's enquiry. Where Twitter served as the place for quick, pithy responses to the show, Tumblr is where the most dedicated segment of the audience went on to dissect themes and nuances of the show with sometimes biting, comedic or insightful precision, applying as a matter of course racial and gendered analysis to their interpretations. These 'negotiated receptions' (Bobo 1995), as Sobande (2019, pg. 437) notes, enrich our

understandings of modern depictions of Black women. My original proposal for this dissertation included a comparative analysis of two other shows (premiering within a year after *Scandal*), that either featured a Black woman lead (Being Mary Jane (2013, BET)), or Black female cast in prominent roles (Orange is the New Black (2013, Netflix). However, I soon found that fans of the additional shows were not producing content about the show as prodigiously as that of the *Scandal* fans, and therefore narrowed my focus. Whilst a lack of volume could point to the fact that both Being and Orange are broadcast on subscription networks, that reason does not account for the lack of analysis. Therefore, something specific to the characterizations and narrative of Black womanhood in *Scandal*, compelled its audience toward copious online discourse.

For many fans, as a Public Relations expert, Olivia Pope always wants to put her best foot forward. No matter how embattled her interior self is, her exterior presentation is endlessly impeccable. *Scandal*'s season one promotional poster features a confident Pope staring directly out at a would-be viewer, projecting that she has everything under control, and can confront any challenge that comes her way. The first time we meet Pope ("Sweet Baby" [1.01]), she is negotiating with Russian thugs to recover the infant of the US Ambassador to Russia. She brings the baby back to her office as it was handed to her by the Russians—in a box, where the baby remains, uncovered, until reconciled with his parents. Before episode's end, the audience discovers Olivia's affair with the then married, White President of the United States, Fitzgerald Grant—a man with whom she has remained emotionally entangled in an on-off relationship throughout the series. The tension between Olivia Pope's public expressiveness—one that smooths appearances—and her tangled interior contradictions is set up as a significant and foundational part of her character from the very beginning. This is a common reading by fans.



The show had already been airing for two years before I considered the relationship between its subject matter and audience to be dissertation-worthy, in 2014. Having been a regular part of a community of women who regularly discussed Rhimes's drama on the social media platform, Tumblr, for a year, I began feeling a distinct divide between the fandom's discourses and the way some Black (and a few non-Black) academics wrote about race on the show. What these critiques zoomed in on was the public expressiveness of Pope's representation, questioning just how many long-held stereotypes were manifest in her character.

Less consideration was given to Pope as a subject imbued with agency, desires, and class privileges, who navigates vortexes of power within a system that was never designed for her benefit. Rhimes herself plays with these expectations. She openly admits to using Olivia Pope's character to explore similar themes in the twenty-first century, tweeting "Can't believe I need to say this: yes, I wrote 'Black woman auctions herself off' storyline on PURPOSE. I have heard of slavery ...We've been writing about the dynamics of race, gender, and power over here at #Scandal for 4 seasons. All Gladiators know that" (Rhimes 2015a — b). The specific critiques about *Scandal's* racial politics will receive more thorough treatment in the literature review chapter.

The ideologies behind controlling images, which are continual sites of struggle (Collins 2004, 148) in the march toward progressive portrayals of blackness on TV. For Black people struggle is a necessary part of the reality of progress. Joseph Winters (2016) notes that the history of Black people in America is laced with unfinished struggles. For him, unifying ideas of progress are fantastical constructions designed to buffer us from a reality filled with melancholy and loss for Black people (p. 6). Winters points to Black literary

tradition as one in which the necessity of ambivalence to the progress of the Black subject is engaged.

The view through the representational lens makes it impossible for the vagaries of Black interior life to express unsavoury parts of selfhood, such as shame, putridness, submission, or any contradictory state of existence, without being thought of as less than human, less than Black. Olivia Pope is a site of struggle. For Black women-created TV characters like her, there is no long history of analysis in which to place her. With Pope, Rhimes troubles the idea of a post-racial character by imbuing her with fear, strategic withholding, attachment to childhood abandonment, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and other challenges that are specific to particularities of her Black experience. During all this, Rhimes challenges the Pope character to thrive and love in the often-violent professional sphere she operates. For Mia Mask, Pope's continued ability to "confuse, bewilder and deconstruct" as she evades easy categorization by skating between various discourses means there is work to be done in the culture (2015, 7).

It was not until Kristen Warner (2015) and Tara Lynn Pixley (2015) did I begin to think more intricate negotiated readings that embraced a sense of internal uncertainty, or ambiguity about Pope's character could be embraced as a positive part of representational language. I first consider Olivia Pope as a character in a novel after reading a blog post by Caribbean Literature and Cultural Studies scholar, Schuyler Esprit. She writes

Our perceptions of [Scandal's] characters are meant to be ambivalent. [Shonda] Rhimes wants to create these tensions by making their flaws present and visible. But are they meant to make us decide whether Rhimes SHOULD show characters like that or not? ...NO. It's not our story to tell. And our politics of respectability, of wanting to see the perfectly radical narrative of blackness conquering all White patriarchal evil is merely a desire that we haven't demanded from our real-life political officials, so why not let Rhimes write her work the way she wants. ... Let's not keep saying 'This is right or wrong'. Let's ask more about 'what does it mean?' (2013).

To only consider Olivia's representational image would be to create a human subject wholly called into being by social discourse. By emphasizing the vagaries of Olivia's subjectivity Shonda Rhimes is returning what Quashie calls the "complexity of the inner life to its rightful place", thus forming a variegated understanding of Black feminine cultural identity (2012, loc. 1585). An expansive look at the Black feminine subject, with which Black (and other women) became preoccupied requires a positionality that examines meaning beyond the limiting binary of representation. So here I am asking what it means, specifically to those who consume Pope's antics whilst taking as axiomatic her race and gender, processing and comparing it to their own lived experiences as well as the various mythos of Black womanhood on which so many have imbibed—from family, community, history and media. This axiomatic approach is not the same as a post-feminist divorcing of race from the female identity; it is an understanding that builds on an obvious reality. Much like what Bobo and Sobande, I decided that this meaningfulness would lay somewhere in the relationship formed between the audience and the media object.

### **What is at stake?**

The meaningfulness of Black creativity—both its authorial intent and its received translation—among the audiences who consume the work are at stake. Most recently, the late summer of 2020 presented a potent example the height of the stakes for Black women creators. A director's film was waylaid under the hampering over misplaced representational fears online, so much so that the project was shelved by its US distributor, Netflix. French film, *Cuties (Mignonnes)*, by Maïmouna Doucouré, follows an 11-year old Senegalese immigrant, Amy, and a cohort of girls, examining the ways in which

prepubescent girls are sexualized in society, for adult consumption, before their own bodies undergo adolescence. Moreover, the premise of the films clearly sides with this sexualisation being a problem for the entire society and had been well-reviewed at the Sundance Film Festival, winning its World Cinema Dramatic Directing Award (Sundance 2020).

However, the very subject matter the film purports to examine was taken as a point of exploitation. US distributor, Netflix, used a still from one of the young girls' dance competitions, in the film, which displays the inappropriateness of the costumes to market the film online. Netflix's description read "Amy, 11, becomes fascinated with a twerking dance crew. Hoping to join them, she starts to explore her femininity, defying her family's traditions". In a viral tweet garnering over 13.5 thousand retweets, Netflix customer and Twitter user @littlewarrior7, as part of a thread of tweets calling out Netflix for its hyper sexualisation of minors, placed a screenshot of the movie's poster next to one of its descriptions, and asked "Netflix WTF is this?" (littlewarrior7 2020). Online outrage ensued, including 'review bombing' of the film on platforms like IMDB and Google (Vulture 2020), the vast majority from those who had not watched the film but based on reaching the worst possible conclusion drawn from Netflix's poster. Whilst Netflix can be blamed for a, perhaps, too vague description coupled with a controversial poster, there is no doubt that US audiences have lost out on the opportunity for discourse on the very subject matter about which they claimed to be outraged. This is but one example of the way in which representation, American puritanism, online social performativity and fear-based virality converge under the perception of justice, but the result is the curtailing of the creative output of a Black woman's work. It is also worth noting that @littlewarrrior7 includes #blacklivesmatter in his or her profile (littlewarrior7 2020), something that is often

interpreted in performative, symbolic ways that address subjugation under the long arm of white supremacy. In many ways, those that had a knee-jerk reaction to @littlewarrior7 's tweet were more concerned about how blackness appeared to be represented in the marketing of Doucuré's film rather than the subject matter of the film itself—the problematic sexualisation of Black girlhood--which is of great concern to Black communities (Epstein et al 2017; Zurbruggen et al 2013). It should be noted that the social media outrage prompted by the film is rooted in American culture's perspectives and fears about Black women and girls. This outsized reaction is not something we see prominently arise in other countries.

The recent controversy over *Cuties* demonstrates some of the shortcomings of representational discourse, and how the pressure of white supremacy, so deeply connected to the discourse, leads us to limit the ways in which the works of Black creatives are allowed to be discussed. As will be evident in the literature review, and throughout this dissertation, the suggestion is never to do away with representation, but to normalize it as but one (incomplete) lens through which we may understand the Black creative's commentary on any number of subject matters. As a viewer and active member of the *Scandal* fandom, I became disappointed by much of the early academic critique about the show, the theses of which, were often connected to some ominous disservice being done to Black people, by Rhimes' pen (referenced earlier in this chapter). But examinations of the erotic (Lorde 1984); the force of desire (Tate 1998); how Black women's invention of their lives (Washington 1988); conceptions of citizenship (Mitchell 2020); and the subjectivities of Black interiority (Quashie 2012) are all fruitful and useful possibilities for examining meaningfulness of Black creativity. That is what I was interested in back in 2013 because those were the types of discussions in which I saw women engaging on Tumblr, specifically

in response to storylines and character responses in *Scandal*. Much like Rhimes' work reflects the shows she herself wanted to watch (Rhimes 2015) I wanted to create a piece of academic work that reflected the experiences of Black women in the *Scandal* fandom.

### **This Project's Contribution**

This research project endeavours to make several contributions to scholarship in the areas of Black representational discourse in media; the intersectionality Black fandom and Fan Studies; and social media rhetoric. As a result of exploring representation's liminality of blackness, the thesis also speaks to Black existentialism and philosophy. The overarching goal of the project is to demonstrate that Intersectionality and Black feminism can serve as legitimate lenses through which we consider the complexities of Black women's fandom.

With regard to Black media representation, it is my wish to convey that, whilst the robust area of study is necessary and must continue, it is an incomplete analytical framework for understanding the meaningfulness to Black people of the portrayal of blackness in media. So much of representational discourse relies on colonial parameters of discussion, thus viewing blackness as a distorted construction of white supremacy. The focus lies in how white supremacy views blackness, not Black people. Secondly, examining blackness through this distorted lens neglects the interior lives of the Black subject. As both Tate (2008) and Quashie (2012) argue, by neglecting interior concepts like the force of desire and quiet, in the Black subject, we miss a chance to humanize them. Attention to Black interiority is also a form of resistance against white supremacy because it promotes the very thing white supremacy wishes to suppress: the complex humanity of Black lives.

Second and related to the subject of representation is this research's contribution to

Fan Studies. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, I write about the three ‘waves’ of fandom, as Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2017) define them, contextualising my exploration firmly within the present third wave. The first wave was, of course, the ‘fandom is beautiful stage,’ which focuses on Bourdieusian approach to wielding power through consumption, and fans taking control of media products created by the powerful. In this stage fans spun meaning for themselves, re-mixing and inter-textualising media products thus splintering the idea of ‘ownership’. That type of fan praxis continues throughout the consecutive waves, even as the lens of Fan Studies scholars has shifted. The second wave (to be further explored in Chapter Three) focused on pathologizing the relationship between the fan and their media love object. The present third wave is more insistent about excavating the lived realities and the intricacies of bonds formed through relationship with media objects—however dark and complicated they may be (Jones 2018: 253). Fan Studies has only recently reached its present ‘Third Wave’, in which fans’ interaction and identity work with their beloved media objects has gained central importance. Because of this, representation of fans has moved away from pathologizing into the realm of understanding the centrality of their interactions to continuing cultural industries and the narratives of those textual fields (Gray et al, 2017: 2). This project centres black women within this third wave, exploring the ways in which identity work, notions of escape and real-life political context of American Black femininity are key to how they engage media texts. Similarly, the themes of these women’s social media rhetoric are influenced by those very same things, which the thesis also examines.

The initial frustration with the representational discourse around *Scandal* led to an unexpected contribution of this project: Black existentialism and philosophy. In considering the sociological representation of blackness, it begged the questions: What does it mean to

be Black? How is this blackness manifested in fan praxis? Does such an identity necessarily require being anchored to whiteness and maleness as portrayed in media? By exploring the multiple interior subjectivities of the Black female fan, this project contributes to how ideas about the self, experiences of joy and well-being can be inhibited by the constraints of representational discourse.

### **Key Questions**

There are several key questions this dissertation seeks to explore. Given that the politics of representation is posed as an both a necessary, but inadequate framework for examining the meaningfulness of Black creativity to Black audiences, the primary research question is what other potentialities exist for framing the *Scandal* fandom's responses to the show's textual themes? This broad enquiry produces a subset of connected questions, such as what is the 'Black' that can be gleaned from these fan responses? To what extent are Black women fans able to resist this representational binary in their fan production and discourse? The second question concerns what intersections of gender and racial politics do these fans see most evidenced in the show that create compelling conversation? When do these political standpoints cause conflict, and how does the conflict connect to blackness?

Finally, because this project's case study is situated within the social media world of Tumblr, it is necessary to explore what affordances and complications this highly visual and performative space lend to fan production and the discourse of gendered raciality?



## Thesis Agenda

This dissertation seeks to accomplish several things, and in doing so situates itself along a few disciplinary axes of academia. Sociology, anthropology, media studies, fan studies are the most influential disciplines to which this project connects itself.

The primary intention of this project is to complicate the representational discourse around Black media. Though much of the strongest representational literature was forged by Black feminist scholars, this project seeks to expand Black feminist readings of representation. By bringing in the Black feminine gaze as axiomatic, and not ‘other’ we can gauge what issues are of primary concern to its most engage audience: Black women. What I discovered during my fieldwork was that ideas around freedom, desire, love, humour, and a distillation of blackness as visual coordinates were all part of the discourse Black women forged around *Scandal*’s text. Though the audience is international, much of the gaze is dominated by AA cultural language and humour because the politics and culture of the show reflect its American context. As a Black woman researcher who was born in Jamaican, but spent twenty years living in America, I bring an African American cultural nuance to this work—as both a cultural insider and outsider.

As the methodology for this work, my Critically Engaged Ethnography of the *Scandal* fandom on Tumblr aims to accomplish several points. First is to establish Tumblr as media space conducive to 21st century blending of media production tools and fan interaction, and intentionally examine the ways in which race and gender play a role in these interactions and productions. What kinds of conversations are made possible in such a space? This leads me to the second goal, which is to produce a dedicated fan studies project in which the intersectionality of race and gender are not a tangential or antagonistic element, but at the crux of the inquiry. By fusing together Critical and Engaged forms of ethnography, the

methodology's third goal is to intentionally blur the line between the objectivity and subjectivity of the researcher. I intentionally include my own fan 'becoming' story and offer up my *Scandal* fan production on Tumblr, as 'katrinapavela' for critical examination and reflection, including fan responses to that work. This, too, is relevant to the overall goal of an axiomatic look at fandom through the lens of Black women. As common to Engaged Ethnography, the researcher places themselves among the researched, not above them. As someone who was a member of Tumblr's *Scandal* fandom before my return to academia and during the conceptualisation of this dissertation, it was impossible to place myself 'above' the very group of which I was already apart. Therefore, my own motivations and attitudes are questioned in the data analysis and reflections sections of the project. Lastly, this thesis aims to examine the contestations around Black femininity that arise from *Scandal*'s themes through the portrayal of the Olivia Pope character, and her interactions with others. One query concerns the ways in which the inherent performativity of social media spaces, shapes the expectations and mythos around Black femininity. This goal is one that the conclusion seeks further research to develop, but this project does seek to start that conversation.

## **Thesis Outline**

### ***Chapter Two: Literature Review***

The Literature Review chapter looks at the politics and limitations of media analysis that is overdetermined by representational arguments. Included here is a summary of the fraught historical context of representational analysis due to racist media depictions based on colonialist desire for the continued subjugation of Black Americans post-slavery. Such depictions have led to a rich academic work on Black representation, but simultaneously

keeps Black subjectivities embroiled in a parasitic relationship with white desire. As related, is a dissection of the ways in which representation's (necessary) concern with the white gaze can also be limiting to creating opportunities for Black creativity.

### ***Chapter Three: Digital Sociality, Fan Studies and Black Epistemologies***

Whereas the Literature Review chapter concentrates on the representational arguments about blackness and the ways in which, whilst necessary and useful, can be delimiting when examining representations of blackness created by Black artists. Because of the fan identity is a mediating layer of analysis in this study, it was necessary for me to have a 'bridging' chapter between the Literature Review and Methodology sections. Perhaps, this can be thought of as a part II of the Literature Review. This chapter endeavours to meld the 'fan' identity's increasing importance with the rise of technological affordances and social media with the potentialities for Black womanhood to be performed in these spaces. It explores various 'waves' of Fan Studies as a discipline, and the ways in which the fan identity was synonymous with the white maleness and how blackness is seen as a disruptive identity. Secondly, it makes an argument for identity hermeneutics and the potentialities within Fan Studies for centring the Black feminine gaze.

### ***Chapter Four: Methodology***

The methodology for this study is Critically Engaged Ethnography, conducted on the social media platform Tumblr. Ethnography allows the researcher to be both observer and participant in the cultures they write about. As fan-turned-researcher, I needed a bespoke form of ethnography that suited my circumstances. Critically Engaged Ethnography (CEE) combines Critical Ethnography and Engaged Ethnography. The marriage that is CEE allows

me, as a Black woman researcher, to place myself among the marginalized group I study whilst remaining critical of the framework, values, and power relations of the environment in which I research. This approach considers the insider/outsider identity of the ‘native’ ethnographer and asks us to consider our multiple positionalities, subjectivities, and the differences between engagement and exploitation, when positioning ourselves among (not above) the researched.

Besides already being ensconced there as a fan, I chose Tumblr as my research site for the creativity and depth of the discursive discourse; and because it is underrepresented in the coterie of research about the *Scandal* fandom. Each blog in Tumblr’s network has an archive, where content created or reblogged can be retrieved. It is organized by year, month and even media type. This organization was invaluable to me gathering data. The data-gathering section of the Methodology chapter also includes a brief discussion on the decision to avoid fan interviews. Also discussed are the ways in which I went about identifying Black femininity in Tumblr’s anonymized space. Both the methodological Standpoint and discussion themes of this thesis intentionally disturb the ways in which the lived experiences of racialised and gendered subjectivities are always present in both academic and fan praxis.

## **Chapters Five-Eight: Discussion**

### ***Chapter Five: ‘Down the Tumblr rabbit hole I go’: Setting the Ethnographic Scene***

The introduction to the discussion chapters explains Tumblr’s landscape and appeal by using an autoethnographic account of my pre-dissertation affinity for the social media

space. I discuss how I came to love *Scandal* as a media object, and the affective impulses that drove me to seek community discourse about the show. It is here that the 'katrinapavela' fan identity and blog are explained, and the *Scandal* fandom introduced. I explain the discussion themes that will be analysed and how they came to be chosen. This chapter also makes the argument that Intersectionality and Black femininity are inherently embedded in much of the fandom's fan production and discourse.

***Chapter Six: 'Bantu knots and oiling her scalp with olive oil': Playing with Black culture in fan production***

The first chapter for analysis looks at the ideas of 'freedom' and 'joy' as racialized and gendered concepts. It does so through analysis of multimedia fan production and the discourse inspired therein by topics such as satire and intersectionality; hair texture and discrimination; masculinity and blackness; and misogynoir and Black family dynamics. The politics of escapism, and the degree to which it is possible to create a 'pocket' of freedom separate from the historical and present lived realities of Black female oppression form the discussion after the data analysis.

***Chapter Seven: 'I want him to be her man': The Intersectional fan politics of love and desire***

The second analysis chapter considers the intersectional politics of the themes of 'love' and 'desire' as presented in discursive discourse and fan productions that are responding to *Scandal's* storylines. Black fans on Tumblr affectively and politically engage concepts of love, sexual kink, and fantasy, which are underexplored in Fan Studies. The contours of 'Black love'—including who is and is not included in this term; the interraciality of the Olivia and Fitz pairing; and the divergent affective responses to sexual kink are explored. These fan-generated topics are considered within the contexts of

#BlackLivesMatter, the long shadow of American slavery, and emotional transference through mediation of Olivia Pope's bodily coordinates. Secondly, to unpack the historical and political burdens to which the fan discourse speaks, I engage the work of several Black women scholars on feminine desire as a productive means of analysis.

***Chapter Eight: 'A true sista': Wellness, Performative Wokeness and Intra-racial Fantagonism***

This third and final analysis chapter looks at a darker and more vulnerable side of fandom, one that is increasingly permeated social media writ large. First it looks at how fans interact with Pope's increasing un-wellness, due to trauma, in the latter half of the series. These discursive responses are placed within the context of what wellness means to Black women. This idea of un-wellness is then turned inward on the fandom itself and how factions antagonise each other in racialised and performative ways. Fantagonisms is a term the fuses antagonisms with 'fan' to look at the fan context antagonistic discourse and behaviour. It carries various degrees and levels of violence and is by no means unique to any one type of fan group. My desire in this chapter is to use fan-generated data to explore the intra-racial aspects of fantagonism, including how the politics of racial representations, and desires to essentialise blackness are embedded within some of these fan antagonisms— be they 'shipping wars or the portrayal of Black femininity. The tools, methodologies and signifying for conflict engagement are also discussed in this chapter.

***Chapter Nine: Reflections on Fandom Love and Negative Bonding***

The final section of the Discussion Chapters is the reflection. The Reflections chapter is a short one that serves as a kind of epilogue, seeking to convey the researcher's

reflections on the subjective impact of my fieldwork on Tumblr and contend with the various ways in which it changed me and my research interests.

## **Conclusion**

I separated my reflections from a formal concluding chapter. The concluding chapter summarises the research and the degree to which the research questions were answered by the data's analysis. It also explores two different possibilities for future research that emerged from the data, including shaming as performance and power on social media; and Black women seeking refuge in interracial romance.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Politics and Limitations of Representation in Media Analysis and Alternative Possibilities for Reading Blackness**

This literature review interrogates the confinement of Black TV characters to a representational politic, as portrayed in US TV shows, created by Black people. I argue that such a politic primarily focuses on the white gaze by seeking to assess the extent to which racial representation monolithically presents Black people as objects for definition under a system of white supremacy. To be clear, my argument takes as given the fact that representation is but one tool of white supremacy, manifested in the form of media, itself largely controlled and financed by white interests. Scholars past (hooks 1992; Nakayana & Krizek 1995; Collins 1999) and present (Rodino-Colocino 2014; Griffin 2015; Moshin & Jackson 2011; Smith-Shomade 2002) have made powerful arguments about the ways in which white supremacist capitalist control of media renders the vast majority of Black representation as racist, or untrustworthy. As Grace Elizabeth Hale (2010) has argued, the volatile racial politics that followed in the early decades after Emancipation ushered in an era of spectacle (mainly through lynching and minstrelsy) in American culture that was taken up by a burgeoning advertising industry and film industry (in Abdur-Rahman 2012, p.8). Arguments such as this are valid and well-substantiated. For this reason, my intention is not to refute those scholarly arguments, but to suggest that if television, by the very nature of its technical, narrative, and industrial (i.e., the capitalist bottom line of the industry) limitations to progressively represent variegated Black characterizations that satisfy diverse and divergent interests, then by what productive means can Black audiences engage with these images offered to us.



Whilst I do not personally believe it is impossible to offer complex representations of Black characters<sup>1</sup>, it is fair to say after centuries of distorted images, we are always poised for media representations of ourselves to go awry. I ask that, in light of the changing landscape of Black producers, executives and storytellers, the way we examine the portrayal of Black people in television needs to expand beyond the concerns of representation and the white gaze. What I intend to do here is consider burrowing into a deregulation of blackness, in which the first consideration is not how the white gaze is portraying blackness, but what we, as Black people, can see of ourselves in these offerings. Important, too, is the media habits of the Black audience to which the media increasingly caters (Ifeyani 2020). Whilst necessary arguments positing that such catering is exploitation of a still-keen audience for profit, these arguments continually place Black people in a subjugated position as both audience and creators. This is a nihilistic lens that takes for granted relations of power enacted by Black people in those roles, obscuring other potential ways of looking. To put it eloquently, an exploitative analysis disregards “the history of African American articulations of identity formation, expressive culture, and political resistance” (Abdur-Rahman 2012, pg. 3). It dismisses, too, Black people’s desires and other interior subjectivities that respond to media depicting their likeness.

The extent to which Black representation in fiction conforms to, or resists, longstanding stereotypes keeps us embroiled in a dependent binary relationship with whiteness. By doing so, we are supporting the means of social control, thereby limiting blackness solely

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<sup>1</sup> Most recently show runner and writer, Misha Green, successfully delivered a very Black, genre-busting series, ‘*Lovercraft Country*’ (2020) on very white-owned HBO.

as a creation and ongoing narcissistic project of coloniality. To support that reasoning, this chapter will examine the sociology of representation, its historical use over the last century, particularly in cultural and media studies. I will then look at how the politics of representation applied to Black works can clash with media studies analysis of encoding/decoding and audience reception theories, making it more unstable. I will specifically focus on a few scholarly arguments made about the first leading Black woman character to star in US network drama in thirty-eight years, *Scandal's* Olivia Pope. These arguments exemplify the narrow confines of the politics of representation. The intention is to show how this type of analysis works to obscure Black women's subjectivity. Lastly, I consider scholarship that might be an intervention into the limitations of representational analysis. I will explore how the lens through which we view blackness might be queried, its scholarly usefulness in analysing TV portrayals, and the degree to which it is an expansive way of examining the contours of the power relations of blackness, particularly the lived epistemologies of Black women.

### **Sociology of Representation**

To unpack the politics of representation and why it can be a static and unstable lens through which to examine Black-created works and how they are understood, we must break down the constitutive elements of 'representation'. Looking more closely at these pieces, we can expose the instability of representation and its binary relations of power that undermine Black subjectivity.

When it comes to works featuring or created by people of colour, the term 'stereotype' is synonymous with representational analysis. The search for stereotypicality informs the very crux of the representational analysis. For a term upon which the vast

scholarship around representation is so dependent, stereotyping as a binary process of modernity escapes much analysis and often operates on contradictory assumption. In his comprehensive book on stereotyping and representation, Michael Pickering (2001) teases out the various modes of stereotyping and their relationship to power and modernity. Pickering writes that stereotyping is a central source of contention over the politics of representation (2001: x). Its criticality and symbolic process are part of the problem. He regenerates the stereotype as a key concept of cultural analysis rather than something that is largely taken for granted as part of representation. His major goal is to critically examine the social dilemma of stereotyping that's been largely absent in academia. That absence has led to "pathologising stereotypical cultural texts and representations" (Pickering 2001: 44). As a result, the process of critiquing the representation of stereotypes has become naturalised, particularly in media and cultural studies. The search for the stereotypical representation is almost a default approach to a cottage industry of media analysis. Stereotypes about people of colour are a mainstay of modernity, as they are tool of maintaining power and control. Stereotyping imposes an inflexible order on categories which upholds certain structures of power. That inflexibility reinforces safety in the status quo that the order of categories is fixed and necessary (Pickering 2001: 3). Stereotypes of groups work to create categories of deviancy against which moral codes can be compared and the groups found lacking. This, then, reinforces the need to stereotype. These dilemmas are also relevant to anxieties of living in modernity. Mostly presented in words and images that symbolically stand for various social groups and categories, representations provide shorthand for describing and thinking about these groups and categories. This can extend to how members of the group perceive themselves and affect their lived experience. Public representations exert a power over marginalized groups, making it easier to curate,

dramatize, and prioritise assumptions and reductive ideas about them. This can result in those groups being idealised, demonised, flung to the margins, holding little political power, or having to combat a negative public image (Pickering 2001, p.xiii). Works such as Bogle's interpretive history of Blacks in American film (1973) and Hill-Collins' treatise on controlling images (2000) of Black women (and many others in between and since) attest to the consequences of harmful representations.

If, as Pickering suggest, stereotyping is a permanence in society, and in fact, fuels modernity itself, then pursuit of its eradication--especially as the responsibility of Black creators--is futile because placing that onus on Black people invariably reinforces white supremacy's attempt at social control. Here I am speaking of Black-created works. I am not dismissing the importance of vigilance against the stereotype, because, as Homi K. Bhabha puts it, to judge the stereotype is to dismiss it, not displace it. The latter can only be achieved by engaging with its effectivity (1997: 67).

Post-colonialist scholar, Homi K. Bhabha, notes that because the stereotype operates in imaginary grounds, it is "as anxious as it is assertive" in that it is both a site of "fixity and fantasy" (1994, pg. 67). So, it must continually produce in a futile attempt at sustaining the idea that there is proof to the unprovable. For Bhabha, this stereotype of the Other is fetishistic. If discourse of the Other is wrapped in a repetitive cycle which the stereotype produces, a representational politic that becomes stagnant, trapped. The othering makes Black people experience what Dubois calls 'double consciousness' (1903). The white gaze casts us out, makes us other, thus Black people see themselves through a veil that renders them objects. Doing so is a kind of violence because it adds to the trouble to be seen. This stands in the way of seeing and realizing themselves as subjects. Perhaps queering as a process (in that it can never be complete, whole, or fixed) is a post-colonial way of seeing

that can be usefully applied to examining contemporary portrayals of Black womanhood in American television.

Lisa Lowe, in her comparative study of Orientalism in British and French literary traditions, writes ‘to conform to binary difference is inevitably to corroborate the logic of domination, to under-develop the spaces in discourse that destabilise the hegemony of dominant formations’ (Lowe 1991: 24).). But Pickering notes that even this perspective relies on an endless chain of signifying in an attempt to liberate us from domination of stereotypes. Pickering says, “Whether celebrated or denigrated, Otherness entails an erasure of distinctiveness and particularity of self precisely because it is always placed over on the other side from selfhood” (Pickering 2001: 161-2). Post-colonial studies attempt to escape the binary hamster wheel by examining the gaps, ambivalences, and contradictions of colonialist discourse of the Other by using Intersectionality.

Noted Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall, in his influential essay, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture” (1992) notes that Intersectionality illuminates the antagonisms of our various identities, which defy neat alignment (261). He cautions against getting trapped in “the endless either/or, either victory or total incorporation” that so often characterizes cultural criticism of representation (1992: 257)). Spaces of contradiction cannot be simplified or wholly explained with binary oppositions (Ibid.) of which representational analysis is often comprised. Hall could see playing out, within popular culture, the struggle over cultural hegemony, which is never about total victory or domination (Ibid.). Instead, the goal is to look upon blackness within popular culture as a site of strategic contestation, the goal being to shift the balance in relations of power in that space. Foucault posits that power is not total nor only imposed from above. It concerns the

unequal relationship of power between the powerful and the powerless. In his view discourse wholly shapes our understanding of the world. Discourse analysis then focuses more on the construction of reality rather than its representation (Freedan 2003: 106). Analysing constructions of reality put forth by Black creators means factoring in the standpoints and subjectivities that inform their views and contending with those meanings.

### **Deconstructing Stereotype: The Foundation of Representation & Its Historical Use to Establish Power and Control over Black Bodies**

Film historian, Donald Bogle (1973, v. 2016 cited), wrote the first definitive analysis of Black representations in 20th century American film. He systematically details some of the earliest and most damning depictions of Black men and women. He begins with Edward St. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), adapted from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel of the same name. This was before Hollywood as the centre of film industry had officially come into being. Even without the significant capitalist infrastructure and profit, Bogle notes the obsequious ways in which Blacks are submissive to whites and forego any racial loyalty, thereby "endearing themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of a sort" (1973: 6). These kinds of characters become the 'Tom' archetype in the title of the book, which serves as an enduring stereotype. It is a term that is still used, over a century later as a response to representations of Black males who side with whites over their own race. Furthermore, it associates servitude with blackness and aligns blackness with commercial commodification. These were idealised white stereotypes of Black people seen in advertising as well as film representation (Pickering 2001: 120).

Bogle spends time exploring the myth of the 'Black buck' archetype (among others such as 'the uppity Negro'; the 'the savage rapist' (of white women); 'the mammy')

instigated with great success in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). The film used white actors in blackface to promote effective caricatures of Black Americans, the legacy of which would emerge in countless Hollywood films and TV thereafter. *Nation* was labelled "as the most slanderous anti-Negro movie ever released" (Bogle 1973: 10). This was, after all, a film that glorified the Ku Klux Klan and was given tacit endorsement by the highest representative in the nation at the time, when it was screened by the President, at the White House shortly after its release (PBS 2002). This moment of symbolic nationalism is important because it communicates to the citizenry those who are the patriots, and those who are the enemy. In discussing *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and its retelling of a racist story as a form of anti-Black propaganda, scholars such as Linus Abraham (2003), Steve Neale (1993) note the way this film's stereotypes endure and injure over time. It elevates stereotypes of violent Blacks, fragile white women in need of protection, and the white masculinity necessary to save the nation. *Birth's* zeitgeist status merges cinema's increasingly key role at the intersection of narration and nation to portray "Films' unique capacity to join the representation of space to the experience of time, matching landscape as a nationalist metaphor with the re-enactment of landmark historical events, has made cinema a primary site for establishing the modern national as a textual unity and imagined community" (McGuire, 1998, pp205-6 in Pickering 2001, p. 101). In this context, Bogle's compendium on Black representation in film is also more broadly about race in America. Bogle's study, more generally, reveals the complex relationship between Black Hollywood actors and the structure of Hollywood itself, particularly the struggles between incorporation and resistance. Now in its fifth edition (2016), Bogle's classic text has become more layered and complex as the Black actors, producers, writers, and directors have made gains, but also fight the same battles. His work has spawned a great number of other texts

concerning Black representation, signifying practice, and agency in media (Guerrero (1993); Diawara (ed. 1993); hooks (1996); Grant (2004); Mask (2009 and 2014); Fain (2015)).

One of the most recent works inspired by Bogle's legacy, *Filmic Blackness: African American Cinema and the Idea of Film*, by Michael Boyce Gillespie (2016), is a departure from some of the aforementioned studies. Gillespie's work is a key inspiration for the goals of my own thesis, as he dispenses with the focus on representation of Black people in film and its attendant issues with the white gaze. Instead, Gillespie interrogates the discursive nature of race itself and the ways in which our demands on the works of Black artists shape the lenses of expression. To do this, Gillespie asks bold questions, such as what if "[Black] film could be speculative and just ambivalent?" (2016: 5). He does not isolate Black film as its own category or genre but compares it to other artforms practiced by Black people such as literature, photography, and new media. This form of trans-medium comparative study has also been adapted by scholars like Caresse John (2011) (whose use Black feminist use of Standpoint Theory as an analytical tool for Black women's fictional characters will be further discussed below). What is achieved in Gillespie's book is an intertextual exploration of Black subjectivities which contend with the complications of raciality but are not wholly defined by that raciality. Gillespie calls on the words of Kimberly Benson to succinctly explain his premise: "[blackness] is not an inevitable object, but rather a motivated, constructed, corrosive, and productive process" (in Gillespie 2016, pp. 5-6). I will call upon Gillespie later in this chapter when I consider analytical modes for blackness on TV that expand the boundaries of representation.



## Deregulating Blackness: Black Existentialism

Further to Benson's point above, if blackness should be seen as a process always in production, then how we examine that production deserves attention. Blackness, much like freedom, is not a thing which can be concretized as a destination or possession. As historian, Thavolia Glymph notes, "freedom is not separate from the understandings and intuitions of those who seek it" (2008, loc. 320). Though blackness is often reified as language-- particularly as colloquial vernacular-- and various creative outputs, it is also a lived spectrum of experiences inseparable from the Black subjects who create it. Resistance narratives that rely on performativity are but one part of that spectrum. I read all acts of resistance as fundamentally being about one thing: our demand, as Black people, to claim the fullness of our humanity--to which we are entitled. That humanity relies on accessing the interiors of ourselves. Audre Lorde describes 'the erotic' as a source of power that comes from a deeply feminine place within us (1984), and that when we access that, we are our truest selves—not as a destination to be reached, but an invention of becoming. Becoming, as philosopher Kal Alston (2005) reflects, is a process without a singular destination, a creative continuation of coming into oneself. If blackness is a process of becoming that requires repeated access of an interior self, which comes from a deeply feminine place, then blackness can be seen as queer—an unfixed state of revision—in many ways (Pow 2018, p 239).

The deregulation of blackness from within its ideological confines is one of the ways we can practice emotional liberation, as we work to compel changes to a larger oppressive system. My use of the term 'deregulation'—a process often associated with loosening control and oversight in industry—is purposeful. Deregulation curtails control and relaxes boundaries of operation. There is a sense of sovereignty to blackness that is beyond the limitations of how we are represented (Quashie, 2012). Stuart Hall (1992) writes that, due to

our encounters with colonialism, 'Black' is a floating signifier containing no essential core. The project of European coloniality, as Elliott C. Mason (forthcoming) notes, forcibly fixes blackness in order birth the modern notion of whiteness and its right to expansion and ownership (forthcoming, pg. 5). By de-regulating, or un-fixing blackness from specific tropes, behaviours, and performances, we give ourselves space to explore identity. Hall goes on to say that 'only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted, and who we are' (pg. 261). Be-ing is a verb. We are a people in the making, daring to imagine ourselves in kaleidoscopic ways. When we ideologically regulate our being-ness as Black people, we make it possible to step into the fullness of who we are, who we can be.

Too often Be-ing Black means being controlled by institutions, but also by our own communities and selves for self-protection. The illusion of safety usually results in regulating ourselves into 'acceptable' boundaries that were devised for our containment. But in a world where saying 'Black lives matter' is a political stance--and where unarmed Black people are blamed for their own murders at the hands of the state--regulating Black identity into confinement can lead to its own misery. I define 'misery' as the inability to find joy in consuming creative Black content without necessarily searching for racial betrayal within it (i.e., looking for what's wrong before seeking to understand).

Perhaps one solution to navigating the trap of confinement should be to think of blackness and its representation in more expansive ways. I am interested in the ways in which Black women are key contributors to how we think about the possibilities of be-ing Black. Through ideas like re-inhabitation (Hesse 2015) --a term that recognizes the Black corporeal presence can transform and adapt hostile spaces to our needs, realities and hopes--Black people can seek to turn the prison of representation into a prismatic

opportunity from which to engage parts of Black culture. These alternatives, or queer pockets seeking ways of analysing blackness that befit the full complexity of our humanity exist in various ways and arguments, particularly through inspiration from the legacy of Black feminism. I visit alternatives to the representational lens, proposed by Black writers, later in this section. But first, I turn to thinking about how Black feminism and its analytical tools shape this project's theoretical and methodological frameworks.

### **Black Feminism's Influence**

I have established that much of the interdisciplinary approach to this thesis is inspired by Black feminist theory and methodologies of the past and present. Here I visit some of the most significant influences upon this thesis project. Jacqueline Bobo (1998) 's analysis of Black women's negotiated readings of *The Color Purple* has been discussed in the introduction. Significant, too, is Patricia Hill Collins' treatise on *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), which legitimizes the intellectuality of Black feminine epistemologies, including tracing these intellectual communities, in the United States, back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. As important is Collin's work in *Black Sexual Politics* (2004), which considers both the limiting narratives which have regulated Black women's identities, but also intra-racial gender ideologies and both the endogamous and exogamous effects. This inspiration is most evident in the data presentation and analysis of Black women *Scandal* fans in the Discussion sections, but also the choice to do ethnography (see Methodology Chapter). Crenshaw's *Mapping the Margins* (1994) complicates this project further by not only considering how race can be centred in fan studies, but specifically how the relationship between race, class and gender complicate the identity work fans perform with their love object. Moya Bailey (2010)'s coining and exploration of misogyny specific to Black women is raised in the

Chapter Three's discussions around systemic and systematic biases of Fan Studies and the categorisation of 'prestige tv'.

Further to this is the influence of Black feminist works by Shayne Lee (2010), Evelyn Hammonds (2004), and Kimberly Springer (2008) helped shaped my thinking about the sexual desires, fantasies, and contention with historical narratives. Those works influence my analysis of the data's themes around sex and desire and how they interact with the intersectionality of Black womanhood. Speaking of desire, the works of Claudia Tate (1998), Mary Helen Washington (1987), Audre Lorde (1984), Grace Dent (1992), Kristen Warner (2015a) have a prodigious effect in shaping how I approach desire as a creative, feminine force in the practice of Black women's identity work in fan praxis. Those scholars, each in their own way, content with the limitations of the representational lens, acknowledging that there are alternative means of reading and analysis that Black women call upon (but are not limited to them) that are generative and necessary. Finally, I want to acknowledge how the Black feminist influence of fiction writers like Toni Morrison, Chimamanda Adiche, and Alice Walker, gave me permission to draw upon influences outside of academia. That if Black feminism was going to be a foundational lens to this project, then it need not be ghettoized as one specific theory, methodology or analytical tool, but a fundamental Standpoint that orients and permeates the work.

### ***Black Feminist Standpoint Theory***

Sometimes in my anger and frustration at the world we live in, I ask myself, what is real and what is not? And now it seems to me that what is real is what is happening. What is real is what did happen. What happened to me and happens to me is most real of all... I write then out of that. ...And when I write about the people [in Georgia], in the strangest way it is as if I am not writing about them at all, but about myself. The artist then is the voice of the people, but she is also the people (Walker 1983, p. 138).

Originally presented to Black Students Association members at Sarah Lawrence College in 1970, Alice Walker's words about the Black revolutionary writer as artist reminds me of my position as both a Black woman researcher and blogger. Walker's articulation that writing about one's own environment, at its most truthful, is akin to writing about oneself. The same can be said of writing about fictional characters. If the writer is "of the people", or the environment in which those people are gathered, her voice will necessarily reflect that of "the people". At least some of them. As a writer who is now in a privileged position of researcher, I'm a participant turned researcher who remains among "the people" on Tumblr as I conduct my research. This is a deliberate and controversial stance but has ethnographic precedence and methodological salience. Using Black Feminist Standpoint Theory (BFST) as an analytical tool allows me to take this stance, and couples well with CEE.

From its early days of articulation as a theory in the 1980s, Standpoint theory began as a movement against positivist notions that an independently objective reality existed outside of the individual's biases. Moreover, getting to this objective reality in one's work was seen as the pinnacle of import for the researcher. Standpoint theory rejects this by noting that all forms of knowledge are socially constructed, and so our social locations produce understandings of the world that are similar to and different from the

understandings of others. Black feminist Standpoint theorists argue against the idea that research is value neutral, instead “calling for the recognition of the social and political circumstances that influence not just the researched, but also the researcher” (John 2011, p. 95).

Black Feminist Standpoint Theory (BFST) is itself an intersectional intervention, created to accommodate the lived, subjugated experiences and analyses of Black women in sociological analysis, particularly as an alternative to a positivism that lauds objectivity as the pinnacle of intellectual rigor. One proponent of BFST is scholar, Caresse John (2011), who pointedly shows the theory’s strength outside of a strict sociological realm by applying it to something ‘soft’ like literature. By doing so, John confirms that all art is created in a sociological context that reflects an understanding and positionality in the world, usually (but not always) by its author. This is the way in which I, as both researcher and fan, regard Rhimes’ fictional writing of *Scandal*. It is the foundational supposition of this project that many of the Black women fans who engage with the show embrace a similar understanding, which is thematically explore in the Discussion chapters.

In an article about strategic ambivalence as a BFST mode of analysis, Caresse John (2011) interrogates the social positioning, power relations and Standpoint (or lack thereof) of the central Black women characters in Nella Larsen’s novels. John creates a layered account that examines the fictional world of the characters, their ideological views alongside Larsen’s real world social positioning as a Black woman writing from both inside and against dominant white, male-centred, and Black middle-class cultures of the 1920s United States. BFST applies a gendered lens to Standpoint Theory, focusing on the perspective of women as the oppressed gender. Feminist standpoint theory recognizes the role of human experience in research and the complex relations of power enmeshed in that. This especially

applies to the debate category of “influence of race of interviewer effects” on research. By extrapolating from John’s explication, I can apply the use of BFST as an appropriate analytical lens through which my ethnographic study of women’s intersectional understanding of Black women characters and the reflexivity (or lack thereof) they and I (as a blogger) espouse in dialectical discourse.

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) began with objectivist leanings that there was a ‘truth’ embodied in the lives of women that offered a particular vantage point on male domination (Hartstock, 1983). However, through later critiques advanced by Black feminists and post-colonial theorists, among others, that universality to the lives of women fell apart (Hawkesworth, 1999). Feminist Standpoint theorists began embracing concepts like “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1991), “subjugated knowledges” (Collins, 1990) and now intersectional knowledge and experience (Crenshaw 1991). Women’s experiences are diverse, their identities multiple, their lives lived at various intersections. There is no universal claim to truth in living as a woman, including those who are Black.

FST questions how people develop knowledge about their natural and social worlds. John says, “Because standpoint theory is interested in interrogating how the social order and knowledge are constructed and maintained, it is an epistemology; it investigates what we believe and why we believe it” (2011: 95). Hierarchy is critical to Feminist Standpoint theorists. Groups gain privilege through oppressing other groups, and for this reason, those theorists insist that we begin our research and thinking from the lives of the oppressed. Doing so offers a better understanding of social conditions, relations, and knowledge production (2011:96). What more perfect place to begin than with the lives of Black female viewers grappling with the various forms of privilege and oppression experienced by a fictional Black woman character?

### ***Multiplicity and Black Feminist Standpoint Theory***

It is important to note that Standpoint theory is not simply a perspective one holds on any given event or phenomenon. A “standpoint is an understanding of one’s individual location in the social order as part of and shaped by that order’s social and political contexts. Thus, a standpoint is both individual and collective, in definition and achievement” (John, 2011: 96). It is a process of ‘becoming’. Instead of permanence, it is fluid, stabilizing at the point of interrogation. Because it is a process, FST reveals diverse spaces between binaries and polarities. An individual standpoint must be reached before one can define in relation to a collective. The individual is then able to reflect on one’s privilege and oppression. Defining in relation, according to Patricia Hill Collins, forces us to not only question what has been said about us, “but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define” (2000: 114).

In a response to Susan Hekman’s article, “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Revisited” (1997), Collins emphasizes that FST as method cannot be unmoored from its knowledge/power framework and made apolitical (1997: 375). This critique is a Black feminist politic at work. Collins says that FST places less emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and more emphasis on the social conditions that construct such groups (Ibid). The idea here is that a group consists not of a collection of individuals, but entities who share certain experience due to their social location. To ignore power relations misses an opportunity to acknowledge inequality (1997: 376). Collins goes on to say that the multiplicity FST embraces comes not from the individual women, but from the social structures themselves (377). Fluidity, she challenges, “does not mean that groups



themselves disappear, to be replaced by an accumulation of decontextualized, unique women whose complexity erases politics” (377).

Central to the idea of shared experiences, due to social location within hierarchies, is the question of whether the individual can stand as proxy for the group and the group for the individual. Collins asks this because she acknowledges that groups often experience conflict in generating group narratives. This is certainly an applicable theme when examining discourse by marginalized women about a central, but also marginalized fictional character. Individual voices within a group are equal and different but trying to establish rules for delineating whose voice is most valid takes us back to objectivism. These politics play out in various ways in data sets proceeding this chapter. Of this, Collins says, “the amount of privilege granted to a particular standpoint lies less in its internal criteria in being truthful... and more in the power of a group in making its standpoint prevail over other equally plausible perspectives” (1997: 380). What matters in standpoint theory is the ideas in systems of power. In this way standpoints must be judged on the terms of their participation in hierarchical power relations. In standpoint theory, knowledge and power are inextricably linked (1997: 381).

Though Standpoint theory begins with researchers examining the lives of the marginalized, the early presumption was that the researcher was not a member of the marginalized. Dick Pels (2004) refers to this as “the spokesperson problem”, something endemic to ethnography until the last few decades. Pels says:

*...all standpoints need to be spoken for in order to become constituted as standpoints in the first place. ...Indeed, if feminist standpoint arguments are investigated more closely, it turns out that it is not so much the contradictory or marginal location of women as such, but precisely that of the female feminist thinker that is deemed to offer epistemological advantages (2004, p. 279).*

Previous studies have used counter-public as an entry point for examining the media geography of marginalized groups (Newman 2014), particularly Black people (Graham and Smith, 2016). These studies, including, that of Lu and Steele (2019) are absent an intersectional focus. This study pays particular attention to Black women and the community of other women they attract to the *Scandal* fan discourse. It also centres this audience, not as marginalized within the Tumblr space, but as wielding some power and as primary purveyors of discourse. This work builds on the scholarship of Warren (2015b) who gives a multi-platform peek into *Scandal*'s fandom of Black women, and Monk-Payton (2017) who situates Black laughter online within a Black queer feminist tradition.

Black Feminist Standpoint Theory also accommodates what Kehinde Andrews defines as Black Sociology (2010). He says Black sociology can borrow from competing paradigms of white sociology because of Black sociology's embrace of ideological positioning (2010, p.19). Andrews criticizes positivism's emphasis on value-free ('objective') ethnography as an intrinsically white and limiting approach that devalues and seeks to invalidate other ideological approaches to sociological ethnography. All ethnography is an ideological vantage point for viewing reality, "Black sociology represents a real challenge to the mainstream because it offers a different vision." (2010, p. 3). For Black feminists, that vision is one in which Black people have full autonomy over their lives.

Describing Western sociology as intrinsically white is both criticism and description. It is an acknowledgment of the fundamental role whiteness has played in the past and future of western sociological theory and practice. ". In positing a move toward Black Sociology, Andrews says the goal of a radical sociological method should be subversion rather than critique (2010. p. 20). Therefore, it is necessary to move beyond saying that all research is ideological and toward interrogating "the assumptions of conduct and

knowledge produced as researchers.” (p. 21). But the two are not polemic; Subversion is itself critique as a rejection of dominant ideology as insufficient.

What themes require subversion, and which require explicit portrayal, those are questions implicitly reflected in fan critiques of the shows’ themes and storylines because race and gender are so central to the characters on screen. The question of what is ‘radical’ or ‘liberating’ is important, but not fixed when examining the discourse fuelled by real women about the plight of fictional ones. The discrepancy of interpretation of those within the prism of blackness could prove revealing when standpoints are compared. This helps us understand social structures through people’s constructed understandings of the world. My ideological constructs as a blogger sometimes lead to discourse encounters with other women that are sometimes expansive, and at other times reductive.

Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, as a form of Black Feminism, is not normally used to evaluate fandoms, as there is little work done specifically on Black female fandoms and the discourse produced by that (Warner 2015b) rather than the performance or experience of fan-ing while Black (Scott 2017; Cooper 2017; House and Bradley (2019) to name a few). Past ethnographies that normalized whiteness as both neutral and standard of humanity also created the “deviant other” in tandem. Black feminist standpoint theory would embrace Black womanhood as the default lens of evaluation for reflecting on a show centred around Black women characters. Depictions of Black people are important sites of struggle, as media becomes an ever more ubiquitous part of popular culture (Hall 1993). The consumption of TV, film and music holds an important place in African American culture (Bobo 1995, hooks 2003, Spooner 2003), fostering a complex interpretive community rich in history. According to Clarence Muse, the ‘fan’ identity has been a core part of the culture as far back as the early 20th century (1940 in Wanzo 2015, 2.17). As popular culture has

become centred around social media, African Americans use those platforms an average of 6% above their white counterparts (Smith and Anderson 2018). The confluence of these facts has implications for how Fan Studies racializes the ‘fan’ and assesses what they care about.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term ‘Intersectionality’, which is an analytical framework for understanding how interlocking systems of power work against marginalized people while benefitting others. The term was intended to illuminate the ways in which the American justice system failed Black women by disregarding the matrix of their racialized, classed, and gendered identities. Though coined in 1989, Intersectionality as a lived experience, has been highlighted by Black women intellectuals since the nineteenth century (Hill-Collins 2000; Cooper 2017). Yet, when it comes to Intersectionality in Fan Studies, there has largely been a dearth of curiosity. Warner writes that, “Producing content is a necessary act of agency for women of colour, who strive for visibility in a landscape that favours a more normative (read: White) fan identity and that often dismisses and diminishes the desires of its diverse body to see themselves equally represented not only on screen but in the fan community at large” (2015, 34). Marking the nuances of gender and race must be part of Fan Studies (see Chapter Three). Those intersections have only just begun to be explored by scholars in the last decade (Bennett & Chin 2014; Florini 2014; Wanzo 2015; Warner 2015; Chatman 2017; Baez 2015; Stanfill 2011; Scott 2012; Pande (2018); House & Bradwell 2019) to name a few. Black women’s intersecting identities means that race cannot be left unexamined when talking about their engagement in feminized culture on digital platforms.

This project seeks to examine race and gender from the embodied subjectivities of *Scandal*’s primary audience, Black women. The seven-season series centred on the demands

and desires of political fixer, Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington). With Pope's character, Black women could do what white (particularly male) fans have been doing for years: imagine themselves as the default fan.

### **Literature Specific to Black American Representational Images Onscreen**

Jacqueline Bobo (1988) is an influential intervention into the representational debate on filmic blackness. Bobo goes beyond the image of the Black characters portrayed onscreen and investigates, specifically, what both the image and the subjectivities of those Black characters mean to the lives of real Black women. When *The Color Purple* was being criticized as racist for its depiction of Black men, Bobo Black women's stories, and the meaningfulness they gathered from the film. Some of the criticisms for which she tried to provide an alternative, are still salient today, particularly the white gaze focus of representationalism (177).

Also, still relevant is a focus that centres the feelings and analysis of Black men in Black women-centred stories, particularly those where Black men are supporting players, absent, or who are critically portrayed. Bobo notes also that there were also Black Feminist criticisms that focused on clichés and racial stereotypes as well but did so under the rubric of a Black feminist agenda (178).

Amidst those pointed criticisms, what Bobo searched for was the meaningfulness that connected to the success of the film. The overwhelmingly positive reception of the film by Black women contrasted sharply with some of the scathing criticism from Black academics and reviewers. Bobo wanted to make sense of this. She believed that Black female audiences consuming the film were did not react positively because they are primed

for manipulative images of themselves, nor was it white people going in droves to see this very Black film. What Bobo did was investigate the meaningfulness Black women constructed from mainstream texts in order to empower themselves (Bobo: 179). By doing so, Bobo modelled the epistemological readings of a film text that was not predicated on representational binaries. What she discovered was the progressive kernels Black women derived and explored from the film, despite its encoding with dominant ideologies, the expectation with most Hollywood produced media.

Bobo notes “Not only is the difference in reception noteworthy, but Black women’s responses confront and challenge a prevalent method of media audience analysis that insists that viewers of mainstream works have no control or influence over a cultural product” (1995, p. 180). She understands that history and experiences are part of what informs both Black women’s textual reading, as well as what the (often) white producers and directors bring to their storytelling. Because those histories and experiences are not the same, this creates room for what Stuart Hall’s analysis of encoding and decoding refers to as reading positions, or interpretive codes (1973). Hall, who borrows from Frank Parkins’ model of ‘meaning systems’) notes that audiences can read a text from the dominant position, a negotiated position, or an oppositional one. The posture a reader takes, is not necessarily one dictated to them by the film, but on which fits with their own epistemologies. This could be any of the three positions.

In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins specifically brings up the ways in which the intellectual communities formed by Black women reflect epistemologies that don’t necessarily adhere to the Enlightenment model of positivism. Collins outlines the contours of Black women’s ideas and the penchant for traditional scholarship to subjugate or devalue those ideas. Collins notes that, perhaps, because as a historically oppressed

group, Black women's knowledge diverges from standard academic epistemology theory. Instead, it takes on artistic and expressive forms. She notes that more people would have been exposed to musical poetry of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith than would have ever read Nella Larsen's novels (pg. 15-16). As critical social theorists, Black women's collective thoughts "aim to find ways to escape from, survive in and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice" (pg. 8-9).

As noted earlier, the politics of stereotypes confines representational analysis, inextricably linking representations of marginalized people to hegemonies of white supremacy. Within this dialectic, powerful myths can take hold that not only affect how Black people are perceived, but also how we perceive ourselves. Bobo calls on Shorer's (1959) insistence that humans are dependent on myths. In doing so, she expresses the double-edged sword of mythology, upon which representational images rely to take root within culture. Their ultimate function is to validate a version of history, whether or not that history is accurate. The belief in the accuracy is most important because that belief creates actions (Bobo 1995, p. 184) and cultural products that ensure harmful mythologies endure. Moreover, there is a shame inherent in our frustration with certain stereotypical representations of ourselves, at the core of which is the white gaze. But these are distortions created by white supremacy to ensure the continuation of that power. There is nothing we can do that cannot be read as stereotypical in some way. In fact, there are representational mythologies that are embraced within Black communities as well as white ones, but also mythologies that are specifically created to counter stereotypes invented by white people. This sense of shame is a form of limitation and control in its own way.

Patricia Hill Collins' celebrated essay, "Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images" (2000), she continues in the tradition of Bogle's critical treatise on the

representation of Black images onscreen by focusing specifically on the stereotypical representations of Black women, through an intersectional lens. Collins discusses the trope of the 'The Black Lady', and how it was developed within the Black community to counter a white supremacist-created myth alive since the 19th century: that of the over-sexed, wild Black woman (aka 'The Jezebel'). Where the Jezebel was perennially available as an object onto which men exercise sexual pleasure, the Black Lady, by contrast was the good, respectable girl who aspired to hetero monogamous marriage and children. In this way she was different from the asexual mammy who took care of other people's families, not her own.

The controlling images of Black women were not just racialized slander, but also patriarchal projection that found purchase among Black men as well. It is in this vein that bell hooks criticizes the representation of Nola, the title character from Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). In "Whose Pussy Is this? A Feminist Coinment", hooks (2009) takes Lee's sexism as a Black man to task, seeing in Nola's representation familiar controlling images, reminiscent of ones Bogle highlights over several decades of work (1973, 1980, 2015), and Collins (2000) does, too, years later. Hooks takes exception to sex and sexuality (despite the film's title) being the dominant aspects of Nola's personality as the supposed lead, in contrast to the multifaceted ways in which the men around her are portrayed. For hooks, such a portrayal does not come off as liberatory, but a reinforcement and perpetuation of "old norms overall" (hooks, 1989: 9). hooks' work on representation can sometimes exemplify the crucible in which media depictions of blackness finds itself in when discussed from this rubric. Even when the representations are those created by Black people, even Black women. In "Representations: Feminism and Black Masculinity," (1990), hooks writes,



Producing images of black in a racist context is politically charged. Black women have been accused of acting in complicity with “the man” (i.e. white male systems of domination) when creating images of black men. Whether or not images of black femaleness in contemporary work by black women are “positive” is never a concern voiced by black men. The concern is with the black male image, who will control it, who will represent it (p.70).

While hooks is responding to criticism sparked within the Black community after the film adaptation of *The Colour Purple* was released, hooks’ point extends further. Discussions about Black-created images—of any gender—become necessarily focused on the image as perceived by the white gaze, particularly in white dominated Hollywood, and the wider racist society. Hooks’ point is not that Black men were hurt by the ways in which Black women saw them, and portrayed them onscreen, but that Black women allowed them (here, Walker) to be portrayed in ways white people could uncritically receive. hooks goes on to note that Black readers who consume Black fiction are not undermining artistic freedom when they “raise political concerns about the content of contemporary writing produced by Black writers in a white supremacist, capitalist economy, where we are all acutely aware that some images “sell” better than others” (1990: 72). Hooks goes on to use Edward Said’s (1978) ideas around the implications of representations in imperialist societies (Said 1978) to support her point. There’s no debating that American capitalist economy has specifically constructed racist, controlling stereotypes of Black people, which were then used to sell products since the 19th century (Hinrichsen 2012). However, interrogating hook’s words means that until we no longer have a racist, capitalistic society in which white people own the highest means of media production, no Black artist has autonomy or agency in the works they create. Even in the case of Tyler Perry, a Black artist that not only owns his own production company, but an entire studio, significant analysis of his work focuses on stereotypicality conjured for the benefit of the white gaze (Harris 2014;

Harrison III 2012; Jackson 2011) and the detriment of Black people (though Jackson also looks at the positive stereotypes of Perry's work on Black audiences).

Moreover, this type of thinking suggests that there is some version of African Americanness, free of the effects of colonialism's legacy that can be portrayed onscreen, or on the page. As mentioned earlier, I already take the position that this is a very difficult thing to achieve in television. Perhaps hooks could not see someone like Shonda Rhimes owning her own production company and producing works she doesn't write. Then again, hooks would still say the representations she produces easily sell to a racist market of white advertisers that are needed to promote her products. The point here is discussing Black-created images solely from a colonial lens of representation creates a quagmire in which it is impossible to dissect the fraught humanity of Black subjectivity.

The negotiated and oppositional reading positions are necessary for marginalized groups to be able to make and derive meaning, from media, for themselves. Donald Bogle, author of the eponymous book on Black media representations (1973), said of *The Color Purple*, after its release:

for Black viewers there is a schizophrenic reaction. You're torn in two. On the one hand you see the character of Mister and you're disturbed by the stereotype. Yet, on the other hand, and this is the basis of the appeal of that film for so many people, is that the women you see in the movie, you have never seen Black women like this put on the screen before. ...I'm talking about the visual statement itself. When you see Whoopi Golder in close-up, a loving closeup, you look at this woman, you know that in American films in the past, in the 1930s, 1940s, she would have played a maid. ...Suddenly, the camera is focusing on her and we say, "I've seen this woman some place, I know her" (in Bobo 1988: 48).

Bogle, in his book, is highly critical of how Black image, derived by white media, are portrayed onscreen. But the 'schizophrenia' Black audiences experience from seeing the

familiarity of themselves on screen, in characters written by a Black person, but adapted for film by white people. The image is suspicious. We are taught that the image is distrustful unless fully in control of Black hands. But short of full creative and distributive control by Black people when it comes to our image, it seems there is no way to escape the bind of representation.

Bobo, in trying to move beyond the suspicious image, and try to reach the core of meaning, calls upon literary analysis, particularly those of Black women authors. Noted literary scholar, Hortense Spillers identified communities of Black women as “cultural workers,” (Spillers 1991) before Bobo brands them as “cultural readers” (a term inspired by Spillers) for her project on *The Color Purple*. In the community of Black women Spillers sees something strategic: producers of content that reflect an interest in their communities that reflect new symbolic values and traditions (in Bobo 1995: 188). They are self-aware and not falsely conscious, as most Marxist-based analysis of media would suggest. Spillers and Bobo’s work is supported by what Stuart Hall defines the principle of “articulation”, which he takes to mean “giving expression to” (Ibid.). The social group formed around a signifying text (e.g., a work of fiction) is a temporal, political pact that communities make over their lives, away from dominant forces that control them (Ibid.). They can regain control over their lives and that of their communities.

Most impressive for me is that Bobo’s study connects the “articulation” of Black women’s communities to the literary traditions of Black women novelists as far back as the 19th century. Using literary analysis from Hazel Carby (1987) and Barbara Christian (1985), Bobo articulates an echo between the Black women novelists of the 1970 and 80s (like Walker and Morrison) and the Black women activists of 19th century America. Carby notes that in written works over a century later, novelists have been able to echo a sentiment

that, though not recorded in the 19th century, were heard, and passed down, creating a tradition (Carby (1987) in Bobo 1995, p. 189). I do not content that the mediums of television and the novel are the same. What I explore later is the degree to which this novelistic approach, which considers its characters' subjectivities, can apply to serialised dramas written by Black women. In this thesis, I examine the character of Olivia Pope, in, ABC's *Scandal* by Shonda Rhimes. In this way, I seek to employ the spirit of Stuart Hall by focusing on cultural strategies that make a difference in the struggle over cultural hegemony.

In soliciting the readings of Black women, Bobo endeavoured not to negate any flawed messaging in *The Colour Purple*, but to centre desires, joy and negotiated readings of Black women who watched the film, knowing that what the film meant to this audience should matter at least as much as we considered what was derived by the white gaze. Bobo's model, which interrogates the subjectivities of Black women as cultural readers, is one in which my own study follows, with some differences. Where I depart from Bobo is in the methodology. She assembled groups of Black women and conducted interviews. I use the mediated expressions already impelled from an audience heavily consuming and producing content in the social media landscape. Though Bobo had fewer layers of mediation to contend with in her study, it still reflects interventions by the researcher. The respondents and their responses reflect decisions made by Bobo.

### **Representing *Scandal***

Because *Scandal* (2012-2018) is the primary text around which I gather social media data for analysis, this section contends with (mostly) Black scholarly critiques of the shows main character, Olivia Pope, a Black woman, to better illuminate examples of contradictions

of a media analysis approach primarily steeped in representational politics. Media can only *re-present* the world (Lacey 2009: 146), so all communication is essentially representative and mediated. The question of who is on the receiving end of the text and the sense they make of it principally inform this project. Considered, too, is the question of the text being held up for reception, and that the thing being represented, and the sense made of that thing may bare no similarities.

In their explication of how meaning is conveyed through media representation, Richard Dyer (1985) and Stuart Hall (1997) both contend with approaches that imagining a ‘real world’ or ‘reality’ against which the representations of that world compare. These are applicable and valid questions, but key question to be asked is whose experience of ‘reality’ are the representational images being compared. How well do they work for deriving visual fiction created by and featuring Black people? Stereotyping functions to make us forget the dilemma between one-sided representation and the more complex vision which can be portrayed.

My chief concern with the overabundance of representation argument is that Black works must primarily be judged from a view of coloniality and its shaping of our social identity. These were not shaped by us in the first place, but by a white supremacy that, yes, has also invaded our psyche. This complicated place that Black people inhabit, within the United States is sometimes given less grace than for white creators who tell ‘Black’ stories. David Simon (‘The Wire’) and his Black characters and characterization of Baltimore drug life have earned both acclaim (DeClue 2011; Thompson (2012) and divergent analyses (Brown 2011; Bramall & Pitcher 2013) by Black academics. DeClue analysed how the show expanded blackness by incorporating a queer lens; and Thompson compared the Black urban experience to the Naturalist tradition. But Black scholars also pulled apart how the series

maintained long-standing stereotypes (Rüdebush 2015; Wilson 2014). More recently, Black media publication, *The Undefeated*, unironically refers to the Misha Green-led TV show, *Lovecraft Country* (HBO 2020) as a beautiful ‘empty suit’ (devoid of true meaning for Black people) in comparison to Damon Lindeloff’s *Watchmen* (HBO 2019) series. These aired within one year of each other on the same network and both tell Black-centred, historically based stories bent to the Science Fiction genre. In her article, Black female culture critic, Soraya McDonald praises Lindeloff’s concluded series as a paragon of storytelling about American racism and its “intergenerational trauma and the harm that results from the accumulation and hoarding of power” (2020). By contrast, Green’s as-yet-to-be-concluded effort is deemed on in which the storytelling’s meaning reveals little else “besides the obvious fact that racism is omnipresent in America and really scary” (Ibid.) The point here is not about story-telling devices, but that even white creators of Black-centred art are given more leeway in representation than Black creators are, especially in the early days of their work. Works by Black show runners are sometimes viewed with scepticism from the outset, which, in part, is because of a well-established history of distorted images of blackness and a sense that any Black creator that ‘makes it’ in white capitalist Hollywood, is compromised in some way. The Black creator is denied agency, creativity, and instead made agents of upholding white supremacy of TV networks. Yet other showrunners on other networks are not looked at with that same logic. In either case, the focus on representation has at its heart the machinations of stereotyping. Given the history of this psycho-social thinking it keeps the output of Black people steeped in a colonial narrative, and attempts, through assumption, that blackness is “inherently” diametrical to what is represented. Ironically that binary idea is a product of the contradictions stereotyping creates. It pretends social identity is two-sided, definitive, and fixed. That fixedness is almost always grounded in coloniality.

They are a form of social control, which we use to limit our own being-ness. Scholar Kevin Quashie, in exploring Black (American) culture beyond tropes of resistance notes that one result of Richard Wright's assertion of the Negro as America's metaphor (in Quashie 2012, loc 38 of 2664)—meaning that whatever there is to say about Blackness, it's meaning needs to be public, rather than intimate or in the process of becoming. In this way, Quashie says, this doubleness (DuBois 1902) produces a self-consciousness on the part of creators for the audience who will receive their work, and thus shapes what is expressed in the first place (Ibid.).

Representations are primarily focused on countering stereotypical images with facts in hopes of eradicating the stereotypes is a fantasy. Logic and information are not all it takes (Pickering 2001, p. 12). The premises of the stereotypes aren't logical in the first place. No one TV image is going to monolithically accord us respect. My concern about representation is the disservice it does to Black people—intellectually, creatively, and socially.

*Scandal* is an ABC network drama written and produced by Shonda Rhimes (Black), inspired by the professional career of Judy Smith (Black), and stars Kerry Washington (Black). The show centres on the professional and personal realities of crisis manager, Olivia Pope. In addition to being a successful fixer operating at elite (read: largely white) levels of American government and business, Pope is also involved in her own personal scandals: a love-affair with the white, married president of the United States; and the daughter to two Black parents--juxtaposed as shadow Patriarch of the Republic and a matriarchal "terrorist" outsider who holds no patriotic sentimentality. From the outset, the dominant criticism around Pope's character and *Scandal* itself revolved around either 1) the reproduction of historical tropes specific to Black women; or 2) accusations of a neo-liberal, post-racial, post-

feminist fantasy land masquerading as ‘progress’. Those views could be epitomized by scholar Brandon J Maxwell’s 2013 offering for *The Feminist Wire*:

In most episodes Pope is little more than a political mammy mixed with a hint of Sapphire who faithfully bears the burden of the oh-so-fragile American Political System on her shoulders... But to only portray Pope as a political mammy with a hint of Sapphire would be too obvious to viewers and would make her character even more noticeably flat... [Enter Jezebel stage left.] When Pope is not gleefully maintaining the house or being overbearing, thus undesirable, she’s in the back shed with massah — the Oval Office — Fitz where we realize she’s actually quite desirable (see Season 1 Episode 1).... In spite of the crafty stereotype switching that occurs on a weekly basis, the character of Olivia Pope is the ultimate amalgamation of three of the dominant media narratives about Black women [Jezebel, Sapphire and Mammy]. She seamlessly switches between each in ways that would lead us to believe she transcends them. In this way, “*Scandal*” very subtly tricks us into celebrating these images as opposed to being critical of them and demanding better (2013).

Throughout the article Maxwell is at pains to shoehorn Olivia Pope (and Shonda Rhimes by extension), off-the-rack stereotypes, which obscure his ability to see what is happening outside those boundaries. There is no attempt made to see Pope as a character outside of the stereotypes he can apply to her. This contrasts, both with the views of some other Black scholars (notably women), and many of the show’s Black female audience (the subject of the discussion chapters). Maxwell goes to lengths to avoid entertaining the messiness of Pope’s character. His feminist analysis lacks self-reflexivity about the moralistic and misogynoir-ist (Bailey 2013)—sexism and anti-blackness specific to Black women—assumptions embedded within. Under Maxwell’s treatment, Olivia is impotent in all respects. Career, sex, and the “oh-so-fragile” American political system all happen to her. There is no consideration of Pope as a subject imbued with agency, desires, and class privileges.



Maxwell's representational analysis is a distillation of a cynicism that Hall calls out two decades before:

There is a kind of 'nothing ever changes, the system always wins' attitude, which I read as the cynical protective shell that, I'm sorry to say, American cultural critics frequently wear, a shell that sometimes prevents them from developing cultural strategies that can make a difference. It is as if, in order to protect themselves against the occasional defeat, they have to pretend they can see right through everything—and it's just the same as it always was (1992: 257)

Maxwell's binary criticism has, of course, been responded to thoughtfully by other scholars (Cooper and Lindsey (2013), Lane (2013), Pixley (2015)). In the politics of representation, Black subjectivity exists for its political and social meaningfulness rather than as a marker of human individuality of the person who is Black (Quashie 2012, loc 41). Blackness becomes responsible for telling us something (often didactically) "about race, racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness" (Quashie 2012, loc 42). But seeing only through this public lens supports racial superiority as a practice intended to dehumanize people, and as such disregards the inner life of our humanity. I must reiterate that this thesis is not trying to dismiss valid arguments of my Black feminist forebears but attempting to broaden how we view TV representations of Black women, through an audience reading Black subjectivities and interior complexity that is, in fact, there to be gleaned.

In 2015, *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* dedicated an entire issue to critical examination of the show. Writing for that issue, film scholar, Mia Mask, notes, "Pope's life is full of contradictions and innumerable complexities, the likes of which we haven't seen in Black women's lives as represented in mainstream culture. Popular entertainment is merely a reflection of the contradictions within the zeitgeist" (2015, p.4).

The politics of identity- a primary point of discussion with representational images- in the Black American community is often fraught with contradictory desires that seeks to cast off the shackles of a racist legacy that monolithically essentializes its ontology, but also seeks to present a united show of strength, and outward resistance to a racist culture seeking to define it. In the end, both attempts interpolate Blackness primarily within the Black/White binary of inferiority/superiority. In other words, these White-define stereotypes make it the responsibility of Black people to 'fix' the image of Blackness under the piercing gaze of Whiteness.

In the Autumn of 2014, this tension came to a head. With the premier of "How to Get Away with Murder" (HTGAWM), Shonda Rhimes became the first Black showrunner to have three television shows on the same night. *New York Times* critic, Alessandra Stanley (2014)—who is white—attempted to highlight this programmatic achievement but caused controversy instead. Stanley's piece begins, "When Shonda Rhimes writes her autobiography, it should be called 'How to Get Away with Being an Angry Black Woman'...Be it Kerry Washington on 'Scandal' or Chandra Wilson on 'Grey's Anatomy,' [Rhimes' characters] can and do get angry. One of the more volcanic meltdowns in soap opera history was Olivia's 'Earn Me' rant on *Scandal*" (Stanley 2014). Stanley never mentions the frequent rage of many of *Scandal*'s White characters, female or otherwise, or the booming monologues of Black male character, Joe Morton (Pow 2019).

It is not surprising that a mainstream publication like the *Times* would put a modern spin on old racism, but Mia Mask, commenting on the Stanley article, observes that a similar problem persists in communities of colour, as many are not sure if *Scandal* is "a progressive step in an anti-essentialist direction or a regressive move backward toward a reconstituted Jezebel-in bed-with-Massa-stereotype" (2015, p.4). This 'either/or' need not exist, as the

representation is capable of containing a spectrum of ‘steps’ as Mask calls them, that are in dynamic tension with each other. There’s no need to resolve the blackness to any singular point of satisfaction. This uncertainty and distancing from Olivia Pope’s representational image are evidenced in a 2016 Medium.com article by a long-time *Black Scandal* viewer, Torri Oats. In “The Genius of Repackaging Old Stereotypes,” Oats writes, “with every utterance of the word ‘whore’, with every physical blow, with every emotional bruise, and with every open display of her sex life, our Olivia Pope was slowly disappearing. Once formidable and mighty, she has been reduced to a ‘Jezebel’, ‘mammy’ and... a voiceless ‘domestic abuse victim’. To people like [Alessandra] Stanley, she is now palatable and ‘in her place’; reinforcing stereotypes that are inextricably woven into the fabric of Black America” (Oats 2016). The “our Olivia Pope” comment denotes a gendered racial familiarity that comes with pride and representative expectation. Disappointed that Pope’s character no longer feels like a reflection of her Black femininity, Oats, by season five, feels shame in the character’s journey. She blames Shonda Rhimes for Stanley’s stereotypical characterization (Pow 2019).

I use Maxwell and viewers like Oats to point out the limitations of the representational lens, one in which the portrayal of Pope’s character should primarily service a political and social agenda that makes the complexities of a Black existence above all triumphant. Whilst every representation may have an agenda when created those on the receiving end may see disparate agendas or reject the intention entirely. And though Oats and Maxwell do not argue for ‘triumphant’ narratives, they also do not clearly argue what Pope’s representation *should* be, just that it should be other than what it is. The critique of stereotyping often brings up (unreflexively) the tendency by the author to be normatively judgmental. Thus, making it easier to make stereotyping a pathological exercise of

something only 'others' of less insight and intelligence do (Pickering 2001, pp. 69-70). The representative image thus gets trapped between fixity and flexibility in thought.

Criticisms like this often leave unexamined deeply entrenched expectations about the kind of spaces Black women can inhabit, and their embodiment and presentation of Black femininity that often mimic the underlying assumptions the critics decry in the first place (Pixley, 2015: 30). Countering such a view, media scholar, Tara-Lynne Pixley writes "Pope cannot be unabashedly strong and competent, sexually active, or act as a caretaker without being categorized as some variant of a stereotype... Clearly an untenable set of expectations over-determines the representation of Black women in pop culture" (2015: 31). Blackness as a clearly defined, insisted upon performance ends up identifying 'Black' only in pockets of difference and otherness (Pow, 2015).

Stuart Hall considers the productivity of representational stereotypes of Black people in popular culture in his classic essay, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" (1992). For him, the obsession with 'difference' as a signifier of representation is a hallmark of postmodernism. Hall sees the danger in defining the 'Black', in Black popular culture, as that which is based in difference (1992p. 256). This leaves intact a positivist contention that white European maleness, and its principles serve as the foundation against which blackness derives its difference. However, difference isn't all bad. Hall says cultural life "has been transformed in our lifetimes by the voice of the margins" (1992: 257).

Maxwell and Oats point to the ideologies behind controlling images, which are continual sites of struggle (Collins 2004, 148) in the march toward progressive portrayals of blackness on TV. For Black people struggle is a necessary part of the reality of progress. Joseph Winters (2016) notes that the history of Black people in America is laced with unfinished struggles. For him, unifying ideas of progress are fantastical constructions designed to buffer

us from a reality filled with melancholy and loss for Black people (6). Winters points to Black literary tradition as one in which the necessity of ambivalence to the progress of the Black subject is engaged.

### **Navigating the Tropes and Traps of the Representational Lens**

The politics of racialized identity and intersectional forms of blackness are already problematic. As a marginalized group, representation of any form of blackness will have its attendant problems because blackness itself is a contested space, no matter the arena in which that blackness is explored. Centuries of public relations campaigns seeking to convince both Black people and those racialized as superior has fractured the ways in which Black existence is perceived and portrayed. Many of the institutions into which Black people have endeavoured to produce art and pursue livelihoods are ones constructed for their exclusion. And because representation permeates all things, the complicated politics of it become endemic in all endeavours. Because of all these issues, representation ultimately becomes a trap. The representational lens is a trap, through which both artists and audiences seek pockets of escape within a system they cannot change on their own for white supremacy is so endemic that it makes us all complicit in its enduring legacy. Short of revolutionary structural changes, Black people must find ways of depicting their realities and possibilities of themselves inside oppressive structures. This requires a process of deregulating blackness.

### ***Alternative or Queer Blackness***

This section considers the ways in which Black scholars have explored existential and genre-crossing ways of depicting and analysing Black existence and creativity. The representational lens can seek to identify, through performative authenticity, the Black struggle, familiar cultural mythos, and other unifying points of identification. There is a sense of melancholy that haunts the Black experience, throughout much of its diaspora. Nearly every iteration of blackness has been interrupted by European colonialism. It is important to note that the pockets of escape, or alternative ways of looking I go on to explore do not seek to deny the ‘interruption’ nor its on-going effects. Instead, as Joseph Winters urges, it seeks hopefulness from narratives of Black progress which accommodate melancholia, not pretend it away. This is ‘hope draped in Black’ (2016).

Winters’ thesis is sceptical of why we are so eager for narratives of progress that provide a buffer against a history filled with loss (2016, pp. 4-6). His is especially critical of ‘hope’ tropes that lean on collective racial uplift, particularly those portrayed via mass resistance. Exploring the seductiveness of ‘hope’—from the historical arguments of those like Dubois, to more recent speech rhetoric of President Obama—Winters picks apart the illusions of American racial progress. Of the delusion of post-raciality, Winters notes that this idea was never about actually achieving hope or progress, but a desire for painless absolution, for white people, from the responsibility of dismantling white supremacy (p. 11). Post-raciality is merely a millennial manifestation of colonialist outlook, itself defined by ideas of progress that were based deeply in denial of the exploitations of others (Ibid.).

In one chapter, Winters, pays specific attention to on-screen narratives of progress. He says, “the idea and promise of progress... is connected to values such as recognition, equality, and freedom,” and that this “has always been a fraught object of discussion and

interest for Black writers, artists and thinkers” (2016, p.7). These values are encompassed in a term like ‘ambivalence’, with its inherent contradictions and mixed feelings, is adopted as a standpoint for exploring the speculative nature of Black progress. Writers like Winters, Quashie (2012), John (2011), Carrington (2016) embrace ambivalence as creatively generative for Black artists.

*In Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, André Carrington (2016) begins with the following lines from Langston Hughes (1926): “We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves”. Those lines are a perfect prelude to Carrington’s exploration of the overwhelming whiteness of science fiction and the speculative nature of situating blackness in a time-space fiction that doesn’t exist. It is a future in which white science fiction writers either actively exclude blackness and Black people; imagine them in the same racial hierarchy of inferiority; or approximate their history of domination for use on an invented ‘other’. Though the book is about speculative fiction, the work is being produced in a contemporary climate. Carrington notes that he’s still following in the intellectual vein of examining “how the production of literature and culture fits within the structure of society in which it takes place” (2016: 1). Carrington identifies that though a generation of scholarship has been published regarding the ways in which popular science fiction texts resonate with passionate and engaged fans about class, national identities, gender sexuality, changing nationalities, the specificity of racism and racial identity to African Americans is under-engaged in the scholarship (Ibid.). This truth extends beyond the realm of science fiction into other types of fiction. Carrington’s work is a specific contribution that places blackness at the centre of experiencing and analysing speculative fiction, including the ways blackness is mediated by this genre (2). But this type of interrogation into the mediation of

Blackness is possible outside of this genre. The whole field of cultural production, according to Carrington, is widely untapped for racial configurations of blackness that go beyond manifestations of stereotypes and the negative impact of representation, including Black knowledge production around speculative fiction (3). Carrington's study is an important touchstone for my own, which examines discursive discourse of race, gender and sexuality as these things coalesce around fiction, fan culture and cultural production by placing blackness at the centre of the inquiry. While Carrington's study does examine articulations of blackness from speculative fiction from Black authors like Octavia Butler, his study is wider. He also looks at Black characters in white-produced work (Uhuru in *Star Trek*); or those that include permutations of race (Marvel comics). For Carrington, the larger primacy is works that are significantly engaged by Black fans.

My study limits its scope to the knowledge production around one piece of fiction, *Scandal*. The Black femaleness of its inspiration, production, and central heroine, as well as the historic nature of its place in primetime American television are integral to my interrogation. What I am interested in is the expectations that fuel fan production when Black femininity is made (or appears to be made) central in a work of fiction. Due to the heterogeneity of blackness, the ground between content and audience reception will be a rich, contradictory one to explore. Though situated in a white political context, the character of Olivia Pope is specifically Black from the start, unlike Viola Davis' character, Analise Keating, in *How to Get Away with Murder*, which is helmed by a gay, white male, Peter Nowalk—a veteran of Shondaland Productions. Keating became Black because Davis' audition convinced Nowalk that the character could be Black. Whiteness so often is the default lens through which white authors see the world, but rarely acknowledge, preferring instead to use code words like 'traditional', 'average', or 'just human'. Whiteness becomes,



an unacknowledged force in the writing, representation and interpretation of the work and the characters within it. The idea of racial transformation contains its own attendant politics and suspicions, especially in the hands of a white head writer. Carrington's work takes up that question with regard to the fantasy and science fiction genres. Though *Murder* is a work of contemporary fiction, the subject matter of Carrington's study resonates here. Carrington has a chapter addressing how Black female characters are drawn and depicted in speculative fiction—from TV to comic books. He also spends a chapter looking at the invention of the Black fan. Gender and race do not intersect much to look at the Black female fan and the specificities of the expectations and epistemologies that manifest because of that intersectional identity.

Carrington and I have a significant point of symbiosis in our examinations, and that is the speculative nature of blackness itself (2016: 6). Carrington does not specifically use the term in that way, but that is how I interpret it. The term is really about the convergence of iterations of blackness in speculative fiction, which is to say fiction that imagines space and/or time other than we know and experience it. But if blackness is to be thought of outside of a binary, dependent relationship with whiteness, then it has to be speculative by nature. By that I mean something that embraces conjecture in its expression, as a way of expanding knowledge of itself. Drawing on the work of cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, Carrington writes:

Hall argues that approaches to Blackness in popular culture are incomplete if they only pursue negative critiques of the way dominant narratives facilitate racial marginalization, because creativity has also thrived in conditions of subordination. Every cultural form invented by Black people is diaspora, from the sorrow songs to break dancing, demonstrates complex and potentially liberatory uses of existing cultural forms. Through the force of these cultural interventions, Black subjects have come to emblemize the generate quality of marginality in the popular imagination. Therefore, Black subjects are not necessarily rendered invisible in popular culture by racial subordination, but... neither are the lived

circumstances of being Black—including practices of coping with and defying racial oppression—meaningfully integrated throughout the field of cultural productions (pg. 13).

Blackness, as Hall urges, is not simply a matter of resistance or capitulation (1993). Finding pockets of freedom, or ways to survive the implacability of living under a white supremacist structure that pervades so much of our consumption, is a constant negotiation. Carrington has found a pocket of expression that considers an expansive view of blackness that includes representation as one component.

Speaking of the speculativeness of Black modalities, Michael Boyce Gillespie (2016) ponders the art of blackness as it is constituted in American cinema, by Black artists. In *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*, Gillespie makes an intervention between the more porous visual representations of race in art and the more delimiting way we, as scholars and critics, charge those works with the burden of indexing Black experiences and rendering them authentic, despite the multiplicity of the Black experience. Gillespie argues for a distinction between “film as art and race as a constitutive, cultural fiction”, in order to “deliberately engender a shift to distinguish between the rendering of race in the arts from the social categories of race and thus forestall the collapsing of the distance between referent and representation” (pg. 2). The distance between referent and representation is a meaningful place of possibilities for referent and representation. The collapsing of that space, due to prescription, ends up doing two things: 1) creating boundaries around the complexity of blackness and its generative possibilities in ways white artists do not have to contend; and 2) making the audience complicit in de-naturalising the socially constructed lie of ‘race’. Gillespie notes that the latter is done, mostly, subconsciously before seeing racial representation on screen, described as a recursive

predetermination of the Black experiential truth (2016: 6). He articulates it perfectly in these lines: “The belief in Black film’s indexical tie to the Black lifeworld forgoes a focus on nuance and occults the complexity of Black film to interpret, render, incite, and speculate. ...Black film does not and cannot satisfy identarian fantasies of Black ontology; instead, it poses conceits, specificities, and contexts” (pgs. 2, 7).

Rather than experience film blackness as what Kimberly Benston warns against, “an inevitable object” (2000:6 in Gillespie 2016: 5), but as a thing that can make and unmake itself, thus exposing on purpose, the very tensions of blackness. The context here, for Benston, is the Black arts movement, itself an outgrowth of the Black political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. But, where the politics could sometimes seem rigid, the Black arts movement was more experimental. It is this shifting, experimental nature, Gillespie is curious about when he ponders the possibility of filmic blackness being something other than embodied, or perhaps intentionally ambivalent, or even one of the worst mirrors into ourselves (Gillespie 2016: 5). Throughout the book, Gillespie unflinchingly, wrestles with identity as an unrigid signifier by examining its subjectivities as considered by Black auteurs. Gillespie is not arguing on behalf of a colour-blind lens that seeks to erase difference but stating that Black film does “not prosper as a diagnostic mission” (pg. 4) when we sociologically predetermine what it should do for the authenticity of the Black experience. This closely resembles Carrington’s (2016) ideas, which themselves are drawn from Stuart Hall’s (1993) essay on the inessential contours of the ‘Black’ in Black popular culture. Just as I have interpreted Carrington’s work as seeing blackness itself as speculative, Gillespie sees blackness itself as “a term for art modalities that evince Black visual and expressive culture” (2016, p. 5)). Carrington has argued along similar lines for considering African American Vernacular culture (AAVE) as an artistic and intellectual forms of expression in fan

production (p 13). This thread will be more robustly explored in forthcoming chapters, particularly in the discussion section.

In his argument, Gillespie seeks an ambitious investigation of Black filmic capacity, much in the way that Carrington argues on behalf of the speculative nature of blackness in the science fiction genre in the culture industry: “Literature, education, media, and the art world are structured in ways that tend to reproduce , meanings of blackness that are amenable to prevailing racial ideologies, but when authors, artists, and critics infuse their work with critiques of how cultural production recapitulates exploitative dynamics in society, they may find ways to repudiate those systems as well” (2016,p. 13-14).

Concerning racial formations, Gillespie thinks expansively, and draws on male and female scholars alike to articulate his thesis. He is (un)surprisingly homogenous and limited in applying his concept of filmic blackness to the works of Black female auteurs, nor filmic subjects that grapple with non-heteronormative expressions of blackness. Gillespie devotes four chapters, each examining one film and the ways in which it discursively functions as “radical art” (2016: 15). Ralph Bakshi’s *Coonskin* (1975), Wendell B. Harris’ *Chameleon Street* (1989), Bill Duke’s *Deep Cover* (1992), and Barry Jenkins’ *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008) all receive deep textual analysis. None of those films are helmed by women, and, in fact, the particular contours of the intersection of filmic blackness with gender don’t receive much attention by Gillespie. This is similar to my earlier contention with Carrington’s under engagement of the gendered aspects of his chapter on ‘The Invention of the Black Fan’. So many times, Black make writers consider raciality from an un-reflexive vantage point of maleness in the same way that white people consider present and future permutations of humanity from the ‘default’ of whiteness.

His filmic exploration has resonance for my study, which looks at engagement around a TV drama's ability to generate discussions around racial identity and its intersectional vectors. TV and film have differences, certainly, in the politics of their production, but neither is more virtuous or authentic when it comes to Black expression. There are no pure politics when it comes to art production with a commercial bottom line. At the same time, it is reductive to interpret all artistic motivations from the Marxist perspective of exploitative commerciality. Where Gillespie analyses the ambivalence, speculativeness, and expansiveness of Black art production as a cultural film scholar, I think a search for this kind of thinking could be applied to audience reception theory—a way to identify, from their perspective, the racialised, sexualised and gendered threads that allow them to ponder more than the degree of authenticity.

Black literary critic, Claudia Tate (1998), is not among the scholars Gillespie draws upon for his para-literary study of filmic blackness. But there is a great synergy between the two texts, as both are concerned with the ways in which blackness is constituted by Black artists and the way those works are received. Tate and Gillespie's central conceit concerns the permutations of Black subjectivity that are marginalised within an artform because they do not comport with dominant racial narratives of oppression and symbolic resistance. Tate laments that "African American cultural history has consistently venerated those works that explicitly portray such contestation as 'the Black experience' even though Black writers have frequently debated what constitutes this experience, its depiction, and its analysis" (1998: 4). Though writers debate these things, it does not mean the audience which consumes their work—Black or white—is willing to entertain those debates in their popular conceptions of blackness. Indeed, this is a central question I have as a researcher navigating

such intricate topics as the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in the landscape of social media, known for ephemerality. The possibility of these issues, regarding the work of Black artists, being engaged in meaningful ways is something I tease out in the next chapter. This struggle of the Black writer, juggling her subjective and artistic concerns while navigating the political tightrope of a, largely, white literary world is the subject matter of novelist Toni Morrison's essay, 'Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination' (1992). Morrison believes that the writerly imagination is "always" (emphasis in original) conscious, at some level, with the burden of representing his entire race, and that this concern is prevalent because of the ways in which white supremacy constructs the 'universal' (xii). The 'universal' is, of course a positivist holdover of Enlightenment thinking, where white, heterosexual maleness informs the default human experience. Blackness, then, is circumscribed to a category of other, even as the subject who lives and grapples with blackness remains very much human.

The African American novel has its origins in the slave narratives, which advocated for the abolition of slavery by arguing on behalf of the humanity of the enslaved (1998: 3). Enslaved persons had much to overcome just to be able to take their own representation in their hands, but the priority had to be the countering the dehumanizing construction of blackness created by white supremacy. In this way, the origin of the African American novel is similar to that of film. Given the successful anti-Black propaganda of films discussed earlier in this chapter, like *Birth of a Nation* (1915), one can understand the compulsion of the Black auteur (in film, and later in television) to counter such representational narratives in their own work. Black people needed to see themselves portrayed as something other than, well, 'other'. At the same time, the abolition of slavery did not occur because white people finally recognized the humanity of Black people, despite our protestations. In fact,

dehumanizing stereotypes flourished and took hold among an American population because white supremacy requires the continued justification of our domination. When slavery could no longer serve that purpose, through literal and social categorization of Black people as non-human property, representation in advertising and film picked up the baton. But the major point here is that there is always an audience who readily desires to have their negative beliefs about Black people reinforced. The African American novel pleading that Black lives mattered—to the audience that hungered to read about themselves—nevertheless changed no mind committed to obstinacy.

Tate understands both the pressure and the tendency of an audience to equate novels about Black social protest as the predominate stand-in for the Black experience. Writing about the Black literary climate before the 1980s—a time when the sociological protest novel was *de rigueur*, Tate notes “scholars and readers all seemed tacitly to agree that such works, which focus on the inner worlds of Black characters without making that word entirely dependent on the material and psychological consequences of a racist society, were not Black enough, and they cast them aside” (1998, pg4). Ultimately, that expectation was based on the literary fashion of the time, she notes, itself dictated by the boxes into which white supremacy has circumscribed blackness. Tate uses a critique of Richard Wright’s (1953) novel, *Outsider*—a less canonical novel of Wright’s—to illustrate white expectations of blackness. Tate accuses that because Wright’s novel “depletes blackness of the usual expressions of racial grievances,” critics—Black and white—fail to question the desires that compel the central protagonist, but instead complain that Wright doesn’t fit into “an appropriate template of racial needs and political demands” (1998: 5). The expectation is that blackness, in novels and in life, should only be conjured by its relationship to political oppression. Yielding to this kind of white patriarchal power demand

forces us into a posture where we “mis-recognize ourselves” (pg. 6). Tate says that the human condition is such that we consciously and unconsciously find ways to mediate, with whatever authority we possess, “the hegemonic effects of white male power” (Ibid.)

Balancing that tension between political resistance and Black subjectivity has been an ongoing theme in the works of Black authors. As with Gillespie’s filmic interrogation, an auteur/author’s speculative blackness can be limited by an incurious audience, or one whose political expectations overshadow the creator’s intention. That tension between the possibilities presented by a creator and the audience’s ability to recognize—through engagement or rejection—those possibilities have deep meaningfulness for my own study, and those issues will be teased out with regard to television.

Much like Gillespie, Tate’s study focuses on works authored by Black people. In *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race*, Claudia Tate, through the lens of psychoanalysis, examines 20th century novels by Black female and male authors. By interrogating topics like desire, romance, death and mourning, and humour for the ways in which they intersect with race to convey permutations of Black subjectivity that are less regulated than what Tate calls the ‘protocols of race’, which is to say: explicit, public racial identification (1998: 10-11). Tate understands that unpacking the interior process of Black characters is necessary to understand the physical expression and communication of that blackness, as the author conceives it and as most people live it. In many ways this speaks to exactly the point Gillespie was trying to make about the works of Black auteurs and conceptual visualisations. Where he pondered the possibility of Black expression that was not embodied, the novels Tate chooses are very much about the embodied experience of blackness. She focuses explicitly on emotion, with the spectrum of desire being the most prominent (indeed it is in the title of the book!). Tate, perhaps because she is a Black



woman, purposely includes works by African American men and women that speak to racialized and gendered experiences on the margins. By 'margins', Tate means texts that speak to "the tension between the discourses of personal desire and political demand in Black texts that cohere around ... latent and manifest narratives" (1998: 5). Perhaps most interesting about this methodology is that Tate does not choose marginal authors, but the more marginal works of canonical Black authors: Dunham Kelley's *Megda* (1891), W.E.B Du Bois' *Dark Princess* (1928), Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* (1954), and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). This way Tate can make comparative arguments about works, by the same author, that make racial politics a central concern, and those which do not. All five novels construct meaningfulness more in terms of personal longing than public conflict. Longing, according to Tate, produces ambivalences that complicate a text in ways our social paradigms of race and gender have limited ways of grappling with. Like Gillespie, Tate is not advocating for a raceless universalising in Black novels, but neither can we "persist in reductively defining Black subjectivity as political agency," otherwise we "will continue to overlook the force of desire in Black texts as well as in the lives of African Americans" (1998: 10). Her use of desire is both a lens through which we can view the imagination of the Black writer, and a pocket in which to explore Black subjectivity from the inside out. I compare Tate's study on psychoanalysis in Black novels with Gillespie's study on filmic blackness to demonstrate a few points. The first is that Tate and Gillespie are advocating for the same thing, in different genres: to query Black subjectivity in art beyond ontology and an oppressive boundedness with whiteness. Secondly, there is a historical and artistic relationship between novels, film, and television in terms of adaptation and inspiration. As a quick example the novel *MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors* (Hooker 1968) was adapted to feature film (Altman 1970) and a successful television series

(Gelbart 1972-1983). And, of course, there is Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Haley 1976) which has been twice adapted to television miniseries (Haley 1977; Konner et al 2016). Today there is no shortage of traditional and graphic novels that have been turned into TV series, most of them, however, without a significant Black presence, save *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan 2013-). Because of this artistic relationship between the genres, the questions that Carrington, Gillespie, and Tate grapple with are highly relevant to television. Jacqueline Bobo's great study (1988) of the epistemological meanings to Black women of the film adaptation of *The Colour Purple*, would still be relevant if the film became a TV series. Though *Scandal* is an original TV series, I intend to follow in Bobo's footsteps.

In a published chapter, "Insider/Outsider: Olivia Pope and the Pursuit of Erotic Power," (Pow 2019, I argue for viewing Shonda Rhimes' historic series as if it were a novel, as a way of pushing against the restraints of the representational trap. This project is about the ways in which the show's most dedicated coven of Black women explore intersectional themes of the show. Television is, of course, a different medium which is fraught with compromising commercial interests that are separate from the literary world. Nevertheless, if we focus on story-telling, we can consider *Scandal* as a serial novel. Doing so places Rhimes in the tradition of Pauline Hopkins, a Black novelist and playwright, writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hopkins uses the serial novel form and romance genre to explore race and other sociological themes in works like *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Cast Prejudice* (1901-1902). Rhimes openly admits to using Olivia Pope's character to explore similar themes in the twenty-first century, tweeting "Can't believe I need to say this: yes, I wrote 'Black woman auctions herself off' storyline on PURPOSE. I have heard of slavery ...We've been writing about the dynamics of race, gender,

and power over here at #Scandal for 4 seasons. All Gladiators know that” (Rhimes 2015a—b).

For Black people struggle is a necessary part of the reality of progress. Winters (2016) notes that the history of Black people in America is laced with unfinished struggles. For him, unifying ideas of progress are fantastical constructions designed to buffer us from a reality filled with melancholy and loss for Black people (p. 6). Winters points to Black literary tradition as one in which the necessity of ambivalence to the progress of the Black subject is engaged. The view through the representational lens makes it impossible for the vagaries of Black interior life to express unsavoury parts of selfhood, such as shame, putridness, submission, or any contradictory state of existence, without being thought of as less than human, less than Black.

The very notion of progress, or moving forward, entails loss, as something or someone(s) is left behind in the moving ahead (p. 15). Who else but the often left-behind Black folks, are in a position to explore these tropes of progress through strategic ambivalence through a combination of existential hopefulness-as-survival with the experience of continued loss and melancholy? Shonda Rhimes’ writing of *Scandal* is filled with this agony of progress and loss as necessarily existing alongside hope. The way in which the past remains present in *Scandal*’s narrative demonstrates the ways in which “the present is always the site of potential breaks and ruptures that can signify both dislocation and pains as well as novelty and possibility” (p. 25). The character of Olivia Pope is a quintessential melancholy Black character who experiences flashes of hope punctured by devastating losses as he navigates and accommodate herself within a system of white political power. In the end, for her to progress as a Black feminine subject, she must leave those corrupting systems of power and determine, for herself, what progress will mean for

her. Rhimes, however, does write Pope into the annals of American political history, as a modern Alexander Hamilton type, by hanging a painting of Pope, her appearance deliberately signalling Black femininity, with the opening lines of the US Constitution, “We the people”, and more, boldly positioned beside her. Pope’s image and work for the American republic serve as an intentional contradiction, since Black and woman as subjectivities are nowhere acknowledged in the US Constitution.



*Scandal's conclusion draws on real life*

Figure i. (Becauseofthem 2017)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Figure I features a scene (left) from the final episode of *Scandal*, “Over a Cliff”, which takes inspiration from the real life photo of a little Black girl in awe at former First Lady, Michelle Obama’s official portrait at the National Portrait Gallery. The nod to Pope emphasises her significant impact on the fake world of American politics the show constructed.

## Conclusion

Contending with the contested space of Black subjectivity against the prevailing backdrop of resistance is a topic African American Studies scholar, Keven Quashie, handles with dexterity in *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012). Quashie offers a speculative take on examining Black subjectivity that, partly, takes inspiration from Audre Lorde's use of the erotic (1984), and works of other Black women, like Claudia Tate and Gwendolyn Brooks, as well as Black men, particularly the ways in which blackness manifest differently in their works along gendered concerns. Quashie uses the

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term 'quiet' as a metaphor to queer the interior contours of Black identity. Born deep within, 'quiet' can be a literal quiet as well as "raging and wild, ... a place of desire and anxiety [that] holds all that is" (2012, Kindle loc 1727). Here, Quashie follows in Tate's footsteps by considering the ambivalences of Black interiority that inspire its cultural productions, across industries. Quashie's book is a key inspiration in my work as I consider *Scandal* as a Black novel, art as well as a cultural product navigating the tensions of creativity and racial politics in the context of commerce and consumption.

What I have done in this section is offer alternatives to the representational lens that explore expansive ways of considering the plenitude of Black subjectivity, and its intersections, in art. These may be useful to analysing the discursive discourse generated by *Scandal's* audience. Though scholars like Quashie, Carrington, Gillespie, Tate, and others offer these alternative ways of reading blackness in creative outputs like film, novels, and art, what has not been done is applying these speculative concepts of blackness (including gender and sexuality) to the audience reception of a TV series, within the techno-social

milieu of fandoms on social media, particularly Tumblr. The necessity for carrying out such a study, and the attendant complexity of doing so is what I turn to in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Fan Studies, Social Media and the Potentialities for Black Epistemologies**

The previous chapter focused on historical debates regarding representations of blackness within film and television media, by examining the delimiting contours of the representational lens and the ways in which such an analysis often circumvents the plenitude of Black subjectivities. Additionally, that chapter explored Black scholarship in the disciplines of sociology, literature, film, science fiction and futurism to glean potentialities for understanding portrayals of Black subjects in contemporary television. The methodology chapter will explain the ethnographic methods by which this study is conducted, the mixed intellectual framework applied, and the tools for analysis. This chapter, however, seeks to bridge the contextual gap between the literature review chapter on Black representation in media, and the methodology chapter. Herein, I will argue why the context of the fan as an increasingly important identity, fan studies, and social media in this contemporary moment, is so important to the ways in which we consume and analyse media with regard to Black women.

While the television show, *Scandal*, is the case study for examining Black subjectivities beyond representation in this dissertation, I do not seek to frame the study through only my own intellectual framework. Instead, I will be analysing a variety of themes from data collected from social media platform, Tumblr, which have been produced by fans of *Scandal*. Fan Studies, in its third decade of evolution, is often derogatorily compared to Literary Theory, with the former's analysis being accused of lacking depth and rigour (Sandvoss 2017: 19). By briefly tracing the waves of development of the Fan Studies discipline, I will argue that the current 'third wave'—in its focus on micro and macro culture-

is one suitable for increased intellectual rigour. This can be achieved by centring-- in its analysis and observations--the importance of Intersectionality as a tool for analysing power. By focusing on the praxis of the Black female fan, Fan Studies can broaden how we think of 'the fan', fan practice and power. Furthermore, the chapter aims to situate the examination of fandom within the context of the digitisation of culture. I will make the case for choosing micro-blogging platform, Tumblr, as a creative and commercialized social media space, wherein the plenitude of Black epistemologies, is made possible.

### ***Scandal* and the Broader Social Media Context**

To set the stage for the importance of the fan identity and the social media context to my study of Black epistemologies and *Scandal*, I will briefly highlight how even more recent scholarship on the show continues to refine this representational lens as the primary way in which we discuss the consumption of its audience. Much of the academic conversation around *Scandal* 's historic debut and continued pop culture zeitgeist, has been specific to representation. The show's significance is not just a topic for pop culture media, but one with which media and academics have been grappling since 2012 (Evans 2014; Erigha 2015; Lan 2013; Maxwell 2013; Oats 2016; Pixley 2015). Articles in mainstream media and peer reviewed journals aside, two significant scholarly devotions to the show are worth mentioning. In 2015, the Black Scholar Journal dedicated an entire volume to academic treatises, specifically by Black women scholars, about the show. A look at the list of articles chosen for inclusion, shows four out of six articles are squarely structured around representational arguments in some way. Editor Mia Mask (2015) lays out a brief history of Black women representations on TV before *Scandal* and the predominant representational debates about the show; Maryann Erigha (2015) discusses representational aspects of the



cross-over success of the show with both Black and white audiences; Tara-Lynn Pixley (2015), an inspiration for my own study, details the ways in which representational debates bog down the character of Olivia Pope, highlighting how certain discussions never arise when discussing white characters; and finally, Kristen Warner (2015a), whose work on *Scandal* I discuss more thoroughly later in this chapter, contextualises her discussion of the power and pleasure dynamic, of the show's central interracial romance, through the representational lens of slavery and the Black woman's lack of sexual agency. An article about Shonda Rhimes as a visionary auteur (Everett 2015); and another that explores the show's deliberate nostalgic use of funk and R&B music from the 1960s and 1970s (Monk Payton 2015) serve as the two glaring exceptions.

The second significant contribution is a forthcoming academic volume, *Gladiators in Suits: Race, Gender and the Politics of Representation* edited by Kimberly R. Moffitt, Simone Puff, Ronald L. Jackson II (Moffitt et al, eds.). By the title, one can glean that the contributions grapple with the question of representation from various angles. My contribution to the volume (Pow 2019) takes a deliberate non-representational angle, and instead interrogates Black female subjectivity through the lens of desire and Olivia Pope's relationship with self and others. As established in the previous chapter, by calling for a critical approach to centring Black subjectivities in media consumption, I am not criticizing representational scholarship for existing. Those contributions are necessary and continue to be valid. While other potentialities need to be engaged, what is missing is applying those approaches to the contemporary politics of social media and ways in which audiences now consume television. More recent work by House and Bradley (2019), Chatman (2017), Warner (2015b), Clark (2012) examine *Scandal's* themes from the perspective of social media engagement (mostly Twitter, though Warner uses multiple platforms). House and

Bradley (2019), also featured in the *Gladiator* volume, analysed the use of ‘Black love’/#blacklove on Twitter during *Scandal*’s broadcast to glean the importance of the representation of Black love relationships to the audience. The discussion of their findings includes arguments for a radical interpretation of ‘Black love’ that centres on Black female interiority (Quashie 2012) and satisfaction within the self, separate from the gaze of any racialized suitor. The works above illustrate that the fan experience is a significant way in which we now consume and experience all kinds of media, particularly television (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2017). Napoli and Kosterich (2017) consider the benefit of fandom labour and engagement to a media industry that uses them to measure success of their productions and to monitor indirect feedback as well as monetizing potentialities from their activity (p. 402). The measurement, for the authors, implies a serious approach to these fandoms—at least on some platforms that lend themselves to being more easily measured. The Nielson Twitter Television Ratings (NTTR) system is an example of this importance. It measures social media activity based around individual programmes. Its impact in television fandom has already made a mark (Bore & Hickman 2013; Highfield, Harrington and Bruns 2013). The NTTR system indicates a difference between measuring and valuation of audiences as fans versus that same audience as consumers (Napoli and Kosterich 2017, p. 403). Abercrombie and Langhurst’s (1998) study on the typology of the fan separates that identity as “skilled”, separating it from the (presumably unskilled) general audience (p. 121). The former are the ones who go out of the way to engage their skills for the benefit of themselves (and the media object) once they finish consuming a programme. The ‘fan’ section of the audience began gaining traction through the increased adoption of live tweeting (sharing opinions of a show in real-time on Twitter, often using a shared hashtag which collates related tweets) since 2012.

Recognizing the potential power of social media engagement and building a fan base to sustain the show, *Scandal* was one of the first network shows to require that the entire cast (soon joined by the crew as well) live-tweet along with the audience each week (Weinstein 2014). The idea was pitched to creator, Shonda Rhimes, by her lead actress, Kerry Washington (Ibid.). *Scandal* premiered in April 2012 to a modest audience, having been given just seven episodes to prove its marketability. By this point, Shonda Rhimes already had two hugely successful, multiple award-winning hits in *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-) and *Private Practice* (2007-2013) on the same network (American Broadcasting Company) yet was not given the courtesy of a full season order of *Scandal*. While there could be many reasons, the noticeable difference is that the first two shows revolve around the lives of white women, and the latter around that of a Black woman. No terrestrial network had aired such a show in 38 years, and the first one *Get Christie Love!* (1974) aired for only one season before vanishing from the air. This historical context lent an additional pressure to succeed to which most white-led shows are not subject. Those most invested in *Scandal*, used social media as a form of intervention, by appealing directly to its audience. That engagement saw the show regularly appearing on Twitter's trending topics, for hours, on the nights it aired (Hilton 2013). Such a feat catapulted the show into the timeline of nonviewers on a regular basis. One highly powerful Twitter user influenced to by Twitter to start watching the show was Oprah Winfrey: "I remember Oprah telling me, 'Well I started watching *Scandal* because it's all everybody talked about on Thursday night on Twitter,'" says Kerry Washington (Butan 2018).

Because Oprah liked the show, she used her power to help catapult it to pop culture phenomenon. Her intervention also speaks to the ways in which Social Media has changed how 'success' is defined for TV shows. Napoli and Kosterich note that "social media

platforms make certain aspects of television fandom more visible and, thus, more measurable” (2017: 406). This visibility is used by network execs in programme decisions (Ibid.)

The industry has oriented itself toward fans as well, in some ways. ‘Talk back’ shows such as ‘Talking Dead’ (after ‘Walking Dead’); ‘Thronecast’ (‘Game of Thrones’); and the ‘This is Us After Show’ (‘This is Us’) are examples of the show’s actors, writers and producers discussing their work to further engage fans. Technologies have forced more embrace and communication between culture industries and fans, according to Jenkins (2014: 294). This can be explained through the *Scandal* Twitter account and its engagement with fans through shout-outs, fan dedications; required live-tweeting by cast which is largely responsible for the trend that continues to this day.

Given the enthusiasm and investment people displayed on Social Media, it was not long before the networks themselves were using Twitter as a powerful marketing and engagement tool to increase consumption and profits in peripheral things attached to the show. *Scandal* had branded sponsorship of tweets which engaged Twitter users to re-tweet in order to unlock a sneak peek at upcoming episodes (scandal ABC 2014) and partnered with The Limited clothing brand to create wardrobes for the Pope character (and others), which were also sold in stores (Elliott 2014). In a more recent example of Social Media’s powerful influence, National Broadcasting Company (NBC) cancelled its situation-comedy, *Brooklyn 99*, in May 2018. Disappointed fans launched a social media campaign to rescue the show (BBC 2018). While campaigns like these are not always successful, the one led by Brooklyn 99 fans worked, as the Fox network picked up the show (Ibid.). Media companies either use programme-specific hashtags of “web-scraping”, which monitors conversations posted across a range of social media platforms, blogs, and forums (Napoli and Kosterich

2017: 407.). While this practice has obvious concerns for privacy and surveillance, it is beyond the scope of Napoli and Kosterich's study, as well as my intentions in this chapter. Other considerations that do potentially impact or guide considerations of what types of shows lend themselves to social movements, and whether or not writers begin including these 'hash-tagable' moments in their episodes for the marketing department to run with or is it that marketing departments create these moments from the scripts. In either case, it would be naïve to think that the marketing potential of social media does is not, at least, a subconsciously thought of the production staff on these shows.

What is also important to note here is that the dedication of fans--not just viewers—along with the technological and social functionality of social media has much to do with the early success of *Scandal*. What the research reveals is that the metrics for measuring a 'hit' show has changed. It's not purely the eyes of the consumer side of the audience, and this change in measurement is a corollary to the proliferation of personalized technology and increase in social media activity, which then leads ostensibly to more 'fans', not just consumers. The next section will define 'the fan' and trace the evolution of fan studies from pathologizing and othering to one acknowledging the ubiquity of 'fan' as an identity increasingly embraced by most people in this contemporary moment of a highly mediated existence.

### **Critical Evolution of 'The Fan'**

The term 'fan' has its etymology in the term fanatic, which is a person who is overzealous about another person, place, or thing. Moreover, the dismissive understanding of the fan as 'fanatical' has usually been applied to supporters of sporting teams, but its use goes far beyond that, applying to many different practices of consumption (Cavicchi 2004;

Duffett 2013; Geraghty 2006). Though Fan Studies as an established genre of study is only several decades old, the idea of the fan as an identity goes back more than one hundred years and has evolved alongside media entertainment and the commodification of urban leisure (Cavicchi 2017). For the most part, the discipline has been keen to move away from its early days (late 1980s and 1990s) to move away from analysis that pathologizes along the ‘fanatic’ angle. These days a ‘fan’ is known more as an aficionado or supporter of his or her love object, with the added layer of emotional attachment to that object (the person or thing from which the fan derives some significant personal meaning). A ‘fandom’, then, represents a collective of fans knowledgeable of, and/or devoted to the same love object. Henry Jenkins distinguishes viewers from fans by way of the latter’s additional investment beyond consuming the media they like. They seek out cultural activity and spaces of production in which to express feelings, thoughts, and grapple with the politics of that which they consume (Jenkins 2006: 39).

Fiske notes that fandoms are constituted by their production (Fiske 1992), which is narrower than Jenkins’ interpretation. I argue that one can still consider themselves part of a fandom via ritualized consumption. Such consumption is carried out by fans who routinely seek out reviews, comments, and fan art, etc., not just for consumption but from a desire to see their own feelings expressed by fellow fans, or to consider additional perspectives. One can begin as and remain this kind of fan, or transition from a productive fan to a consumptive one, due to various reasons (lifestyle change; change in emotional attachment to media object; politics of the fandom. I stress a definition of fan that does not rely on productive output and labour for two reasons: the first is that the fan identity is not necessarily linked to Marxist politics of labour and exploitation, which focuses on material collection and consumption as well as acts of resistance. Sometimes the communal aspect

of discussing the fan's love object is the extent of the fan engagement (Harris-Lacewell 2004), or the productive output may be limited by economic factors. The second reason is to distinguish the fan from the 'anti-fan'. Gray (2005) describes the 'anti-fan' as those whose affective relationship with media texts circulate around disdain or displeasure, rather than enjoyment. This negative feeling requires that they be productive in voicing their displeasure via some of the same kinds of activity seen by fans, but with a different tone. These arguments will be examined in the context of the major data findings in the discussion chapter.

In their second volume of *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, the editors (Gray et al. 2017) define fandom as something that "...constitutes a spectrum in which a multiplicity of practices, groups, and motivations span between the polarities of the personal and the communal..." which is sufficiently broad (pg. 10). Gray et al. go on to note that the abundance of mediated content, made possible via the proliferation of digital channels, and the politics of monetizing and controlling such content "have put fans at the heart of industry responses to a changing marketplace" (2017: 2). Because of this, representation of fans has moved away from pathologizing into the realm of understanding the centrality to continuing cultural industries and the narratives of those textual fields (Gray et al, 2017: 2).

### ***Time, Technology, and 'The Fan'***

Being a fan is now a mainstream form of cultural engagement. The invention and proliferation of 'smart phones', which enabled people to carry around the internet in their pockets, is one reason for this mainstreaming. Social media's integration into daily life, and the concept of 'live tweeting' on Twitter also has much to do with the mainstreaming of fan

engagement. Fans no longer have to delve into the bowels of internet forums and chatrooms to perform fanning. It could easily be done in bite size increments, at leisure and periodically, through mobile technology. This has implications for the geography of media and the space(s) in which fan activity could be performed, making these practices more visible. Increased visibility allows us to move away from the fan as pathologized curiosities. As an example, what we now refer to as emojis were icons that were integral to fan praxis in forums (Live Journal, mediaboulevard, TWOP) and chat rooms (AOL Internet Messenger, ICQ) long before the mobile internet. Mobile technology's embrace of these digital blips of affective emotion has brought feeling and expression mainstream.

Technological changes are important to the development of fandom and the ways in which it has proliferated into many cultural aspects of life is one of the main reasons given for a second edition of *Fandoms*. The cultural embrace of Social Media has brought increased choice in fan engagement spaces. Each mobile platform has boundaries set around the tools it provides, and, as importantly, the culture that develops around it, which in turn can influence the types of people drawn to the platform and the creative output on the platform. This partly reflect Bourdieu's work around taste and habitus. For instance, why are young white males more drawn to the architecture of a platform like Reddit at four times the rate of their demographic counterparts (Pew 2016), while Facebook's demographics have shifted over the last decade, wherein most of its activity from those over age 30, with a significant number being over age 50 (Pew 2018). Pinterest, for instance, has a demographic that skews toward white, cis-gendered, middle class women (Wilson and Yoachim 2015). And African Americans have high levels of social media, especially for a minority group. According to Pew research (2014), "73% of African American internet users [80%]—and 96% of those ages 18-29—use a social networking site of some kind. African



Americans have exhibited relatively high levels of Twitter use since we began tracking the service as a stand-alone platform, and this continues to be the case—22% of online Blacks are Twitter users, compared with 16% of online whites...” (Pew 2018).

Given that fan practices are happening in these spaces, Social Media participation has implications for how we racialize the ‘fan’. Many rapid personalization of media content and media devises, including the algorithms designed for individual customisation and prediction must be a critical part of Fan Studies' future. The algorithm part has direct connection to one's interactions and the collective, or cliques one joins within the larger collective (e.g., the ‘recommended’ and ‘trending’ tabs on Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and ‘people you may know’ on Facebook). This does not even include micro-targeting with through paid Facebook ads, which by this point played a crucial role in shaping the political discourse of the 2016 American presidential campaign (Rosenberg et al. 2018). The extent to which these algorithms affect discourse, drive trending topics, and the relationship between that which is made easily visible and the discursive themes that arise are important points of exploration for Fan Studies. This study does grapple with some of those in the discussion chapter, as presented in themes from the *Scandal* fandom on Tumblr. The term “fan” has infiltrated descriptions of political supporters and activists (Gray et al, 2017: 1), making the term part of international political rhetoric. The editors of Fandom think fans and social media, along with generative affective ‘hope’ were impactful in Obama’s bid in 2008 (Ibid.). A political organisation in the United States has named its Facebook group of over 1.4 million members “President Donald Trump Fan Club” (presidentdonaldtrumpfanclub 2018). This organisation, both reflects the proliferation of the fan identity into politics (CBS News 2016), as well as Trump’s own branding as a political ‘love’ object, replete with frequent rallies that are tantamount to fan conventions. With fan

activity encroaching so much on everyday life, the 'fan' as an identity, does not have the same ridicule anymore. The fan is no longer 'other'. The fan is you. The fan is me.

### **Intellectual 'Waves' of Fan Studies**

Gray et al use the term 'waves' instead of 'phases' because each 'wave' of fan studies will still retain some relevance for subsequent waves. While this first generation of fan studies emphasised fan communities as political interveners who were active readers, creatives, and not uncritical, a lot of time was spent defending these communities against the tastes ridiculing assumptions of the media and non-fans (Gray et al, 2017: 3). The ridicule now comes from the extremes of behaviour. But that determination still comes from mainstream media and Fan Studies scholars, thus maintaining some alterity to the fan identity.

The editors call this first wave the "'fandom is beautiful' stage, to draw parallels to the early stages of identity politics common for other groups hitherto othered by mainstream society" (Gray et al, 2017: 3). This description by the editors is rife with a lack of white male reflexivity- the idea that only the 'other' has identity politics, for which those racialized as white are unburdened. This is a common refrain for many white, male politicians, and not just the Conservative variety. In 2016, Democratic presidential hopeful, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT), fond of socialist ideology, advocated moving "beyond identity politics" because "The working class of this country is being decimated..." (Arcenaux 2016). The implicit assumption here is that 'working class' is synonymous with whiteness. The thinking that informs that kind of rhetoric is not far off from the same ideology that underlies previous (and present?) forms of positivist-based theories by Fan Studies scholars,

even sociologists. The idea that there are some people who don't possess identities around which their politics do not necessarily coalesce is preposterous.

These early iterations were mostly concerned with issues of power and representation. The fan was identified with struggles against the hegemony of media producers and seen as disempowered and subversive appropriators of their love object (Gray et al, 2017: 2). To an extent, it is around this kind of ideology that Jenkins' (1992) theory on textual poaching coalesces as a form of resistance. The disempowered fan was taking power for himself by appropriating copy-written content and using it to challenge the status quo of the media producers. This wave of Fan Studies is part of a long line of thinking that extends back to Adorno's early twentieth century writings on the mass deception of the Cultural Industry (Horkheimer 2002), particularly the rise of popular culture. Adorno thought the popular culture blurred too much line of taste between low art and the more intellectually superior high art. Adorno would be turning over in his grave as mobile technology makes this blurring even more muddled in the culture industry.

Mass media and Communications disciplines, during the 1990s, had a monopoly on the representation of the fan (Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2002), largely from a stereotypical place of assumed disempowerment (Gray et al. 2017: 3). The editors go on to make a worthy point regarding an earlier wave of fan studies, and how the producer-consumer binary was not deconstructed, but instead placed the fan in the power position within that binary. (e.g., the consumers call the shots) (Ibid). What this did was provide a counter argument to more Marxist-based analysis that saw the consumer as those being passively exploited by a capitalist-driven culture and entertainment industry indoctrinating them with hegemonic politics. Remnants of those relations of power between corporate interests and the individual remain in fan studies discourse today.

What both Fiske and Jenkins establish through their Fan Studies groundwork is that the fan is capable of collective strategy that evade the meanings preferred by the 'power block' (Fiske 1989 in Gray et al 2017: 3). Misrepresented fans in mediated discourses now have the voice to fight back against analysis which condescends and casts them as extreme. Social Media lends power and visibility. Daisy Asquith's 2013 Channel 4 documentary, *Crazy About One Direction* is a good example of this turnabout in power dynamics between researcher and informant. Fans who felt misrepresented by the programme took to Twitter and Tumblr to voice their disapproval, surprising Asquith with their vehemence (Gray et al. 2017: 4). Perhaps including the dismissive term 'crazy' in the title was a clue. The added layer of technology and social media creates complex power dynamics, and a host of considerations for the researcher (often also a fan of the research subject) and fans to navigate.

In their excellent study of upper class white women on Pinterest and the notion of the 'happy' family, Wilson and Joachim (2015) see the social media site as one that reinforces, through the perpetuation and dissemination of idealized, 'happy' family images, modern liberalism's need for affective, gendered labour. I agree with the authors on that conclusion, but also see it as only part of the picture. Platforms that are fuelled by affective labour of web 2.0 architecture depend on an almost compulsive need to populate these sites with content. These scholars call this 'communicative capitalism' (Wilson and Yochim 2015; loc 5243/7072). According to Katherine Stewart, the potentialities of 'feeling' something draws a continual flow of content fuelled by fan labour (2007: 2 in Wilson and Yoachim 2015). Is that entirely 'manipulative'? Or is there a dynamic sociological tension occurring?

Developed at the start of the 21st century, Web 2.0 goes beyond the flat page interface of web 1.0 to deliver a richer user experience. According to Communications scholar, Tim O'Reilly (2007), Web 2.0 is:

the network as platform, spanning all connected devices. [It's] applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating networked effects through an architecture of participation (pg. 17).

Most Social Media sites (and the Internet writ large) are underpinned by web 2.0 technology, which drives the culture of participation. Without the participation, there is only the framework and no content. Without the constant circulation of content, there's no affect to drive repeat behaviour.

Wilson and Yochim's approach to affective 'labour' is from that of the corporation who benefits from the business model of web 2.0. In this case, it is Pinterest's marketing of itself as a place for 'happiness' ('good vibes'). Perhaps it is the lack of criticality and depoliticization of the space that largely endears upper class white women to it. Pinterest can be seen as a 'break' from the demands of life, while also allowing women to feel productive in their creative endeavours. One is not just passively consuming tweets but engaged in the act of production, for which there is an outcome that lives on, and from which others may benefit. That, too, is part of the affective draw. The same mothers who are 'pinning happiness' are less likely to think about it as an act of gendered labour, but one of gendered indulgences and smugness.

Wilson and Yochim do go on to aptly note how neoliberalism has made all life precarious as social safety webs continue to erode (2015: loc 5350/7072). But in this

context, the authors see the pinning of happy family images on Pinterest as a compromised site of happiness, because women are duty-bound to promote the neoliberal myth of the happy family. Wilson and Yochim find this a cruel turn on the “optimistic work of affective investment” (2015: 5359/7072). If neoliberalism erodes the myth of the family and domestic space as a realm of serenity and happiness. Setting aside that the home simply serves as literal shelter for many and not necessarily emotional safety, perhaps these women whose lives don’t cohere to that are creating this myth in in the largely mediated world that now governs their lives. While I do not find affective investment necessarily optimistic at its core, the cruel effect on it, that Wilson and Yochim discuss, is caused by the precarity neoliberalism engenders outside the home and is worth examining that dynamic within fandom discourse on other social media platforms.

Moving beyond the resistance/incorporation (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998) binary of power set up by the first wave, Wave 2 relied on consumption motifs (see Dell 1998; Jancovich 2002; Dixon 2013 in Gray et al. 2017: 5) influenced by the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Scholars replicated the “social and cultural hierarchies within fan cultures and subcultures” (Gray et al, 2017: 5). This wave examined how the consumption choices and practices of fans are enmeshed within larger socio-cultural and economic implications of their habitus. Implicit and explicit within this mode of analysis were questions about power, inequality, and discrimination (Ibid.). This need not be limited to Bourdieu’s habitus theory, but this summation of fan studies second wave also reflects Stuart Hall’s (1980, 1996) work on the popular and interpretive communities. One could examine this wave of fan studies as a reflection of fans wider cultural tastes and values, but also that of scholars who chose certain fan objects to study over others based on their own habitus. The habitus and cultural capital-influence of ‘wave’ 2 also does not reflexively

consider the ways in which certain kinds of fandoms are privileged and the relationship to capital—those who can acquire the material minutiae of fandom, as well as participate in experiences like conventions (Wanzo 2015). Those who are not being underpaid, saddled with familial responsibilities, or economically disenfranchised in some other way become more privileged fans—literally and within Fan Studies, including the aca-fan participating in and writing about those fandoms. John Fiske (1992) located the fan as those with subordinated cultural tastes who were disenfranchised within cultural circles by “any combination of gender, age, class, and race” (pg. 30 in Gray et al 2017: 3). This description all but admits that those whose tastes weren’t being subordinated, but, in fact, catered to, were white, middle class males.

These taste choices affect the discipline of Fan Studies. As Sarah Ahmed (2013) notes, the act of citation for scholars is a powerful reproductive technology that works to highlight as well as obscure. Citation is not just a matter of merit, but a political intervention, a matter which Wanzo (2015) takes up in her critique of Fan Studies lack of critical attention to race. Wanzo sees the absence not as oversight but an intentional act of reproducing white hegemony by leaving whiteness unmarked. The result, according to Wanzo, “makes transparent the ways in which pleasures and fears around bodies circulate in scholarship: we replicate paradigms that reproduce who we are, what we desire, and what we fear (2015: 5.2). In that sense, Fan Studies is reflective of a larger western cultural context that fears Black bodies and the inconvenient truths they force us to confront as scholars.

Another criticism of wave 2 is that it has little to say of the individual fan’s motivations, enjoyment and pleasure derived from engaging with their fan object(s) (Gray et al, 2017: 5). While Gray et al. are right to point out a lack of critical examination of pleasure,

they do, however, leave out the fact that this was, in part covered by female researchers (Ang 1985; McRobbie 1985; Radway 1995; Bobo 1988) about the ways in which derive pleasure from literature and media. In fact, the act of watching for pleasure and fulfilment is the central premise around which those studies were built. And these studies did not take the pathologizing, othering path that the first wave of fan studies generally took. More recently, other female scholars have carried on in the footsteps of Bobo, Ang and Radway (Click 2015; Scott 2013; Warner 2015b).

### ***Fan Studies Now***

The third wave of fan studies aims to change the nature of inquiry, by employing a micro and macro focus on consumption: the interior relationship between the fan's self and her love object within a larger context of global socio-cultural and economic dynamics (Gray et al 2017: 7). The intrapersonal pleasures and motivations among fans as a subject of inquiry produces psychoanalytic analyses (Thompson 1995; Hills 2002, 2007; Sandvoss 2005), making some scholars leery (Jenkins 2007), as they fear a return to the pathologizing of wave one. For Jenkins, a focus on the fan's self becomes problematic because of the technical era we are in (2007: 361). He thinks the use of productivity and connectivity—and the networks they create—should rightfully be the centre of attention for media and communication scholars and that concerns with the fan's self are scholarly diversions (Ibid.), But this fear of diversion is unnecessary, as the "intrapersonal dimensions of [fandom] appear to be complimentary, intrinsically connected parts of the same eco system of analysis" (2017: p. 8-9).

On the macro consumption level, the third wave aims to move attention away from hegemony and class and toward larger questions of social, cultural, and economic



transitions of the time in which to situate the importance of studying fandom (Gray et al, 2017: 6). As expressed earlier, the growth of mediation and technological consumption prompts the macro-level inquiry. Gray et al. place their own efforts of *Fandom* 's first volume (2007) squarely on the precipice of establishing this third wave, which we are still currently in more than ten years later. This wave is broader, more inclusive, and intersectional in its focus on the fan, especially within the context of technological advances and connectivity in the last decade. This third wave of fan studies seeks to broaden the scope of inquiry into fandom by "examining a wide range of different audiences reflecting fandom's growing cultural currency. ... [and] helps us understand and meet challenges beyond the realm of popular culture because they tell us something about how we relate to each other, and to how we read the mediated texts around us" (Gray et al, 2017: 6,7). This mitigates Jenkin's fear of pathologizing because it contextualizes the examination of the fan's self within the cultural web of connectivity. Marking the nuances of gender and race must be part of that web.

Noting the lack of attention to race in the first volume of *Fandom* (Gray et al. 2007), Rebecca Wanzo (2015) notes that the editors argued against including sports fandoms because of their association with racialized violence and nationalism. But to say that is to ignore racism as a hegemonic part of most fandoms, making sports fandoms quite 'normal', in that sense (1.4). Wanzo states that for some fandoms, the investment in whiteness (and masculinity) is imbedded within their affective investment (e.g., Gamergate) (Ibid.). Thus, Fan studies had been de-racializing their work (race and racism have always been there), and leaving it open to accusations that it lacked critical rigour (Gray et al, 2017). The third 'wave' of fandom argues that it needs to be made explicit. Fandoms of colour, especially female dominant ones, have been underserved and underexamined because

intersectionality in fandoms has been underexamined. The rich criticality does not lie, necessarily, in intra-fandom racism, but the ways in which affect manifests across race and gender within a fandom, especially in relation to the fan's love object and the media discourse surrounding that object.

While Gray et al indicate they prefer a mid-range approach (2017: 14), there is a desire to explore trajectories beyond themes of technology, such as textuality, space, temporalities, participation, and citizenship (Ibid.). While I am looking beyond those as well, each of those topics and the way they specifically interact with issues of race and gender (from the fan, fan collective and the fan object), those intersections have only just begun to be explored (Bennett & Chin 2014; Florini 2014; Wanzo 2015; Warner 2015b; Chatman 2017; Baez 2015; Stanfill 2011; Scott 2017; House & Bradley (forthcoming)), for us to rush into moving 'beyond' them. Furthermore, concepts of space, and the ways in which it affects ethnography—the preferred methodology within fan studies—will always be relevant. I do agree with Jenkins (2007) that pathologizing individual fans in classist and patronizing ways should be avoided by scholars. However, the individual focus need not only be of the negative psychological variety. Academics writing in the vein of the third wave are aware that belittling “portrayals of fans reflect social and economic stratification that persists most notably along the lines of gender, ethnicity, class and age, which in turn are reflected in specific fan cultures and the choice of fan objects ... [particularly] those associated with the young, the female, the queer, the outsiders, the poor, the ethnically different” (Gray et al 2017: 4). This reflects the relative homogeneity of those with the power to judge. Morimoto and Chin (2017) emphasize that de-politicized fan studies elide critical examination of ways in which “communities of affect and belonging are constituted”

(p. 175). Here, the authors are building on their previous scholarship interrupting transcultural aspects of fandoms (Morimoto and Chin 2008) as well as other fan studies scholars (Sandvoss 2009; Stanfill 2011; Jenkins 2014; Wanzo 2015; van der Goor 2015). An explicit centring of raciality and its intersections with gender, class and sexuality necessitates an individual as well as collective focus. This is where my own research is firmly embedded. This third wave moment is ripe for research line mine, which applies both micro and macro lenses. The former examines the relationship between Black women fans and their Black woman centred love object, not from a position of alterity, but critical affinity. Secondly, the macro lens interrogates the potential meanings of the fan discourse, on Tumblr, within the larger context of Intersectionality, which is explicitly concerned with societal inequalities and power.

### **The Systemic Biases of Gender and Genre**

In the previous section, I mentioned the importance of marking gender and raciality as crucial component of the fabric of discourse and analysis. I now turn my attention to the systemic ways in which whiteness and masculinity have unreflexively shaped the media we value. Moreover, the influence can be seen on a mainstream cultural industry that brands shows as 'guilty pleasures' and 'prestige TV'. The parameters for these labels are not rigid, but are often determined by white, mostly male, and middle-class standards of taste. As explained earlier those who determine value have the power to legitimize, and thus shape entire disciplines of inquiry—whether it be media critics who rate our viewing choices, or scholars who write about those media.

In a *Guardian* 'Long Read' article, Lili Loofbourow (2018) unpacks the sociological assumptions implicit in the difference in value assigned to male and female-centred TV

programmes. Loofbourow suggests that the ‘problems’ lie less with the shows content and production and more with the systematic ways in which women-centred dramas are receive and read. Whereas Laura Mulvey (1975) theorized ‘the male gaze’ as a gendered and objectified way of seeing and portraying women in the film industry, Loofbourow engages the term ‘the male glance’. The “glance” dismisses after quickly summarising, so it never rises to the level of the peering “gaze”. It is about how the work is received and judged vs the structure and productions of the work. An exercise of dominance coheres both the glance and the gaze. The former looks at the horizon beyond its subject, the latter projects its own meaning onto the subject. Neither sees what is in front of them. Loofbourow notes that it is not limited to the glance of men, but a systematic way of viewing that takes its subject for granted, without value or taste:

*The male glance is how comedies about women become ‘chick flicks’. It’s how discussions of serious movies with female protagonists consign them to the unappealing stable of ‘strong female characters’. It’s how soap operas and reality television become synonymous with trash. It tricks us into pronouncing mothers intrinsically boring, ad it quietly convinces us that female friendship come in two strains: conventional jealousy, or... saccharine love... Who consumes these stories? Who could want to? (2018).*

Loofbourow is right. In her facetiousness, she concludes that these types of stories are unappealing and that those who consume such stories are less sought-after consumers. Loofbourow’s examination of the role gender plays in how media is valued or lauded is very political, but not Intersectional, as there is no layer of racial analysis to complicate her excellent theorization of ‘the male glance’. At one point, to elucidate the nature of the dismissive way in which we view female content, Loofbourow makes it analogous to Dubois’ ‘double consciousness’ theory, which says, “It is a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the take of a world

that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (1903, p.38). There are two things interesting about this quote: the first is that all humans are relational beings, so esoterically one could make the argument that looking through the lens of 'we' of a culture vs. the 'me' of the individual consumer is something happening all at once. Could it be that this behaviour, encouraged by social media (what gets promoted, circulated, etc), is the dismissive way of looking that is often masquerading as 'criticality'? The 'I' grows tired of defending itself. Secondly, I find it interesting that a quote about the Black experience in America is being applied to gender across the colour line without any racial reflexivity. The ways in which white women represent Black women in their art (*Girls*, *Big Little Lies*, etc.), could be accused of the same double consciousness from an Intersectional perspective. Loofbourow's argument is largely white, neoliberal, and hetero-focused, even as it does have plenty of validity across racial lines.

The way in which Loofbourow encapsulates the characterisation of female-driven genres are spot-on, even if de-racialized. They have application to how audiences view Black women-centred media. The visual system isn't objective. It is already referential, and we bring to it a system of references that included entrenched ways of seeing that purport to be universal. Morimoto and Chin note that "...English-language online fan communities often flatten difference, particularly when their fannish focus centres on hegemonic Anglo-media texts" (2017, p. 175). In western media, terms such as 'Quality' and 'Prestige' are affixed to mostly white, male-centred dramas (Kang 2014) by a mostly white, mostly male audience of critics (Sun 2018), who rarely acknowledge those privileged positions. The very association of 'guilty' and 'pleasure' convey a lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Levine 2015) typically associated with middle class, white maleness. As if entertainment should not foremost be pleasurable. That one should derive guilt from certain types of pleasure seems

like a dog whistle toward lesser valued forms of culture, of which ‘Black’ and ‘feminine’ are usually associated (Pulver 2016; Loofbourow 2018; Gates 2018).

The other side of Loofbourow’s argument is the examination of post-feminist sentiment evidenced in media texts centring women. Rather than a rejoinder to waves of feminism defined during political eras of that past, post-feminism has become more of an accusation of a feminism that is superficial, at best (Butler 2013); neoliberal fantasies that ignore the intersectional realities of systemic oppression, at worst (Gill 2016). Moreover, post-feminism is typically seen as irreconcilable with Black feminism. As Sobande (2019) summarises, “postfeminism is commonly linked with the idea that women have achieved equality, which contrasts with Black feminism’s emphasis on intersecting inequalities” (p. 3). If postfeminism is seen in opposition to Black feminism, this constricts the possibilities and expectations for Black women creators and the projects they produce. Moreover, unlike feminism (often read as (white) feminism), which has different movements (‘waves’) that change and expand over political eras, Black feminism is not spoken of in such ways. It is static, and therefore the expectations, when performing a Black feminist reading of media, are the same as they were decades ago in the works of intellectual giants like Lorde, hooks, Crenshaw, Collins and Carby. As if Black feminism has no more room to expand, no ‘waves’ to create. This expectation of Black women, when it comes to feminism, is to address collective systems of interlocking oppressions (explicitly!) in their creative work, lest too prominent a focus on the contours of the self, earn hyper critical representational analysis. Systemic oppressions that Black women face have not gone away, but they can manifest in different ways as society advances. The hurdles are ever present, but the styles change and therefore the approach to navigating those hurdles change. We must leave room to acknowledge this, particularly when reading media, whose primary responsibility is to be

entertaining, not teachable and subversive. Of course, some Black women-centred entertainment can be all those things, if we allow ourselves to see multiplicity and contradictions within them. Sobande (2019) endeavours to examine post-feminist possibilities within a Black feminist reading of millennial comedies, *Insecure*, *Awkward Black Girl*, and *Chewing Gum*. In her piece, she notes: “Black feminist aims, visions and methods are distinctly different to postfeminist perspectives; the latter of which often upholds individualistic notions of self-work and self-transformation in the pursuit of personal and professional desires.” (p. 21). The implication here is that Black feminist aims sublimates the needs of the self to that of the collective. It is interesting that both things cannot be true because, for me, *Insecure* and *Chewing Gum* do both these things. Denying the desires of the self for the greater good is a key theme with which the Olivia Pope character wrestled. In the end, she chose an erotic path (Lorde 1984) of fulfilment but was also lauded for her service to fighting injustice and trying to make the words in the US Constitution less of a lie for Black people by placing a portrait of her in the National Portrait Gallery (*Scandal* 2018). When do Black women get to honour their contradictory inner lives? Must they always be servicing the collective struggle, and if so how is that different from the expectation that Black women be the ‘mules’ of the world—doing the work that no one else wants to (or is expected) to do, including Black men (Hurstons 1937). These two things do not have to be oppositional. When one places the oxygen mask oneself first, one is in a better position to help others with their survival.

*Scandal*, at the intersection of both blackness and femaleness, has been plagued by headlines deriding it as a guilty pleasure, soap opera, or both (Rowles 2013; Sanders 2015; Barron 2018). It happened so much that series creator, Shonda Rhimes gave a pithy and critical response: “Calling a show a ‘guilty pleasure’ is like saying ‘I’m embarrassed to say I

watch it, but I can't stop'. That's not a compliment. That is not a compliment! Then don't watch it, don't watch it, please." (Paskin 2013). Elana Levine (2015) assembled works by women scholars to examine feminised popular culture in the early 21st century. In it, she notes that "whether by dismissive naming—chick flicks, mommy blogs, ladyporn—or by the general derision with which they are treated, feminized popular culture is often constructed as lightweight, frivolous, and excessively emotional" (location 85). These are all considered undesirable by the same profit-driven culture that targets this type of consumption. Yet they hold value to women who consume these products and play in the fandom spaces related to them (Wilson & Yochim 2015; Hunting 2015). The tension between both has implications for the future of Fan Studies.

Wanzo notes that African American fandoms necessarily complicate this idea of self-selected otherness (Jenkins 1992) that has been popular in Fan Studies of the past, because the population's existence in the socio-economic climate of the United States, is already 'othered' (2015: 2.1). She says, "Fan communities with women, queer subjects and people of colour often demonstrate the complicated tension between pre-existing socio-political otherness and chosen alterity." (2015: 2.4). Morimoto and Chin emphasize that in a world of greater global convergence and exposure the need to tackle more often in fan studies is one in which certain culturally specific assumptions and practices come to be privileged or excluded (pg. 175).

Morimoto and Chin are addressing non-English fandoms on a global scale, but their arguments are applicable to cultural issues across the English language, along racial axes. They complain of ghettoization within the "transcultural fandom" label and that their work is not articulated within a broader framework of English language fan studies (pg. 176).



Morimoto and Chin challenge that all fan communities are inherently trans cultural sites (Ibid.) that are not always nation central (i.e., Transnational). There is a general issue within journals like *Transformative Works & Cultures* and *Journal of Fandom Studies*, concerning the prevalent and frequently unmarked assumption of the normative fan as white, middleclass, and heterosexual. In the June 2018 volume of *Transformative Works & Cultures* online journal, which is devoted the topics of 'Fandom and Tumblr' (TWC, 2018), none of the contributions pay explicit attention to race, or any of its intersections. On the other hand, matters of race can get ghettoized (Morimoto and Chin 2017: 176) in special issues.

The

June 2019 volume of the journal is slated to address 'Fans of Color, Fandoms of Color' (TWC, 2018). The bundling of all fandoms of colour within special cultural tour volumes further entrenches the 'fan' as the white, middle class male as normative.

Not all scholars of colour take Morimoto and Chin's view. For Kristen Warner (2015), neither academics nor fandoms are groups that are invested in diversity, examining privilege "or even seeing their own selves as racialized bodies in a system designed to benefit some and disadvantage others" (loc 796/7072). Warner's statement is complicated because, at once, she is pushing back on Fiske's (1992) assumption that fandoms are necessarily made up of subordinated communities across gender, race, etc. And to be fair, her statement assumes largely white academics writing about mostly white fandoms. On the other hand, my study aims to disprove Warner's assumptions about fans' ability to be reflective and create discourse that considers the relationship between their racialized beingness and that of their love object.

## **Identity Hermeneutics: Centering Black (Female) Fan Tastes and Praxis**

Having argued that the ‘fan’ identity has a crucial place in an increasingly mediated and digitised culture, I then outlined the major ‘waves’ of Fan Studies and the problematics of the first two waves. I then looked at how this current third wave might redress biased gendered lens applied to women-centred TV, and overall avoidance of racialized fandoms in critical ways. This section argues for an Intersectional approach to the digitized culture of fandom, particularly one racialized and gendered as Black. I suggest that one way of redressing the problematics of Fan Studies is to employ what Rebecca Wanzo (2015) calls ‘Identity hermeneutics’, which is to place “a particular identity at the centre of the reading or interpretive practice” (1.6). While the methodology section will explain how such a practice can be carried out in this study, this section will review literature to consider why this is still a gap in scholarly literature. It looks at the small, but growing number of scholars whose work makes explicit connections between race, fandom, and digital culture, including scholarly lacunae to be filled.

Representations of Black men and women are important sites of struggle, as media becomes an ever more ubiquitous part of popular culture (Collins, 2004: 122). TV, film, and music hold an important place in African American culture, which African American and other scholars have devoted much study to (Bobo 1988, 1995, Hills 2002; Adams 1992; Rose 1994; hooks 1996, Coleman 1998; Brown 2000; Spooner 2003, to name a few), making this complex interpretive community rich in history. That the ‘fan’ identity has become a core part of that culture extends back to the early 20th century (Muse 1940 in Wanzo 2015: 2.17).

With some exceptions (Warner 2015, Scott 2017), Fan Studies has largely failed to take Intersectionality into account in its inquiries. Legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989)

coined the term 'Intersectionality', which is an analytical framework for understanding how interlocking systems of power work against marginalized people while benefitting others.

The term was intended to illuminate the ways in which the America justice system failed Black women by disregarding the matrix of their racialized, classed, and gendered identities. Though coined in 1989, Intersectionality as a lived experience has been highlighted by Black women intellectuals since the nineteenth century (Cooper, A-J 1892 (2017); Truth 1851; Collins 1990; Cooper, B 2017).

Black women's intersecting identities means that race cannot be left unexamined when talking about their engagement in feminized culture. A common refrain found in male academic's treatments of fandom analysis, such as those of John Fiske, Matthew Duffett (2013), Henry Jenkins (1992) and others, is that more attention needs to be paid to race within fan studies and then regrettably defend why one does not have the space/time/capacity to do exactly that. Morimoto and Chin bemoan exactly this point, when they call for reimagining imagined communities: "...Within an American context ...white American fans are in no way compelled to pay attention to or otherwise acknowledge racial representation in the American media around which a given fandom arises. African American fans are often unavoidably implicated in a love/hate calculus with media they may love, but that has not been created with them in mind" (Morimoto and Chin 2017: 182). Perhaps because of relative lack of representation in media, African Americans have not, or cannot afford to dispense with realism entirely. Warner (2015) writes "Producing content is a necessary act of agency for women of color, who strive for visibility in a landscape that favours a more normative (read: White) fan identity and that often dismisses and diminishes the desires of its diverse body to see themselves equally represented not only on screen but in the fan community at large." (Warner (2015), location 743). Jacqueline Bobo (1988) saw

Black women as cultural readers of media texts, specifically ones created by or based on the material of Black women artists (*The Color Purple*, *Waiting to Exhale*). This was at a time when most critics and scholars did not consider their insight culturally valuable.

Noted scholar, bell hooks, later theorized the term 'oppositional gaze' (1992) as part of her feminist film theory that was more specific to race, which Mulvey's 'male gaze theory' (1975) does not conceive of in its analysis of gendered power relations. Whereas Mulvey imagines the possessor of the gaze as male (and invariably white) and the feminine object upon which he gazes is also white. hooks' theory posits that Black women are not recipients of the male gaze let alone ones who internalize it. Of course, this is not entirely possible because all Black people internalize white supremacy (to varying degrees) through the gaze. Given that patriarchy is a form of white supremacy, these things get internalized by Black women, and remain something with which they struggle in addition to sexism from Black men. The oppositional gaze is theorized from a standpoint of both repression and power, as it recognizes that the category of 'woman' is not universal, as Mulvey's work suggests. As marginalized members in a racist society, hooks recognises that Black women are subjects who take their power (and pleasure) where they can. Bobo writes that "Black women's challenge to cultural domination is part of an activist movement that works to improve the condition of their lives" (1995: 22). They can become powerful by standing in opposition to the gaze which denies them, ignores them, misrepresent their image. hooks' supposition is that Black women's oppositional gaze arises because they are not used to seeing themselves truly represented in media. This notion gets flipped on its head when studying a fandom which is predominately Black, but which include people of other cultures. Trying to grapple with the complexities of the ways in which gender, race, class, sexuality present themselves

in variegated ways (as opposed to monolithic ones) has the potential to change what the ‘fan’ can teach us about media and society.

In the last ten years, a growing number of scholars are focusing specifically on Black fandom modalities in online mediatized spaces (Chatman (2017); Warner (2015b); Scott 2017; Clark 2015; Brook 2012; House & Bradwell (2019)). Though not specifically about Black online fandoms, Carrington’s (2016) *Speculative Blackness* is a substantial contribution to Fan Studies. He examines the intersections of blackness, gender, and fandom across science fiction media. Chatman’s focus is that amorphous group called ‘Black Twitter’ and the public politics of *Scandal* discussions on Twitter. In addition to the politics of representation, Black viewers consumption of media texts provide opportunity for “resistance, pleasure, cultural politics, and identity construction” (Chatman 2017: 300). Chatman notes Reception Studies often fail to examine Black audiences, with a handful of exceptions (Bobo 1995, Coleman 2000; Cornell & Orbe 2002; Innis & Feagin 1995) (Ibid.). Most of those do not critically examine gender as part of the racial lens.

Kristen Warner 2015 article, “ABC’s *Scandal* and Black Women’s Fandom”, though she does use a couple of examples from Tumblr, her treatment covers multiple online sites of *Scandal* fandom expression. Typically, there is little focus on Black women as fans, either from a racial or gendered perspective. And considering the history of exclusion from femininity, due to its construction via whiteness, it is a welcomed change to see Black women fan modalities queried specifically from the perspective of feminization. These conversations between Black women fans are rare, as Warner says, outside of fan spaces. This must be considered in light of online connectivity becoming a means of ‘always on’ community that is connected across time and space. These online fandom spaces are important cultural areas of sharing and performance that they are not afforded in

mainstream culture (location 733 Warner in Levine 2015). The fact that Black women do not have to adapt to a predominately white or male fan space is, as in so many other instances, is worth exploring for the differences in power dynamic it produces. That a Black woman centred show facilitated this community, is crucial to this exploration.

Where Warner and I differ significantly is our conception of how race, specifically Black femininity, is presented and operates in the show. Warner approaches *Scandal* as having a post-racial “spirit of color-blindness” (2015, location 764), which she sees as proffering a neutralized gender while adding race as seasoning. My research on the Tumblr fandom’s discourse indicates more complexity than Warner is willing to acknowledge. The theoretical differences of perspective necessarily affect our analysis of fan expressions around the show’s themes and storylines. Criticisms like Warner’s often leave unexamined deeply entrenched expectations about the kind of spaces Black women can inhabit, and their embodiment and presentation of Black femininity that often mimic the underlying assumptions the critics decry in the first place (Pixley, 2015: 30). Examining the ways in which Black women fans on Tumblr derive pleasure and joy in their connection to their consumption of *Scandal* can illuminate ways of seeing that are otherwise obscured by the politics of representation.

### ***The Politics of Joy for Black Women***

One undervalued analysis in the examination of Black women, media and power is the pursuit of joy, its contours, and the ways in which it is engaged. According to Loofbourow (2018), the marginalized viewer has a greater cognitive burden to bear, as they must juggle more POVs the further you get from white, cis gendered, hetero male.

Abandoning this for one's own pleasure becomes political. Gina Dent (1992) sees Black women's pursuit of pleasure as part of a Black progressive context (pg. 2). Analysis is warranted of how this manifest in the digital age of an always-on, always connected culture, itself imbedded in a larger racialized discourse of marginalization. For Stuart Hall, who sees popular culture as a rich arena of strategic contestation, it is not one in which we find our 'true' selves because of the deeply entrenched mythologies (1992: 26-27). Dent thinks it is a false dichotomy, and something we must un-learn because "the new cultural politics depend on our reconfiguring the field of representation, on creating another context for cultural and political activity as we reconstitute the ground of difference" (1992: 6). Dent's overall advocacy is for an 'erotic' (Lorde 1984) approach to the ways in which we experience popular culture to access pockets of joy as Black people, even as we acknowledge a system of marginalization that compels us in this direction to save our own sanity.

Scholars like Wanzo (2015) may disagree with Dent because the social conditions of African Americans make it impossible to ignore the concerns representational portrayals highlight. For Warner (2015 b), Black women are rarely afforded the chance to see themselves on TV as the main driver of choice, desire, and fantasy (pg. 17). One of two articles, about *Scandal*, Warner published that year found her writing about her complicated feelings toward the central interracial romance of the show, between Olivia Pope and the (white) President Fitzgerald Grant (2015a). Her analysis is anchored by a childhood memory of watching a TV production of Alex Haley's slavery era novel, *Queen*, wherein a sexual relationship between the white master figure and mixed race, enslaved woman is portrayed. Black women's pleasure is often mediated by the long shadow of history. This is something Kimberly Springer (2014) contends with when she writes about the struggle for Black women to control their own sexual agenda. The right to seek pleasure in ways sexual and

non-sexual is part of that agenda, including, including the ways in which that pleasure is interpolated.

Chatman (2017) and House and Bradwell (forthcoming) work on *Scandal's* Twitter fandom skates between pleasure and representation, giving us a figure 8 analysis. Chatman's about section about the pleasure of watching the Olivia and Fitz romance is described as 'tawdry' in Chatman's own words (p. 312). The 'pleasure' section is short and bounded in criticism from anti-fans over deriving pleasure from watching a 'problematic' show. House and Bradwell (2017) tangle with the Twitter audience's definitions of 'Black love'. So, a deep dive on Black women's pleasure and discursive analysis of what constitutes that beyond 'tawdry' romance is still warranted.

Fandom, coupled with statistics that show Black people utilising social media at higher rates than their white counterparts (Pew 2014, 2015), and the growth in the mediated experience of consuming TV means that this is a significant arena in which to explore expressions of Black subjectivities. According to Nielson (the bedrock of TV ratings analysis), African Americans watch far more TV than any other ethnic group at over 40 hours a week (Levin 2017). While their tastes are diverse, Nielson also notes that when it comes to dramas, Black audiences prefer Black characters in the lead (Ibid.), and *Scandal* is specifically noted in that article. According to Gray, et al. "Being a fan may be as important to one's community memberships as one's sense of self" (2017: 11). The editors go on to say that in an era where traditional markers of identity in 'high modernity' are being made increasingly instable and fluid (rise of digital technology, forces of globalisation, etc.), the voluntary communities people join through fan attachments say much about our identities as the traditional markers do (Harrington, et al, 2014). What are the effects of these fan attachments, for Black women, in white-owned social media space such as Tumblr?



## The Tumblr as a Space for Intersectionality Discourse

Now that an argument has been made for studying Black women's fandoms, the social media environment in which that fan discourse manifests must be made an intentional part of the examination. Each social media platform has its own set of tools, functionality and culture that contribute to the content found there. Most of these fandoms are not hegemonic communities. Place and platform do make a difference to the culture of fan-ning that takes place. These spaces are like schools and other physical environments in that they are "multi-layered, socially constructed environments in which participants struggle to formulate identities as well as grapple" (Preissle and Grant 1998: 6) with canonical knowledge and competing realities. As mentioned in the previous section, most of the *Scandal* fandom analysis has focused on Twitter, particularly live tweeting (Clark 2015, Chatman 2017; House and Bradwell (forthcoming)). Warner's study examines content from multiple platforms, including Tumblr.

Tumblr is a media platform with a network of 396 million blogs, founded in 2007 by David Karp. Like Twitter, Tumblr is a publicly accessible platform that allows users to 'follow' one another's content; and it is searchable by terms and hashtags. A key difference between Tumblr and most social media sites is the micro-publishing functionality. It provides users with a set of tools that allow them to create and upload multi-media content to their Tumblr blogs. Neither biographical data, image, nor description is required of users to create a public blog. Being at least 13 years old and possessing a working email address are the only requirements. While mainstream media outlets and commercial brands are represented on Tumblr, most of the site's networked blogs belong to individuals who use the space to create, curate and circulate content that matters to their identity and belief

systems. What matters may be purposeful and ‘on message’ for some blogs, while for others it may shift with their moods or trending phenomenon.

Purchased by Yahoo in 2013 (owned by Oath Family since 2017), the site’s tagline is “Follow the world’s creators” (Tumblr 2016). To that end, the platform provides its users with a set of tools to enable text posts (without character limits), photos (still or animated), quotes, links, music (or other audio), and videos to be imported from a variety of sources. These tools are easy to use and encourage content creation as well as its consumption and repeated circulation, effectively transforming the producer and consumer into one identity. This type of Social Media user is frequently dubbed a ‘prosumer’, a term which was coined by Alvin Toffler (1980) to describe the increasing amalgamation of the ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ identities in the post-industrial age, and the impact on the urban landscape. The prosumer compound is, perhaps, having its most profound impact in the digital landscape, particularly in Social Media. With the means of production more accessible due to the proliferation of smartphones and internet access (Aaron, 2014), the distinction between producers and consumers of content is increasingly blurred, especially considering the ways in which Web 2.0 architecture drives participation and circulation of content. Communications theorist, John Fiske (1989), notes that this lack of distinction is essential in the functioning of the popular because consumption is itself productive. Fisk summarises by saying, “Every act of consumption is an act of cultural production, for consumption is always the production of meaning” (1989: 35). These mutually constitutive identities are enacted on Social Media, where, if there is no production, there is no inherent content to consume. And content is ‘king’ on Tumblr.

Since its beginnings in 2007, Tumblr has become not just a digital zeitgeist of modernity and crucible of the popular, but an established area of social research within the

fields of Sociology, Media Studies and Cultural Studies, Communications, Media Geography, and more (Downey, Bundy, Shih & Hamilton-Honey 2018; Turk 2014; Booth 2016; Kohnen 2013; Newman 2014; Stein 2015). Blakely refers to Tumblr, in a Bourdieu-ian sense, as a ‘taste community’ (2012: 343). On the site’s landing page, right beneath its logo, reads “Come for what you love. Stay for what you discover. It is a space in which heterogenous groups coalesce around things they care about—from the serious to the silly. They meander across the series of networked blogs looking for compelling content, but also producing their own contributions to be sought out, disseminated, and commented upon. These audiences bring wildly divergent understandings and experiences (sometimes to the same content) and are not bounded by their physical geography.

These ‘transnational taste communities’ (Blakely 2012: 344) are largely shaped by women. I would also add that they are important polyvocal, counter-public spaces (Newman 2014) vital to the voices of marginalized communities. Though men slightly outnumber women on social media sites, women spend more time engaged on these sites (Abraham, Mörn and Vollman 2010). *Scandal*’s audience are women and has an overall racial demographic of nearly 70% non-Black (Schneider 2017). As mentioned earlier by Abercrombie & Langhurst (1998), the fan is a ‘skilled’ segment of the overall audience. The show’s Tumblr fandom has a very visible Black female presence. More than 50% of Tumblr’s users are made up of 13-34-year olds, with most of that percentage in the 20s and 30s bracket (Brenan in Morimoto 2018: 54). Still a significant number (over 20%) are between the ages of 35-44 (WeAreFlint 2018). Taken together, the data indicates a decent connection between Black women in their 20s and 30s who watch *Scandal* and participate in the show’s Tumblr fandom. The intersection of Black and female *Scandal* fans on Tumblr is quite fruitful for exploration.

Dean (2010) notes that “Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique” (Dean 2010: 95). Binding is a perfect term because the emotional affect is what drives us to keep going back, adding packets in search of more attention. Blakely (2012) believes that social media can be helpful in obliterating absurd stereotypes about gender that have built up over decades in traditional media (p. 342). She believes social media provides an opportunity to break down those stereotypes. There is some truthfulness in Blakely’s statement, and it can also be applied to race as well as. The tools provided by social media do amplify voices, but they also raise the stakes for expectations of traditional media, some of whom respond with more complex images of marginalized people than in the past. If pleasure can be voiced, then so can displeasure. And with the advent of social media metrics being used to monitor the success and cultural temperature of a programme’s reception (Napoli and Kosterich 2017), fans can derive a sense of power from being observed.

One key part of my study aims to understand the ways in which affect gets reproduced and circulated on Tumblr to bind the *Scandal* fandom to that space, especially in opposition to other spaces. And to what extent does raciality play a role in this binding, which to me is a better term than ‘community’. I see fandoms as groups of people bound by the affective emotions of the same love object. Chatman (2017) and Wanzo (2015) legitimize online discourse politics of Black fans and situates it specifically in a historical continuum of Black cultural activity dating back to the 19th century (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Collins 2000). This shows there is a need for examining Black women’s fandom on Tumblr, from trans-cultural contexts (Morimoto & Chin 2008, 2017).

### ***Intersectionality and Curatorial Poaching***

When Tumblr users combine the power of language, visual imagery and curation for counter publics or social justice purposes, I dub this ‘Curatorial Poaching’ (Pow forthcoming), a portmanteau that merges the act of curation with fan activism of textual poaching. When textual poaching meets the intentionality of advocacy, I call it curatorial poaching. Originally coined by de Certeau (1984), heavily influenced by Stuart Hall’s (1980) work on encoding/decoding active audience model, textual poaching was further developed by Henry Jenkins (1992), in the context of challenging hegemony in Fan Studies. Jenkins (1992) writes, “Consumers are selective users of a vast media culture whose treasures, however corrupt, hold wealth that can be mined and refined for alternative uses...” (p. 26). This is not dissimilar to the curatorial process of museums. A curator is a content specialist and caretaker of cultural heritage, who selects and interprets material, at institutions, for public edification. Curatorial poaching, then, selects and interprets cultural material that has been poached and bricolage-d from multiple media platforms. Moments of culture are purposely selected, extending the boundaries of meaningfulness and creating multiple discourses around the content. Tumblr’s tools also turn these curatorial poachers in to digital archivist through its built-in archival system. Furthermore, users can create multiple meanings through the re-mixing and reframing of the limited material, just as a museum curator does. Curatorial poachers are more than caretakers, they are advocates for the meaning embedded and created by the content they poach.

Jenkins work mostly focuses on fan studies and its intersection with media. As fan activity increasingly bleeds into socially mediated popular culture (Gray et al, 2017), textual poaching has become a lingua franca of online media. Though mostly used for

entertainment purposes, its use can extend into activism, or what is derided as slacktivism, a term that is dubious of Social Media as a conduit for civic engagement (Guillard, 2016).

Curatorial poaching is a twenty-first century manifestation of digital Intersectionality praxis. It tells us how Intersectionality is being understood and deployed in the social media space, taking Intersectionality beyond academia and into public consciousness by embedding it into popular culture, particularly Black popular culture. I do not suggest that this praxis is always understood as such by the author of the content. These acts of curatorial poaching—however they are compelled—contribute to a layman’s discourse on Intersectionality.

Taken together, these acts of curation and poaching create a potent example of the multiple layers of racialized and gendered power struggle the term ‘Intersectionality’ was intended to combat. Moreover, this curatorial poaching in the digital space exemplifies what Communications and New Media scholar, Lev Manovich (2001), refers to as modularity.

Manovich thinks of the entire web as a modular structure, in that it is comprised of independent elements and web pages, each combination of which creates a new structure. Madeleine Sorapure (2006) likens Manovich’s concept to the structure of an essay, noting that while each sentence or paragraph may stand on its own, it is the clever combination of those elements that are used to explicate new contours of a single idea. This is what curatorial poaching does as a praxis of Intersectionality: explicate new contours and ways of expressing and comprehending melodramatic material. Given that Tumblr prides itself on passionate creativity, and its reputation for attracting politically engaged users concerned about ‘identity politics’ and ‘callout culture’ (Taylor 2017, par 6.1), the Discussion chapters will examine thematic ways in which the cultural producer identity discursively manifests in the *Scandal* fandom’s Intersectionality discourse on the platform.

## Conclusion

Black women's epistemologies are not usually given authority, but social media platforms provide a new window into legitimizing those voices, especially in the Fan Studies genre. I am taking Jacqueline Bobo and Patricia Hill Collin's approach of examining the lived epistemologies of Black women and the ways in which they discuss those intersectional identities in relation to the historic character of Olivia Pope. Where Bobo crafted questions that were fed to a focus group for discussion, I am taking an online ethnographic approach that draws from the discussions being had on the social media app, Tumblr. There are a few scholars doing work specific to *Scandal*, fandoms, and social media (Warner 2015; Chatman 2017), but they are not specific to Tumblr. Additionally, both approaches home in on the representational politics of the show's storylines (Warner), or of the audience watching and tweeting about the show (Chatman). My intention is not to ignore or escape representational politics, because, as discussed earlier in this chapter, that is neither possible nor desirable. By using Black Feminist Standpoint Theory, I intend to interrogate the possibilities of discussing the complexities of Black female identity, through the discursive work of *Scandal's* fans on Tumblr that extend into those pockets of freedom mentioned earlier.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Methodology**

#### **Mapping the Margins of Black Feminine Identities**

For most researchers, their subject of research tends to be something about which they are intensely passionate—enough to dedicate several, sometimes maddening, years of their lives to it. No matter how clinical the approach, the process of undertaking and evaluating one's research compels the researcher to consistently examine her own positionality in reference to the work. The research output, then, is not just a valuable contribution to the academia, but reveals the contours of the researcher's variegated subjectivities. This may go unacknowledged by the researcher to act as an 'objective' conduit for the research output (Noblit 1984), but that is simply an illusion. Moreover, it is patent pretending. The very act of choosing the method by which to conduct the research and deciding the theoretical parameters in which to ensconce data evaluation is ideologically revealing. With a growing list of methodological possibilities suited to any number of research topics, the question of why one and not another drives the research outcome. The decision rests in the subject matter of the research, the genesis of the research project and the political leanings of the researcher—including the desired impact of her research output.

My thesis topic examines discourse concerning the intersections of gender, class, sexuality and race, or Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), as captured on social media and microblogging site, Tumblr. Specifically, I examine that intersectional discourse as it pertains to fan-generated content for the US television shows: *Scandal* (2012-2018, ABC Network). As a Black woman led narrative, the show provides fertile ground for discourse. My enquiry



into this TV show's fandom highlights a convergence of several things: 1) Modern American television landscape for Black women characters; 2) The politics of representation; 3) Audience reception and discursive textual analyses; and 4) Black women's fandoms. All of this culminates in a quest to understand how intersecting identities and lived experiences of Black women shape their encounters with *Scandal*'s text, and manifest in their fan production on social media site, Tumblr. The aim is to gain insight about how these fans, as Black women, understand the world, and their own identities, through this show.

How I arrived at this topic principally informs my choice to use Critically Engaged Ethnography (CEE) as a methodology. I will discuss below how I arrived at choosing this hybrid methodology, and how Black Feminist Standpoint Theory informs my discursive analysis of fan discourse. My intimate involvement as a content producer (participant) and consumer (observer) in the *Scandal* fandom on Tumblr, and epistemology of that lived experience as a Black woman, are underlying motivations for this project. Because blackness critically intersects with gender, sexuality and more (Crenshaw 1989), the contours of fan discourse can take on complicated and contradictory trajectories. The generative discourse produced by fan engagement with the show's content is the fertile ground I wish to traverse.

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Critically Engaged Ethnography (CEE) can serve as a methodological intervention which considers the racialized and gendered situated knowledges of Tumblr's *Scandal* fandom as a main course, not a side dish. Through data analysis, reflexive fan encounters, and personal reflections of the fandom, I will examine fan praxis on Tumblr using Black Feminist epistemology as an evaluative framework. Feminized popular culture is more likely to be viewed as frivolous, excessively emotional (Levine 2015, loc 85), which is code for dismissing it as un-critical or inconsequential. Black

women have had to contend with a media landscape that features limited and, often negative, images of themselves (Wallace 1989, Collins 2004). Because femininity has historically been constructed around whiteness, Black women have been disallowed from claims to it (Glymph 2008), including the identity of the ‘fan’. *Scandal* has been plagued by headlines deriding it as a guilty pleasure soap opera, finding itself at the intersection of both blackness and femininity. I take a productive approach that looks at the meaning-making Black women participate in through their fan production and discursive musings about Pope.

### **Critically Engaged Ethnography**

The methodology for this study is Critically Engaged Ethnography, conducted on the social media platform Tumblr. Ethnography allows the researcher to be both observer and participant in the cultures they write about. As fan-turned-researcher, I needed a bespoke form of ethnography that suited my circumstances. Critically Engaged Ethnography (CEE) combines Critical Ethnography (Madison 2005) and Engaged Ethnography (Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau 2018; Ortner 2019). The marriage that is CEE allows me, as a Black woman researcher, to place myself among the marginalized group I study whilst remaining critical of the framework, values, and power relations of the environment in which I research. This approach considers the insider/outsider identity of the ‘native’ ethnographer and asks us to consider our multiple positionalities, subjectivities, and the differences between engagement and exploitation (Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau 2018), when positioning ourselves among the research (as opposed to above the researched).

I began observing from Tumblr’s side lines in December 2012, beginning to produce content in early 2013, on [katrinapavela.tumblr.com](https://katrinapavela.tumblr.com). The idea to formally study the fandom

(2014-2015) came out of my lived experience in that space. Formalizing my scholarship would not suddenly erase the subjectivities and biases I had brought with me. At that point, I had not seen any journalistic or academic work, about the show, that truly reflected what I experienced within the fandom. I needed a methodology to analyse the way in which I and many others already engaged with the show's content. Secondly, as a known fan and content-producer on the platform, I did not intend to cease activity, or exempt my praxis from critique. As a researcher whose social positioning resembles that of the population whose interactions and discourse is being examined, I must acknowledge the theoretical suppositions at work in my blogging and in the theoretical approach to my research. Critically Engaged Ethnography allowed me to keep my place among the groups of (mostly) Black women I spent tens of hours interacting with and creating content for each week. I was them, in many ways.

### ***Benefits and Challenges of Ethnography***

Ethnography, as a method of infiltration into spaces of the marginalized, is not without valid criticism. In the summer of 2015, Sociologist Alice Goffman was heavily criticized for an incident in her much acclaimed book, *On The Run* (2015), which was created from her PhD dissertation. Goffman uses ethnographic methods to detail the lives of a group of over-policed young Black men in Philadelphia. She had been building relationships with informants there since her undergraduate days at the University of Pennsylvania (Goffman 2015). At issue was whether or not Goffman crossed the professional ethics boundaries during fieldwork to commit a felony. In her methodological appendix, Goffman writes about one of her research subjects, "Chuck", as a friend who was shot, and her

wanting retribution for his shooting (Parry 2015). Fuelled by that emotion, she knowingly gets into a car with one of “Chuck”’s armed friends. As explanation, she offers “I got in the car [because] I had wanted Chuck’s killer to die” (2015). Such action could constitute conspiracy to commit murder, or other charge. When confronted with this by reviewers, Goffman responds that she “had good reason to believe that this night would not end in violence or injury” (Goffman, 2015b). This created a discrepancy between how Goffman portrays the evening’s events in her book and what she knew at the time. Bringing the threads of controversy together, Marc Parry writes in the Chronicle of Higher Education, “Ethnographers frequently will pick a field site, see what they find, and then make an argument about it, says Patrick Sharkey, an associate professor of sociology at NYU. This can work well; he says in an email. But it often leads to situations like that of Ms. Goffman, whose book, though a major contribution, is undermined by what he considers a weak relationship between her data and her argument” (2015).

The imprecision and lack of controlled environment in which to replicate an ethnographic experiment like Goffman’s has been a consistent criticism of ethnography as a research methodology. The problem, in part, is thinking that an ethnographer is “a precise capturer of a set of facts” (Parry, 2015), and that those facts are the only ones to be had. People do not live their lives in narrative form, so as ethnographers we are never telling the story, but a story. That story is mediated by our methodology, research goals, theoretical constructs, individual standpoint, and narrative style.

Commenting on the article’s quote from above, “elizabethsmediatedlife”, herself a Black university lecturer in Communications, and member of the *Scandal* fandom, writes on Tumblr:

I find this whole discussion fascinating as my preferred methodology is grounded in the tradition of critical ethnography. Often when reading ethnographic work, specifically ethnographic work that involves the study of “others” as well as autoethnographic work, there is lack of self-reflexivity and positionality. How the researcher’s very presence in the community affects the behaviours and communication and ultimately the data is so important to constantly interrogate. This is especially salient when conducting ethnographic and autoethnographic work in online spaces. If ever there was an opportunity for “navel gazing” it would be in netnography and autoethnography (2016).

“elizabethsmediatedlife” is correct that online forms of ethnography are better able to skirt the kind of controversy that surrounded Goffman. In this era of data transparency, online discourse is archived and can be checked against the researcher’s argument. The above statement also corroborates my stance as a researcher of being critically reflexive of my words as a blogger in Tumblr’s *Scandal* fandom. Though this dialectical relationship will be constantly interrogated, it is difficult to always pinpoint with certainty—particularly in an online space—that the researcher as participant-observer has affected a particular response, backlash, or trend. To go back to Goffman’s account, how can a reader, or even Goffman herself, know that the armed response of “Chuck”’s friend wasn’t performatively played up for Goffman’s white presence? To give her a thrilling account to write about? Can she say for certain that in her absence that would have happened anyway? In my case, I have 18 months of encounters before publicly announcing the subject matter of my dissertation (which has undergone changes in the last year). In the section about Tumblr as a fieldwork site, I will detail how the functioning of the space makes the researcher affect a tenuous assumption.

### ***Choosing the Right Kind of Ethnography***

Participatory Action Research (and limitations thereof) is one form of research that has been influential to carving out my methodological approach. The aim of PAR is “to engage the oppressed to create new and liberating knowledge by democratising knowing” (Brown & Tandon, 1983). Action is central to this. It critiques the legitimacy of knowledge produced by elites and “challenges dominant conceptions by attempting to create new transformative understandings from the actions of the oppressed. However, even in PAR, one of the more radical exponents of action research, there remains a dodge of the normative” (Andrews 2010: 13). The researcher must be careful of domination; therefore, research questions and goals have to be led by the people.

Key here seems to be the researcher engaging with the people to help produce their own knowledge. As a blogger and researcher, I find this aspect problematic because there is a presumption evocative of the early problems with Feminist Standpoint Theory: the idea that the researcher holds a higher level of knowledge and paternalistically engages “the people” to elevate their level of knowledge, which is seen as key to liberation. While Patricia Hill Collins (1997) notes the inextricable linkage of the knowledge/power paradigm, I have learned things from other fans on Tumblr. They have transformed my thinking at times and facilitated my achievement of a standpoint. What is attractive about PAR for my uses is the idea of writing and discourse as action, as transformative. Dialogue is participatory. Salient, too, in my work is a respect for ‘native’ types of knowledge and expression on a seemingly superficial site, like Tumblr, as legitimate and worthy of academic interrogation. The concern is not with regard to creating value but drawing attention to the value that has already been created.

Achieving the ‘science of liberation’ (Staples, 1998: 168), which is PAR, can only be achieved by being “of” the people. This requires the separation of academic and popular knowledge (Andrews, 2010: 17). This seems more idealistic than practical. Marx worked in that way as he straddled the university/community divide by writing explicitly political works in keeping with his theories. This has attracted criticism of his work, particularly claims of dogmatism (2010: 18). My essays and analyses a ‘katrinapavela’ are born from my political ideology and social positioning. I explicitly create work that embraces these positions that are not neutral, yet I have had encounters with fans that use that word to describe the position of my writing. What one regards as ‘neutral’ is just a Standpoint that comports with that of the reader. For other fans my position was seen as ‘divisive’, ‘biased’ or ‘stupid’ because it fails to validate their own reading of the show.

CEE, as I approach it in subsequent chapters, takes inspiration from Autoethnography. Often derided as highfalutin, narcissistic journalism, autoethnography embraces subjectivities of the researcher as central to her search outcomes. The dedication to reflexivity makes this form of methodology influential in crafting my own. It is described by autoethnography Scholar, Carolyn Ellis, as “not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively” (2013: 10). It is a methodology in the vein of postmodernism with the goal of not eliminating the scientific method, but to interrogate its dominance, and to demonstrate that knowledge can be gained and shared in a myriad ways (Wall, 2006: 2).

Autoethnography encourages the researcher to grapple with their own biases, vulnerabilities and ideology that affects their work (Custer, 2014: 4). The personal and the cultural are linked. According to Spry, autoethnographic accounts “reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self-interacting with others in the context of researching lived

experience” (2001, p.712). The contention with autoethnographic methodology is that all encounters ultimately serve the researcher’s becomingness instead of locating the researcher as one among many under examination. The latter is a more attractive, and slightly less self-revealing process. My research intends to use many of my own encounters on Tumblr as a basic for understanding how others (and myself) construct meaning, and process content to corroborate or contradict their standpoints.

The narrative elements allowed by autoethnography intersects with the analysis of patterns and processes of observations. It bridges the narrative blogging style of “katrinapavela” with the data analysis of Kadian Pow the researcher. The Layered account is another presentation style to draw upon. The focus is on the author’s experiences alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature. Like grounded theory, it shows that data collection and analysis are concurrent procedurally, thereby framing research as a source of questions and answers, not truth seeking. But unlike grounded theory, layered accounts use vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection (Ellis, 1991). Research and writing become a socially just act, with the goal of producing analytical but accessible texts that have the power to transform understanding (Holman Jones, 2005).

This study’s methodology combines Critical Ethnography and Engaged Ethnography, resulting in Critically Engaged Ethnography (CEE). Anderson (1989) says that while anthropologists (at the time) were experimenting with “literary” approaches to ethnography, education field was going in the opposite direction with elaborate data analysis procedure and language to inculcate it against accusations of mere “story telling” (his emphasis) (1989: 252). The need to legitimate science over literature, creates a false binary.



What then distinguishes Critical Ethnography from accusations of “mere storytelling”? In this effort, Anderson alleges that critical ethnography in education is characterized by a blurring of lines resulting from the fluid borrowing from other genres. Anderson says, “Like other ethnographers—particularly those who define themselves as interpretivists—critical ethnographers (CEs) aim to generate insights, to explain events, and to seek understanding. They also share with interpretivist ethnographers the view that the cultural informant’s perceptions of social reality are themselves theoretical constructs. That is, although the informant’s constructs are, to use Geertz’s (1973) expression, more “experience near” than the researcher’s, they are, themselves, reconstructions of social reality” (Anderson 1989: 253). Critical reflexivity as built into the critical ethnographic process.

J. B. Thompson (1984: 99) points out that if everyday language is the basis of ideology, and used to exert power, then the method for elaborating its analysis needs examination. Black oral culture as a form of resistance dates to the 18th century, encompassing speech practices such as song, storytelling, and signifying into everyday life (Lu and Steel, 2019, p. 824). This enabled them to critique changing forms of white supremacy, forge community, and communicate whilst being behaviourally policed (Scott, 1990). 21st century social media platforms enable digitized versions of these oral traditions that take advantage of the affordances of technology (Brock 2012; Florini 2014; Pruitt 2015; Squires 2002; Kuo 2018). This technophilia (Everett 2002) is itself a form of resistance, as Black people have been historically associated with lower intelligence (Murray and Herrnstein, 1994), along with fewer technological capabilities and creativity (Warschauer, 2004).

Storytelling was used to “resist dominant narratives” (Lu and Steele, 2019). This study examines Black women’s assessment of Rhimes’ storytelling abilities to engage in that historical resistance. Their discursive assessments of her work call upon long-standing traditions of African America political debate in public gathering spaces (Wanzo 2015, Harris-Lacewell 2010). On Tumblr, Black people can gather, tell stories and debate without the intervention from white authority (having the police called on them for being ‘loud’), or white pseudo authority (any white person feeling threatened by racial critique). Moreover, one’s perspective is not simply one’s own. It derives from social interaction” (1989: 14 in Anderson 1989: 255). This can certainly apply to commentary on TV texts as well. This is built into my own work and way of thinking but needs to be more explicit. This makes it OK to understand that biases are natural part of the process. I can’t obliterate them, but I must own up to and admit them, no matter how unattractive.

My contention is not with empowering informants. I take the position that those people are informed and using Tumblr as a form of empowerment, a way of being heard. Perhaps the power I have gained through recognition is interpreted by others as endorsement or legitimization (I will have to analyse the data). I am analysing the structure and cultural construction of their knowledge and its distribution and flow in the space of Tumblr. These “informants” have already been active participants in the space alongside me.

### **Marrying Ethnography with Black Feminism as an Analytical Tool**

As ethnography has grown over the last few decades, it has become more sophisticated and bespoke. The foundation remains the practise of studying a world through participant observation and then reflecting and writing an intensely descriptive account.

Ethnography as the original way of knowing, has used qualitative methods, inductive logic, and holistic explanation.

Positivism has often sought to bring the irrational under administrative submission. Noblit sees applied ethnography as a “science of becoming” that replaces prediction with anticipation through the “creative construction of possibilities” (1984, p. 97). Noblit believes ethnography has the most potential to be honest because it seeks to “maximize the reflective capacity of humans concerning their own thought and action” (1984p. 96). Any researcher can come in to observe conversations on public blogs accessible to anyone with internet access. It is the relationships, the emotional tenor of the interactions between bloggers that cannot be objectively replicated. Each researcher will chronicle that in a different way. And since I am the only researcher that also understands the impetus behind blogging as “katrinapavela,” I am in a unique position to speak to that.

Hawkesworth writes “As an epistemological doctrine, feminist standpoint theory is seriously flawed. It entails a subjectivist approach to knowledge without grappling with complex questions concerning the validity of particular knowledge claims” (1999: 135). Where Hawkesworth thinks FST fails as a way of validating truth claims, its use as an analytical tool can prove much more fruitful. An analytical tool is a heuristic device used to illuminate an area of inquiry, framing questions for interrogation, identifying mystifying areas in need of exploration or clarification, or providing concepts or hypotheses to guide research (Lakatos, 1970). It presupposes multiplicity and complexity rather than a single emergent truth of experience.

Hawkesworth notes that a move away from a singular Feminist standpoint to a recognition of multiple feminist standpoints embraces plurality as inherent to the human condition (1999: 136). Showing this plurality requires collecting competing claims from

women about the same issue and comparing the theoretical assumptions and empirical claims. This is what I aim to do in the subsequent, thematically divided sections of data analysis. FST as an analytical tool acknowledges that claims about the world are theoretically mediated, constructed in relation to experience in light of a range of theoretical interests.

As a blogger whose writing has been influential among some of the population I am examining, and as researcher whose social positioning resembles that of the population whose interactions and discourse is being examined, I must acknowledge the theoretical suppositions at work in my blogging and in the theoretical approach to my research. Embracing my own influence and biases in my arena of study is the ethical thing to do. Pretending otherwise is intellectually dishonest.

The influence of Black Feminism on this project—the desire to dig deeply into the cultural readings of Black women about their favourite media object—is what inspired me to merge Critical Ethnography with Engaged Ethnography. As a Black feminist, Critically Engaged Ethnography (CEE) accommodates a subaltern perspective that allows me to have a dual identity as both researcher and fan (aca-fan), and to explicitly acknowledge and evaluate that duality throughout the project. It follows that accommodating this dual identity allows me to use autoethnography in parts of this thesis that feel appropriate. Chapter Five's orientation to Tumblr, for instance, follows my own introduction to both Tumblr and the *Scandal* fandom. Much of Chapter Eight is oriented around confrontation of my dual identity as blogger/researcher by a member of the fandom, and ripples of consequences that emerge. Those consequences are both personal but are also explored from an intellectual lens about the ways in which white supremacy can disrupt and cause eruption even within intra-racial fandom spaces.

### **Methodological Limitations: Access, Ethnocentrism and Critically Engaged Ethnography**

All methodologies have limitations, no matter how bespoke. I have emphasised in Chapter Three that Intersectionality is under-explored in Fan Studies, and thus this project holds space for race, gender, and sexuality in its analysis. What it does not do explicitly, however, is consider issues of access to online spaces, leisure time, and other issues reflective of class. Whilst class should be an important intersection to examine alongside race and gender, it is not explicitly matrix of identity under examination. It is likely that the data gathered from women on Tumblr reflect those who have access to leisure for participation and are highly literate based on the quality of commentary. But I do not make those assumptions based on several other considerations. *Scandal* was shown on the American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) network, which is terrestrial television, thus no additional streaming service, or cable subscription was required. Second, in Chapter Three I mention a Pew Research Centre (2014) study which notes that African Americans adopt social media use at twice the rate of their counterparts, but African Americans are also more economically underprivileged. There is no direct correlation between social media access, literacy, and class that I as comfortable making. Those things were also not important to this study but are worth exploring. Thirdly, I did consider my own economic experiences throughout the time I was blogging prodigiously as Katrina Pavela. I was child-free and had a partner that was employed full-time, which allowed me to be employed part-time for several years when I could not find full-time work. This is relevant to being very present online--crafting memes, frequently writing meta-analyses between 4-6000 words long each week and answer anonymous fan question (fans of *Scandal* and the katrinapavela blog). In other words, I had leisure. By 2014, when I was working three part-time jobs and exploring a PhD programme, I *made* leisure time by sacrificing sleep to engage in fan activity. It gave me

joy, which served to contrast with the sea of obligations commanding the rest of my time. Based on my interactions with some of the Black women on Tumblr, some of them were university students, journalists, college professors, accountants, US Government workers, PR professionals, and more. partnership work for museums, but at one point worked 3 jobs and found time to write.

This project has an intentionally American perspective, even as it is being written from Britain, where I have resided for the duration of my *Scandal* fandom experience. As a Jamaican-born Black woman, much of whose education took place in the United States, African American culture has been hugely influential in my perception of the world. Secondly, it is a cultural perspective that is significantly undervalued for its influence on the larger American culture (music, food, civil rights, fashion, literature, communication) and as a global export around the world. *Scandals* a global TV export reflects this cultural impact, as it was sold to TV stations in Canada, Britain, France, Italy, South Africa, Jamaica, Australia, and parts of South America. This cultural influence could be seen in the adaptive ways non-American fans, on Tumblr, adapted to the communicative styles of code-meshing standard American English with that of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). What today is so often regarded as ‘internet speak’ is, in fact, stylised communication popularised by African Americans and their culture. It is from within and about this cultural perspective that this project comments. On a personal note, the longing for home (Washington, DC—where I grew up) was a subconscious, affective pull towards both the TV and the fandom (explored more in the next chapter (Chapter Five)).

Rukmini Pande’s *Squee from the Margins* (both the 2017 thesis and 2018 book) is a laudable and dynamic contribution to Fan Studies, particularly speaking to the dearth of

explicit racial concerns and the multiple intersections between race, gender, nationality, and sexuality. Pande's work gives voice to the fan praxes of those at racial and cultural margins on an international scale. Because I have made clear this is written from an intentional insider perspective that at times looks out, its endogamous perspective is purposeful and is highlighted, at times, in contrast to other studies before it. My contribution's perspective of being and observing Black women in the practice of fangirling is unequivocal. Pande's work is also more traditionally steeped in the vocabulary of fan practice ('meta-analysis', 'head-cannons', etc) where I do not because this project is an interdisciplinary one, merging anthropology, sociology, and philosophy with fan studies. The language is an important part of departure here because it was not common in the *Scandal* fandom to use terms like 'wank', 'flame war', 'meta-commentary', etc. Much like Pande, I unabashedly embrace intersectionality in this study and engage with how the impact of marginalisation necessitates the need for a project that centres race and gender within Fan Studies. However, my methodology does utilise interviews (see 'Data Gathering and Analysis' section below). As importantly, Pande engages an analysis of racial identity that disturbs 'progressive orientations' (2017, p. 168). Here 'progressive' can be read as white, therefore the concern is with how fans of colour are pushing at boundaries with their head cannons and race-bending in ways that make majority white segments of fandom confront race. This project is less concerned with outside racial and gendered perspectives. It digs deep into a world in which Black women (and other women to a lesser extent) pretend to live--if even for a few hours--without The Gaze; a world where their identity as Black women is neither defined as 'other' nor anchored to an antagonistic racial presence. Pande does an excellent job of mixing both the insider and outsider perspective, but there is room for multiple approaches to intersectional Fan Studies offerings.

## **Data Gathering and Analysis**

My Black Feminist Standpoint Theory (BFST) praxis in the subsequent chapters, reflects both Williams (2018) and Cox's (2018) approach to data analysis on Tumblr. Williams' interrogation of her own fannish reaction and rapture for the US TV show *Hannibal*, and Cox's focus on identity work performed by marginalized communities around a POC character both rely on discursive and textual analysis. Influential, too, is Celia Pierce's methodological approach in *Communities of Play* (2011) in which she takes on a dual identity as researcher and engaged fan.

### **Data Gathering**

Besides already being ensconced there as a fan, I chose Tumblr as my research site for the creativity and depth of the discursive discourse; and because it is underrepresented in coterie of research about the *Scandal* fandom. Like Twitter, Tumblr is a publicly accessible 'taste community' (Blakely 2012, 343) that allows users to 'follow' one another's content; and it is searchable by terms and hashtags. It provides users with a set of tools that allow them to create and upload multi-media content to their blogs, without character limitations. Each blog in Tumblr's network has an archive, where content can be retrieved. It is organized by year, month and even media type. This organization was invaluable to me gathering data. The fan pieces I analyse here are taken from archives of known (to me) *Scandal* fans, between 2013-2015.

The data was gathered from individual blog archives between the periods of 2013-2016. Just as the show evolves and changes storylines, so do the subjects in the fandom that upholds that show. Because the fandom has different political leanings and



objects of fan worship, the data for this chapter will largely focus on the section of the fandom which I mostly inhabited as KP. This cluster represents primarily fans of the central character, Olivia Pope, and many were also ‘shippers of the central romance between her and President Grant character. These are representative of a dominant section of the *Scandal* fandom, though many other combinations exist. One of three of the case studies examples I analyse is from the KP blog. First, it echoes the Critically Engaged Ethnography model by holding up my own fan labour for critique. Secondly, it was not just my voice reflected in the meme used but a dialectic of voices and cultural understandings. Different politics emerge depending on factions that jostle for power and visibility within the fandom.

### ***To Interview or Not to Interview***

The decision to abstain from interviewing fans for this project is conceived around my own introduction to *Scandal*’s Tumblr fanbase. I wanted to capture and explore two sides of the voyeuristic coin that is endemic to fan praxis on social media. First is the identity performance of an embodied conception of a self that is regurgitating a consumption of *Scandal* but is also latently aware of being consumed by others on Tumblr. Whereas Sobande (2017) used this consumption concept to investigate Black British women’s understanding of their self-image, education and need for representation by interviewing them, I was not interested in fans’ self-analysis of their own words. Nor did I want to guide the content with my own set of questions. I wanted the themes of the discussion to arise from what I observed online. Both methodologies have their merits. To put it succinctly, I am more compelled by what people show of themselves, not what they say about themselves. This brings me to the second reason for eschewing interviews: the generative

properties of voyeurism. Interviewing fans adds an additional layer of the fan experience that does not reflect the majority experience of being in a fandom. Many online fans interact as their (performance) personas, and don't know the real names of the people behind the avatars. Keeping that reality at bay allows Black women to keep the fantasy of fandom alive, maintaining a portal for escape (see Chapter Six, and Chapter Eight for when things get too real). Whilst I do find value in the dissonance and harmony between ethnographic observation and interviews, the conceptualization of this project required only observation.

### ***Identifying Black Womanhood***

In the social media space where 'catfishing' and other forms of identity obfuscation abound, proving the Black womanhood behind the avatar is a tricky prospect. I used political leanings like #BlackLivesMatter, participation in activist efforts like #Blackout days, interests in other Black women TV characters, 'about' sections, blog URLs and archival history to assess their identity. In keeping with a Critically Engaged methodology, I used African American cultural hermeneutics and the epistemology of my lived experience (Collins 2000) to determine my knowing. For example, I intuited Black womanhood based on Black (American, Caribbean or other diasporic) socio-linguistic references (e.g., AAVE, patois), or expressed commonalities about Black womanhood. Whilst all these means of intuiting Black feminine identity could be manipulated, or run the risk of essentializing, they were largely effective.

### ***Time Period of Data Gathering***

The data will be gathered from individual blog archives between the periods of 2013-2016. Just as the love object (the show itself) evolves (or devolves) and changes storylines, so do the subjects in the fandom that upholds that love object. By using data from several years, I hope to show the consistent and changing players, politics, and contentions within the fandom. Different politics emerge depending on factions that jostle for power and visibility within the fandom.

### **Conclusion**

My contribution is rooted in Tumblr's crucible of entertainment, performativity, politicality and affective prompts as I have experienced them in the *Scandal* fandom. In short, this chapter aimed to bridge the experience of what it is like to be a Black woman in a fandom with other Black women, whilst translating that experience to a wider audience without flattening its texture. My research examines the identity work performed between Black women fans and the show's protagonist (Pope), not from a position of other, but intimate affinity. Secondly, the macro lens interrogates the potential meanings of the fan discourse within the larger context of Intersectionality, which is explicitly concerned with societal inequalities and interpretations of power.

Black women's epistemologies are not usually given authority, but social media platforms provide a new window into legitimizing those voices, especially in the Fan Studies genre. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins specifically brings up the ways in which the intellectual communities formed by Black women reflect epistemologies that don't necessarily adhere to the Enlightenment model of positivism. Through *Critically Engaged Ethnography*, I examined the lived epistemologies of Black women and the ways in which

they grapple with the identity of Olivia Pope and themselves. As Fan Studies embraces intersectionality, I hope to see more work exploring the tensions between the interiority of Black subjectivity (Quashie 2012) and the demands of Black political life.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **‘Down the Tumblr rabbit hole I go’: Setting the Ethnographic Scene**

The research questions for this inquiry sought to understand fan potentialities for discussing the portrayal of Black women characters on TV beyond binary discourses of representation. To that end this study seeks to gain insight by examining the conversations of Black women (and other women) fans watching a portrayal of Black womanhood through the character of Olivia Pope, from ABC’s *Scandal*. It interrogates the ways in which Intersectionality manifests in the television discourse of that show’s fandom, the core of which presents as Black women. This study also seeks to understand the contours of the *Scandal* fandom discourse specifically within the digitized culture of social media and microblogging platform, Tumblr. By addressing these issues, this work will broaden the discourse on representation; interrogate the impact of digital sociality’s intersection with race and power; and emphasize the centrality of lived epistemology in the fan practices of Black women.

This chapter is divided into five sections which explore dominant themes that emerged from the content of the data collected, as well as the interaction between Tumblr users based on that content. Again, the analysis is based on the data collected from Tumblr, between 2013-2016. The first section introduces the Tumblr landscape, and the multiple ways users navigate the space. The researcher’s own early experiences of coming to grips with Tumblr’s functionality and interactions with fandom provide a grounded and reflexive example of a common way Tumblr users encounter the platform, which is through search engine results for specific content. Additionally, this section describes the researcher’s introduction to the space and the *Scandal* fandom, and background on her active presence

in that fandom, prior to and during ethnographic research. It will explore how this complex identity affected the researcher's prior knowledge of women in the *Scandal* fandom, and what was learned during the data collection. Sections Two through Five each interrogate a dominant theme that emerged from the data and participant observations. Section Two explores the theme of 'Pockets of Freedom,' which interrogates how Black women fans use *Scandal's* script to play with the idea and reality of race, and Intersectionality, through fan production. Section Three examines the racialization of feminine pleasure and love as critical discourses of fan activity. In Section Four, I give critical consideration to the Intersectionality of wellness and fantagonyms in the socially mediated crucible of Tumblr. Finally, in Section Five, the researcher reflects on the potentialities of her research findings and fieldwork experience.

### **First Comes Love, Then Comes Tumblr**

How I found myself in the culturally rich environment of Tumblr, as a researcher and a fan, has everything to do with *Scandal* ...and Google's search results. In June 2012, I had little intention of re-entering academia, let alone joining another TV show's fandom. Whilst on a business trip and perusing Netflix, I discovered season one of the political drama. The plot, which focused on Washington DC's premier political fixer with a messy personal life, Olivia Pope (played by Kerry Washington), was interesting enough. However, the more significant draw was that a Black woman character was at the centre of this network TV drama for the first time in 38 years.

Busy with the purpose of my trip (selling 3-D exhibition planning software to museums and art galleries), I did not have time to complete the seven-episode series. I did so several months later once the series had made it to Channel 4 in the UK. Whilst the

historical natural of Washington's casting was an intriguing draw, and one I wanted to support, I had never waited on a Black female character to "represent" me, nor did I feel I needed one to identify with or feel bonded to a fictional character. I had done so with non-Black characters before. But there was something about Pope's character from which, after seven episodes, I could not turn away. Her blackness was not incidental to the provocation I felt; it was the cherry on top of a good sundae. Written as unpredictable, politically cunning, unapologetically brattish, and undoubtedly the smartest person in every room, she and other characters pulled me in as more than a casual viewer. Re-consuming the seven episodes and searching for copies of the second season proved inconsolable. My fangirl bell was ringing inside my head, a familiarly arresting feeling that strikes me now and again, when I fall in love with a piece of media.

What does it mean to 'fall in love' with a piece of media? It is different and more emotionally intense than to simply like or enjoy consuming that object. The process, much like falling in love with a romantic partner can be logically explained but is not totally rational. A considerable element of this phenomenon is irrational, and emotional. Whether with a person or an object, falling in love is spoken of as involuntary, passive seduction because western cultures circumscribe love to the feminine domain, which is to say of lesser value. However, one has to decide to pursue one's desire, in whatever way is most compelling and permissible, making 'love' active and productive. Becoming a fangirl is an embodied role, a treasured identity one displays or keeps protectively hidden (from fear of criticism). Key here is that this identity must be engaged through pursuit. Acting upon my internal fangirl trigger meant to decide to be in a relationship with that love object. The fan identity and participation in a fan community require an object—be it a personality, media, or material culture—around which the fan identity revolves. The subject-object relation

highlighted here is deliberate because the fan identity, in many ways, is not about the object itself, but what it triggers in the subject. The fan identity is self-serving. I refer to myself as a series monogamist, who is the opposite of promiscuous with her viewing affections. I fall in love with only one series at a time because my affections are like a spotlight that can only shine on one object, or area at a time. I do not fall in love often or easily, and object of my affections nearly always contains a feisty, Type A female protagonist at the centre of the story. Before Olivia Pope, it was biracial Bette Porter (played by Jennifer Beals) of Showtime's *The L Word* (Chaiken 2004). Before her it was Jamie Buchman (played by Helen Hunt) on an NBC sitcom called *Mad About You* (Reiser and Jacobson 1992). I discovered all three shows once a fan community had already formed around them.

In addition to the characterizations, *Scandal*'s aesthetics, fast pace, cognitive and emotional affect won me over, causing me to question for whom else this was true. I needed community, people with whom I could fellowship over this show. To locate a fan hive, I used Google to search the term "Scandal blogs." Clicking on the first entry, which was a link to the most recent posts on Tumblr (hash) tagged with "scandal", "scandal fandom" or related phrases. Dame (2016 in Chew 2018) studied the tagging habits of transgender Tumblr users and concluded that the practice extends beyond a system of semiotic organisation, but also one of social organisation and connectivity.

### **Understanding Tumblr: Easy to Use, Hard to Explain**

Tumblr is a micro-publishing platform with over 430 million blogs under its umbrella. What makes it different from blog publishing sites like WordPress or Typepad is that it has made the tools of publication simple and ubiquitous on its site, and the platform has the sociability of circulation ingrained into its structure. It is as if someone combined the power



of WordPress with the never-ending content loop of the social media feed. Each visit or refresh to the site's landing page, [tumblr.com](https://tumblr.com), reveals a visual backdrop consisting of content posted by one of hundreds of millions of the site's users, complete with attribution given to the tumblr page from which it came. Centred on that landing page is an invitation to sign up or log-in. The page also acknowledges the perception that it is a mysterious or complicated platform. Running along the lower third is an inviting question for potential users: "What is Tumblr?" Clicking that text reveals the following description:

Tumblr is so easy to use that it's hard to explain. We made it really, really simple for people to make a blog and put whatever they want on it. Stories, photos, GIFs, TV shows, links, quips, dumb jokes, smart jokes, Spotify tracks, mp3s, videos, fashion, art, deep stuff. Tumblr is 434 million different blogs, filled with literally whatever" (Tumblr 2017).

The tone of that explanation reflects the kind of language the Oath, Inc.- owned Tumblr uses in its site policies to portray a casual ease that belies a company as serious as any other profit-driven platform.

### ***Tumblr's Tools***

Tumblr has two types of interfaces, only one of which is visible to those without Tumblr accounts. The site's landing page has a search functionality that anyone can use to find content by Tumblr users relevant to their search terms. The 'results' page lists blogs whose content is most associated with the search term entered. Below that it returns hits that can be filtered by 'most popular' or 'most recent', with the former being the default setting. Guests and Tumblr users both have access to the search page and can also get more specific by filtering search returns for a specific type of content (e.g., images, text, audio).

This functions similarly to search engines like Google.

One major limitation with Tumblr's search function is that it depends on users to tag posts accurately. Unlike Google, the Tumblr engine does not, for instance, scan text, or responses to non-text posts for key words that fit a search. Image posts have an obvious limitation. How users engage the tagging feature is extremely important to how Tumblr functions, as it can connect users across similar niche interests, or facilitate conflict when the unspoken rules of fandom tagging are not adhered to. Section Two will cover the former in more depth, and Section Four will explore the intricacies of the latter.

Those who are simply visiting a tumblr know nothing about the intricacies of tagging, as individual tumblrs look like a fairly standard blog interface. This is the public-facing side of the Tumblr experience. Unlike Facebook, or Twitter, which are oriented around the individual's biographical identity, Tumblr promotes itself as a place where the interests and passions of the individual are priority markers of individual (Tumblr.com 2020). An individual tumblr<sup>3</sup>'s URL may be incongruous and have nothing to do with the subject matter of the blog, if it has an identifiable one at all. As a result, a tumblr's 'About' section is likely to prioritize a list of interests, current media consumption, political stances, and socio-political categories of identity over listing their occupation, geographical location, a photograph, or representative avatar. As an example, the 'scottmcsalvatore' tumblr was a high ranking blog in my search results for "Scandal fandom". Though the URL is discernibly male, the blog's tagline is "surprise bitch", and the description indicates that it is run by a Black, Muslim woman residing in London (scottmcsalvatore 2018). Where the avatar for the blog's author

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this work, I use the capital 'Tumblr' to refer to the network of blogs; and 'tumblr' to refer to individual blogs on that platform.

would typically be is a dusty pink square that reads “POC [people of colour] ARE IMPORTANT” followed beneath by a rainbow coalition of hand emojis set in the ‘rock on’ pose. Tumblr users tend not to present the self in uniform ways, as if they are brands. Instead, the self is presented as static in some ways, but dynamic in ways that accommodate shifts and raw edges that are shaped by mood, interactions and the politics of the day. Users can choose avatars that match their moods, politics, or current passions. I can identify with scottmcsalvatore, as my tumblr’s URL is a convenient nom de plume (katrinapavela), originally created to publish a personal essay on a now-defunct blog about racial issues. The author photo on my page is of a white male character from *Scandal*, President Fitzgerald Grant, photoshopped with spectacles. Both scottmcsalvatore and the katrinapavela blog orient themselves around their passions.

Visitors to a tumblr page may consume content, read post comments, and search a blog’s archive. What they cannot do is offer commentary or circulate that content within the Tumblr network. Some blogs do enable the sharing option, making it easy to spread Tumblr content to other social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. There is also the option to email; copy the permalink to the post; and embed a post onto another website. The embed feature will not work with Tumblr’s mechanics because it disrupts the ‘reblog’ feature, which allows only other Tumblr accounts to copy content onto their own blogs and add commentary, or ‘notes’ as Tumblr calls them.

Another limitation placed on visitors without a Tumblr account is the inability to interact with the blog’s user. Like many other blogging platforms and social media sites, non-members cannot like or comment on tumblr posts without an account. This one-sided relationship of consumption may be intervened by means of a feature the ‘Anonymous Ask’. The ‘Ask’ feature allows Tumblr’s users to submit questions or short commentary, privately,

to individual tumblrs. Tumblr users can then choose to address the ‘Ask’ privately or publicly. Tumblr users can limit the feather to registered Tumblr users, or they can enable ‘Anonymous Ask’, which enables a direct line of communication for the blog reader to the blog owner, but the final word remains with the blog’s owner. Between 2015-2017, Tumblr made incremental changes to this feature, that somewhat changes the nature of it.

Previously, when an ‘Ask’ was publicly address on the blog so that anyone could read the interaction, users could not reblog or comment, only ‘like’ the post. Over two years, Tumblr enabled others to add comments but limiting the reblog. Now, as with any other post, ‘asks’ that are published can receive comments, likes and reblogs. This changes the intimacy of the ‘ask’ communication, specifically between blog owner and non-tumblr user, as the interaction is now mediated by other Tumblr users.

### ***Members Only***

For those who decide to register as users of the platform, an email address and agreement that you are at least thirteen years old is all it takes to register for a Tumblr account. A 2013 study of Tumblr revealed 61 percent of those aged 13-18 to be regular users of Tumblr. The 19 to 25 age bracket was not far behind in preferring Tumblr over other social media platforms (Lynley 2013 in Cox 2018). There is an element of pleasure and depth, particularly for an audience of women over twenty-five. Musing about the reason for Tumblr’s preference among the over 25s, Downey, et al writes, “because it is a microblogging platform—and allows for user=friendly image, GIF, video, audio, and text posts—there is room to curate, share, squee [emote joy], and have conversations in a way that’s easier to follow than Facebook, allows for more depth than Twitter, and is overall more encompassing of musical content fandom” (2018, par 2.3). Whilst Tumblr’s overall

popularity has shifted over the last few years, due to policy changes and the emergence of simpler, pithier applications like Snapchat and—more recently—Tik Tok, the fan community remains firmly ensconced on Tumblr.

Louisa Ellen Stein (2016), describes the ‘endless scroll’ that the [dashboard] offers, saying Tumblr as something that keeps the user transfixed by an endless cascade of content, without much effort. Newman (2014, 7) refers to the dashboard as the “river of images”. Of course, the same is true of other platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, in which content all comes to a central area. What makes Tumblr different is the unique combinations of images, texts, videos, and audio that fans manipulate and enhance with each re-circulation of the image. Stein seems to think the interface is opaque and confusing to newcomers (Stein 2016.). Williams seems to agree, saying “Tumblr’s opacity and impenetrability may actually work to allow those who identify as lone or individual fans a space to engage in private acts of working through such disruption without needing to actively interact and engage with other fans” (Williams 2018, 1.1). It can also be said that this view of the platform is exactly what attracts fans to Tumblr in the first place: the exclusivity of it. One has to ‘get’ or understand Tumblr, and an inability to grasp the space is indicative that one does not belong there. This same idea kept me from investigating Tumblr for years before reconciling the fact that fully embracing my *Scandal* fan identity would mean adapting myself to Tumblr’s architecture. That is where the fandom was, so that is where I needed to be. The promise of pleasure, squee, and intellectual stimulation was too irresistible not to tackle the learning curve.

Once inside the members areas, right away you are greeted with a deep blue background of the dashboard, mere tones away from the similar blue of Facebook and

Twitter. Tumblr's search feature, and menu guides to access private messages, an explore button, post notification, profile access align along the very top of the page. The last item is a pencil on a highlighted blue square calling you to action. Pressing the button reveals the same seven tools foregrounded prominently in white, just below the pencil. These are Tumblr's publishing tools.

The dashboard is empty until you start following people. Once a user begins following individual tumblrs, those posts show up on the dashboard. Tumblr instructs users that if they "See something great? Replog it to your own blog. Add commentary if you like. Make it your own. Other people will do the same to your posts. That's how you meet people here" (Tumblr 2018). Encouraging such interaction is expected from the platform itself, but even aca-fans, such as Keidra Chaney, understand that Tumblr cannot be fully experienced if you "just sit there and post things" (Morimoto 2018, par 1.7). Interaction is the key to a 'fuller' Tumblr experience. Tumblr's heavy emphasis on images and remixed content from other platforms (both online and offline) allows users to "re-appropriate, repurpose, and recirculate these images to suit their needs and desires. Through this circulation and interaction, users cohere around shared patterns of distinction and solidify group formation," according to Cox (2018, loc 2.3). The prevailing type of image tumbling down the dashboard is the GIF. GIFs are web-based graphics that contains a series of still frames, looped together to make a moving image lasting nanoseconds. Their most prolific use was associated with fan communities, as an effective way to emote, even before Tumblr. Invented in 1978 by Steve White (smithsonianmag.com 2017), their use grew more ubiquitous as social media became increasingly popular in the 2010s. Fan culture became Internet culture.

## **Tagging**

Tagging, as Hoch (2018) notes, allows intra-fandom cloisters to be more visible to each other (par 2.8). Tumblr's decidedly different social media architecture, which does not require a visible social profile nor makes connections (follows) visible by default, makes practical and creative use of tags necessary owing to the lack of formal grouping structures. (Hoch 2018). On a practical note, tagging content also optimizes them for search engine results, making it easier for content producers to find viewership. Websites most frequently aligned with the search terms used, and most visited by people, will rank highly in one's search results. Tumblr, it seemed, was a major playground for fans of *Scandal*. Tumblr made it easy for me to find a fandom tribe within which I could embed myself and become a contributing member. It represented a time with which I have had the longest, sustained relationship with a TV show and its fandom. It is, by some researcher's account a most conducive place for fan productions and rich research data around media (Downey, et al 2018; Winterwood 2018).

Before Tumblr served as a searchable network of blogs and a hub for media production, fan communities were concentrated in online forums such as Media Boulevard, Live Journal, Television Without Pity (TWOP), Archive of Our Own and other sites (Winterwood 2018; Castells 2012; Dekosnik 2016)). Winterwood discusses how fans from many of those sites migrated over to Tumblr (and Twitter), partly as political realities dovetailed with fan culture's increasing emphasis on discussing issues around marginalization and mainstream media's role in this. DeKosnik notes the increasing demand for diversity in fandom coalesced around 'RaceFail' on Live Journal, in 2009 (2016). What began as an imbroglio of authors speaking to their own failings around race and

characterization in their books, expanded outward to social justice issues in media representation, including the perpetuation of microaggressions in the works of creators (DeKosnik 2016 in Winterwood 2018, p 14). What Tumblr's tagging architecture afforded this cultural pivot toward more explicit concerns with social justice--and subsequent adoption of academic language to describe the issues—was a space in which the marginalized could produce and interact with those topics, with reduced stigma of marginalization. In Section IV of the Discussion chapter, I discuss how the academicization (or 'wokeness') around race and representation becomes a tool of interracial aggression in the name of social justice.

Tumblr is the au courant platform for fandoms (Deller (2014)), which remains particularly attractive to people of colour, queer identified people and women by embracing an interconnected fluidity (2017 Pande and Moitra). As technological affordances multiply in the future, this may change, as the historiography of several fandom scholars has shown (Winterwood 2018; Castells 2012; Dekosnik 2016) []. Opinions differ on how adaptable Tumblr's interface is to fandom communities. Williams finds Tumblr to be an opaque and impenetrable space for the uninitiated (2018, par 1.1). Cox, on the other hand says that Tumblr is "more adept at inaugurating unpractised fans into communities, learning community norms, and undertaking intertextual practices, since Tumblr facilitates and 'intertextual discourse' (Thomas 2013 in Cox 2018) based on" a preponderance toward visual textuality (2018, par. 1.2). Other scholars note that Tumblr is also able to connect personal narratives with wider cultural concepts and issue around marginalization (Brandt and Kizer 2015; Gilliland 2016; Warner 2015). The technological markers of Tumblr are not what make it unique, but what the affordances of its tools enable in distinct social



formations and communications (Cox 2018), which prior online fandom platforms, due to their static natures have not engendered

I did not experience this migration process, which happened whilst I was absent a fandom. Between 2005-2006, I was an active member of *The L Word's* (TLW) fandom on Media Boulevard and a lurking consumer of fan content on TWOP. Much like social media platforms today, each forum had a different cultural orientation, and communication style. The organisational cultures were usually determined by the most dominant personalities. Media Boulevard was home to an international TLW fanbase, with a vast array of subforums oriented around characters, relationships, and plot points. This is where I began feeling comfortable to write long-winded musings about my favourite characters and interacted with other fans. I even discovered that a fellow fan and I worked for the same institution, at which point we met and remain friends, even after I left that fandom. A razor-sharp wit seemed a tacit requirement of TWOP's smaller, more American-dominated, TLW thread. It was the lion's den—one that provided much entertainment, laughter, and occasional bruises—but a place I saw myself as ill-equipped to survive in. I was too soft. The compulsion to find community in the 1990s was there, but the technology was much more rudimentary for fan activity. In the mid-90s (the early days of the Internet), my fandom participation was limited to an FTP site for *Mad About You* fans. File Transfer Protocol, or FTP sites were text-based HTML sites organised by file folders. At the time, they allowed fans to use a single server to trade files back and forth, and post simple topics to discuss the show. I found it largely unsatisfying and did not manage to form any relationships. Though I had a shallow awareness of Tumblr before 2012, I had no desire to use the service, and found using multiple social media sites to be work, not entertainment. I opened a Facebook account because I was required by my employer to do so. Then came Twitter, for

which I felt social pressure to sign up, then proceeded to not use for several years. As for Tumblr, if I am honest, I was a little intimidated by it, because as an outsider, I did not understand it. Not only was I ignorant of how to use the service, but my lack of understanding also led me to regard it as young and frivolous. Clicking on that first Google search result led me to a mediated space that was complex, inspiring, but certainly not frivolous.

### ***Circulating Content***

Reblogging is the primary mode of circulation upon which the algorithms for mobility tracking depends. Such a feature has embedded within the code attribution for the tumblr from which it comes and facilitates the distribution of tumblr posts across other publishing platforms. BuzzFeed, a news and pop culture blog, frequently curates 'news' features out of social media fare on Tumblr, Twitter and Reddit, trending topic or not. Tumblr's built-in citation code means user are more likely to receive attribution for their content. This also means that BuzzFeed does not need expressed permission to cite user's posts on their website, which is independent of their tumblr page. Tumblr denotes in its user agreement that "...when you post something publicly, others may choose to comment on it, making your Content part of a social conversation that can't later be erased without retroactively censoring the speech of others" (Tumblr 2018). One could argue that BuzzFeed's thematic post curations are deemed uncensorable "speech". Tumblr's user agreement also stipulates that public posted content can be cached in a live feed by search engines (Ibid.), which is the feature responsible for my awareness of Tumblr's *Scandal* community. Electing to make one's blog private or create a closed group blog sidesteps the issues above, but this also limits one of the key draws of Tumblr, which is the sociality of discourse.

Renninger's 2015 study emphasizes that Tumblr's value for many is in its counter public bona fides. Users actively seek out Tumblr to enact non-mainstream politics or expressions, including identity formations seen as non-mainstream. Cox notes that Tumblr "accommodates users whose self-actualization of identity components do not correspond to normative mainstream constructs" (2018: 3.1]. Other studies, such as that of Oakley (2016) on queer-identified Tumblr users, indicate that they perceive it as a safe space away from gender binaries. This perception does not always bear out and is limited to the tags and interactions with like-minded users.

Reblogging a post means to copy and paste it onto one's own tumblr page and the dashboards of those who follow that tumblr, with or without additional commentary. This act of reblogging is a protected form of "speech", permission for which all users agree to when they accept Tumblr's user agreement when signing up (Tumblr 2018). This means that should a content creator decide to delete a post after publishing, all reblogged copies of that post remain on the site, and only the original is deleted. To delete all copies, according to Tumblr, would be to censor Tumblr community members who have reblogged or added commentary to that post. Reblogs cannot be read solely as endorsement of content. This feature can also be read as ridicule by virtue of commentary in the tags, which the 'OP' (original poster) cannot see when notified their post has been reblogged by another user. Reblogging can also be used to counter the argument made in the original post, derail the original point, mock the post itself, or commentary made on the original post. The counter public uses of the reblog feature, and its rippling effects will be covered thoroughly via examples in Section Four. When users want to be less confrontational, but still antagonistic against a post, they utilise 'sub-posting'. Sub-posting, like sub-tweeting, is a form of 'shade'. Sub-posting allows users to non-confrontationally address the content of a post (and its

author), with which they strongly disagree, or otherwise harbour ill will towards without derailing the discourse of the original post itself. The content of the sub-post may use direct language from the original post in mockery, to signal to other like-minded users that they may unload on that sub-post. Users engage the sub-post as a form of release without confrontation. This will be examined in more detail in section four when I explore the intersectionality of antagonisms and mental wellness. Tumblr builds itself as a place for creatives, and the idea that the production, circulation, and consumption of content is correlative to creativity. In keeping with that spirit, users can select a tool specific to the type of content they want to create. The video tool enables users to upload a low-quality video (100 MBs or less, under five minutes) of their own (or poached from someone else) or paste in the URL of one published elsewhere on the web. With the audio tool users can search for a song, or paste the URL of a song, which Tumblr finds and allows to be posted to your blog. It draws on Spotify and Soundcloud's data to do this. Should a user try to upload copywritten material from their own library, in Tumblr's typical casual-but-very-serious language, users are warned "Hey, that file is copyrighted. Don't upload that stuff. You can use one of these [Spotify or Soundcloud] sources instead." The chat tool is a quirky one because it is not a two-way form of communication. It is more a tool for writing imaginary conversations between two or more parties or recalling real conversations with others. It can, perhaps, be used to write a short play. Selecting that button reveals an example of how Tumblr suggests it to be used:

Firefighter: That's the way the cookie crumbles.

Butler: It falls on me to reassemble the cookie (Tumblr 2018).

This is the only tool that is limited to plain text, with no multimedia functionality. Next is the link button, which encourages the sharing of content from elsewhere on the web (e.g., news

outlets, other blogs or social media platforms), with proper attribution to the original source. The quote button, a personal favourite, is as straight-forward as it sounds and lends an air of nerdiness to Tumblr. This feature encourages users to post their favourite quotes from books, or other sources, and has a built-in feature for listing the source of the quote. Users sometimes will give a full citation list. This type of circulation allows Tumblr users to add counter-public discourse to the content, away from its original source, or simply make the Tumblr community aware. The last tool, is perhaps, the most inclusive of the seven tools. The photo tool is among the most frequently used on the platform, as it covers a wide variety of image content. Users can upload their own still or moving images (GIFs) or use the URL of those published elsewhere on the internet. Artists use Tumblr to upload their own photography, hand-drawn comics, fan art, etc. Users can include up to ten images in a single post. Text posts, which can range from a simple sentence to lengthy essays that incorporate multimedia such as GIF, photos, lengthy quotations, links and even video. Apart from the chat tool, all post types allow users to add description or other multimedia commentary to accompany the content.

### **The Business of Mediating the Social**

Tumblr, Inc. was founded by David Karp in 2007. In 2013, it was bought by Yahoo, Inc., and functioned as a private subsidiary of the company. In 2017, Yahoo, Inc, and all its subsidiaries were purchased by Oath, Inc., itself a subsidiary of US telecommunications giant, Verizon Communications, Inc (Bloomberg 2018). Karp has remained CEO of Tumblr, guiding the platform's quirky identity, but the two-time acquisition of the company has had political implications for the platform. Some changes have been more controversial than others. Not long after Yahoo's purchase, Tumblr began various experiments with advertising

that became increasingly obtrusive—at least to this user. Embedded into the ‘waterfall’ of content each user has elected to see, are advertisements that cannot be switched off. Oath Inc’s decision to disallow pornography (nakedness and sexually explicit still and moving images) from the platform, at the end of 2018, remains an implosive consequence that saw significant abandonment of the platform (Liao 2019; Bronstein 2020). The effect of this ban is beyond the scope of this research, as it takes place after the research period, and *Scandal’s* conclusion. However, several my own posts that included stills or GIFs from the show were flagged as ‘pornographic’ and removed. This is a show that aired on terrestrial TV, where a display of nudity or even the suggestion of ‘thrusting’ is already censored, so Tumblr’s system for flagging pornography is clearly imperfect.

### ***Manipulation, Net Neutrality***

Facebook and Instagram (also owned by Facebook)’s algorithms how’s some followers/friends more frequently than others. You can pay to promote certain posts in your friends’ feed. Therefore, visibility is not democratic. Buying bots makes this more complicated. Twitter now has a trending page that directs users to certain global and local trending topics, thereby shaping the discussions. This, of course, begs the question: what is being obscured?

Tumblr is subject to the same surveillance and complicated privacy issues as other social media. In March 2018, Tumblr, during the height of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, revealed a list of 84 tumblr accounts linked to state-sponsored campaigns (Dolcourt 2018). Attempting to distinguish itself from the privacy policies of Facebook, Tumblr, on its website, Tumblr wrote the following: “Democracy requires transparency and an informed electorate, and we take our responsibilities seriously. We aggressively monitor Tumblr for

signs of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns and take appropriate actions when we uncover anything” (Tumblr 2018). The list of 84 blogs reveals more than a dozen blogs with specific reference to the term ‘Black’ (‘weproudtoblack’, ‘starling-all-black-all-day’), or terms coded as Black (‘melanin-diary’, ‘hustleinatrap’) (Ibid.). Content may be king on Tumblr, and users but it can be disingenuous, state-sponsored propaganda as well. The space centres around constant flow of information, there is a significant randomized element to discovering that content. Not all users hashtag their content. Relevant images without text captions may be excluded from search results and may only be discovered at random.

### **Down the Tumblr Rabbit Hole, I Go**

Having registered for Tumblr, I could begin following, reblogging and commenting on the *Scandal* tumblrs suggested by Google. My “Scandal blogs” search term yielded results Tumblr organised by ‘popular’ (the most liked or reblogged posts), and ‘most recent’. These categories can be further filtered type of content one is looking for (visual, text, audio, etc.). I settled on examining the ‘popular’ tag from which to choose whose content I would follow. I chose based on content that referenced characters I like the most (Olivia Pope, Fitzgerald Grant); those that reflected or expanded my racial, gender and sexual politics; or those whose humour matched my own—whether or not their politics were a match. An additional layer required that the tumblr had to post frequently about *Scandal*, but not necessarily exclusively. Some tumblrs were not expressly dedicated fan accounts (i.e., their blog name does not include any reference to the show), but rather people whose current interests included *Scandal*, among other content. For instance, one user, aliasvaughn, between posts about *Scandal*, would reblog photos of luxury interior design, jewellery, fashion as well as photos of celebrities. This sort of blog is representative of a significant percentage of

personal blogs on tumblr whose content changes with the interest of the user. Other blogs choose to post content based on broad (politics) or narrow (Black, plus sized trans models) subject matter. More than specific content parameters, I was searching for a feeling. Having left my family and friends in the USA two years prior, outside of my marriage, I felt largely socially isolated. I yearned for community with which I could bond over *Scandal*.

The desire to connect with those others, who could relate to the torrent of thoughts and emotions prodded by the series' content was heady and intense. To say that I was unable to stop thinking about the show's themes, characters, and potentialities is not hyperbole. The thoughts invaded my sleep and my focus on other activities. Clearly, I needed a creative outlet to indulge my growing attachment to the show, if not just to quiet my own mind. Having moved to England two years prior in the spring of 2010, by 2012 I still lacked a close social circle to which I could connect without the Internet.

I was already an infrequent user of social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I did not need more. Until *Scandal* happened to me. Yes, 'happened' to me because that is how seductive the allure of the smart, funny, insightful community spirit I discovered. I was Alice and I had entered the Wonderland that was Tumblr. Play was all that mattered. And to jump into the sandbox, and not just watch from the side-lines required registering a blog. Research was far from my mind when I hastily registered [katrinapavela.tumblr.com](http://katrinapavela.tumblr.com) on the 20 December 2012. The intention at the time, however, was to observe the hive of activity from Tumblr blogs dedicated to discussing *Scandal's* content, as well as the "Scandal" hashtag--from which I would occasionally re-blog the posts of others onto my page to promote the content. In the beginning, I did not want to create any original content, only consume. To create content would mean subjecting myself to



possible rejection from a space in which I had already felt included through my consumption and active participation via reblogging.

Williams analyses her own engagement with GIFs as part of the *Hannibal* fandom on Tumblr. She says the lone fan (a fan who inhabits a largely consumptive identity and is neither ‘enunciatively productive’ (Sandvoss nor Kearns 2014), or actively engages with other fans in each fandom space) is often overlooked in fan studies. The lone fan, however, is a mainstay of many fandoms because a lack of fan production does not preclude a large segment of fandom to “derive a distinct sense of self and social identity from their fan consumption” (Sandvoss 2005, 30 in Williams 2018, 1.4). Williams’ study is a boon to my identification with the fandom I study and describes my initial discovery of Tumblr’s *Scandal* fandom before I became an active producer. The trouble is that Williams defines the act of reblogging and ‘liking’ content as part of lone fandom. However, that is a form of production, according to Tumblr’s own policy for deleted posts. Williams says she was in a liminal place between consumption and production. The reblog and like are ‘active’ because it lets the content creator know about your consumption. And those small acts do establish a connection, even if unacknowledged. This is especially true of tumblrs with smaller followings.

There is an imagined sociality in reblogging, or ‘pinning’, which is not done in isolation, as Galloway and Thacker (2007) put it in their analysis of women’s use of Pinterest. There is an act of performance in pinning, or any blogging or online curation. Galloway and Thacker describe the fraughtness of curation, this means we are aware of being watched. And we seek to ameliorate that anxiety by playing, even somewhat, to expectation (Ibid.). According to Dean (2010), “Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique” (95). Binding is a perfect term

because the emotional affect is what drives us to keep going back, adding packets in search of more attention. One key part of my study aims to understand the ways in which affect gets reproduced and circulated on Tumblr to bind the *Scandal* fandom to that space, especially in opposition to others, and even after some users no longer consider themselves fans of the show.

I use this example because it epitomizes Tumblr's propensity for curating a narrative theme using content from other Social Media platforms. Doing so speaks to the mutual constitution of media production and consumption Fiske (1989) explained. Consumption on one platform (Facebook, Twitter) leads to production and more consumption for another platform (Tumblr). The flows of consumption in the Tumblr-sphere adds another layer of production each time a user re-blogs the post and comments. What builds up are layers of discourse, reflecting a range of emotions and serving a range of purposes. Originally coined by de Certeau (1984), heavily influenced by Stuart Hall's (1980) work on encoding/decoding active audience model, textual poaching was further expounded upon by Henry Jenkins (1992). Whereas de Certeau situated the term as an act of resisting hegemony, Jenkins reconceptualises it for fan culture (fandom). When applied to fan culture—importing content for circulation and critical thought can be read as an act of appreciation—textual poaching becomes a means of extending the boundaries of meaningfulness for a text. Fans of TV shows 'poach' characters and make art, or fan fiction. With subjects on Tumblr this is done through narrative curation, often using screengrabs, but can be done with other forms of communication. These acts of textual poaching from other platforms extend the shelf-life of the content, enabling them and the additional discourse to be archived for future circulation. This curatorial poaching (see Chapter Three) that selects moments of culture deemed important enough to preserve in historical context.

Fink and Miller label Tumblr a place in which consumption and production are joined simultaneously (Fink and Miller 2014, pg. 614). Booth (2015) sees it as a more liminal or precarious position between the two. This diverges from Williams (2018), who sees ‘lone fandoms’, as a collection of disparate individuals who consume fandom content, but do not produce their own (par 1.1). However, the reblog feature acts as a form of commentary and interaction that does not require original thought or unique expression. Its action is still a form of production that builds on fandom discourse. Moreover, according to Tumblr’s own community guidelines (Tumblr.com), once a post has been re-circulated by a tumblr other than that of the originator that post belongs in the community conversation because Tumblr sees the act as a form of commentary. The original poster (or root) may delete the post, but it will not disappear from the blogs or archives of other tumblrs. While the ‘notes’ on the post, which acts as a historical timeline of the distribution, indicates if users have deactivated or deleted the post, the branches of discourse are free to flourish despite the originator excluding themselves from the narrative.

All that consumption compelled me to production. The whirlwind of options clarified for me that I had my own, which I came to understand as valuable. It was not long before I felt compelled to comment in solidarity with a post I came across. The post, entitled “Olitz: Sexual Dominance and Submission” (miltonsong 2012), speculated on a taboo sexual dynamic between the Black female lead and her white male love interest:

...I’m new to the #Scandalverse, but have already gone from zero to 60 in obsession levels in less than a week. If you don’t mind, I’d like to add to what you’ve written.

Yes, people who are usually slaying dragons in their public/professional life sometimes need an escape from having to be that person. They need to safely remove the armour. The bedroom (or a tree, desk, whatever) is the perfect place to temporarily cast off the role of the (public) Dominant. While Olivia seems to be a submissive in the bedroom, it is important to note that it is not Fitz—the

Dominant sexual partner– controlling their sexual dynamic: it is still Olivia. She holds all the cards.

... It's all so delicious! This is just the tip of the iceberg and I can't wait to see more" (Pavela 2012a).

Responding by compulsion, looking back at my words reveals my own knowledge and suppositions about the intersections of sexuality, power, gender, morality, and race as projected onto the content and characters from *Scandal*. These subconscious political themes were at work in my comments and original posts in the weeks and months to follow. I was not conscious of this at the time, but merely pursuing provocation and translating internal musings into text. Posts like "Scandal: Our Black and White Morality" (Pavela, 2012b), "When Simple Minds Watch Scandal: Enough with the Race Bullshit about Edison" (Pavela, 2013a), "Mellie: What's Love Got To Do With It" (1shara, 2012c), "Blackness and Black People Are Not Monolithic" (Pavela, 2013b) and "If Olivia Pope Was Less Attractive" (Pavela, 2013c) represent a handful of early examples of my latent politics on the subjects above and attempt to grapple with them through engaging with other fans' opinions. What those writings evidence were my sociological understandings of the world, which would go on to become both clearer and more complicated the more time I spent on the platform interacting with *Scandal's* fans.

A turning point would come in the spring of 2013 when I would declare a blogging identity for 'katrinapavela':

An American Gladiator living in the UK. Taking a cognitive, anthropological, sex-positive, and feels-filled approach to Scandal-ing. This page is a dissertation of sorts (see "Scandal Essays & Satirical Posts") on #Scandal, with an emphasis on [the character motivations of] Olivia Pope, #Olitz and Fitzgerald Grant. Insightful, eternally optimistic, and --occasionally--ratchet. Follow at your own peril or pleasure ;o).

This description largely remains the same. The “About” section is prominently displayed on the front page of my blog, and every single one of the nearly 3000 pages which comprise the blog. I will begin what is left out of the description: race and gender. The blog name gives the expectation that ‘katrinapavela’ is female. Having an avatar of a fan object unrelated to one’s race or gender is fairly typical for Tumblr bloggers. An undeclared race in a world where whiteness is the default—invisible and ubiquitous—visitors could assume that I am a white woman. To engage with the content of my writing and humour confirms otherwise. Inserting the “katrinapavela” Twitter profile and handle (@number1feeling) beneath the “About” clarifies the blog description: “Awkward, queer, Black girl #3, 689, 328. Jamerican ex-pat...”.

The description declares a geographical positioning to note that my views are informed by a lived experience of American culture and politics, as *Scandal*’s themes are to be understood within those contexts. The “living in the UK” portion conveys that I am a displaced ‘insider’ peeking in from abroad. Perhaps, too, situating myself physically in the UK acknowledges a distance, and/or influence of another culture’s politics on my views. Following on from geographical and cultural influences, the description highlights thematic intentionality with which my original writings are concerned. At the time “this page is a dissertation of sorts” was somewhat of a joke. Primarily a nod to my penchant for long treatises, filled with citations of evidence from the text (*Scandal* episodes) historical relevance, and pop culture references. *Scandal* Fans with whom I interacted began taking my writings seriously, finding value in them before I could articulate the same to myself. These fans were primarily Black women, and they were educated and insightful. One of them, “academicgladiator” (now “thatmaroongirl”—a Dominica native with a PhD in Caribbean Literature and former Assistant Professor at Trinity College in Washington, DC—

wrote recommendations for my successful PhD applications to University of Birmingham and Birmingham City University. But it was Louisiana PhD student and Communications Lecturer, “elizabethsmediatedlife”, and her students who would have a significant impact on my critical reflexivity as a part-time blogger. Elizabeth began using writings on *Scandal* as part of her Communications lectures at an unspecified Louisiana university. Students were assigned my analytical posts as part of their media studies and communications coursework that year. It would be another year (2014) before I would write my first dissertation proposal for admission to the University of Birmingham.

### ***Tumbling and Reading Blackness***

The ‘Black’ part of my identity was important for me to disclose because my lived experiences influence how I read and write about *Scandal*. Perhaps, too, I wanted to signal to other Black women, whose tumblrs I had been reading, that I wanted to commune with them about this show. I had hoped that some of them would like me, too. My diagnosis of other users’ Black woman identity were manifold. Some users declared it in their blog profiles, pictures they shared, or I noted it explicitly in their commentary. Other times, I would glean it via Black (American or diasporic) reference points, or commonalities about Black womanhood. Other times it based on repeated and deft use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Whilst all these means of intuiting Black feminine identity are open to manipulation, I relied on these forms of signalling to create community with other Black women.

## Conclusion

I began taking my writing seriously, seeing the potential in it as well as in myself. Though an unpaid hobby, blogging became an important means of assessing my intellectual capabilities as a thinker and writer, which my paid, temporary, part-time employment as an Education Coordinator at The Barber Institute did not always fulfil. I was still trying to find my professional footing in England after resettling here. I was re-inventing myself. As what, I did not know in 2013. I was sure of only this: as a Black woman ensconced in a fandom attracting many other Black women, my intellectual framing was valued, important, and sometimes controversial. It would be much later before I realized my position was not mere perspective, but a standpoint in progress of achievement, which I was not alone in reaching. Moreover, it was not just my voice that reflected sociological understandings of the world, it was a dialectic of voices and encounters that constituted these understandings. The identity of these women informs their standpoint, which they bring to bear upon evaluating themes from *Scandal*, and how those themes relate (or don't) to their own epistemologies. This will be explored more specifically through content in the next four sections.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **‘Bantu knots and oiling her scalp with olive oil: Playing with Black Culture in Fan Production**

The previous section introduced the Tumblr space as a digital playground for *Scandal*'s fans. This playground is one in which the affordances of the multimedia tools that Tumblr provides encourages the wheel of production and endless consumption of its conveyer belt of visual confections. Whilst different types of analysis can emerge from the production-consumption binary on the site, this section is primarily concerned with the meaningfulness of this playground for Black women and other female fans of *Scandal*. As mentioned in the Representation and the Discussion chapter's intro, I refer to this theme as 'pockets of freedom'. It explores what I would classify as the overarching theme that emerged from data produced by *Scandal*'s fans on Tumblr between 2013-2016, particularly the tonal and thematic shifts in what (fan) 'freedom' in the (Tumblr) 'pocket' meant during those years. More specifically, this chapter details how Black women fans use *Scandal*'s script to play with the ideas and realities of race, gender and Intersectionality, through fan production.

#### **Pockets of Freedom as a Racialised and Gendered Concept**

To understand how the data below comes to be classified under the term 'pockets of freedom,' which I take as synonymous with the concept of joy. It is necessary to ground the analysis in a specific definition that allows for complexity within Black cultural traditions. In his treatise on Black popular culture, Stuart Hall writes:

...popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all ... the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is profoundly mythic. ...It is where we discover and play with the



identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time (1992: 32).

Whereas blackness as discourse is often seen in majority white fan spaces as political agitation at worst, or a fringe issue at best (the same being true regarding feminism in majority male fandoms (see Chapter three for a fuller discussion)), by centring a fictional political world around a Black female character who is having an affair with the married white president, *Scandal* presents race, gender, and sexuality as core issues ripe for dissection. Hall's message is nuanced and complicated, and his words speaks to the ways in which Black people can discuss racial politics and identity in casual, yet complicated ways and in everyday spaces (Harris-Lacewell 2006). Tumblr serves as this 'everyday' space where Black women fans of *Scandal* (and others who desire to participate in overtly political discourse) can play with the imagination and representation of Oliva Pope's character as well as themselves as fans who may or may not identify with her. Tumblr's digital geography and tools for connecting or isolating one's content from larger conversations means that *Scandal's* fandom could different colonies of conversations without having the same exposure as a fan forum where topics are laid out for anyone to see. This emboldens a sense of freedom from those whose consumption of entertainment is antagonized by racial discourse, and from those who wish to limit that racial discourse to the representational binary (see Representation chapter). This mirrored matrix in which fans encounter and play with these familiar and foreign ideas of identity are reified below.

## Data Analysis:

Satirising *Scandal* and Intersectionality and Memes



Figure 1.1 (katrinapavella 2013) Olivia's sexual partners in fake conversation

A meme is classified as a behaviour, style or reified idea representing a broad or specific idea or phenomenon, the goal of which is to carry cultural ideas, symbols and practices using different forms of communication, and are prone to slight changes as the idea is passed around in each community. The original term was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) to explain the evolutionary relationship to the spread of cultural phenomena and ideas (Ibid.). The term 'meme' has come to be used in many different disciplines, including the fields of fan studies, communications, cultural studies and more where there is often disagreement between the biological evolutionary principles of mimesis and the cultural practice of it. Internet technologies have allowed the memetic practice to be created and distributed rapidly and often, as such it has become a ubiquitous part of our increasingly digitized lives. One style that the visual meme, in fan production, often takes is that of

satirical humour. Satire is frequently used in fan production to poke fun or lovingly criticize the shortcomings in the object of one's fandom. In the *Scandal* fandom satirical memes that re-interpret visuals from the show can also be used to highlight political or Intersectional subtext that is specific, or culturally recognizable to Black people. Fan Studies scholar Henry Jenkins notes that the most valuable aspect of a meme is what it conveys through the everyday reality of communication:

...that ideas get transformed, repurposed, or distorted as they pass from hand to hand, a process which has been accelerated as we move into network culture. Arguably, those ideas which survive are those which can be most easily appropriated and reworked by a range of different communities (2009: Part One).

Satirical memes allow subtext to become main text, thus allowing a group to collectively laugh at, and perhaps discuss more substantively themes that are neither implicitly embedded in, nor explicitly addressed by *Scandal's* text. In so doing, fans are free racebend, or re-interpret scenes using Black and female cultural tropes or, challenges that would never occur to the show's white audience.

The term 'race-bending' is a fandom neologism that describes the extensive practice of changing a character's (or story's) perceived race or ethnicity when adapting creative works from one medium to another (racebending.com 2010). Sparked as a protest movement, on Live Journal in 2010, in response to casting announcements for *Avatar: The Last Air Bender*, race-bending eventually stood for a praxis of combating Hollywood's whitewashing in media. Elizabeth Gilliland (2016) notes that this allows those most others, and underrepresented by Hollywood to build an empowering, Afrofuturistic fan space in which they are centred.

The four-part meme above is taken from my own fan blog, *katrinapavela*, done before embarking on PhD research. It features a humorous but imagined confrontational scene between the three men with whom Pope's character had been sexually involved during the 22-episode run of *Scandal's* second series. The meme is splice together from several scenes across two non-consecutive episodes. It uses both actual text from the show weaved in with subtext and fantasy, all steeped in a theme about Black womanhood and partner intimacy. In the meme, the Black character, Senator Edison Davis, expresses jealousy and symptoms of a wounded ego to President Grant (bottom left image) after learning that Olivia, having turned down his marriage proposal, has gone back to having an affair with the married, white Grant. Davis attempts to use a racial reference to assert his superior suitability for Pope, by mentioning that he has watched Pope press (temporarily straighten with heat) her hair.

Though most of the meme's dialogue is imagined, that line is one featured in the series, but directed at Pope as a reminder of their shared romantic past. The idea of pressing one's hair is a specific cultural touchstone for Black women, and the decision over whether to and when to do so is an on-going political debate. Grant's retort to Davis dismisses the character's special connection to Pope, through race, by asserting that he, too, has been privy to the intimacy of Pope straightening her natural curls. In the same sentence Grant implicates that his sexual prowess in the shower is the reason Pope's curls needed said straightening. The shower scene with Pope's wet curls hair did happen on the show, but hair straightening did not. As a death knell to Davis' Black cultural connection to Pope, and as a means of compensating for his lack of melanin, Grant is imagined complimenting Pope's naturally kinky-curly hair to Davis' face. The meme's punchline involves a third, and newer lover, Jake Ballard, who is conveyed as both sexually inept for Pope, and culturally obtuse

about Black women. Owing to Black women's fandoms being under-studied, it stands that there are few explorations of the ways in this bending by the marginalised allows them to map on to white characters Black racial characteristics (and stereotypes), especially when said character is beloved or deemed 'cool'. This furthers their ethnocentric reading of the character and the text. Contained within the meme above are instances of such bending regarding the Fitzgerald Grant character, but not for the Jake Ballard one. In fact, by bending Grant as Black, he and Davis are more readily imagined enjoying a specific Black cultural language (about hair texture) from which Ballard is shut out.

There is clear evidence of fandom 'shipping politics in the meme set above, such as who is most suitable for Pope's character and why, and serves as just one way that fans read, interpret and re-interpret their favourite media texts (Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Harris and Alexander 1998; Gray et al 2007, 2017; Warner 2015). I, as 'katrinapavela', express a clear preference for the pairing of Pope and Grant, otherwise known by the nomenclature, Olitz (Olivia + Fitzgerald). Whilst romantic 'shipping (the desire of fans for two characters to be in a relationship) serves as the backdrop for the meme, that topic is not unique to the *Scandal* fandom. 'Shipping's history, functions, and contours have been thoughtfully explored by admirable fan scholars (Verba 2003; Felder 1999; Click 2010; Scodari and Felder 2003; Williams 2011; Gonzalez 2016). What is less explored is how romantic 'shipping, using memes, becomes a mechanism for playing with realities and stereotypes around the intersections of race and gender. The 'katrinapavela' meme plays with the significance of racial identity bound up in Black hair, and stereotypes of masculinity and blackness.

### ***Hair Texture and Intersectionality***

A distinction between the straightness and kinkiness of Pope's hair is a central part of the meme set being discussed. The fan discourse that emerged from the nearly 900 notes on this post zoned in on both Black hair politics, in a humorous way, as well as notions of masculinity (to be discussed in the subsequent section).

Not the hair typing system. I'm done! Done! Damn, Edison put in more work than Joke. That's a damn shame! (babycakesbriauna 2013).

***Bantu knots and oiling her scalp with olive oil. Yo, I bet soon they'll start doing coconut oil deep treatments together. You know Fitz gotta keep his curls fresh too! Lmao (babycakesbriauna 2013)*** (emphasis added in below poster's reblogging)

This is hilarious! (side note: Olivia/Kerrys' hair is 3b or C. I have for 4a, tighter curls, lol) (mypencries 2013)

The transformation of Pope's hair (a universal avatar for Black women's hair) from one state to the other is bound up with ideas of intimacy, romantic bonding, and cultural value. The comments above note that the meme references the hair type classification system, developed by celebrity hair stylist Andre Walker in the 1990s. The system classified hair textures by numbers and letters, descending from straight (type 1s) to kinky (type 4s). The race and gender of the two commenters above is evidenced by both the sense of familiarity with the meme, itself constructed as racialised and gendered. But also, the specific information offered about Black hair styles, textures, and products show the ways in which Black women map their lived racialised and gendered realities onto *Scandal*'s script, in lighthearted ways.

The discussion of hair in the meme set may seem trivial, but such thought is indicative of a wider problem wherein the importance hair texture is overlooked, despite being central to the way race and racial discrimination function. Visual Sociologist, Emma

Dabiri, notes that skin colour as a marker of constructed racial identity does not hold water when examined more closely, and that it is hair that marks blackness more so than skin colour. She says “...an African albino is still read as Black due to their hair and features. There are East Asian and South Asians who have darker complexions than some Africans... yet they are not ‘Black’” (2019: 12). Dabiri’s thought makes sense experientially and follows on from Orlando Patterson’s (1982) discussion of the function of Black hair during Transatlantic slave trade. Patterson declares that hair became the “real symbolic badge of slavery”, disguising its symbolic power linguistically in terms like ‘Black’ (in Dabiri 2019: 12). This linguistic trickery obfuscates the basis of perceived racial degeneracy of Africans (and their descendants) by equating it to skin colour when it is specifically hair texture--at times even more so than skin and features.



*Figure 1.2 (uptown-funk 2015) Transition of Olivia's hair from straight to natural*

Achieving mainstream employment success or be thought of as beautiful meant Black women felt compelled to straighten their kinks and curls (Collins 2004: 194). The following related comments, from two years after the one above, demonstrate the degree to which curliness of Pope’s hair becomes a racially defensible issue<sup>4</sup> for Black women:

just waiting for some white journalist to say something racist about the hair in the last gif (uptown-funk 2015)

<sup>4</sup> These comments reference scenes depicted in Figure 1.2 from episode 10 of the second season, “Run”.

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And we'll take him/ her to task! They better not try it (lennybaby2 2015).

what was that magazine that tried at the beginning of the season when she had the semi-afro on the beach with Jake? (uptime-guarantee 2015)

Whoa...I must've missed that or I'm drawing a blank! What the hell could they say about that?? For a white woman it would've been "beachy waves" or a "bed head" look. SMH. It's the same damn thing with a different hair texture. People are so ignorant. Lol. If they think Olivia's was crazy, they'd scream to see mine. (lennybaby2 2015)

just searched it on twitter. It was people mag [link provided]  
(uptimeguarantee 2015)

Okay. Yeah I definitely remember now. They got their asses handed to them and then said they didn't intend to offend. I buy it. Again, super ignorant but no malice intended. People just need to get informed. But in a country where kids are getting sent home for wearing their hair the way it naturally grows from their scalps, people have to realize we're not always gonna be nice about it. SMH. (lennybaby2 2015):

The conversation is sparked by a set of GIFs from a January 2015 episode entitled "Run" (Rhimes 2015). The set (julianamargulies, 2015) documents the way Pope's hair goes from sleek to kinky, over the course of the episode, coinciding with her increasing levels of distress after having been kidnapped. The premise of the conversation between uptimeguarantee and lennybaby2 are based on the potential of repeat discrimination from (white) media commentary, specifically about the curl in Olivia's hair. The skittishness around the hair issue is based on past media infractions.

Moreover, this matters to the two users because, though Pope is not real, discriminating against people with kinky textured hair is a real issue. Pope's voluminous, kinky hair takes up space and reminds the two fans that the right to occupy certain spaces (school, work, military) is being denied to women and children because of their Afro-textured hair. Hair texture discrimination disproportionately affects Black women (and girls), who, as women, are measured against feminine beauty standards that are also



racialised (Collins 2004; Thompson 2009; Tate 2007). As a function of white supremacy, such discrimination at the intersection of race and gender is pervasive in societal institutions, including employment policies and court systems which do not recognize discrimination against women with kinky textured hair (Carbado 2013). In 2014, a US District Court dismissed an employment lawsuit wherein the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) argued on behalf of their client, Chastity Jones (a Black woman), that her (dread)locked hair reflected “cultural characteristics related to race or ethnicity” (Gandy, 2018). Two years later, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with the 2014 dismissal of Jones’ case (Ibid.). Perhaps that story, or many like it came to mind for uptimeguarantee, thus eliciting her comment. In both the USA and UK, there are few protections against discrimination based on hair texture. Black women, even in this pocket of playtime and discussion of a beloved Black fictional character, are reminded through her plight, of the challenges of non-fictional Black womanhood.

### ***Masculinity and Blackness***

Returning to the katrinapavela meme (figure 1.1, the second theme that elicited joy, abandon and humorous indulgence, is the way in which masculinity is being expressed through sexual congress with Pope. Through humour or serious commentary (as evidenced further below), these women and I were commenting on our learned conceptions and stereotypes of masculinity, specifically Black masculinity. Whilst discussion section III will cover sexuality, interraciality and power in fandom discourse, I turn here to the way in which these comments show how masculinity, for these women, is racialised and tied to Pope’s body. These conceptions can be evidenced in the below comments:

lol he didn't even sweat out her edges. c'mon, son!(mybeautifulmultitudes2013).

U R A Genius. This was absolutely not a mistake... R U kidding; this shit is manna to a ture [sic] [ Olitz] Shipper.... I'm laughing at the thought that these three men are comparing notes on the effects of their "mack daddy" on Livy... To [[sic] funny. Do it again (bloglindab 2014).

LOL! Damn. At least Edison was able to sweat it out a little. After #strugglesex Liv's hair was still laid like the gods. That's some lousy sex right there lol. But no one got it on Fitz. Girl got her hair wet for him. That's real love right there (jellyroll22 2014).

There is plenty of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) present in these responses, and both relate to Pope's hair. Moisture causes Afro-textured hair to coil tightly and is the opposite of "laid like the gods" (straightened and coifed to perfection). Terms like "sweat out her edges" or "sweat it out a little" convey that a Black woman's enthusiastic participation in robust sex should make her sweat enough to put a kink, or two, in her temporarily straightened hair. The masculinity of each of the three male characters is ranked by their virility, as manifested in the change in Pope's hair.

Moreover, being privy to the textural change of Pope's hair (as Edison and Fitz mention in the meme) is used to signify not just their ability to sexually satisfy her, but a racial comfort level as well. In one episode the Edison (the Black male) character reminds Pope of their past shared history, specifically naming the time he watched her straighten her hair. This beauty ritual by Black women indicates intimacy and trust. Thirteen episodes later, we watch Olivia and Fitz, naked in her shower, her hair completely curly. Revealing the true texture of her hair to Fitz in shower sex with Fitz (as mentioned by jellyroll22) indicates to the Black audience that he has crossed a racial comfort boundary and is accepting of Black hair. The Jake character had not yet crossed this boundary, so was seemingly left out of the conversation, in the meme, and ranked low in the masculinity league. The #strugglesex

hashtag indicates an imagined inability to satisfy Pope, thus not gaining access to Black masculinity in the way Edison and Fitz do. To emphasize this in the meme, I imbued the character with knowledge of the hair typing system. This acceptance of Black hair further endears the Fitz character to Black women because, as mentioned earlier, racialised feminine beauty standards has long meant that Black women's hair was seen as less feminine and beautiful. If Pope is an avatar for these women, who imagine being loved in all of her blackness by the Fitz Grant character, then they can be, too.

It should be noted that these women are responding to a fictional scenario that I, as *katrinapavela*, created, subconsciously, based on stereotypes that many of us had absorbed. The joke would not have worked without those shared cultural conceptions of Black sexuality. The politics of Black sexuality and the degree to which these conceptions are shared across culture are probed more fully in section three.

Embedded in these discursive reactions is a race-bending of the Grant character that points to stereotypical ideas of Black masculinity. In a piece about Black identity marking tactics in popular communications, Means Coleman (2003) discusses the implications of the Elmo puppet being adopted into blackness because it was revealed that the actor (Kevin Clash) lending his voice to Elmo was Black. Whilst the actor (Tony Goldwyn) playing the Grant character is unquestionably white, he is adopted into blackness, by some segments of the fandom, because his 'puppet master' (writer), Shonda Rhimes, is Black. The assumption in both cases is that Black cultural identity is so integral that it permeates everything that a Black person does. In other words, whatever a Black person does becomes associated with blackness---be it the assumption or questioning of said blackness. *Scandal* itself--though it featured many non-Black actors--was inspired by, helmed by, and starred Black women, and thus becomes a 'Black' show. Of course, there are implications, as Means Coleman

discusses, about who gets to mark Black identity, and the essentialist ideas emerge in communication platforms, like Tumblr and Twitter. Whilst those implications are valid, there are beyond the scope of this section, and will be more fully interrogated in section four's theme. More useful here is how Black women adopt the Fitz character into blackness, with a full awareness of his white privilege and short-comings. The adoption recalls Stuart Hall (1992), who emphasized that popular communication platforms allow Black people room to play with aesthetics of blackness, including trying on tropes to fit other characters. I avoid overusing the term 'racebending' here because Black women fans do not wish for Fitz to *be* racially Black, nor change his skin colour. What they wish is for him to culturally understand and accept blackness because of his love for a Black woman. This is beyond racial aesthetics. Such play can be overlooked by mainstream culture (before they eventually exploit it for marketing (Means Coleman 2003)). The act of adopting something into blackness is a form of queering the character because the women keep the whiteness of Grant's power, privilege, race, but imbue him Black aesthetics such as 'cool', 'swag' and sexual prowess that specifically benefits Olivia Pope. These markers are not othering but are central to their affinity for Grant. Such identity play is in contrast with Jenkin's (1992) notion that fans operate from a position of cultural and social weakness (in Wanzo 2015, par 2.9). Playing with identity hermeneutics (Wanzo 2015, par 1.6) gives Black women a sense of pleasure and power, like a large box of crayons with which they can colour and shape the aesthetics to their delight.

### **Meme-ing Black Patriarchy**

Bridging the gap between humour and exploring serious cultural wounds, I now turn to fandom discourse around Black patriarchy as a theme in *Scandal*, and its effects on Olivia

Pope as an avatar of Black womanhood as well its effects on actual Black women. Black patriarchy becomes an increasingly present topic of discussion with the arrival of the Rowan character (Joe Morton), who is Pope's father. I mark this moment as significant because it complicates the interracial romantic dynamic, and marks Pope as more specifically Black. The specificity of this blackness and the ways in which it is or should be portrayed becomes tied to the politics of Black masculinity. The theme is rife for discussion from the moment the audience discovers that Rowan is Olivia's father (2013), right up until the end of the series (2018). The two characters share an explosive first scene together in the season 3 opener, "It's Handled" (Scandal, 2013).

A seemingly humorous meme of the father-daughter scene reveals deeper, real-life wounds of Black patriarchy (scandalouscastleanatomy, 2013).



Figure 1.3 (scandalousanatomy2013) Turning pain into laughter

Scandalouscastleanatomy replaces the original script with her comical interpretation in a gif set. Rather than static photos that capture a single facial expression, the gif set offers a range of expression from the characters, paired with alternative text. This looped effect enhances the reinterpretation of the original scene below.

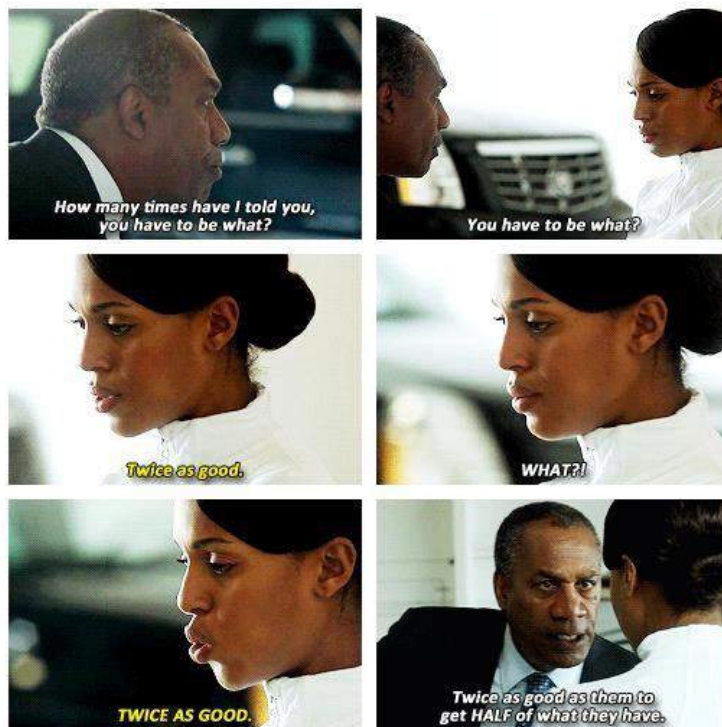


Figure 1.4 (*theblacksophisticate2013*) *Twice as good*

First, I will analyse scandalouscastleanatomy's reinterpretation, which will lead us into the analysis of the original scene, as GIF-ed by theblacksophisticate (2013). The context of the scene is that Olivia has just been publicly revealed as the mistress of the President, which she discovers when a gang of reporters await her outside her apartment building. She's whisked away into an awaiting limo by several men. Her father, whom she has not seen, nor spoken to in years, awaits her inside the limo. He takes her to an airplane hangar, which leads us to the scene in the gif sets. In scandalouscastleanatomy's meme, Olivia is being harangued for being her romantic relationship with the married president, which

causes public embarrassment to her father. Race is explicitly noted (embarrassment in front of white people) in a way that the original scene does not name, yet still speaks to. The punchline to the meme is that Pope was to overcome by sexual satisfaction (Fitz's strong dick game) to concern herself with the public racial implications of her decisions.

Scandalouscastleanatomy's meme above accomplishes several things. The punchline reflects more of the fan's projection rather than what the series has revealed about Pope's racial concerns for the Olitz relationship, earlier in the series. Pope's "excuse" for immoral behaviour is about satisfying her internal needs rather than complying with publicly prescribed racial scripts for morality. Secondly, it highlights Black patriarchal ownership over Black women, specifically through their bodily expressions.

### ***Laughing through Pain***

What I find most significant about scandalouscastleanatomy's interpretation is she writes what led her to add humour to the scene: "This scene was really serious and made me sad, so I changed it a little bit" (2013). The sad reality of the scene, and its implications for Black women, led scandalouscastleanatomy to keep the racial essence of the scene, but to mock it in a humorous way. Humour and mockery are tools often used to emotionally cope with pain, particularly for marginalized groups. Laughter, as an embodied act, not only connects us to a spatial awareness (Noxolo 2018), but can displace racial anxieties, thus cohering those who simultaneously recognize the pain underneath their shared laughter. Oppositional gazes (hooks1992) can find laughter where they are expected to prioritize pain. Counter public spaces like Tumblr (Renniger 2015) allow fans to confront such difficult topics in diverse and layered ways. Humour, as a form of 'reverse discourse' (Weaver 2010), serves as resistance to both being subjugated to Black patriarchy and white supremacy's

influence on said patriarchy. A joy shaped by intersectional marginalization is deliberately foregrounded by scandalousanatomy because the reality of the alternative is too much to bear. Weaver's discussion of Black humour as anti-racist resistance notes the ways in which Black humour often 'plays on' and 'plays off' racist ideology about blackness by consciously drawing on stereotypes (2010, p. 32, 35). Weaver's treatise is absent an intersectional gendered analysis, but it is salient here because these Black women are drawing on intercultural conventions and experiences of Black patriarchy's expectations around female obedience to use humour as a form of resistance.

Both the original scene and Scandalouscastleanatomy's AAVE meme translation rely primarily on Black cultural knowledge. Henry Louis Gates (2014) views this understanding as so second nature to Black people in its communal understanding, that its specific genesis is hard to pinpoint. In both the original scene and meme it is about Black people needing to be publicly "twice as good" (as white people), which is to be morally upstanding—the opposite of well-worn stereotypes of Black people dating back centuries. Now dubbed 'respectability politics', this movement to replace social constructions of the 'savage Negro' with that of the upstanding, well-behaved one dates back to the late 19th century, reaching its zenith during the 20th century's Civil Rights era (see literature review discussion). Black male leaders and writers like DuBois and Booker T Washington pushed these ideas as revolutionary for their time, but prominent Black women leaders and activists, like Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells engaged respectability as a key pillar of their liberatory politics (Cooper 2017, p.65). The meme, however, points to the Intersectionality of the burden of this morality upon the bodies and lives of Black women.

Scandalouscastleanatomy was not the only person to feel sadness upon watching the scene between the father and daughter characters. Theblacksophisticate, who made a GIF-set of



the original scene titles it “twice as good” and comments “Damn near every Black family”

(2013). A look through the comments on his GIF set reveals similar sentiments:

This makes me sad. Not only because it is true, but because many times this is how we teach children about racism, with anger and other negative feelings directed towards them. And then before you realize it, they’ve internalized that they themselves are the problem, and not a system that asks them to work twice as hard for half the gain.

Instead, we should also teach our kids to ask why they need to do so, not just say that’s what they need to do. And we need to ask ourselves why our kids need “half of what they have”, why we measure success by that metric.

I’m not trying to say that this alone will solve anything, but at least psychologically we can make sure that kids learn that this is how the system works, but it’s the system that’s wrong, not them. Otherwise, it’s just reinforcing internalized racist thinking that makes us seem like we’re inferior (the logic being that we work twice as hard for half as much because we suck twice as bad) (imnothavinit 2013).

This commenter articulates what scandalousanatomy found “sad”, and thus had to transform into Black cultural satire in order to laugh at the pain many know all too well.

### **Intellectualization of Fan Production: Misogynoir and Black Family Dynamics**

So far, we have looked at the way in which *Scandal* fans imbue humorous posts with sociological topics of intellectual concern within Black culture, primarily those which impact Black women. I would like to now turn to the long form fan production. Besides memes, fans also write serious essays and analysis on these topics. To do so is not viewed as strange, or unnecessary, but welcomed. It just depends on the content for which a fan is searching, and how they wish to engage a particular episode’s topics or moments. Because the moment between Olivia and her father in the season three opener was one which was highly engaged on Tumblr, I now turn to a piece of fan production that deliberately sat in the ‘sad’ discomfort of the Black patriarchal reality scandalouscastlesanatomy sought to escape. In

fact, one quote from said piece echoes scandalouscastleanatomy's emotional reaction: "The laughter on the surface is to soothe the pain underneath" (gradientlair 2013).

I came across gradientlair's post via the scandalmoments tumblr, which was run by a Black woman (it was abandoned in March 2014) to amplify diverse fan content, sneak peeks, behind the scenes information from the show and more. Gradientlair's blog of the same name is connected to Tumblr so that she can maximize her audience. A creative retreat for tackling the tonal spectrum of Black women's lives, her blog focuses on Intersectional politics of Black women, art, media, socio-politics, and culture (2018). *Scandal* became a show whose content fit with the blog's subject matter. As such, gradientlair wrote a 2000-word post entitled "Scandal: Papa Pope and The Black Patriarchy" (gradientlair 2013). To date it has over 500 Tumblr notes, a significant feat for a wall of text. I say this as a fan who increasingly produced more walls of text about the show than I did memes. Gradientlair (Trudy) argues that the Black diasporic proverb "You have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have!" (Scandal, 2013) of which Rowan reminds Olivia, "...is a truth Black people know well. We know [emphasis in original]" (2013). She goes on to say that the familiarity of this moment is not overshadowed by the way in which a domineering father directs the line at his cowering adult daughter, a posture which engendered praise by some on Twitter (Ibid.), thus prompting Trudy to write this essay:

Too many of us idolize abusive parenting. This is why we make jokes about getting whooped or how our parents would react if we talked slick out the mouth at them in the way many White children do to their parents. ... That pain is fostered by Black parents who think they have to be dictatorial or even abusive to "harden, protect and prepare" Black children for living in a White supremacist society. Instead, we have to explore nuanced ways to do this without abuse while still working to dismantle White supremacy. ... And let's be clear, in *Scandal*, "Rowan" only wanted to protect "Olivia" to protect his career and his power. I felt nothing paternal (though it was patriarchal, which is not necessarily a synonym for paternal) and loving from their interaction whatsoever. ... Her father stole [her power and agency] away during his tirade. Her body language and

speech regressed to that of a little girl being screamed at by an abusive father. And, sadly, I think this was the allure for some people; to see a patriarchal Black man (if not a lover, then a father works second best) put her “in her place” and humiliate her. (Humiliation to evoke shame as a parental tool is abuse.). ... And I understand the racial politics involved where acknowledging that Black men can be abusive and are responsible for most of the interpersonal abuse that we Black women experience is viewed as being a race traitor, as if Black women aren’t a part of the race, but there’s no way to reconcile her father’s abusiveness so far. (Ibid.).

Gradientlair takes on the short father-daughter exchange—one we witness for the first time as an audience—as something Fan Studies scholar, Matt Hills (2002), labels as hyper diegesis. A hyper diegesis is “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nonetheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension” (2002: 137). I’m employing it slightly differently here, as I’m applying it to the relationship and family background which gradientlair views the one scene as indicative of. Her overall argument explores the complexity of the misogynoir-ist impact of Black patriarchy on family dynamics in a white supremacist society, particularly the line between protection and abuse. Though this seems like a heavy topic for what many mainstream media outlets had dubbed a “guilty pleasure” of a romp, and a soap opera (see discussion in “Fan Studies, Social Media and Black Epistemologies chapter), the, sometimes lengthy, responses to Trudy’s piece on Tumblr reveals a deep recognition that escaped the majority white audience:

this is the truth. all my thoughts about ep1 ^right here^  
(manicsoutherncoloredpixie 2013)

I love the show Scandal, and I love reading about the intricacies that I don’t “see” when I’m watching the show. ...(bankedonamyth 2013)

LOVE. LOVE. I LOVE seeing writing on this site that centers Olivia as the show’s core. Beyond that, this whole essay is just so on point. I just, I agree with every single thing written above. Trudy, you are a wonder. (teathings 2013)

Some commenters went beyond praise and recognition, sharing their own politics or experiences with Black parental abuse:

That line about abusive parenting tho. This is exactly why I am so wary of Black peoples love of 'whoopins'. Because it's really abuse. It's abuse. Revelling in the assault of a child is abuse. Saying "I deserved it" is excusing abuse. It's used especially to control Black girls' sexuality. This message is so important (sourcedumal 2013).

For real, though. Corporal punishment is still seen as the default method of disciplining children in this country. For the longest time, I thought it was normal to be pushed to the floor and beaten with a stick for coming late to school. I actually thought I deserved it when I had welts on the back of my legs from when my dad caught me doing my homework on Sunday. I would cringe from my mother when she started screaming at me for leaving a textbook in my locker and hate myself for not being a better child. I still struggle with this mentality, and with me still living with my parents, there have been some serious clashes where I don't behave like they expect me to when they try to bully me (culturalrebel 2013).

Because gradientlair's essay used *Scandal's* script (literally her essay has no photos, only quotes from the scene) to explore a lived experience of some Black people, it was not necessary to be a viewer of the show for her message to have impact:

I don't watch *Scandal*, but this essay touches on a lot of how I felt after watching the gif of this scene that's making the rounds (my other feelings are summarized here[link provided]).

I got this talk when growing up, but it was never yelled at me. It was said matter-of-factly or sadly, because that's what it is, a sad reality of racism that we live with, and that we learn very young. I think that we all have to make sure to not only to teach our children about the realities they'll face, but do so in a way that's supportive, and lets them know that in a world that hates them, they can find love in the people that care about them. If not that, then at least in a way that doesn't carry anger and do extra damage (imnothavinit 2013b).)

The discourse inspired by the parental dynamic in the show, and gradientlair's exploration of the topic shows that the 'Black' in Black popular culture (Hall 1993) is complex, dynamic, and contested. This is opposed to a tendency to treat racial topics in essentialist 'all' or

‘nothing’ ways. Hall notes that for Black people, who are already engaged in a hegemonic struggle, the way their lives, their reaction to seeing those lives represented in media are not just expressive or reflective, but that those responses are formative (1988: 28). In fact, gradientlair’s motivation for her essay was prompted by her discomfort over essentialist reactions she witnessed in Twitter discourse. Moreover, the reactions to Trudy’s essay reminds me of Jacqueline Bobo’s research (1988), which focused on Black women as nuanced cultural readers of the film *The Color Purple*.

In a later piece on the politics of interpretation, Bobo notes that it is the responsibility of academics to give voice to audience members who would not otherwise be considered in the analysis of Black cultural works (1992: 73). All the above pieces of fan production speak to Bobo’s wish. What I intend to accomplish in the discussion section below is a look at devices employed and themes at work across the humorous memes and long-form pieces of Black women’s fan production.

## Discussion

The data examples above indicate that the idea of ‘pocket of freedom’. These pockets of freedom are not just about ‘joy’, but about the ability to express one’s beingness and political thoughts on one’s culture without fear of reprove. As historian, Thavolia Glymph says, ‘...freedom is often reified as a ‘thing’ or ‘place’ that one can ‘obtain’ or ‘go to’. But freedom is not separate from the understandings and intuitions of those who seek it’ (2008: loc. 320 in). Claiming the full humanity of our blackness, in whatever ways possible, is a key tool (Pow 2018) in Black women’s fan production. Spaces like Tumblr can also mean feeling emboldened enough to talk about issues like Black patriarchy- the expression, internalisation and damaging effects of; sexual kink; and Black cultural references without

explanation, and processing gender trauma specific to Black culture (e.g., the twice as hard conversation). Whilst Tumblr is not a private platform, bringing lived experiences to fandom production ensconces these conversations in a bubble slightly less penetrable by trolls than if the discourse centred around a news story.

This brings me to the next common theme, Intersectionality discourse as a mode of expressive freedom. We are so used to seeing how racialisation or fan discourse that critiques a lack of Intersectionality, within fan studies, is usually offered as a form of antagonism (Wanzo 2015, Pande 2018) within more hegemonically white fan spaces. In a space like Tumblr, where it is easy to curate your dashboard to reflect one's political and cultural preferences, these women become more comfortable exercising their racial logics. One of my key interests is the ways in which 'joy' is constituted for Black people, particularly because exercising this right is more challenging from the margins. Claiming the right to this (and pleasure) is what I have previously called tackling small regimes of domination (Pow 2018, 237). These regimes are often ignored or devalued when considering the relationships between being-ness, femininity and the radicality of blackness as an identity embodied by Black women (Ibid.) Cornel West, in distinguishing between the conceptions of 'joy' and 'pleasure' notes that the former is not limited to the individual, or necessarily inward. Instead "joy tries to cut across that. Joy tries to get at those non-market values—love, care, kindness, service, solidarity, the struggle for justice—values that provide the possibility of bringing people together" (as recalled by Dent 1992: 1). By that definition, the content produced by *katrinapavela*, *scandalouscastlesanatomy*, *gradientlair*, and the discursive responses they evoked speak to West's point. We should actively take up ideological and emotional space through the exploration of our humanity (Pow 2018, p. 240). The way the fan content is constructed is also important to the blackness of that content. Each of

the pieces above use a form of code-meshing. Code Meshing, a term coined by language educator, Vershawn Ashanti Young (2014), is a form of communication and anti-colonial literacy metric that explicitly reconciles language to cultural identity, rather than causes cultural anxiety and denial like code-switching. The former is inherently segregationist, and expects all cultures to bend to white, European hegemonic communication styles.

Teachers of mostly Black American students found that code-switching damages self-esteem and racial identity (pg. 7). Code-meshing is not unique to English, and on Tumblr it is a standard form of communication. Tumblr users blend audio, visual and textual elements in the same post to strengthen communication. The result is authentic, entertaining expression that is also critically engaging because it reflects a reality familiar to the users. An environment where each user is capable of being both teacher and student is what happens when individuals use language in expansive ways instead of feeling alienated from parts of their own cultural identity. In short, code meshing is a way of bringing the full self to fandom and knowing that others will get it. The data examples and their responses mix Black comedy tastes, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and axioms, musical lyrics, biblical scripture (gradientlair) for literary expression. This creative blend of language enhances expression because these fans are unconcerned with a peering white gaze on their own fan production, though this is not always the case when they are watching the show.

As rich and compelling as the data set is, I return to the idea that ‘pockets’ of freedom in which fans find joy are still spaces of confinement. Lu and Steel (2019), in their US-focused examination of cross-platform expressions of joy as resistance in Black orality online, make a distinction between ‘joy’ and ‘happiness’. They theorize the latter, much like West, as circumstantially dependent, and ‘joy’ as an ontological expression of one’s right to

beingness. Such an expression for Black people, who face systematic oppression, is a form of resistance (p.823). But how much freedom can there be on platforms that are fundamentally not democratic, but privatized, for-profit spaces that depend on the publicness of engagement? Lu and Steele (2019) note that Black people are not unaware of this fact, but that they reinvent these platforms “as critical sites of Black resistance that seize upon, yet are ultimately indifferent to, widespread public visibility” (p. 824). This is what I have observed on Tumblr. This resistance comes in various forms—expression of joy, defying and playing in stereotypes, and the right to indulge in one’s flights of fancy. Unlike with Twitter, I have observed that Tumblr is thought of more like a walled garden, one not exposed in the same ways as Twitter. This is mostly due to its identity as niche, or a place for nerds and porn enthusiasts (pre-2018). Of course, this is all an illusion. In some ways this collective shrug to lack of privacy is an insistence on the right of expression without consequences. But the shrug can turn to a defensive posture.

## Conclusion

Signifying is perhaps one of the most significant parts of Black oral culture, and its influence can be seen in the data sets used throughout all the discussion sections. Signifying is “a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection” (Florini 2014, p. 224). Scandalouscastlesanatomy’s fought through her encounter with the confining reality of Black patriarchy by putting on a veneer of comedy to mask it. Others, like gradientlair, and her audience, found relief is coming out of confinement by sounding a critical voice. And for my own contribution, I leaned into a sexist trope to make a comedic point on the import of a Black woman being a desirable subject men strove to satisfy, as



opposed to the historical role Black women have played as objects to the desire of these same types of men. But no matter the point, each of these topics had race and gender at the centre of the production and analysis, showing Black women as keen cultural readers and fan spaces as ones in which the freedom to chop it up is not incompatible with criticality (Wanzo 2015).

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **‘I want him to be her man’: The Intersectional Fan Politics of Love and Desire**

As far back as the 1980s, notable research has been done by scholars regarding how women engage the romance genre (Radway 1991); Ang 1985; Brunsdan 2000), but none of those spoke explicitly to racialized experiences. Despite Ang’s being of Indonesian background, her work was read as explicitly white and female, because she solicited letters from people in her home country of the Netherlands, which in the 1980s was overwhelmingly whiter than it is now. As noted in an earlier chapter, Jacqueline Bobo’s research in the late 1980s and 1990s with Black women is significant. Though the responses were to a southern racial drama film, and not a television soap opera, the negotiated readings of Bobo’s informants showed that Black women had a rich interiority that they brought their media consumption. One that was ripe to be plumbed. As Internet forums became popular, work by scholars noted above gave way to more contemporary iterations such as that of Warner (2015a, 2015b), Baéz (2015), who engage the racial politics of watching soap operas, from the perspective of marginalised communities these media products supposedly reflect. Even within those excellent studies, attention to explicit sexual discourse among Black women fans is sorely lacking, perhaps, in part, because it is burdened by centuries old harmful sexual stereotypes discussed earlier in the Literature Review.

My intention in this section is to analyse the discursive discourse of Black women (other women as well as a male fan). Through intersectional lenses of race and gender, I will discuss the ways in which Tumblr fans affectively and politically engage of love, sexual kink, and fantasy. Secondly, I will engage the work of several Black women scholars whose work

specifically addresses Black feminine desire to tease out the underlying real-world historical and political burdens to which the fan discourse speaks.

## Data Analysis

### *Questioning Soap Opera Love*

*Scandal* is often derogatorily referred to as a soap opera (as discussed in chapter three), in part because romance is as central to the series as its bold operative storylines about American politics. Because romance is culturally aligned with a softer, more seductive, and emotional (read: feminine) affect, when critical works about the genre emerged (Ang; Brown 1984; Radway 1991), the subjects of those works were not treated as ‘robust’ scholarship. The lived experiences and internalised stereotypes the Black women fans bring to consumption of the show’s central romantic storyline has received some attention (Maxwell 2013, Warner 2015a), usually regarding the interraciality of the Olivia Pope white president Grant pairing, compared almost entirely within a context of American slavery. A second popular form of interrogating the show’s romance is predicated on the show’s erasure of racial politics and difference between the characters (Kay 2019; Erigha 2015). Whilst clearly relevant and valid, these pieces also reflect choices that align criticality in opposition to pleasure, as if an audience cannot embrace both or decide to foreground one and hold the other in dynamic tension. In visual media—particularly photography—dynamic tension<sup>5</sup> refers to a way of using features and movement within the frame in contrasting ways to draw the eye out of the frame. In short, dynamic tensions

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘dynamic tension’ originates in the world of body building. It refers to tensing a muscle and deliberately moving the body against that tension to enlarge the muscle. Dynamic tension is always about expansion rather than contraction.

holds multiple things in contrast with each other, encouraging the on-looker to literally expand their view. Recent work by Gibson III (2019) provides an example of dynamic tension about the interracial relationship between Pope and Grant, complicating this pairing within the framework of American slavery. Gibson's deep analysis about what it means to compare the 'tangled skeins' of Olivia and Fitz's twenty-first century relationship to Sally Hemmings and House and Bradwell (2019) of data drawn from Twitter hashtags (and 'Black tags'—secondary hashtags associated with the show, reflecting African American Vernacular communication styles), demonstrate that "Scandal rhetorically positions Black women viewers to engage in deeper and more radical reading of Pope's relationship with [her romantic suitors]" (p. 135). The logo for Shondaland, the production company of creator, Shonda Rhimes, places a beating heart symbol in the centre of a roller coaster. In doing so, she symbolically centres love as a key theme in the 'wild ride' artistry of her storytelling. The centrality of 'love' in Rhimes' work translates to the Black women who consume it and remained a central concern throughout my tenure in the *Scandal* fandom. 'Love's contours and iterations, as translated by Black women fans, are well worth dissecting.

House and Bradley's analysis comport with my long-term experiences on Tumblr both as a fan and researcher. What both surprised and titillated me most was the openness and philosophical considerations with which these women engaged the theme of love, particularly their readings of how gender impacted the interracial pairing of Olivia and Fitz. One of the earliest fans to whose writing I was drawn, was 'miltonsong', who observes the white heterosexual male archetype of the show, Fitz, to actually be a sensitive and openly emotionally driven man, providing textual examples to support her assertions (2013a).

So let's switch this up a bit and pretend Fitz is a woman. This Geraldine is in this marriage where she doesn't love her husband and knows the husband is using her for his own agenda. She is isolated and lonely. ... That was what was happening with Fitz at the beginning of the series. Amanda wasn't an "I need to get my dick wet" experience for Fitz. It was, from what we know of his character, a sexual experience so he didn't feel lonely. ... This is not saying he was right for what he did... What it is saying is that Fitz [sic] sexuality isn't as simple as him wanting to put his dick in people. That Fitz needs a certain emotional warmth and attachment to enjoy sex or have it. JMHO (miltonsong 2013a).

In the piece, 'miltonsong' tries to contextualize an early plot point wherein, after Olivia ends the affair by leaving her job as Communications Director in the White House, and Fitz has a one-time sexual encounter with a white, 20-something intern. 'miltonsong' (I would later discover through discursive commentary unrelated to the show that this poster lives in the same Maryland county as my grandmother) imagines a gender reversal, where Fitz is the woman, and how his sexual transgression may be understood as emotionally desperate rather than sexually opportunistic. The accessibility of her commentary resonated with how I thought about the characters. Mine was not primarily a representational analysis of race, gender, and privilege, nor did it ignore race. Instead, it sought to think about the characters psychoanalytically, and how their internal understanding of themselves would impact the representational observations. Black women wanted and deserved such deep analysis of their Black heroine and the men in her orbit.

'miltonsong's commentary resonated with my own analytical perceptions of the show. From a racial perspective I felt an emotional connection to the Fitzgerald character, initially questioning myself over why I felt so much connection to a character who, on the surface, could be perceived as the pinnacle of white male entitlement. I was none of those things, and from what I knew of 'miltonsong', she was none of those things either. Our attraction (and that of many other Black women) to the Grant character extended beyond

the physical handsomeness of the actor who played him (Tony Goldwyn). The character seemed deliberately imbued with an emotional charge typically reserved for female characters: being led by emotion, inquiring about the wellbeing of those he loved; fondness for babies and talking about wanting children, being forgiving; putting love above all else. The import of these things is not isolated but appreciated in concert with (and perhaps because of) the subject of Fitzgerald's desire, Olivia Pope. I went so far as to write an essay analysing the strategic use of the instrumental theme for the couple, entitled 'The Light' (Lavelle 2006). In it I argue that the song is not schmaltzy background music for romantic moments but used more carefully. Its symbolic deployment is used to reference Olivia being the light of Fitzgerald's life, and whether that light is emerging or waning in the story's unfolding (katrinapavela 2013 c).

I was not alone. Hundreds of posts were made parsing the illicit romance of Olivia and Fitz (Olitz), making detailed points the legitimacy of their affair and the suitability of the star-crossed characters for a long-term relationship. That aspect in itself is not special. What makes this instance significant is that Black women were paying attention to the interraciality of the Olitz relationship from the beginning, holding it in dynamic tension with affective elements of the pairing. In the eighth episode of the second season, "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" (Rhimes 2012), gave the audience a didactic moment about race and the shadowy American history of sexual dynamics between Black women and white men. To briefly summarize, whilst President Grant is in operating theatre from an assassination attempt on his life, Olivia, thinks back to an earlier moment of conflict in their affair.

*Fitz: We're together. That's all that matters.*

*Olivia: Really?! Because I'm feeling, I don't know, a little Sally Hemmings-Thomas Jefferson about all this.*

Written by Rhimes, the loaded statement requires that the audience have some understanding of the controversial relationship between Hemmings, an enslaved teenager and the then president and slave owner, Thomas Jefferson. The racial implications would go on to colour how such racial couplings are perceived, and the ways in which Black women are allowed to claim pleasure for themselves. I tease out the historical weight of these implications later in this section, I want to focus here I want to offer an example of the affective ways in which Black women contend with the historical weight being carried by the coupling from which they also derive pleasure.



*Figure 2.1 (Randy Holmes/ABC via Getty Images) Olivia and Fitz touch the US Constitution*

Pope's statement is not a throw-away line but is used as the serve in a later match in which the couple volley back and forth, in the White House's Garden, regarding its relevance to their specific situation. Tumblr user, '1shara', analyses the moment in the context of American history and its present-day politics, in which America had just re-elected its first Black president. In fact, a key scene, in which Fitz (also a flashback memory of Olivia's) takes Olivia to see the original Constitution at The National Archives, was filmed on the very night of Barack Obama's 2012 re-election (Washington 2013). '1shara' brings all these moments together:

When the Founding Fathers –Thomas Jefferson included- drafted and ratified the constitution, African Americans were considered 3/5 of a person, not a full person and were therefore denied the same rights bestowed by the constitution on all the other citizens. ...

I believe that Fitz took Olivia there because he wanted to restore her faith in their relationship by reminding her that the America they are living in now is in many ways different from ...the America of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings. ...Fitz needed Olivia to recognise that through collective effort the nation had moved on from its unsavoury past and had indeed become better... not perfect ..., but better. He needed her to remember that America is in many ways currently a nation in flux, continuously striving to re-define itself in its quest for perfection, in its quest to fulfil the promises enshrined in the Constitution. Most significantly he wanted her to understand that it is through collective effort, both his and hers, only by standing together would they hopefully be able to navigate the perils of their own imperfect union and all its inherent difficulties. ... (1shara, 2013).

Black women, like '1shara', are foregrounding affective interpretation to justify their love object, Olitz. Secondly, they are being explicit about (their perception of) the writer's intentions and the historical and contemporary racial context in which it is being received. Whilst this user's writing treats race with more romantic idealism than gradientlair, in the previous chapter, it does show that these women are negotiating their racial readings, even when not didactically presented to them. Moreover, they are bringing their own political



inclinations to their reading of the show's racial text even though Rhimes style of storytelling remained largely non-didactic. As an example, Rhimes has explicitly conveyed a loathing for the ways in which Black characters are made to emphasize their blackness in some shows, as if that is the only interesting thing about them (Myers 2015). However, her stories did, sometimes, reflect the politics of multiple Black voices in the writer's room whose politics differed (Ibid.).

### ***Seeking Black Love***



Figure 2.2 (supernatasha 2015) Olivia has a one night stand

Desire and interraciality was a consistent theme parsed within the *Scandal* fandom, and it often raised the spectre of Black love. Earlier I referenced House and Bradwell's (2019) Twitter research on the topic of Black love on *Scandal*. This concern over the lack of and/or desire for Black love was also a fixture of the Tumblr fandom.

The second season of *Scandal* introduces Olivia's first on-screen Black lover, Edison Davis, who, turns out to be her last relationship, before her affair with President Grant. The audience was not privileged to Olivia's dating history, and was therefore left to their assumptions, some of which included Olivia having an exclusive preference for dating white men. Plot exposition at the beginning of the third season includes photographs of Pope's

past relationships, most of whom are Black men. One season later, Olivia initiates a controversial sexual relationship with a young Black man. I detail Olivia's Black liaisons because the race (and marital status) of those lovers mattered very much to segments of the show's female fan—sometimes above other attributes or narrative rationale:

finally Liv gets a black man (atira-patrice, 2015).

I want him to be her man (misstaylorsaid 2015).

HOW THE HELL SHE HAD THE TWAT STRENGTH TO CLOSE THE DOOR ON THAT FINE SPECIMEN!?! IF SHE DONT BUSS IT MY NIQQA!! (lovediomara 2015).

Finally getting rid of all the old ugly white guys they've been pairing up her with (thehighpriestofreverseracism, 2015).

There are several reasons for this desire to see the Black heroine show desire for another Black man. On a simple level this desire suggests an identification with Olivia, in which these women's primary attraction is to Black men. This is partly noted by the women want the flow of desire in one direction. There is no question of Olivia's attractiveness to any man, including the Black ones. On shallow note, sometimes these women just rejected the married Fitzgerald Grant's suitability for Pope, based on a complex set of factors: marital status, availability, attractiveness, security threat posed. This particular hunger for Black love was idealized as an antidote to Olivia's predicament of being a Black woman being in love with a married white man. Therefore, Olivia's being with Black men matches with their projection and wish to have their wants reflected back to them through this character. Secondly, the affective pull towards Olivia's pairing a deeper, more political motivation results from the lacuna of functional Black romance on television. Just as Black women had largely been overlooked by ethnographic research in fan studies, Black women viewers had not been catered to by television executives. Some fans interpreted Olivia's pairings with

white men as a deliberate attempt at upholding a long-standing stereotype about dysfunctional Black families, or white audience's disinterest in consuming stories about Black love. It should be noted that two of five sexual partners portrayed over the show's seven seasons were Black. The third was Latino, which occurred brief enough and late enough in the series (final season) that very little was made of this type of interracial pairing. In fact, Olivia was positively admired for having a diverse taste in men. On another note, the Black love question can sometimes be oversimplified and reductive to the narrative. The second text post I felt compelled to write, as 'katrinapavela', resulted from frustration over what I saw as misdirected, or shallow racial commentary, in mainstream media and the #scandalabc hashtag on Tumblr, that proffered a racially charged narrative for fans who disliked the pairing of Olivia with Edison Davis. Titled "When Simple Minds Watch Scandal: Enough of this Race Bullshit about Edison" (Pavela 2013a), the post wondered aloud why the romantic pairing of two Black people could not withstand analysis outside the narrative of Black love and its attendant politics. Was dismissal of Edison more about the lack of 'game', his controlling nature than it was about preferring a white love interest for the Black (anti) heroine? I refer to topic of Black love as a question because it is a category that invites assumption and probing with regard to the elasticity of both the terms 'Black' and 'love'. Is hungering for Black love so needed that any available Black man would do? Must Black love always necessitate two Black people in the relationship? Later in this chapter, I will take up the parameters of how this question may be answered, and the spectre of American history which compels it.

### ***#Closetgate: Sex and Interpretive Agendas***

One of the most titillating, evergreen and politically affective themes to which Black women fans (including myself) repeatedly returned was sex. We revelled in reliving each one of Olivia's sexual encounters, zooming in on details we missed the previous 200 times, or clowning (poke fun at) the performance of the lovers we disliked. Through reaction GIFs, wordplay, play-by-play recaps, and repetitive reblogging of isolated sexual moments, we were living. Whilst the theme of sex can be a broad, I wish to narrow down this next section to sexual kink. As this programme was shown on terrestrial television, I define 'kink'/'kinky' here as sexual activity or behaviours that fall outside the parameters of what is deemed acceptable or within the normal boundaries of what's shown on television. Acts such as visible tongue sucking, erotic choking, D/s (dominant and submissive) roleplay, or frenetic sexual hunger serve as examples. I will recount the affective joy and analyse the political sophistication with which Black women fans treat their divergent readings of sexual kink in Olivia Pope's erotic pursuits.

Most data which follows are reactions to a polarizing Olitz scene from the 14th episode of season two, "Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot" (Rhimes, 2013a). In it an Olivia and Fitz, who ended their affair six months prior, have frantic and desperate sex in a communications closet inside the White house. That scene follows the reason for Olivia and Fitz's meeting after so long: the baptism of baby Ella to whom they serve as godmother and godfather, respectively. (Ella is the Black adopted daughter of white, gay Chief of Staff, Cyrus Beene and his husband, reporter, James Novak.) Both proponents and detractors of the scene, dubbed "#closetgate", made their opinions known about the racial and sexual politics they believed to be at work in the scene. What is most interesting is that these divergent

opinions are contained in the Tumblr notes of a GIF set made to celebrate the controversial scene (blessedbeyondmeasure15, 2013).



Figure 2.3 (blessedbeyondmeasure15 2013) Olivia and Fitz have sex in a closet

What I would class as the more positive affective reactions ranged from the libidinous to the intellectual. One commenter praises Rhimes for the “beautiful” execution of the scene, zooming in on the musical choice, Stevie Wonder’s ‘Don’t know why I love you’ (dettlylover, 2013). This relishes in the emotional connection of the song to childhood memories of this favoured song and intellectualizes the sonic escalation of the music mirroring the frenzy of Olitz’s erotic encounter, “...until it has nowhere to go (Ibid.). Other Black women fans, like ‘scandalmoments’, considered #closetgate to be par for the course of a couple who “don’t do normal” (scandalmoments, 2013a). Her blog served as a central hub for *Scandal* press releases, speculation, original thoughts, and recirculation of her favourite fan productions. Though she displayed a clear favour for the Olivia and Fitz pairing, she generally did not get too political with her opinions (e.g., bashing pairing of other men with Olivia), likely to serve the desires of a diverse fandom.

The most passionate responses fell into two camps: those who classed the event as disrespectful, at best, rape, or abuse of Olivia at worse; the other camp considered it raw, but consensual moment of libidinous abandon. A handful of comments reveal the feelings of the former camp:

This is some of the most dysfunctional, toxic bullshit I've ever seen on television. It's not romantic. It's demeaning and disgusting. Fuck that entire scene. Fuck Fitz, that limp dick of a man. I really hate him. He doesn't respect Olivia one bit. Fuck Olivia for betraying her power to thY[sic] political eunuch (notesonascandal, 2013a).

not romantic at all. Fitz is manipulative, controlling, and emotionally abusive (blkgirlblogging, 2013a).

Yooo i was SCREAMING fuck fitz forever. this foolio disrespected liv for the last damn time and now i really do not care what happens his man baby ass.. ole cheesy bitch ass (sheishurr, 2013).

The above responses are all from accounts with Black women avatars (some of them actual photographs) or indicated 'black' in their URL title. Whilst the weaponization of 'blackface bots' on social media (including Tumblr), who espouse 'woke' opinions has been on the rise since the 2016 election (Ewing, 2018), and, in 2019 remain a threat to the Democratic party and perceptions of reality (Lynn, 2019), these were far from concerning in 2013. Their responses are also in conversation with each other, echoing and validating their rejected reading of the scene as 'abusive'. This is defined as Fitzgerald taking advantage of Olivia in that closet. Before sexual congress ensues, Olivia is rapidly walking away, not wanting to face Fitz. He walks speedily behind her, grabbing her by the arm when he gets close enough and forcefully yanks her into a nearby closet. He then grabs her face and kisses her. Olivia pushes Fitz off her and slaps him across the face. He reels back, standing away at her as they both look at each other. After a few beats, Olivia sprints toward Fitz, and starts to kiss him frantically, after which point, she assists him in lowering her underwear from beneath her dress and unbuckles his belt before sex ensues.

I note the facts of what happen in the scene because passion in the responses above are not free from contradictions, and the affective emotions these fans held even before this scene. All three women dislike the Fitz character, believing him to be abusive,

ineffectual, and emotionally manipulative toward Olivia. But the responses indicate that this scene simply validated these already held opinions, rather than caused them to form. Whilst they can be read as sympathetic toward Olivia, who they believe to be Fitz's victim, there is some contradiction in this view. 'notesonascandal' acknowledges a small bit of Olivia's agency by writing that she has yielded power to Fitz, something this fan dislikes because she dislikes Fitz. Moreover, the messiness of the scene engenders an emotional response she registers as 'toxic'. But, overall, the dislike for the (white) male character means that he bears the all the responsibility for the sexually scandalous predicaments in which Olivia finds herself. Such rationalizations placing Olivia as a sexual victim are not limited to the scene above, and I will contextualize these shortly. First, I want to note the contours of those who regarded the scenes transgressiveness in celebratory ways.

As 'katrinapavela', I was one of those who dug into the complicated raunch of the scene, even going so far as to annotate a pictorial play by play of the scene (katrinapavela, 2013b), largely in response to accusations of manipulation and abuse like the ones above. It was frustrating to see a fair number of women disregard the clear and decisive actions taken by Olivia to push a certain narrative. Of course, this thesis can also be said to proffer a certain narrative, but in fact, is attempting to foreground ways of seeing the narrative that have largely been ignored (at the time of writing). There were women whose eloquence was beyond my own, who were able to elucidate a particularly Black and soulful understanding of the Olitz relationship, illustrated by #closetgate. Much like the reactions above, the following comments were also in conversation with each other:

I do wonder if people's discomfort with #closetgate is the fact that its [SIC] too close for comfort. We've all known/heard and puzzled over anecdotes about that kind of love, the one which left the twin horrors of disgrace and scandal in its wake. ...TV and media have sold us a bill of goods that love is a

gilded slide into pleasure and petals, sans thorns. Or if there's obstacles, it's from the gentle nudge of misunderstandings, to be slain by nothing but feels.

However, Shonda Rhimes seems to have a very 70s R+B approach to this thing called love (jazzypom 2013a).

This is some Sam Cooke/Bill Withers/late 60s and early 70's soul stirring shit. ... This whole show is a soul song of each character trying to navigate in a world where all they want, deep down, is love. Any type of love.... This is soul music on television basically (miltonsong, 2013b).

IA [I agree]. The thing with soul music (old school R+B) is that they don't just focus on the joy of love, but the sorrows as well. ...There's a reason why Rhimes (I hear she's heavily involved in the song selection for the show) goes back to the 1970s- because love songs were complicated back then. .... They [Olivia and Fitz] aren't necessarily good for each other, but I'm interested enough for them to strive for that chance and find out for themselves (jazzypom, 2013b)

...Soul is also something that could only be made in the African American experience. It was born as a mixture of blues and gospel. So you have those spiritual cords that reach the heavens and those dark dank beats mixed together to make such a sweet and sour sound. And I think Shonda picks R&B and soul for *Scandal* because even for it's [sic] diverse cast the show doesn't forget that its main protagonist is black. And that mixture of pain and pleasure, strength and weakness, triumph and defeat that Olivia goes through is reflected in the songs that are played as her soundtrack (miltonsong 2013c)

The selections above are indulgent, but I wanted to give a sense of how these conversations unfold, and along a route that entwines memory, history, race, gender, and media consumption. These women are very aware that they are watching a media product and that these are characters. However, they can simultaneously hold the tensions of what they imagine the auteur, Rhimes, is trying to relay to them and the rest of *Scandal's* audience—even if they rest cannot see it. I highlight these passages because often readings privileged as 'critical' foreground what is negligent in a media product rather than exploring multiple meanings of what is on offer. The fan readings above are complicated, negotiated just like the product they are consuming.



### ***Inappropriate Wednesdays & Kink***

In this section I wish to explore the titillation and joy Black women derived from revelling in explicit imaginings of the sexual portrayal between Olivia her paramours. Sex and romance were such staples of the Fandom that an entire day of the week was dedicated to the unabashed celebration of such: 'Inappropriate Wednesday'. This day was the middle of three consecutive days on which fans were encourage toward specific content, the other two being 'Tony Tuesday' (celebrating Tony Goldwyn the actor as well as the character, Fitz, he plays); and 'Scandal Thursday' (a pre-game day preparing one's energy and emotions for a new episode airing that evening). In this section, I analyse data from the discussion of both no-strings attached (NSA) sex as well as the Olitz (Olivia + Fitz) pairing, as theirs is the central romance of the show, or, in fandom parlance, one true pairing (OTP).



*Figure 2.4 (supernatasha 2015) Olivia stalks her sexual prey*

Black women were able to celebrate when Olivia 'scored' by picking up a hot young man for one-night stand ("It's Good to Be Kink" (4.16)):

*I'm waiting for the kissing ones [GIF sets]. Them's the real action! This first tile though? The look on her face? He's gonna need a wheelchair. Hahaha. K, going to timeout... (lennybaby2 2015d)*

*I just love reblogging this mainly for Kerry sexy strut and the way he yanks off that belt. Whew!! Fanning myself lol (smith39440 2015)*

*yawl see the, I'm finna get this dick, look on her face though? (catchstds 2015a)*

*He was already naked and sitting on her bed like I MAY BE YOUNG BUT I'M REAADDDDY by the time she got into the room. Look at how she looks at him before she closed the door. That's what that smile is about in the final gif. Well.....that's what I imagined in my head and I'm sticking to it (diamondlikeprecision 2015).*

Whether through projection in commentary or literally mediating Pope's body by zooming in on moments they looped again and again through GIFs, these women were experiencing Olivia's sexual highs. They encourage each other with these affects, layering their imaginings of what was not shown on screen. Notable in these comments is the fan attraction to a sexual power they read in Olivia. They see her as the one driving the sexual encounter with her one-night stand (ONS), and he is the willing recipient. Secondly, though race is not explicitly mentioned in the comments, it is part of the joy they derive. I can attest to this, as many who disliked the Olitz pairing did so from a racial perspective. They desired to see Olivia with a Black man with whom she had romantic chemistry. The ONS is a Black man, and prior to this Olivia had not been seen in a true sexual moment with a Black man. Her previous on-screen relationship with Senator Edison Davis did not portray or inspire carnality for most. The ONS, Russell Franklin, turned out to have a multi-episode arc with Pope, leading to several sexual encounters. GIF sets of these were in constant rotation in the anti-Olitz corners of the Fandom, re-blogged numerous times.



Figure 2.5 (Mayyce 2014) Olitz phone seduction

### ***Panty-Dropper-In-Chief***

*Scandal* was able to provide many sexually provocative moments in which the characters were fully clothed. In its fourth series (2015), the show gave the fans something I had never seen on terrestrial television: phone sex that wasn't coy. The scene above, from "Baby Made a Mess", rated highly in an otherwise uneven fourth series, portrays Pope calling the President to ask about her missing boyfriend. The two are not in a romantic relationship at the time, but the conversation leads down that road, initiated by Grant. Olivia is mostly silent, but we see her physical reactions to Fitz's words, including unbuttoning her cloak, so that she can begin rubbing her chest in response to his erotic words. Moreover, we witness a white male character play a seductive tease to a Black woman. The gender and racialized flip of this dynamic sent plenty of fans, including me as 'katrinapavela' (2015a) into a frenzy. The following conversation tree, in response to the GIF set excerpted above, bears witness to this:

*So we not gone discuss how Olivia was touching herself & getting ready [to pleasure herself] & shit? Okay. I didn't want to talk to y'all anyway (loveniaimani 2015).*

*Gurrrr, I saw that too. He left her high and dry. Lolz (baronessvondengler 2015).*

*Highly doubt she was dry... But that's none of my business (goddesscru 2015)*

What I left out from the above conversation with the GIF goddesscru uses to punctuate her statement. It shows a young Black woman ((presumably of herself) sipping on a bottle of water, looking deadpan at the camera. Goddesscru could be commentary on Olivia's state of arousal, or her own. Both she and Olivia were left thirsty, overeager for sexual fulfilment. I have observed the three fans above be in frequent conversation with each other with regards to the show and other subjects such as contemporary politics. All three present as Black women<sup>6</sup>. This brief exchange pokes fun at Olivia for having been left in sexually arousing predicament, as Fitz hung up on her before his teasing could reach denouement. As fans of this coupling, those women were left in the same situation when watching. They live through these characters. As mentioned earlier, this is a gender reversal of the female sexual tease, wherein male satisfaction is curtailed by the woman. Secondly there is a racial reversal of seeing Black women as neither a victim of white patriarchal sexual aggression, rejection, nor as a stereotype of Black female promiscuity.

Inappropriate Wednesday was not limited to re-living scenes from the show. It was also an opportunity to extend the sexual narrative in a multitude of ways, from innocent (scandalouscastlesanatomy, 2015) to raunchy, for which the show cannot cater. This included mature-rated fan fiction, scene requests (elegantpaws 2013), extending an established sex scene to be more explicit (tonysidechick 2015), speaking to a collective

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<sup>6</sup> As referenced earlier in this thesis, whilst intuited Black womanhood based on my own lived experiences, there were times that Tumblr fans did post pictures professing to be their own images.

fantasy of many of the women (aliasvaughn 2014). Fans also assigning Olivia and Fitz pornographic avatar found elsewhere on Tumblr when pornography was allowed (Alptraum 2018). Some fans would even discuss the genitalia of the show's actors and the degree to which that does or does not comport with their fantasies (lennybaby2 2015), find explicit sexual GIFs (including genitalia), and project their favourite characters onto that image, therefore allowing them to semi-manifest on their dashboard what the show could not provide. These sexual fantasies sometimes extended to gossip and imaginings about the offscreen relationship between Kerry Washington and Tony Goldwyn (tonysidechick 2015). A few fans would overanalyse gestures, a hug, a hand placement, and others, from award shows and promotional activity for the show. I include myself in this group, as the freedom to indulge in what was inappropriate felt good.

Not everyone was displayed the kind of liberal ebullience over Olivia's sexual exploits. Some fans read Pope as sexually promiscuous (redorkulous 2015, mizzvett 2015 in we-gayparee 2015), and therefore reinforcing negative stereotypes of Black female sexuality. These fans imagine that Olivia's sexual activity should comport to a more conservative segment of the fandom because of the real sociological context in which Black women's behaviour is interpolated. This is more complicated than it seems, as during the 7 series of the show, Olivia had a sexual relationship with five men. I found that critiques of promiscuity often came from women (redorkulous is a Black man) who wanted Olivia and Fitz to remain a couple during the series. I have not observed the critique come from fans of any other 'ship that include Olivia. It is significant that Rhimes shows Pope initiating or signalling consent in every one of her sexual encounters. Here is a Black woman taking

charge of her sexual life<sup>7</sup>, a notable counter to an American history in which the rape of enslaved Black women was at once rampant, and not considered rape due those women's status as property and not women.

Through the sexually themed discursive comments from the Fandom provide a window through which we view Black women's affective pleasures, fears, and political concerns. A handful of contentions are prevalent beneath the surface of their discourse, which I will interrogate in this next section. The themes to be considered are the emotional transference through the body of Olivia Pope; the ever-present spectre of American racial politics' relationship with sexuality; and the context of the Black Lives Matter era.

### **Emotional Transference and Mapping the Black Body**

One of the more observable themes from the sex discourse above is the affective ways in which the women project their desire, fears, and political concerns onto Olivia's Black body. Patricia Hill-Collins notes that thought and feeling are interconnected approaches that coexist in scholarship (1989), so it is possible that layered within a seemingly simple comment are complex matrices of political thought and emotional experience.

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<sup>7</sup> This is a perspective Viola Davis would go on to publicly tout for her character, 'Analyse Keating', in another Shondaland production, *How to Get Away with Murder*. Davis has repeatedly promoted the fact that seeing an older, dark skin Black woman sexualized in ways that puts agency in her hands is refreshing (Variety Staff 2020)



Figure 2.6 (ihyuni 2013) *Mellie and Olivia*

For many of these women the blackness of Olivia's body matters to them, because through her character they are able to witness a narrative centred on a Black woman who is regarded as highly intelligent, stylish, accomplished, and sexually desirable by powerful men of all races. This is a far cry from how Black women had been portrayed in American media for most of its history, as discussed in the literature review. As important is who is expressing desire for Pope. As the highest office in the country, the US president—thus far inhabited largely by white men—has come to represent symbols of American strength, masculinity, and power. That the president Fitzgerald Grant character would divorce his white wife (whilst in office) to pursue love with Olivia allows the audience to see Pope as more than the desire of some white man's loins. This brings a kind of safety that allows the Fandom to indulge in Grant's every affection for Pope. Her body comes to signify coordinates of information, becoming an avatar onto which fans map their own romantic desires:

#white woman begging in the background @ mellie stans everywhere, this post is for you, gather around (foreverolitz 2013)

Haha that's why I'll never ever feel sympathy for Mellie. She is weak AF (candi4olitz 2013).

Yet this triflin ho wanna act like shes the victim. She can have ALL the seats. Mellie is so disgusting (aixela89 2015).

You ever notice Olivia only became a “whore” to Mellie after she realized Fitz was helplessly in love with her and their connection wasn’t just sexual. Miserable ass twit didn’t mind their relationship before that. Also show this to people who don’t watch the show complaining about it still. #OLIVIA POPE #MELLIE THE MOOCHER #THE REALLY NEED TO STOP STANNING FOR A FAILURE (thefandomdropout 2015).

The figure and conversation above display a distinct perspective on the affair between Olivia and Fitz, and the ways in which Grant’s wife profits from their relationship. The scene as aired sees Pope strutting to a private room at a re-election fundraising gala, escorted by Secret Service. She assumes it is for a rendezvous with the President. Instead, she is greeted by his wife, who then begs Olivia to manage Grant’s re-election campaign by drawing on Fitz’s love for her. Ihyuni’s GIF and caption, “Mellie Grant begging Olivia Pope to fuck her man,” casts Pope as victim of Mellie’s manipulation. Furthermore, the Black women above note the racialised power dynamics at play between these women. Finally, these fans are beyond the surface-level representational discourse of Pope as ‘Jezebel’, instead holding her in the position of ‘beloved’. The latter necessitates interrogating beneath the surface to consider Pope’s variegated, contextualised subjectivities as *a* representation of Black womanhood. This is not dissimilar to Bobo’s panel of Black women whose reading of *The Color Purple* held meanings about Black feminine identity beyond what the representational discourse at the time offered (see Introduction chapter for this discussion).

Consequently, in moments where Pope rebuffs Grant’s affections, or proffers political advancement over their shared fantasy of leaving Washington for Vermont, some of the fandom expressed anger at her character. As fans, they would never turn down the opportunity to be loved so fully by a specimen of Fitz’s calibre, so something must be



‘wrong’ with Pope. This type of anger was not limited to Olitz fans, as it was observed among fans of the alternate pairing of Olivia and Jake (Olake). Therefore, the anger was not about rejecting a particular man, but being denied the emotional transference they would experience through the pleasuring of the Pope character. Whilst I will expound on the American racial context in the next theme, it is worth noting here that the anger of rejection and feelings of jealousy are embedded in a racial context—both for Black and white women fans. These women were sometimes critical of Olivia’s response to the desire and expressions of love President Grant (and other suitors) readily display for her. But others see Black feminist empowerment in Pope’s fickle rejection of Grant’s desire in favour of her own needs (or fears). This sense of empowerment is often tied to Black racial politics and use of historical past to justify both Pope’s rejection and embrace of Grant something I will discuss later in this chapter. Sometimes Pope’s rejection of Grant, or insistence that they delay their coupling, was taken as evidence of white feminist leanings by Rhimes and her writing room. White feminism here is read as a rejection of love in favour of political power (as evidenced by the conversation around Figure 2.6).

As mentioned in the Discussion Section II, Black women here exhibit a protectiveness (albeit hypocritical in some instances as they, too, wish to experience affection bestowed on Pope) over Pope’s body. In the previous chapter fans were defensive over her hair, and here it is Olivia’s entitlement to desire and to being desired on her own terms. This protectiveness extended to Olivia’s mental health, particularly signs of PTSD following her kidnapping (“I’m Just a Bill [4.19] 2015), and her experience of misogynoir following her public outing as Grant’s mistress (“Dog Whistle Politics” [5.04] 2015). These mental wellness concerns by fans will be more thoroughly engaged in the subsequent chapter.

Lastly, regarding the emotional transference through Pope's body, I want to note the strategic employment of Olitz content to cleanse negative emotional states. When fandom flame wars, or political strife were recurring too often on one's Tumblr dashboard, from those you followed, the 'dash cleanse' serve as a strategic washing away of more distressing content in favour of more placid and soothing fare. Affectionate moments featuring Olivia smiling, being emotionally comforted or shown affection were re-blogged repeatedly, often without commentary. By doing so, fans became projected themselves into better emotional states, temporarily inoculating themselves against arguments about fiction and volatile political realities. Sara Ahmed (2004) theorizes that emotions serve a cultural political purpose that provides a stickiness (or moving goal post) between bodies. The groups come to be defined by this emotional stickiness (p. 5). Whilst emotional affect is generally a binder in fandoms of all genders, it can facilitate the creation of factions and subgroups within fandoms that adopt emotional affect as cultural and political standpoints.

## Discussion

### ***(Inte)racializing Sex and the Long Shadow of American Slavery***

Race, especially in the United States, is integral to the everyday existence of most people, and particularly sexuality. With a Black woman lead and prominent interracial romance, the racial politics has been a key point of discussion for lovers and critics of *Scandal* alike (Maxwell 2013, McClearen 2015, Warner 2015a, b; Erigha 2015; Kay 2019). Without regurgitating arguments from the literature review chapter, or my own meditation on the erotics of Pope's arc as a Black woman (Pow 2019), most scholarly pondering about Pope and the interracial romance—as Mia Mask summarises—wonders if the show is “a progressive step in an anti-essentialist direction or a regressive move backward toward a

reconstituted Jezebel-in-bed-with-Massah stereotype” (2015, p.4). Rhimes’ general preference for non-race specific casting has also been used to allege a purposeful erasing (or (e)racing as Kay (2019) puts it) of race’s significance (Warner 2015b). Here I use ‘non-race specific’ rather than the more politically charged ‘colour-blind’ when referring to casting. The latter term means to pretend race has not significant impact on a role. Rhimes’ casting methodology is not motivated by this, according to her own descriptions (she despises the word ‘diversity’ because it normalises whiteness as the default (Ferber 2017)). Roles where neither race nor gender are explicitly marked in the script are not read as ‘white and male’, thus allowing Rhimes further creative possibilities for her work to be transformed by what the actor brings to the role—including their race, gender, and other embodied experiences (Myers 2015). This is the opposite of ‘colour-blind’ casting, which uncritically assumes that unless race is specified white is the default (Long 2011).

The data presented earlier in this chapter as well as the previous section about joy, makes it clear that fans find race and sexuality to be embedded in the show’s content, in ways that are not binary (as Mask (2015) put it earlier), or simply indicative that the actors who play these characters are themselves raced. The Fandom’s textual analysis of *Scandal*’s sexually charged content is, polysemic in ways that are not reflected in most scholarship. What this section endeavours to discuss is the historical racial awareness and Black cultural significance embedded in the data presented earlier.

Data from one of the more controversial sexual moments of the show indicate that some fan responses reflect the spectre of slavery and interracial erotics. For some Olivia being yanked into a White House closet by a powerful white man triggered memories of widespread rape of enslaved Black women by white massahs and plantation overseers.

Other readings of power dynamics were aware that Rhimes was playing with that cultural memory but distinguishing the moment through displays of consent and active participation by Pope (initiating the sex, removing Fitz's belt and unbuttoning his pants; helping him remove her underwear).

Others became uncomfortable, perhaps even ashamed of seeing Pope sexualized in openly erotic (but clothed) ways, particularly with white men, and having multiple, noncommittal sexual partners during the series' run. Such reactions evidence an expectation of

Black female respectability (morality above reproach also known as 'the Black lady' (Collins 2000, p.81)) as an antidote against controlling images. Collins notes that respectability politics was developed during the post-Reconstruction era to self-police sexual boundaries, a strategic means of self-protection from white aggression. However, this false sense of security re-inscribes disenfranchisement by denying full access to citizenship (Ibid.). Still other fans embraced the complicated mess of Olivia's sexual encounters, their oppositional gaze electrified by the transgressive portrayal of Black feminine sexuality. Sexuality represents a key area of oppression (Crenshaw, p. 405 in Hammonds 2004, p.307), telling us more about what Black women are not sexually defined by more than it tells us about their actual interpretations of sexuality (Hammonds 2004, p. 307). Abdur-Rahman (2012) notes that sexual transgression in African American literature can help to challenge popular and restrictive theories about identity, national belonging, and racial difference. Kimberly Springer notes that the history of slavery and American racial politics makes it more difficult for Black (heterosexual) women to practice liberatory sex because their actions are always interpellated through the wants and needs of others (2014). Springer's thesis is that Black

heterosexual women should apply a queer orientation to their sexuality—not in terms of partners—but about the pursuit of their own pleasure.

It could be argued that the Blaxploitation film era of 1970s American cinema laid the groundwork for what scholar Yvonne Sims (2006) calls a reshaping of how African American actresses could be presented on-screen—as feminine action heroes. Sims is correct about these representations of Black women in films that were driven by Black imaginations, thereby expanding, and presenting Black women in a position of agency and not victim. It should also be noted that those filmic representations were largely driven by Black men and their gaze and were ones in which many of the Black heroines were sexualised and of a particular bodily aesthetic, yet much of the credit is given to the actresses' portrayal of iconic characters. Not to mention that consumption of these films was not exclusively Black, and therefore still subject to the same arguments about the white gaze. In this way, Blaxploitation's representations of Black women hold in dynamic tension both the self-making of Black feminist erotic potentials (Roach 2017; Cooper 2017) and Black hypermasculinity (Wallace 1999). The point here is to note that Black women auteurs like Rhimes should be given as much leeway as the Black male auteurs of the Blaxploitation era to define their Black female characters in ways they define as powerful and sexy, or, at the very least compelling.

The pursuit of one's own pleasure is a Black feminist interpretation that is consistent with Lorde's notion of the erotic (1979) and Evelyn Hammonds's call for Black feminist writers to explore more pleasure and agency in their work (1994, 307), among many others who have pondered the same thing (from Nella Larsen to Hortense Spillers). Rhimes is exploring this in *Scandal*. Sociology has a long history of ignoring Black women's sexual attitudes, especially when they don't comport to well-worn categories of trauma or

victimization, rather than exploring the ‘pro-sex’ contingencies in Black feminist scholarship, as Shayne Lee puts it (2010, loc 251). My experience of the Fandom has shown me that sexual attitudes are diverse and divergent. Through the regular practice of things like ‘Inappropriate Wednesdays’, which largely centred around the interracial romance of Olitz, Black women fans used interraciality to ponder beyond fetish, things like racial power dynamics, connection and reconciliation. As a symbol of unearned power in America, it matters that President Grant is seen to literally and metaphorically get on his knees to satisfy the needs and desires of a Black woman, to the point of leaving his (white) wife for Pope. This is a flip of the historical script that does not escape keen Black women readers who read such actions as symbolically valuing Black subjectivity.

### ***Black Lives Matter***

The relationship between sexuality and race became an increasingly contested arena in the Fandom, particularly 2013-2016. This ethnographic study took place during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement (2014-2016), during which media was proliferated with reports and images of the murders of unarmed Black civilians by state Law enforcement in the US (Mike Brown, Alton Sterling, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and more). These years were also the height of prominence for Black liberation movements which swelled after George Zimmerman’s acquittal for murdering Trayvon Martin, the most notable of which was #BlackLivesMatter. I see a link between yearning for full Black citizenship in reality and the desire in fiction to see Black subjectivities valued and desired onscreen in ways that ran counter to the violent images of Black death and police brutality flooding social media.

Fighting for joy amid so much pain becomes even more critical. In their study of Black oral culture on Twitter, Lu and Steel note that utilizing the affordances of online culture to cultivate joy is a form of resistance that challenges dominant narratives that demean and dehumanize (2019). Weheliye argues that the process of racialization “disciplines humanity into full humans, not quite-humans, and non-humans,” (2014 in Lu and Steele 2019, p. 831), with Black people falling into the latter category. The latter two categories can be as insidious as disregarding (or not considering at all) the emotionality of Black people in favour of theoretical frameworks or thought exercises. Far from being racial Shangri-Las, online spaces can allow marginalized people expressions of their full humanity (Gallon 2016), including emotional capacities and affective range denied to them in the past.

### ***Contesting ‘Black Love’***

The often-non-didactic ways Rhimes prefers to write about race stood in contrast to the hyper-realism of Black death and brutality flooding social and traditional media. Revelling in the politics of love, desire and interraciality of Olivia and Fitz served as an antidote to violent realities being broadcast across media. But for others, their interracial love affair, during a Black neo-liberation movement, made the absence of Black love more glaring. Black love is usually described as a (healthy) romantic relationship between two Black people, a sight that is underrepresented in traditional broadcast media and reality for the high-achieving Black woman (Wanzo 2015; duCille 2003; King and Allen 2009; Lubiano 1993), a trope relevant to Pope. One of the earlier data sets showed Black women fans desiring and preferring to see Olivia with a Black man. Both desire and preference are subconsciously shaped by various epistemologies, including socialization and media exposure (Homes and Johnson 2009 in Wanzo 2015). The idealization of the marriage of the

First Black couple, President Barrack and Michelle Obama (Wanzo 2011) is also an important context for Black women's desire to see this reflected in their favourite White House drama. Afterall, *Scandal's* president was decidedly not Black, thus denying Black love's prominence onscreen. This led to speculation that Rhimes feared representing Black love or was herself resentful of it.

I use the term 'deny' deliberately to convey a longing for, or almost entitlement to fantasy fulfilment of the ideal, powerful Black couple—one that would be beloved by the show's larger audience, not rejected<sup>8</sup>. A feminist reading absent of racial considerations would interpret this desire as having consumed too many neo-liberal fantasies portraying the ideal marriage partner as another acquisition a successful woman makes. However, Black love and its elasticity is really a rhizome of Black representation, and authenticity. Questions over what qualifies as Black love, speculation for its absence, fears over displays of dysfunctional Black love point to broader latent longings. The history of the United States, and the ways in which regulating race is intrinsically tied to erotics. Its treatment of Black people—particularly the abuse of Black women—is predicated on a disregard for their humanity, to provide “the delineating contours for the emergence and consolidation of whiteness as a necessary component of (individual and national) identity...” (Abdur-Rahman 2012: 21). Therefore, loving a Black person is one of the most radical things one can do. The idea of embrace of Black love is, in part, a wish for America as a nation to embrace and love Black people. Interracial love, whilst once taboo and illegal in America, when portrayed

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that *Scandal's* decision to have a white president and not a Black one was to avoid any potential comparison with the real life first Black administration of Barack Obama. Washington has voiced that she would not have done the series were *Scandal's* president Black, as she felt it disrespectful to her relationship with the Obamas (Shadow and Act 2013).



onscreen could read as either 'radical', or a concession to the fears of majority white audiences that are comforted by a status quo that regulates too much blackness.

## Conclusion

Whilst I have shown that Tumblr' allowed *Scandal's* fans to translate epistemologies, both lived and learned, into affective states of escape and pleasure, the realities of racial history and current realities shaped some of their expressions and desire. What I have not yet thoroughly addressed is the points of open contestation within the Fandom over matters of race, gender, and sexuality. I will endeavour to unpack in the next and final discussion chapter.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **‘A true sista’: Wellness, Performative Wokeness and Intra-racial Fantagonisms**

In the first three discussion sections, I introduced the world of Tumblr, and the ways in which its rhetorical and digital affordances attract fan production and enable emotional bonding among *Scandal*'s fans. I did this largely through recounting my own Alice-InWonderland like fall down a Google-sized rabbit hole, into the Fandom on Tumblr. The ensuing two chapters used fan discourse to explore the thematic contours of freedom, joy, desire, and sexuality through the epistemologies of Black women's lived experiences and historical narratives that surround blackness. These discussion sections endeavour to contextualize Black women's fan discourse as complex, and sometimes contradictory as it relates to race, gender, and sexuality. To that end, this final section will explore thematic ways in which concepts of emotional wellness and intra-fandom antagonisms converge around the industrial logics and racial performativity of marginalized identities. Secondly, I hope to convey, through personal experience as *katrinapavela*, the emotional and psychological toll these logics promote. By doing so I endeavour to perform a humanizing analysis that minimizes pathologies of the past in Fan Studies (see Chapter Three) whilst emphasizing the complex dynamics representational rhetoric (see Chapter Two) can create. This exploration is more vulnerable and, sometimes, tense. Such is the complex experience of being a Black woman in a fandom where Intersectionality is a tacit part of negotiated readings of media. Audre Lorde says that "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not lead single-issue lives" (1982, p.138). That quote follows me as I think about the logics and emotional pressure points that inform fan reactions to *Scandal*'s plot points and characterizations. Whilst the data sets largely evidence the words of Black

women, these women are not a monolithic block, but rather a diverse group with divergent experiences, desires, and social aims. The heterogeneity of their standpoints can create a kaleidoscopic canvas of conversation, but also spark conflict. Whilst the previous section's data evidenced differing opinions around the portrayal of Olivia's sexuality, this section embraces the inevitability of conflict by looking at the major themes around which conflict can develop, as well as the motivations and emotional impact of the conflict. The discussion will attempt to reach the roots of these divergences.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***The Wellness of Olivia Pope***

The emotional well-being of Olivia Pope has been a consistent concern for the Fandom, almost from the beginning of the series. A deliberately melancholy character, Pope's forms of (dis)stress and emotional aches were endlessly parsed on Tumblr, garnering much sympathy. With a pivotal point of trauma for Pope, in the fourth season, discussions around mental health became a discursive staple for the remainder of the series. In episode of nine of that season (Rhimes, 2014), Pope's home is invaded, she is kidnapped by white men, held captive and is threatened with being sold on the dark web for her political (as opposed to physical) labour. For many Black women fans, myself included, the slavery comparison seemed controversially deliberate and uncomfortable, as evidenced by this anonymous Q&A I received on the *katrinapavela* blog:

...I am worried - considering this is BHM [Black History Month] - that the idea of "putting her on the market" will cause others to think, "OH, so you're putting the black girl on the market for sale??" and some people bought into it.

Those people didn't see how powerful and strategic Olivia was being, and just bought into the "slave" narrative :( (Anonymous, 2015)

I share the comment above because it points to two persistent fan concerns which germinate from the same plot: The psychological and intentional racialized trauma the character experiences, and secondly, the ways in which this triggers racial anxieties for fans about how Pope's powerful character would be diminished in the eyes of *Scandal's* wider (read: white) audience. These two concerns later dovetail as the character continues to suffer from untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I present some short comments over the course of seasons four and five that represent both a pattern of expressing wellness concerns. Secondly the comments indicate the diverse ways in which Black women fans read the coordinates of Pope's face and body as exhibiting a lack of wellness that serves to reinforce certain agendas.



*Figure 3.1(supernatasha 2015) Sexual aggression as a sign of trauma*

In episode sixteen of the fourth season ("It's Good to Be Kink" 2015), Pope brings home a man for, presumably, a one-night stand. I used this example in the previous chapter where I focused on Black women and desire, I highlighted fan commentary praising Pope's sexual aggressiveness. I call on this example, again, to indicate that multiple levels of

discourse simultaneously take place on any given plot point, or character action. In this chapter I use revisit the example for the data set on well-being. It is the first time that the audience witnesses Pope's character engaging in risky sexual behaviour with a stranger. The concern is heightened because this comes only a few episodes after Olivia is abducted from her apartment. Secondly, within the episode, Pope fails the first time to go through with her plan to bring home the same stranger, due to experiencing an episode of PTSD in the bathroom of the nightclub she visits. She tries again later in the episode with success:

Does she really have a strange man in her house after locking herself behind all of those locks?" (solockedup 2015)

[Responding to solockedup]: Well, she's got a gun....Seriously, though. She still has PTSD. She is not thinking strait [sic]. She just wants to feel...something. She is acting out... (pjammasf 2015).

The implication from these two fans is that Pope's action misaligns with her concerns for safety (additional locks on her door, keeping a gun) following the kidnapping. As importantly, mental wellness should be pursued as a priority following trauma, not sex with strangers.



Figure 3.2 (take94 2015) *Olivia in pain*

This next example is divorced from a sexual context, and focuses on stressful political decisions triggering traumatic memories for Pope ("I'm Just a Bill" [4.19] 2015):

SHE NEEDS TO BE IN FITZ ARMS WHY DOESNT SHE SEE THAT...OH  
SHONDA SAYS SHE CAN'T. (bloglinab 2015)

She needs a damn psychiatrist more than she needs Fitz (gladi8rs 2015). (

...Olivia n[sic] therapy is a no go so her next best option is Fitz. At least if she was with him she would have some love and support n[sic] her life (eaudrey35 2015).

... She always look [sic] so close to a nervous breakdown, So vulnerable and beautiful, ...her eyes screams lonely and alone. It sad and after 4 Seasons depressing. My Heart bleeds for her (diamondjay22 2015).

The comments above are all reacting to a scene from the nineteenth episode of the fourth season, the plot of which concerns Olivia's decision to tell the American public that the president started a war under false pretences. The scene captured in the still above shows Pope experiencing distress and anxiety, which can be read as her fighting back tears, change in breathing, physical shaking, and flashbacks to being in captivity. All of the comments acknowledge Pope's anguish but propose different solutions. Some interpret 'love' as an antidote to emotional pain, whilst others believe Pope needs professional therapy, an opinion that was repeated across many episodes. Diamondjay22 speaks to an overall disappointing pattern over four seasons where Pope's life causes continuous trauma, empathising to the point of depression.



Figure 3.3 (*gifthetv 2015*) *Olivia confesses to losing her mind*

The final example in this section comes one season later, in the fourth episode of the fifth season (“Dog Whistle Politics” 2015). Having romantically reunited with President Grant, Pope is outed to the media as his mistress. A media firestorm ensues, focuses on her actions more than that of the president. In the scene captured above, Pope has a vulnerable moment, on the phone, with Grant wherein she calls out examples of misogynoir directed at her from the media and the public. As a result of the mental toll of this online abuse, she begins to cry (but only a little bit). She highlights online comments whose abuse is specifically racialized and gendered:

‘But only a little bit’ [Oprah crying gif] (*lazyexceptwhencooking 2015*).

Man, this scene got me! It’s ok Liv, sometimes I feel like I’m losing it too! (*terryissomessy 2015*).

Our girl needed that date (recognition) so badly. And her love [Fitz] gave her what she needed (*naejpink 2015*).

Fitz told her to turn off the computer. So necessary. But being sent thousands of messages threatening your life will bog you down (*luvvdivine 2015*).

In a rare moment, the “Dog Whistle Politics” episode portrays Pope as victim of a scandal as opposed to the extinguisher of one. Moreover, the producers are explicit in their focus on the intersectionality of coded language used to denigrate Black women, otherwise known as misogynoir (Bailey 2010). A 2018 study by Amnesty International found that online

harassment against women is rampant, with abusive commentary being hurled as often as every 30 seconds (Amnesty International, 2018). However, the study shows that Black women are disproportionately targeted for abuse based on both their race and their gender—as much as 86% more than their white counterparts (Amnesty International UK, 2018). The *Scandal* episode aired three years before the published study, but clearly these issues of harassment, ensuing psychological trauma and silencing have been the experience of women for many years. It is in this vein that I wish to connect the fan commiseration with Pope, not just on an emotionally manipulative media moment. Black women saw their humanity and vulnerability portrayed onscreen. In that moment, “the audacity to be born both Black and female” (Rhimes, 2015c), as Pope says in the episode, and use your voice become reasons for your destruction. Olivia became an avatar for Black women, giving them a sense of recognition. As importantly, which naejpink writes, is the fact that Pope is not completely left to suffer this pain in silence. Rhimes allows Grant’s character to publicly embrace Pope during this abuse, showing up to her apartment and taking her on a date. In an episode where she is being dehumanized by so many, the ultimate affirmation of her humanity is for her character to be defended and shown love. Because acts of domination are rooted in the opposite of love, love then becomes an antidote to abuse (hooks 2000). Caretaking becomes one way in which Black women’s humanity is recovered from the suffering of pain and alienation (Pow 2018). Black women fans like those above, and myself, find immense satisfaction in this moment because is transformed from controlling image of sexual object to human subject.



### 'A True Sista'

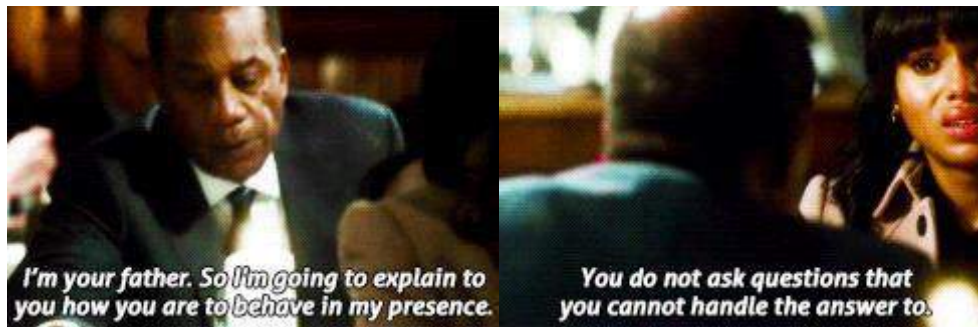


Figure 3.4 (yerundi 2013) Rowan disciplines Olivia

The emotional and mental wellness of Olivia as a character was sometimes a genuine concern, as discussed above. At other times, these wellness concerns for Pope intersected with essentialist beliefs about the 'true' nature of Black womanhood and the ways in which it was expected to perform during time of interpersonal conflict with other characters. There were times when this concern either masked or dovetailed with fan agendas against Rhimes' portrayal of Black femininity. These discussions transpired most often after Pope's antagonistic interactions with her father, or First Lady Mellie Grant:

A true sista would have told him to fuck himself. As I appreciated the speech he gave her in the beginning of 301, this fool, rolled like a slick willy ass typical black man that wants females to be beneath him. ... (isthiswhereibegin 2013).

real sistas are multifaceted. come on now. we have our own way of dealing with a tramatic [sic] situation (bronzekat 2013).

I disagree with the Olivia [finally] grew balls statement. I think she's still a scary ass woman (originalmissdillard 2013).

The above fan comments are reacting to a scene in which Olivia has recently discovered that her father is the Command of a secret Black Ops force with extrajudicial powers outside the government, and that most her of life has been a lie ("Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" [3.02] 2013). Confronting her father with this information results in Eli morphing from father

to Command, signalling to Pope that she is to be obedient or be considered a threat to his organisation. In the moment, Pope chooses reluctant obedience. The fan reactions consider this unsatisfactory, not just to their expectations of a 'strong' Olivia Pope character, but inauthentic to her performance of Black womanhood. The expectation is that she should summon the power she uses in her role as the Olivia Pope, not allowing her father/Command to assert dominance over her. At the root of this is an attempt to root Pope in specific, and often comforting (if not familiar) stereotypes of Black femininity but only as a means of mental and emotional self-protection. The 'authentic' response would have been a defensive one, which would protect these Black women's views of Pope as self-assured and powerful. Moreover, it would reaffirm their own beliefs about Black womanhood:

#LISTEN this ["Run [4.10]] episode was nothing but liv and it got all up in her psyche's business and that's honestly all i've ever wanted!!!#i don't wanna get my hopes up but pls can we see her struggle w/take care of the psychological/emotional damage this would leave anyone w/#when this is all over#like just P L E A S E thanks good looking out tonight shonda... (juliannamargulies 2015b).

This concern for Pope's well-being masks an insecurity about the place of Black femininity in the American politic. The example above, it could be argued, displays and intra-racial power struggle over gender dynamics and power within the Black community.



Figure 3.5 (katrinapavela 2014) Olivia confronts Mellie

At other times Black women fans levied Intersectional authenticity arguments when Pope was in an interracial dynamic, gender identity remaining constant. These authenticity arguments were sometimes weaponized as a cudgel, used to strike out against Rhimes who fans accused of purposefully neglecting her lead Black woman character in favour of a pet affection for the white first lady character, Mellie Grant.

So accurate. The virtuous white woman kept her legs closed, while the sinful black woman opened hers wide open.” (gladiatorinrags (2014) - deleted account, via baronessvongengler (2014))

LOL! maybe that’s the whole point. women can never beat the patriarchy. ... It bugs me that while both of them are suffering, liv seems to be paying an especially high price.... (gladiatoringoldglitter (2014)—deleted account, via baronessvondengler (2014))

Nah, Olivia’s problem is that the writers are fucking her up, and making her act out of character. Also, the only people they let her read are Fitz and the other black people on the show. Last week, she was literally everybody’s whipping girl, and the only person she got to scream at was Fitz. Just..ugh (cindersinrags 2014).

Black women fans are reacting to the scene itself, from twelfth episode of the third season, in addition to my (katrinapavela) meme-ification of said scene. Briefly, the scene is ostensibly a confrontation between Olivia Pope, the President’s re-election campaign

manager, and the First Lady, Mellie Grant. But the confrontation's subtext is between President Grant's (Black) Mistress and President Grant's (White) wife, who is fully aware of the cyclical love affair. In the scene, Pope cautions Mellie against an assumed affair between her and the new Vice President due to the potential political repercussions. Grant is aghast at the insinuation, and assures Pope that, unlike her, she "kept my legs closed" and is therefore more virtuous (Rhimes 2014). My meme overstates the patriarchal implications at work in the scene, and the way the concept of 'virtue' is explicitly tied to white femininity and Black women's historical exclusion from it. The commentary of the women above is in conversation with all the aforementioned contexts. The commenters support Olivia's relationship with Fitz, even as they recognize that the perceived illegitimacy of it places the greatest burden (and vulnerability) upon Olivia as a woman, specifically a Black woman. Historically, during and after colonial slavery, white men practised institutionalised sexual violence over the bodies of Black women and men. Black women were conveniently only seen as feminine to satisfy the wanton desires and capitalist reproductive needs of white males, whilst simultaneously re-enforcing racial power dynamics through sexual violence (Wells-Barnett 2002; Hill-Collins 2004; Abdur-Rahman 2012). This historical exploitation of Black women also created a contentious relationship between them and white women who also held racial power over Black women and men, despite being disadvantaged in some ways by patriarchy. Thus, the weight of American history and the ways in which Rhimes tethers her storytelling to that history, is brought to bear up on the scene between Olivia and Mellie.

The last commentary, by baronessvondengler, dispenses with the historical (and narrative) context in favour of the one she finds most emotionally satisfying.

Baronessvondengler's desire to see Olivia 'read' (performative verbal insult) people is

similar to those commenting on the previous scene between Olivia and her father. It is a desire to see Black femininity triumph through every obstacle and denigration. For this fan, Pope's character, as a Black woman, is being failed by the writers because the only instances in which her anger can freely fly is when she's with the President, her lover. The final fan commentary points to what I will further develop in the rest of this chapter: the ways in which Pope's fictional Black femininity fails fan's authenticity test comes to signify a real failure against Black women by the series' creator and head writer, Shonda Rhimes. Furthermore, protesting the unacceptability of this failure means treating Rhimes and supporters of her writing with, often, virtue-signalling derision. Rhimes' identity as a Black (presumed heterosexual) woman is inextricably tied to fan expectations and disappointments in Pope's character.

### **Intra-Fandom, Meta-fandom Conflicts and the Online Economy of Wokeness**

The first half of this chapter provided an intertextual exploration of Black women *Scandal* fans' relationship to the Olivia Pope character around the concept of emotional and psychological wellness. More specifically fan comments indicated both desires for and preconceived expectations of an Intersectional portrayal of Pope's Black, heterosexual femaleness. Furthermore, these expectations were wrapped up in complicated, historical American marginalization of Black female identity. What I wish to examine in the next few sections is the degree to which those intertextual ideologies around Black identity can drive intra-fandom and meta-fandom conflicts. The contours of those online conflicts take place within Black linguistic practices, cultural shame, and an intellectual economy that reveals age old contestations around Black liberation. In keeping with 'wellness' theme of this chapter, these antagonisms. I will use analyse content from my own encounter, as

katrinapavela, with intra-fandom antagonism. The relationship to Intersectionality, fan practice, as well as the psychological and mental toll these adversarial encounters take is worth exploring.

‘Fantagonism’ is a term coined by Derek Johnson (2007), in his detailing of differing constitutive hegemonies of fandom. The term merges ‘fan’ and ‘antagonism’ to express specific tensions, within communities of fan practice, around textual meaning and struggles to shape production to their expectations. Closely related is the term ‘antifan’, which predates Johnson’s term. Coined by Jonathan Gray (2003), anti-fan ostensibly identifies fans whose relationship to a media object is almost exclusively antagonistic. The spirit in which I employ ‘fantagonism’ merges definitions of ‘fan-tagonism’ (as Johnson spells it) and ‘antifan’. Studies which have explored fantagonism or anti-fandom focus on contested relationships between the fans and (show) producers, or fans and writers (Jenkins 1992; Milner 2010; Tushnet 2017). As Jenkins later notes, stressing the positive, homogeneity of fandom enhances the perception of the field as worthy of intellectual study (in Harrison 1996, p. 274). In some instances where intra and inter-fandom interactions reveal gendered concepts of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fan (Bacon-Smith 1992; Busse 2013; Stanfill 2013), race is not highlighted as a significant variable, even in instances where gender is. Those studies largely left the interplay of race and gender (both of fans, producers, and the characters in the text) underexamined. In instances where race is explicitly factored into the intra-fandom aggression, it’s usually about a marginalized group being labelled as the aggressors, by the dominant group, for raising race-based concerns (Scott 2012; Johnson 2017). What I wish to do is to examine intersectional identity tensions of being a Black woman in America from the ideological expectations of those within the group itself, and how *Scandal*’s textual and meta-fandom politics lend shape to these disagreements and factions.

### ***Meta-fandom Tools: Sub-posts and Callouts***

Before sharing the complex twists of my own encounter with fandom aggression, I wish to zoom out and address two often-used linguistic methods of evidencing hostile disagreement, as well as how and why they function in these ways. This discussion will better inform the antagonism case study I will shortly share. More widely known is the ‘callout’, which is a confrontational message or post that directly names the target of critique, usually by tagging their social media handle:

[To:] aliasvaughn

You’re saying I need help based on a post I made yet you’re under the impression that Tony and Kerry are married and have a child but are keeping it a secret in the media. Have a seat, shut the fuck up and go back to strumming yourself over Tony [Goldwyn] gifs in your mother’s attic you lowlife (jamaicanheaux 2015a).

The above example tags the target, so that Tumblr’s system will notify the poster that they have been mentioned in a post. The content indicates an on-going disagreement between the two posters. Were this study not specifically rooted in racial and gender politics of Black women within fandom culture, jamaicanheaux’s clash with aliasvaughn would simply be a pedestrian example of behaviour typical of computer-mediated fora, known as a ‘flame war’. Coined by social psychologists, ‘flame war’ to describe the de-individuation and disinhibition effect caused by lack of face-to-face communications where each person is communicating based on sets of assumptions that are never made explicit (Kiesler, et al, 1984). A flame war is speech deliberately designed to denigrate, humiliate, and produce a winner, or superior intellect in the end.

The on-going hostility between these two women was not unique in the Fandom and is an example of a ‘shipping war (on-going disagreement between fans of rival romantic

relationships on the show). The example from indicates there was a previous exchange by aliasvaughn which was unkind to jamaicanheaux, thus her response. What is not evident from the example, but to which I was privy, is the fact that aliasvaughn (a white Italian woman) blocked jamaicanheaux (a Black woman of Jamaican ancestry, like myself) from responding to any of her content directly, thus leading jamaicanheaux to defend her name, and racialised gender politics among her own followers. In content and context jamaicanheaux's performative defensiveness toward aliasvuagn is rooted in the politics of their racial difference, and as well as the implications of a real-life interracial affair between Washington and Goldwyn (who are married separately to partners of their same race). The second form of inflammatory communication is more indirect, and passive aggressive. The 'sub-post' (or 'sub-Tweet'), like 'flaming' is particular to mediated forms of communication. It is a way of venting, trolling, or entertaining (more on this below) that attempts to mitigate the consequences of one's content:

You want to complain about how the show no longer focuses on Olivia and she's no longer the centre of it all but you're the main ones out here screaming "The show would be nothing without Olitz"... Like, are you women serious? I hope you know that when you say this shit, you're pretty much saying the black female lead had nothing to do with the success of the show and that black women can't succeed on their own in general (jamaicanheaux 2015b).

In this second example from jamaicanheaux, she is indirectly addressing aliasvaughn and those who share the same ideological stance as her. She is frustrated that the interracial relationship is being praised for the success of the show above the individual Black women who is its star. This concern reflects the reality of invisibility/visibility paradigm Black women face. As a passive-aggressive act of critique, the sub-post would likely not fall within Jenkins' definition of a 'transformative' (productive) fan practice (1992). It is not fan fiction, or media



that creatively reinterprets characters or plots drawn from the show. However, like transformative works, the sub-post is productive in the sense that it provides entertaining spectacle and, often, leads to fantagonyms. The relationship to race and gender at play in the sub-post, and its generative qualities are worth teasing out.

I bring up sub-posting because I see it as a way of metaphorically throwing rocks and hiding one's hand. Sub-posting is almost always used to offer derisive or hyper-critical commentary out of earshot of its target, as a way of avoiding confrontation. Rarely is sub-posting used to positively affirm. Rather it is used as a form of passive aggressive venting for the poster (the flaming-baton twirler), which then serves as a source of entertainment for their followers (the audience). On occasion, sub-posting can be used to Those who may have insight of the target of the poster's shade are both entertained and enthralled with the cleverness of the poster, communally brought closer by the inside joke (the cheerleaders). It is largely seen as harmless because the target is not directly mentioned, therefore the content of the sub-post is seen as a victimless critique. I, too, as *katrinapavela*, had participated as audience, cheerleader, and flaming baton-twirler. One of the tacit rules in some Tumblr fandom pockets is the idea of not tagging your hate or 'anti' opinions, meaning that those searching for a topic, character, or person via the hashtag system are usually looking for positive or neutral content that supports their budding affinity. Content that is specifically antagonistic, or hypercritical is encouraged to be tagged with suffixes like 'hate', 'trash' or similarly derisive terms. Therefore, if I were searching to indulge in hatred of a *Scandal* character (Jake Ballard, played by Scott Foley), or producing sharply critical content (as I did), hashtags like '#jakeballardhate'. I did not always do this because, frankly, I had no respect for those who liked the character. How could they possibly see any good in him, I thought. As a fan, I would write inflammatory sentences and phrases in the hashtags

of post railing against the Ballard character. I was called-out a few times for my flagrant disregard of the tacit tagging rules, by fans of the character, and once by a fan of the actor who played Ballard. As an anti-fan of that character, I was not in a minority. I was part of a significant community that bonded over both love for the central romantic 'ship of Olivia and Fitz, and the hatred of the character used to deny that relationship (Ballard). I was part of a community of hate, but I did not see it that way. I saw myself as righteous, insightful, and funny. I was a deft flaming-baton twirler, reaching for greater heights with wordplay and GIFs as my stunts. But because Ballard's character is not real, this allowed me to see my sub-posts and direct posts as victimless entertainment. That is until katrinapavela became the target of direct criticism by another Black woman *Scandal* fan with whom I previously shared ideological synergy.

***'[The] woman saying [this] is BLACK like us': Regulating Black Women's Fandom***

In late October of 2015, I logged into Tumblr. One of the first posts floating down my dashboard was a (since deleted) sub-post by a mutual *Scandal* follower. She was a cheerleader praising, directly, the flaming baton-twirler for the way she excoriated an unnamed fandom member. I wanted to be part of the entertained audience, so I went to the baton-twirler's blog in search of who was being dragged and for what reason. My heartrate increased tenfold when I came across a post, I had made earlier that evening, which had received significant engagement. I kept scrolling down to the response, my anxiety levels off the charts, hoping mine was not the post in question. It was. I was the subject of the excoriation (babycakesbriauna 2015). I was being dragged for all to see, and it had been done well.

In 2013, when a user wrote “SCANDAL FANS LIKE THIS WHORE KATRINAPAVELA NEED TO BE BRUTALLY MURDERED” (katrinapavela, 2013d) because I had critiqued Foley for the way he played Jake Ballard, the cartoonish violence of the posed not even a ding to my armour of self-esteem. It felt distant, emotional, and generic. It is likely that crimesceneamy’s whiteness coupled with the fact that she was external to the *Scandal* fan community shielded me from feeling personally attacked. We had no relationship. I mockingly wrote in my sub-post response (I did not respond directly to the user) that should anyone else which to be critical of me, the dagger to my ego would need to go through my analytical arguments (Ibid.). Two years later, that is what babycakesbriauna did. In section three of the discussion chapters, I included responses from this user to posts by katrinapavela, so we did have fond interactions and followed each other. We had had no negative interactions before this 2015 moment, therefore the ferocious precision of the response surprised and flummoxed me because it went beyond a disagreement, it felt like a dragging, a public shaming disguised as intersectional analysis. It blurred the lines between katrinapavela the blogger and Kadian Pow the researcher, the consequences of which had mental and emotional ripples extending well beyond that autumn evening in 2015. I will offer a synopsis of what took place before describing the wellness consequences.

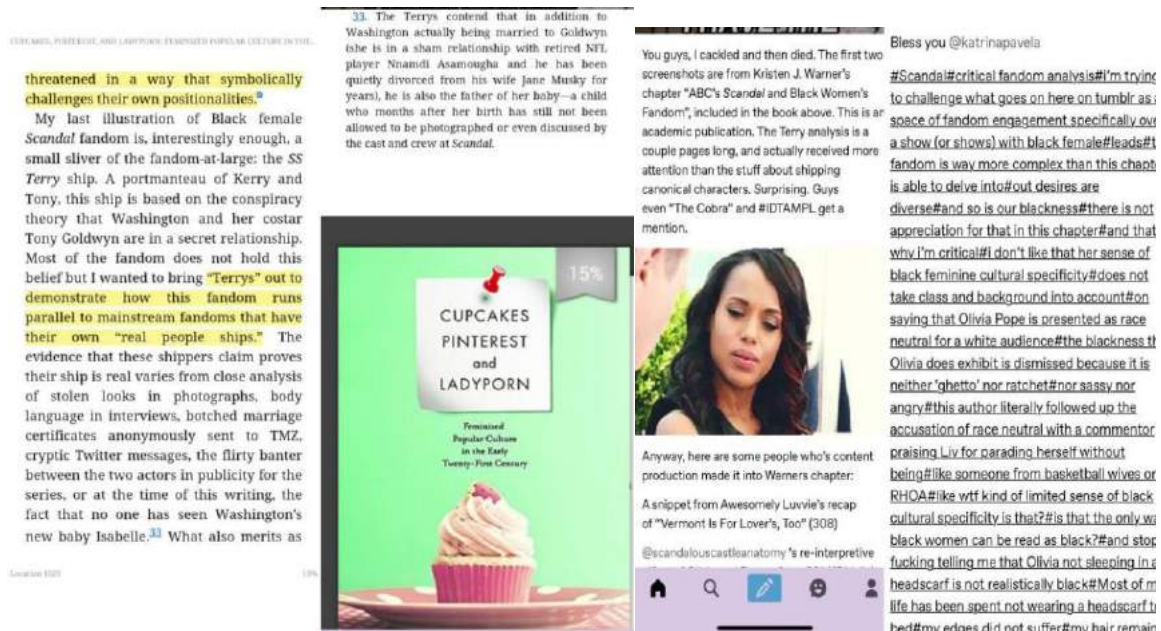


Figure 3.6 (katrinapavela 2015 c) screenshots of Fans referenced in *Cupcakes and Pinterest* book

After reading Kristen Warner’s “ABC’s *Scandal* and Black Women’s Fandom” (2015b), I was so excited to see an academic piece which not only centred Black women’s fandom, but more acutely reflected the fan community I had known. I wanted fans to know that such an article existed, and that some of their fan labour featured in Warner’s analysis (katrinapavela 2015c). I named the article, posted a screenshot of the cover, and a salacious snapshot, which I found bemusing. The excerpt concerned the ways in which fans concoct and participate in shipping a romantic relationship between the actors whose characters play lovers (e.g., Kerry Washington and Tony Goldwyn are shipped in parallel with Olivia and Fitz). Warner deftly wielded fandom terminology that this aca-fan found both delightful and surreal. I tried to convey this to the audience. As discussed earlier in this section as well as the introduction to the discussion chapters: using Tumblr’s hashtags can be strategically and politically deployed, particularly if offering criticism. I used the tags to vent about the contradictory ways Warner discusses Pope as a race-neutral character to whom Black women fans must labour to racebend Black cultural specificity (Warner 2015b: loc 749, 764).

Where the content of my post was diplomatic, my tags were not (katrinapavela 2015c). Less about Warner, and more about arguments that fix Black femininity in familiar, but limited, tropes, the absence of which renders void the character's cultural specificity. It is a flawed argument elegantly interrogated by Tara Pixley (2015), who, ironically, appears alongside a different article of Warner's in *The Black Scholar* journal earlier in that year. Unbeknownst to me, Warner was following my blog, and my Twitter account. She read my post and tags. On Twitter, she thanked me for spreading the word about her article and took my criticism, though she remained firm in her argument about creator, Rhimes, having a history of colour-blind approach to her work. In sum, it was a productive discussion (Appendix D). This section is less about Warner's argument, which I use throughout this thesis but about fan reactions to my posting of and excerpt from Warner's piece, and criticism of a specific part of her argument.

My post garnered a fair amount of engagement with the fandom, some in ways unexpected and unfair. Some posters agreed with my hash tagged arguments about the diversity of Black femininity, copying, and pasting them in their responses for all to read (ctron164 [deactivated], 2015). Other Black women fans expressed a distrust about academics who write about fan communities:

It reads like an indictment and likens the fandom to a group of bored teenaged girls with nothing better to do than sitting around living vicariously through actors' characters. That this is just very specific to "Terrys" only and that other fandoms don't do the same which wouldn't be as insulting if weren't titled "Black female fandom (thefandomdropout 2015(ctron164))

...Black women root for all sorts of characters, not just other black women. This is why we need our own academics on the subject, lest THEY make it into yet another anomaly/curiosity to be poked, prodded, derided, and ultimately killed (baronessvongdengler 2015).

The fucked up thing is, the woman saying is BLACK like us (thefandomdropout 2015(ctron164))

Well, you know how that goes. Some of these ppl will say anything to be accepted. Sadly, it never pays to sell out your own (baronessvondengler 2015).

Notable here is that these reactions are based the combination of the excerpt of Warner's argument discussing shipping real life actors and the context of Black women's fandoms. It is not based on a reading of Warner's actual piece. As expressed in Chapter Three, this defensiveness is warranted, as Fan Studies has, in the past, had a wave of pathologizing analysis about fan relationships to their love object. Whilst far from the argument Warren was making, these women had their defensive hackles raised, based on partial information. This is comparable to those who write entire Twitter threads based on a headline, but do not bother to read the nuanced article. Nevertheless, what is notable about the reactions above are the ways in which Warner (perhaps, ironically, because of her non-ethnicized name) is presumed to be white, thus solidifying the belief that her argument sees these Black women as anthropological curiosities—the opposite of Warner's arguments. Secondly, when Warner's race is corrected as Black, and therefore 'like us', baronessvondengler reaffirms her position about the researcher by casting Warner as a race traitor who gains white acceptance through pathologizing her 'own' people.

Freedomisasecret, who had read the full piece (unlike the others commenting above), and had written up her reflections in a since deleted post, still agrees on some points with the posters above (freedomisasecret 2015), but goes on to note:

I actually don't think it was strictly set up as a "fandom as pathology" argument which annoys me to no end, -\_\_-but more of a call to acknowledge that processes of identification are a part of fannish behaviour and they always implicate difference (freedomisasecret, 2015)

She dispels the problematic pathology argument but reaffirms Warren's argument that blackness is identified in difference, and ones that are particular and somehow universal to Black women (the character and audience under examination). It is a stance that I think leans too closely into essentialisation to claim difference as a stand in for 'truth'. But this section isn't about Warner's chapter so much as it is about two age old contestations brought to the fore by her piece. The first is the idea of being 'studied', specifically as Black women. In my original post about the Warner piece, I noted how grossly under-researched Black women's fandoms were—which is also discussed in Chapter Three. From fan responses above, and those not included here, but contained in the responses my post, opinions differed, based on trust. But even in an instance where the researcher had a relationship with the fandom, and was part of said fandom, fans could still take issue with the research outcome, if they interpret it as negative or judgmental in any way. This sense of judgment may not even come from the researcher but could reflect an insecurity or sense of shame on the part of the fan should their fan production be judged outside the imagined containment of Tumblr.

The second contestation—intricately linked to the first—concerns warring ideological factions of Black womanhood, among which there must be a singular winner. I, as I came to discover, was representing the losing, status quo team, which Rhimes heads up. This was pointed out to me by *babycakesbriauna* ((BCB) 2015b), who read the piece and came back with a lengthy treatise defending Warner. BCB, though she had admitted to no longer following the show closely, agreed with Warren's argument that Pope lacked racial specificity, and that this was engineered by Rhimes to appeal to a white audience. I say that this contestation is linked to the first because, ironically, *baronessvondengler* (2015c) accused Warner of the same thing by studying Black women. Both Rhimes and

Warner are accused of being racial shills, even as they are coming from different ends of the ideological blackness spectrum. Moreover, I was told that given all the critical reviews of the show and academic articles, I should have “shifted your [my] views” by this point (Ibid.). For BCB (agreeing with McClearen’s claim of post-identity erasure (2015)), Pope’s blackness was so non-specific, that she could have been played by “...a white man and nothing about her characterization would change” (babycakesbriauna 201b).

BCB’s argument gets into several more circular arguments that compare Pope’s inauthentic blackness with other ‘Black on purpose’ TV characters for whom Pope, arguably, paved the way (Empire’s ‘Cookie’ and *How to Get Away with Murder*’s Analise Keating, as I argued earlier in this thesis). What BCB’s leaves unaddressed is the difference that class and environmental upbringing have on these character’s blackness—all information given by those shows. Pope’s lack of imagined limitations as a Black woman character are not flaws in characterization, but Rhimes’ deliberate attempt at having the character appropriate white male privilege for herself. It is something Rhimes voices in the fourth episode of the fifth season, which airs two weeks before this meta-fandom blow-up: “He [Eli Pope] once told a colleague that he was on a quest to do the impossible... raise an African-American girl who felt fully entitled to own the world as much as any white man” (Rhimes, 2015). Just as racial stereotypes about Black people allow others a false sense of knowing, familiar and unifying tropes of blackness provide a false notion of its fixity. Therefore, witnessing an attempt at appropriating white male privilege (‘the impossible,’ as Rhimes notes), can invoke racial insecurity in some viewers, allowing them to feel unmoored from blackness as they know it, or expect it to look like. Beneath the discomfort of such unfixed representations is resentment imbued by the limitations of white supremacy, which has already othered us. What we don’t want is to feel a sense of alienation or otherness from the characters that



are ‘for us’. The impetus for the creation of our art, and the response it engenders from Black people is not always defined by the white gaze, even as white capitalist patriarchal systems remained primed for exploiting such creations. Black people should be allowed to define a reality for themselves outside of the dictates of whiteness. The pursuit is a form of resistance (mynumberonefeeling, 2015). If not allowed this freedom, as Fanon notes, we get caught between ‘not yet [being] white’ and being ‘no longer [Black], thereby rendering us damned (1972: 138). I was not a ‘true sista’.

### ***Bedbugs of the Mind: the Interiority of a Dragging***

I felt damned, not by the argument BCB directed at me, which was in my intellectual wheelhouse, but by the sharpened dagger of her tone and the intent of it, which sought to put me in my place. Being at least 15 years younger than me at the time, BCB’s retort was meant to embarrass me from a perch of imagined Black feminine cultural superiority. I knew this to be the case because I first witnessed the sub-posting of cheerleader praise for the precision of her flaming baton. It burned me, and I felt attacked. From spending time on Tumblr, I knew that to not respond would be interpreted as a moral and intellectual win by the flaming baton twirler and cheerleaders. Perhaps even the general audience. A lack of response typically means one has been sufficiently embarrassed into silence by the shade thrown at them. It is seen as weak, not ‘above the fray’. This incident eventually led me to adopt quiet as strategic protection, which I discuss later in this chapter. But in the immediate aftermath, through the overwhelming anxiety I felt, and the sleeplessness, I knew I would respond because I felt, as katrinapavela, I had a reputation to protect. As a person, my ego was hurt, responding felt like medicine. This interaction was witnessed by many, and I had been dragged into an arena where I was expected to give my own

performance as part of the entertainment. Plus, I just plain disagreed with BCB on several points. I wrote a response a day later, conceding some points, presenting my own evidence, and pointing out her inconsistent arguments (katrinapavela 2015d). She wrote back (babycakesbriauna 2015c). I never read it. I did not respond because it was not a good faith discussion, it was a debate to which I did not consent, and to which there would be no winners—only praiseworthy performances and ‘losers’. This cycle is endemic to much of what social media platforms have become and was not unique to this exchange on Tumblr. I would not turn my blog into a night at the Apollo. I never spoke to her again, though, for a while, she continued to make snarky responses to my fan content until she realized I was no longer engaging her. My sanity, continued data gathering, and levels of anxiety required this. This is what I told myself. I could not reconcile BCB’s insistence that “the conversation [about Black femininity] needs to happen” (2015b) with the attitude of the response, the latter indicating that the conversation was open only to one perspective on the lived experience of Black femininity.

In addition to the anxiety, there was shame and depression for weeks afterward. I felt shame because plenty of people were entertained by the thread and found the discourse challenging, but I felt as if I had been told my perspective was wrong, and that I was not smart. I started questioning myself intellectually. The shame became entwined with the anxiety, and then the depression. Actor and podcaster, Dylan Marron (2018), uses the term ‘bedbugs of the mind’ to describe the psychological paranoia and changed state a person goes through after a public dragging. He says:

And I've started thinking about pile-ons as bedbugs of the mind because it's that kind of thing where you... They can be gone and you still feel that it's there. You can be walking in the street and you're afraid like that person fucking hates me... And the reason I say is that it's bedbugs of the mind--and I want to be super

clear I don't mean the people, I mean the ideas, the kind of this thing that seeps into us. ... (2018).

Marron's analogy works because a bedbug infestation is a health concern, and creates a sense of haunting in the body, which is what I felt. I was so unsettled by this public spat, I sought help from my GP. We eventually settled on an antidepressant that would also help the anxiety.

## Discussion

### *Fandom Policing: Monolithic Expectations and Divergent Realities*

I wish to now work through an analysis of underlying processes embedded in fan commentary earlier in this chapter, and the explicit relationship between fandom politics writ large to Black racial discourse in the digital realm. First is how the concept of fandom policing is used to create and manage boundaries around racial representations and permissibility of blackness. This topic then segues into authenticating Black womanhood and the fertile space it enables for negative bonding relationships to grow. Lastly, I will provide a meditation on the mental un-wellness these bounded restrictions can create and interpret Kevin Quashie's notion of 'quiet' as a strategic practice in Black women's fandoms.

Attempts by some fans within a fandom to enforce rules or promote allowable perspectives and behaviours whilst denouncing disfavoured ones is known as fandom policing. This policing can also be taken up by fans toward celebrities (Busse 2013, Chin 2015,) or by fans towards each other, particularly those deemed 'unruly' (Zubernis and Larsen, 2012; Philips 2017). Jones notes that fan policing produces boundaries, which in themselves are not intrinsically good or bad. The need to produce these boundaries arises from internalized "stereotypes about bad fans and the need to define oneself as appropriate" (Stanfill 2013:

122 in Jones 2018: 265). An Intersectional extrapolation of this concept would mean some fans attempt to police the boundaries of Black women's behaviour and its permissible translations onscreen. Because fans do not have the power to produce the media product itself, this power is exercised within fan spaces where the show is parsed, praised, and panned. I see boundaries that attempt to protect fans' emotional constitution (e.g., calling-out intra-fandom denigration or threats toward other fans) as worthwhile, but ideological boundaries around race and gender should be queered more, in the Glickman (2012) sense. By this I mean that the boundaries should be made more elastic and malleable in parts.

These boundaries can get tricky because attempts to implement them are bound up in two concerns: 1) who has the power of persuasion and/or enforcement; 2) the nature of the request. In Fan Studies, a 'Big Name Fan' (BNF), is a fan who has gained a considerable amount of recognition within a fan community (Hills 2006: 104). The BNF's standing has usually been achieved through "hierarchies of knowledge, fandom level/quality [of content produced], access, leaders, venue" (Jones 2018: 258 via McDonald, 1998: 137-138). In Tumblr's *Scandal* fandom, there were categories of BNFs. Some were known for their speed and skill with producing GIFs; manipulating scenes to fit deeply affective pop songs; and humorous or insightful commentary about the show. What is important to note about BNFs is that they are not self-designated, but fan designated. That designation is not static, but dynamic and can be seen in ways both positive and negative, depending on the media object's ability to maintain compliance with various fan desires. Though I did not have any interactions with the cast or producers (in fact I deliberately refrained, in most cases, from courting their attention), as *katrinapavela*, I was eventually viewed, by some, as having power in the fandom. This could be gleaned from the reblogging of and comments on my analytical *Scandal* pieces as well as my memes. But it could also be surmised from the

amount of anonymous (and identifiable) requests and question I would receive in my inbox soliciting my show-related opinions. As importantly, sometimes fans would try to recruit me to settle tensions, recruit me to a 'side' of a disagreement, or speak up about an injustice. In many ways, *babycakesbriauna's* public call-out of my politics, discussed above, had much to do with the perception of me as a BNF. There was online social currency and clout at stake in positioning herself as a Black intellectual challenge to *katrinapavela*, and certainly my ego wanted to defend the standing I had gained in the fandom (though that standing was not always positively charged). What BCB symbolically unravelled was the illusion of any power I thought I had, and the precarious liminality of my position as an aca-fan in the *Scandal* fandom.

This insider/outsider, or aca-fan (Jenkins 1992), positioning is not new. The aca-fan is one who identifies as both academic and fan. Tumblr is seen as a rich fieldwork site where many researchers also engage their fan interests and network simultaneously (Downey et al 2018). However, it is a precarious methodological tightrope one walks at times. Though the incident with BCB was very direct and public, it was hardly the only example highlighting the dynamic of the aca-fan in highly emotionally charged spaces like Tumblr.

*Elizabethsmediatedlife* was a Communications researcher and *Scandal* fan who had been active in both worlds since as far back as 2013. I learned of Warner's Cupcakes and Pinterest chapter from *elizabethsmediatedlife* (2015a). I bring this up as an example of how researchers, frequently position themselves in these liminal spaces, and that hostility is fostered by disagreement. *Elizabethsmediatedlife* and I used to be friendly with each other, in the fandom, and as researchers. As *Scandal's* plots became darker, and Pope's character shifted in that direction, the greater the divergence within the fandom. Along with others, *elizabethsmediatedlife* and *katrinapavela* became ensconced in different textual reading

camp. Some deserted the fandom all together over toxicity within the Tumblr fandom itself; moved to Twitter for less serious fodder; or became silent observers of hyper-curated Tumblr dashboards. I knew women who fell into all three categories. The greater point highlighted by this splintering is that attempting to police boundaries around permissible Black opinions or representation can impact fan production, and communalism. This is usually because the feeling of intra-fandom surveillance can lead some fans to retreat to private spaces with approved members or seek more liberating fan spaces in which to practice their preferred type of fan behaviour. As a fan, I ended up participating in the above whilst also blogging on Tumblr until the end of the series in 2018.

### **Authenticating Black Womanhood and Negatively Charged Affective Bonds of Anti-fandom**

Black women have contended with dissatisfaction concerning character representations and narrative trajectories for as long as Black women characters have been on TV, as should be expected. The increased digitization of culture and proliferation of media content that can afford to cater to niche audiences have led to the success of platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube. Francesca Sobande (2017) notes that Black women use spaces like YouTube to seek like-minded Black female representation. In this way, they can perform identity and ideological work they cannot perform with the dearth of images on network TV. Though Sobande's study was aimed at Black British women, who have even fewer options on terrestrial television, it highlights Black women's propensity for combining entertainment and epistemological labour. In the previous chapter, I argued that fan desire for Black love and the ways in which they mapped emotion onto Pope's body needed to be understood in the context of the peak of online Black liberation movements, during 2014-2016 (the election of Donald Trump marking a

shift in types of rhetoric). What has been evidenced in this chapter is that Black women fans of *Scandal* were not only heavily engaged, in the contested politics of authenticating Black womanhood, but used oppositionality to form affective bond with each other. The politicization of dissatisfaction was palpable in the fandom, as hyper critical comments about *Scandal's* storylines were used to virtue signal larger political pain points. Plot points, dialogue, seasonal themes now needed to run parallel with fans' socio-cultural politics, or risk being called out for the inadequacies toward Intersectionality. Whilst other scholars have argued that these contestations evidence particular moralities and passions of fans (Scott 2017; House and Bradley 2019), or that it is customary for fans to rib their object of affection, having been an active member of the *Scandal* fandom, I propose that there is something more happening here.

Fiske (1989) notes that fans use media to explicitly interpret the world around them, reproducing parts they like the most. This deeply affective process applies even to the anti-fan, who does the opposite: reproduce parts of the world they dislike the most (Johnson, 2007). The denigration of *Scandal's* politics around Black womanhood may be the point. As I see it, the anti-fans' love language is expressed most authentically through biting criticism and denigration. They are flaming baton-twirlers. The comments were not made in hopes of producers eavesdropping and taking notes for improvement. The proliferation of digital fandoms has enabled these anti-fan sentiments to be more visible and more disruptive to the fan experience (Lanier and Fowler, 2013). As consequently, the ease of finding each other has allowed anti-fans to build enclaves inside fan communities. The virtue signalling taking place is for disaffected fans who either never liked the show or had since fallen out with the show due to severed expectations. Using Pope's sexual decisions, for instance, anti-fans create fretful discourse about her mental and emotional health. This talking point is

then used to signal that the fans making the critique are the ones who care about Black women's mental health. Affective bonds begin to form on a foundation of hypercriticality, which if breeched, would sever those bonds. Performing negative, or overly critical critique of the show reinforces both a sense of communalism and an authentication of 'true' Black womanhood.

### **Beyond Performativity: 'Quiet' and the Interiority of Black Womanhood**

Thus far I have discussed policing of racial and gender boundaries, and attempts at authenticating Black womanhood, within the *Scandal* fandom. These attempts are, sometimes, the effects of living as Black under the watchful gaze of white supremacy. I have noted the ways in which the performative nature of fan, and anti-fan comments that uphold such boundaries can lead to stressful fissures and lack of emotional wellness. I wish to now discuss the ways in which I, as *katrinapavela*, dealt with my anti-fan encounter, and the racial paranoia it brought on. Furthermore, I wish to explore how Kevin Quashie's conceptualisation of 'quiet' helped me reconcile my place within the *Scandal* fandom and influenced my fan praxis thereafter.

Previous discussion sections focused on embrace Tumblr as a potential playground for Black women's joy and humour, as well as how fans performed identity work around desire through affective mapping of Pope's body. The later spiralling of Pope's well-being, erratic behaviour and numbing allowed conversations around these topics to be had openly. But it was far less welcomed to speak openly about mental distress brought on by other fans (or anti-fans). I had to turn inward to do that work. I realized that the attempts to authenticate Black womanhood all desired to keep it fixed, uncertain, immovable. Quashie writes that when blackness becomes synonymous with political acts of resistance, Black



subjectivity is then expected to always serve a social and political purpose rather than the individual self (2012: loc 41). But this racial regulation of blackness serves white supremacist claims to individuality and nationhood because “blackness provides the delineating contours” around which white identity coalesces (Rahman 2012: 21 in Pow 2018: 240). In other words, whiteness knows itself as ‘not Black’. The narrower blackness is defined, the larger the playground of whiteness. I began to think about Black people as absorbent forces, and blackness as “an uncontainable process of construction,” continually making and remaking itself (Pow 2018: 241). Because if this were true, then there was no such thing as inauthentic, or insufficient blackness practiced by a Black person. Scholar Kevin Quashie conceptualizes the notion of ‘quiet’ as a strategic defence of the Black subject’s right to a rich interior world, with vagaries that do not have to be representative of anyone but the Black subject herself (2012). ‘Quiet’ is drawn, in part, from Audre Lorde’s concept of the ‘erotic’ (1983), as the capacity to feel one’s own feminine power from within and engage it. Internalising this idea gave me inspiration, as katrinapavela, to keep writing my thoughts on *Scandal*, even if they did not align with virtue-signalling politics of the day. I stopped arguing with people about their Black political opinions, instead focusing on accessing my own and seeking out those who wrote with humour or fair criticality.

## Conclusion

All these arguments boil down to what is this 'Black' in Olivia Pope and what does it say about the rest of us? This chapter is really about the fight for the meaning of Black womanhood and the right to interpret that in diverse ways, which means it will be portrayed in diverse ways. Resistance Black multiplicity can lead to antagonisms—both regarding discussions of the narrative, subject matter taken up by the narrative (5th season openly dating Fitz), but also spill into real life and cause real harm to the women doing the discussion. The issue over 'wokeness' and who is more woke is the thing used as a cudgel to cause harm.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **Reflections on my Time in the Fandom**

Discussion sections I to IV provided context for understanding Tumblr and the researcher's introduction to the *Scandal* fandom, as well as interactions with fans, and creative production a member of the fandom. Moreover, those sections explored the Intersectionality of Black women's fandom through the epistemological themes of joy, desire, wellness, and racial insecurity that were gleaned from the data. Whilst the concluding chapter will provide a summary of the research, this section serves as a kind of epilogue, seeking to convey the researcher's reflections on how she was impacted by her fieldwork, and the potentialities from that experience with which she has since contended.

### **Reclaiming my Pocket of Freedom**

As I explained in Section IV of the Discussion chapter, I was rattled by my encounter with *babycakesbriauna*. The pretence of hostile discussions around permissible and impermissible manifestations of blackness, in a television show, are never mere intellectual exploits when you are a Black person. Underneath the arguments is something intensely personal, as you are arguing for the right to a joy and freedom in a Black body that may run counter to established cultural narratives. The urge to embrace one's 'erotic' nature (Lorde 1979) means having to fight against an invasive sense of 'incorrectness' (Walker 1983), and racial shame. The shame is about letting down the 'side' of Black womanhood because you are representing it improperly.

There were months after the stand-off with BCB that other women in the fandom began to challenge the lens of Black womanhood I applied to my fan production. I began to feel as if the pocket of freedom, the playground I had created for myself on Tumblr was threatening to become like everything else in my professional life: something for which I would be evaluate and live in the anxious uncertainty of being deemed inadequate. My creative space was threatened, and it was not until the spring of 2016—towards the end of my fieldwork—that my resentment forced me to confront my responsibility to protect my fan experience. After the fieldwork was done, I would go back to the simplicity of who I was before: a fan. This process meant unfollowing some of the more critical accounts to which I had exposed myself for the integrity of my research data. Recovering my playground meant reducing the chances of involuntarily seeing anti-fan or rival ‘shipper content on my Tumblr dashboard. As mentioned in Section IV, I used Quashie’s (2012) notion of ‘quiet’ as a strategic part of my fan praxis. This amounted to scrolling past hostile arguments that came across my dashboard and reminding myself that I was the arbiter of nothing, and that weighing in would only change my peace, not their opinions. It was an exercise in quashing narcissism.

Besides my dashboard interventions, I began to be more active on Twitter. All my original content and reblogs had been set to link to my Twitter account. I began to interact more, with the Twitterati, who engaged my content. The (then) 140-character limit helped me keep things light and humorous. Lastly, I created a private chat with four women—two from Tumblr, two from Twitter—with whom I had been corresponding about the show. I created the group out of convenience for myself, as maintaining four independent chats was becoming time-consuming. It was just a hunch that they would also find things in common since we were all fans of the show, liking and disliking the same characters. What started

out of convenience blossomed into an actual friendship with, and between, these women that still exists as I type this, two years after *Scandal*'s denouement. This private 'pocket' gave me sense of safety in which to freely play, largely without the worry.

### Negative Bonding

Whilst I am personally wired to building emotional bonds, within a fandom, on a constructive basis, meaningful bonds can also be formed in a negative space of absence, or destruction. One of the key areas I have continued to reflect upon, after completing my field work and write-up, is the way in which Negative Bonding has become an increasingly pervasive basis around which group identity is formed and sustained in the digital space. The focus on 'fantagonism' (Johnson 2017) is typically examined from an intra-fandom perspective that explicitly centres race and gender. The 'Stan' [FOOTNOTE M&M SONG] culturalization of social media increasingly makes it acceptable to live in righteous silos. [What I label as 'Negative Bonding' is a sub-genre of anti-fandom, which I discussed in section IV. But here I consider the construction of this bond beyond the *Scandal* fandom. Negative Bonding, much like a photograph's negative, is the distinct flip of the way something is intended to be viewed. The lighter parts of the projected image recede into a flattened darkness and the normally recessed images are the ones that are prominently displayed and textured. The negative is now the positive and vice versa. The deconstruction is its own art form just as the negative side of an image has gained its own appreciation as photography. It changes the mood of an image, but is still art, nonetheless. In the same way, Black women fans use race-critical, or racial doom provocations to create social bonds that are grounded specifically in de-struction. I say destruction because some of these fans literally wished for the destruction of *Scandal* whilst still sporting screen names derived

from the series. Friendships become anchored in the ability to call-out, shade, or intellectualise emotional dissatisfaction. Much like any social group wherein the bonds are formed around a weak premise, Negative Bonding can only be sustained when dissatisfaction remains a constant. This is an area of research to which I am drawn for further investigation, which I discuss in the Conclusion chapter.

### **Fandom love in the time of Corona(virus):**

Finally, I wish to reflect on a new fan experience: the post-original content fandom. *Scandal* ended in the spring of 2018. It is true that most fandoms based around original content reduce fan production once the original content ceases, plenty of fandoms continue to be vibrant, recruiting new fans. Prior to this fandom, when original episodes of my love object ceased, my fan activity ceased. I was surprised to find myself continuing, albeit no longer daily, following and interacting with fan accounts on Twitter and Tumblr. Regarding the latter, I return to the words in my blog's description: "This page is a dissertation of sorts..." (katrinapavela 2012). It was the first time I had built something, as part of a fandom that would exist even after I stopped participating in the fandom. Because the show continues to have a life in syndication and streaming platforms, Tumblr's archives of fan content will continue to be relevant.

During the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which has non- 'essential' employees working from home, or furloughed, since March, streaming platforms have seen significant growth. The hours of content watched on these platforms have gone up by as much as 75% (Erbland 2020). This is not just out of boredom, or a way of productively whiling away the hours at home. During times of great uncertainty, we are more likely to cling to things of the past that we associate with happiness, security, gratitude, or relaxation, including previously

watched programming (7starsagency, 2019). In a 2020 update to his 2014 Psychology Today article on the roots and comforts of nostalgia, Neel Burton (2020), notes that what was once seen as mental illness, is now positively regarded as an adaptive function that aides us in managing pain and anxiety brought on by the stresses of the world. In this way, I have noted how much my own longing for comfort has allowed me nearly daily indulgences in the *Scandal* fandom. As Burton notes, nostalgia “is more pronounced in uncertain times and times of transition or change” (2020). Now knowing that the series ended on a semi satisfying note, I (and others) freely re-visit the most enduringly affective moments. These mostly translate to funny moments and ones concerning the central romance of Olivia and Fitz. Somehow, we find that bond to an emotional blanket in which we swaddle ourselves, preserving and protecting ourselves from a far more complicated and destructive lived reality.

## Conclusion

Given the many ways in which the pressures of representation can plague Black content, it has been reassuring to see other Black women reaching back towards series like *Scandal*, or present Black women-centred comedies like *Insecure* (HBO) serve as pockets of joy. Knowing that Black cultural products can still serve an interior joy as well as a political publicness reifies their significance.

## CONCLUSION

### **Looking Back, Thinking Forward**

This project has examined the ways in which Black women fans of *Scandal*, on social media site, Tumblr, have interrogated and reflected on the text in thematically discursive ways. It did so by centring the racialised and gendered identities of these women, rendering them ‘default’ rather than ‘other’. The project demonstrated the relationship between their embodied experiences and the political concerns of Black womanhood they engage in *Scandal*’s text. The project revealed that Black women’s responses were diverse and complicated, holding space for both the heady possibilities of blackness suspended in fantasy, and the contours of the realities of blackness. Ultimately, the conclusion of this thesis finds that the *Scandal* discourse by Black women fans navigates a dynamic tension between the interiority of desire and the more externally focused politics of representation.

This dissertation had several interconnected objectives. The first was to explore the degree to which *Scandal*, as a historic TV drama, which centred its story around a Black woman character for the first time in 38 years, could be engaged in ways that were not overdetermined by representational discourses. These discourses are heavily formed as responses to the oppressive constructs of white supremacy. Instead, I longed for a project that reflected the experience of a Black women’s fandom from the inside out—one that laid bare all the intricacies and contradictions of the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality.

As a follow on from exploring alternative ideas for understanding Black womanhood in media, beyond representation, the project aimed to use a Fan Studies theory to study the discourse of those most intimately connected to *Scandal* as a media love object. By using



Critically Engaged Ethnography (CEE) as a methodology, it allowed the researcher to adopt an openly racialised and gendered form of reflexive subjectivity that enabled the researcher to acknowledge the shared identity with her research subjects. Moreover, CEE allowed me to use Black feminism as an analytical framework for interpreting the discourse of Black female subjects and their orientation towards *Scandal's* text.

Thirdly, the project aimed to identify and tease out themes of Intersectionality to which the *Scandal* fandom returned to repeatedly, between the years of 2013-2016. To this end, I analysed discursive responses to key moments on the show which had high levels of engagement. I found that the Tumblr discourse on the show fell into three broad themes: desire (sexual and non-sexual); the challenges facing Black womanhood; and authentic portrayals of blackness.

### **Summarising the Research**

This dissertation project began out of a desire to fill in a gap in the scholarship on Black women's television fandom. The reasons were two-fold: to explore the possibilities for engaging with fictional content about Black women wherein the representational value to the white gaze was not the exclusive concern. In the literature review, I outlined the long history of representational scholarship about the portrayal of Black people in American media, including how these images relied on the political function of stereotype to aid in the continued subjugation of Black people in white supremacist society. The degree to which stereotypes, or controlling images, as Hill-Collins (2000) calls them, have been effectively absorbed by the victims and perpetrators of those images, makes it impossible to completely disentangle those ideas from modern characters we now see. This is sometimes

true even when those Black character are written by Black artists. There is a deep-seated suspicion that already guides the evaluative lens we use to assess such media. I went on to pontificate that for us to see a Black character as more than a patchwork of racialised and gendered tropes, perhaps we must use a different lens. Having already experienced being in the *Scandal* fandom, on Tumblr, with many Black women inured me to the possibility of such a lens.

To bridge the gap between the literature review's focus on representational scholarship and the ethnography of fandom, I discussed the ways in which Fan Studies, as a discipline has under-engaged Black women's affective and Intersectional relationship to their media objects. I proposed that it was through this discipline that we may understand in what ways portrayals of Black characters might offer something more.

By using Critically Engaged Ethnography for the project's methodology, I was able to capture the rich tapestry of epistemology and affect Black women bring to their media consumption and fan production, using Tumblr's tools. Moreover, CEE allowed me to reflexively relay what it was like to exist in concert and conflict with these women and their astute reflections of *Scandal*'s text. Moreover, as a known fan and content-producer on the platform, I did not intend to cease activity, or exempt my praxis from critique. As a researcher whose social positioning resembles that of the population whose interactions and discourse is being examined, I must acknowledge the theoretical suppositions at work in my blogging and in the theoretical approach to my research. Critically Engaged Ethnography allowed me to keep my place among the groups of (mostly) Black women I spent tens of hours interacting with and creating content for each week. I was them, in many ways (Pow, forthcoming).

### ***Chapter Five: Down the Tumblr Rabbit Hole I Go***

Chapter Five sought to accomplish two things. Firstly, it set up the parameters for the ethnographic exploration of the chapter's four race-themed sections: the ways in which Black women fans use Tumblr as a kind of sheltered pocket in which to use their fan production to play with both the realities and fantasies of race and Intersectionality; how fans racialize feminine pleasure and give critical consideration to the notion of 'love'; fans' Intersectional interpretations of 'wellness' in *Scandal's* script and the ways in which the politics of Black representation are critical components of fan antagonism toward each other and the researcher.

Secondly, the Discussion's introduction established that the data collected from *Scandal* fan's tumblr blogs would be analysed, thematically, for epistemological discourse as well as how the discourse fit within the digitized culture of Tumblr as a social media platform. To that end, the researcher took the reader on narrative introduction to the Tumblr landscape by recalling, ethnographically, how her infatuation with *Scandal's* first series and the compulsion to engage with others about the show led me down a Tumblr rabbit hole to its fans. Moreover, the Discussion chapter's introduction gives the reader a reflexive understanding of Tumblr's technological functionalities, limitations, and linguistics, which are key to understanding fan interactions and behaviour contained in the ensuing data sets.

***Chapter Six: ‘Bantu knots and oiling her scalp with olive oil’: Playing with Black Culture in Fan Production***

In some ways, this chapter served as a counterpoint to representational arguments in the dissertation’s Literature Review. That chapter discussed the long history of works about Black representation and stereotype, and how much of scholarship on Black media portrayals was overdetermined by the lingua franca of representation. In part, the dissertation sought to explore the extent to which perspectives that considered gendered concepts of raciality would excavate contours of filmic Blackness beyond representation. The section examined racialised contours of humour, the epistemological centrality of Black hair to Black women fans of the show, and complex attempts at battling with the ways in which Black patriarchy impacts Black womanhood.

***Chapter Seven: ‘I want him to be her man’: The Intersectional Politics of Love and Desire***

A key focus of how Black womanhood is represented on screen is about sexuality, specifically the degree to which it comports with established stereotypes or controlling narratives (Hill Collins 1990). Whether it be the oversexed ‘Jezebel’, the sexless ‘Mammy’, or the prudish ‘Black Lady’, what is clear is that so many portrayals of Black women’s sexuality were not by or about Black women’s desires. This section examined how Black women fans interpreted Black feminine sexuality as written by a Black woman, and seemingly centred on Olivia Pope’s pleasure. The mediation of Pope’s body, and the ways in which it responded (or not) to romantic queues became a key focus of analysis and fantastical projections by fans. These considerations included the very women who were analysing Olivia’s ever sexual interaction, freely conveying their every lascivious or condemnatory thought freely.

The research also revealed that Black women revealed complicated and contradictory feelings about how Pope's character should be loved and by whom. These feelings were often an extension of their own personal desires and lived experiences. For some, race was central to how they envisioned romantic fulfilment for Olivia, in part, because they desired it for themselves. The longing for 'Black love' on screen was a projection of some Black women's own preferences, but more broadly spoke to a colonialist absence in much of network TV wherein Black heterosexual romantic couplings were a rare sight. The absence increased their longing, with some Black women fans increasing their commentary when Olivia's character was paired with a Black man. This discourse on 'Black love' also prompted the researcher to consider whether 'Black love' was expansive enough to include the autonomous choices of Black women to be loved in the specific ways they wanted and by whomever they wanted, even if that other defied gendered and racial expectations.

### ***Chapter Eight: 'A true sista': Wellness, Performative Wokeness and Fantagionisms***

Section IV of the Discussion chapter was ambitious in endeavouring to connect racialised discourses around Pope's encounters with trauma and ensuing (un)wellness with the anxieties produced because of the fandom's divergent politics around Black representation in *Scandal*. Through data analysis, I was able to convey fans' commiseration with Olivia's emotional lows and perceived lack of mental wellness and how they connected this unwellness to epistemologies of Black womanhood. Secondly, the chapter aimed to zoom out by examining the contradictory logics of the fandom itself regarding the mental health of each other. As researcher, I used strategic vulnerability of traumatic fieldwork

encounters, within the fandom, to consider the ways in which dynamics of racial performativity on Social Media can degrade mental health.

### ***Chapter Nine: Reflections***

In this brief section, I reserve a space for reflecting on the impact that doing the research has made on me, as well as the intellectual and philosophical contentions with which I have continue to grapple because of it. Whilst unconventional, the precarity of my position as both fan and academic, during my fieldwork and write up, needed a space outside the analysis of the fan data.

### **Project Limitations**

This research sought to elevate critical voices of, mostly, Black women in *Scandal's* fandom on Tumblr, by demonstrating the ways in which these women's fan praxis goes beyond visual representations of race, gender, and sexuality on TV. Particularly regarding Olivia Pope's character these fans take as axiomatic various concepts about blackness, and intersectionality in their fan discourse, attempting to both access the character's interiority as well as their own internal fan projections in the process. Framed by a methodology that draws explicitly draws on the researcher's experience and praxis as part of the fandom, this research coalesces around those experiences, which are themselves limited by a favourable posture toward *Scandal*. By zooming in on this focus, this thesis did not seek to dislodge the necessary importance and value of well-developed theories around race and representation. Nor did this study purport to be inclusive of all *Scandal* fans' perspectives. Instead, it sought

to contribute bricolage-d potentialities, from segments of the show's audience, drawing out the intersectional representations of race, gender and sexuality using the technological affordances of Tumblr's publishing tools and platform design.

## **Future Research**

### ***Shaming as Performance and Power on Social Media***

This research can be further developed in several key areas, based on each of the discussion themes. There are two that I find most compelling to pursue. The juggernaut that is social media has achieved near ubiquity in the lives of many since the mid-2000s. Vectors of research have focused on the ways in which social media is shaping and changing our dating habits (Vogel et al 2014), sociality (DeChoudhury et al. 2013; Kraus et al. 2011), shared culture (Van Dijck 2013; Kasra 2017), and political rhetorical (Huntington 2016) The notion of 'dragging' (as discussed in Section IV) as an intentionally humiliating act packaged as a teachable moment has become increasingly commonplace over the last decade. Whilst Ronson (2016) interviewed people at the centre of infamous social media flare-ups, his study excluded critical attention to race. This research project points to need for further research regarding the impact of public racial performativity on Social Media on the emotional wellness of the performers, the target, and the audience.

Steele (2016) notes that the rhetorical strategy of 'playing the dozens' uses sharp and pithy exchanges of critique as forms of communal self-discipline. The 'dozens' uses observational comedy and insult of the target, including their family (especially the mother) (e.g., your momma teeth so yellow, she could butter a whole loaf of bread). Whilst the example I gave is a juvenile one from my own childhood, the wordplay of the dozens can be

embedded in sophisticated critique. Both Lu and Steele characterize these exchanges as, perhaps, appearing coarse or cruel to outsiders (meaning non-Black people), these gestural performances are to be thought of as strategies pursuant to communal sharing and joy (Lu and Steele 2019, p. 825). Moreover, these sharp-witted linguistic displays showcase Black oral culture's subversion of the dominant culture (ibid.). Monk-Payton (2017) views "'antagonistic displays of truth telling as vital viral activity'" (pg. 28 in Lu and Steel, 2019, p. 826). For her, comedic ridicule, and truth-telling among Black people on Twitter as an "affective network of social scrutiny" (pg. 30). I agree that these strategies can be externally justified as resistance, and previous sections have examined the communal sharing of joy and speaking truth to power. But what examination is there for the emotional disruptions caused by these very public displays of shade and 'truth-telling', especially when all parties are Black women? It is one thing to feel powerful and righteous when 'truth-telling' is punching up, but what about when punching across? Creating virality out of antagonistic truth-telling leaves out those who are the objects of that and focuses only on the 'truthteller', and the audience being entertained by it.

The use of dragging may be seen as an industrial logic, deployed by the marginalised to wrest power when diminished. What needs further examination is the intra-racial impact and cruelty of these rhetorical performances. Because there are typically three parties to these rhetorical performances (the accuser, the accused, the onlooker(s), notions of shame, embarrassment, meanness, and power must be examined. Moreover, rather than resistance to dominant narratives, as Steele (2016) suggest the dozens evidence, I these types of insults can also assess the ways in which white supremacy undergirds accusations of racial insufficiency that arise in the 'dozens' discourse as manifested in social media. Moreover, given that 'dragging' can often masquerade as a tool of justice or virtue-signalling,



producing ‘moral orgasms’ (Morrow, 2019), but little else. Morrow describes these ‘orgasms’ as temporary, emotionally satisfying releases of serotonin. The effect does not last because calling out what’s wrong is not the same as suggesting or creating solutions. Being rewarded by others for these performative highs may encourage the pervasiveness of this behaviour, which could be ultimately more destructive than constructive to debate on these platforms, particularly around how blackness is performed.

Some key questions to consider for future research would be: Are performative wokeness and racial shaming effective means of correcting unwanted political rhetoric, or does this methodology have undesirable consequences? If so, what are the intersectional differences of these consequences? What is the basis the communal identity among the marginalized? Is the oppression the glue? And as representative images gain more power, does it become more necessary to explore every crevice for critique in entertainment to maintain the group’s stickiness? Who’s going to watch the perfect intersectional drama? Thirdly, what is the emotional toll of this public shaming and to what extent do the cultural expectations of blackness impact how the targets and the aggressors manage emotional consequences? These questions, and more, are ripe for further research.

### ***Black Women, Refuge and Romance***

Another area of future exploration that emerges from both the research and observations during the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, concerns the perceived emotional bonds Black women form around their One True Pair (OTP), in their favourite television show. Whilst this research spent a short time analysing romanticised and sexualised discourse about the Olivia and Fitz pairing in *Scandal*, it did not present interviews with

women specifically about his topic. As mentioned in the Methodology chapter, the decision to abstain from interviewing fans for this project arises from an interest in the performance/voyeurism duality of online fan praxis. Research that engages the affective bonds formed through literature and with each other is an area more conducive to fan interviews. I am curious about the ways in which fictional familiarity and comforting romantic tropes may be used as harbours of refuge or strategic distractions, particularly during a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Included here is a question about the duality of the fraught publicness of Black resistance and the interiority of Black fragility.

### ***Black Existentialism, Time, and Fandom***

The desire to find more malleable ways of discussing Black identity outside a representational rubric led me down pathways I now recognize as Black existentialism and philosophy. The following are the most significant stimuli toward that realisation: Kevin Quashie's treatise on Black interiority (2012) along with Audre Lorde's theorising of 'the erotic' (1979); Caresse John's (2011) use of Standpoint Theory to analyse the fictional works of Nella Larsen; Claudia Tate's (1998) emphasis on the force of desire and psychoanalysis as alternative discourses present in the works of Black writers; and re-reading the fictional oeuvre of Toni Morrison. These influences led to me publishing a piece entitled "'Be Exactly Who You Are': Black Feminism in Volatile Political Realities" (Pow, 2018). Inspired by interview with Black women who lived through the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, the thesis of that piece concerns how the connection between an aware self, rooted in a racial and gendered identity, can become an important survival tool in oppressive realities. In the future, I would like to take this idea of Black interiority and merge it with

philosophical concerns of time, leisure, desire—ones less concerned with Black mythologies of identity performance.

## Final Thoughts

This research project endeavoured to make several contributions to scholarship in the areas of Black representation in media; Fan Studies; and social media rhetoric. It was my goal to show that Intersectionality and Black feminism could serve as legitimate lenses through which we examined those topics.

Inspired by Jacqueline Bobo's research with Black women's reactions to the film, *The Color Purple*, this project brought that legacy into the digital era of social media. Black women could have varied and complicated ideologies about the ways in which fictional themes reflect and intertwine with their lived realities. Moreover, this analysis sought to centralise the 'Black', 'women' and 'fan' identities in their own complicated and contradictory right, and not from a place of lack or in comparison to a white (and male) 'norm'.

Much like Feminism, the 'waves' keep coming. I imagine the same will be true for Fan Studies. As the media landscape becomes increasingly splintered, and no monoculture truly exists, the question of how this will affect fandoms remains. Will the size of them recede due to the sheer number of fandoms popping up in relation to an increase in media offerings? Whilst media offerings are continuing to explode, with the likes of multiplying streaming platforms with original content, and acquiring legacy content, the number of hours in a day has not changed [. There are real world limitations that limit this consumption as well as participation in fandoms. Will there be such a boom that it creates a bust that 'corrects' or changes how fandoms operate? Given the increase in consumption of legacy

content (cancelled or concluded TV shows of the past) on online streaming services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nielson 2020), the implications for fandom revivals and nostalgia are ripe for mining. With more media products come diversification of Black life and Black art portrayed onscreen. This increase in diversity coupled with smaller fandom sizes contract the Intersectional criticality of those fandoms. Will it feel more beneficial or 'productive' to spend time on constructive engagement rather than destructive engagement? Time will tell.

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